

## **Flourishing School Leadership: Perspectives of Canada's Outstanding Principals**

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Article abstract

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## **Flourishing School Leadership: Perspectives of Canada's Outstanding Principals**

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### **Abstract**

With research pointing to increased levels of stress and work demands on school leaders, attention has turned to examining the factors that contribute to their well-being. Studies have also shown that many school administrators not just survive but also thrive in their work and succeed despite work-related challenges. Furthermore, some principals experience flourishing at work, which is characterized by optimal functioning, feeling good, and achieving a balanced life. Our study examined the sense of flourishing of the national award-winning principals in the Canada's Outstanding Principals program, which recognized outstanding contributions of principals in publicly funded schools. In this article, we describe the participants' perceptions in relation to the following constructs in the overall flourishing: flow, thriving, resilience, and grit. This study highlights the conditions, behaviours, mindsets, and characteristics that are critical for the well-being of school administrators.

*Keywords:* flourishing, flow, thriving, resilience, grit, well-being, Canada's Outstanding Principals

### **Introduction**

Attention to well-being in school leadership has increased in the last decade due to emerging research that shows increasing job demands for principals and vice-principals. School administrators around the world face work intensification, growing workloads, excruciating work hours, and increased focus on accountability and high-stake testing (Beausaert et al., 2016; Collie et al., 2020; De Jong et al., 2017; Lingard et al., 2013; Maxwell & Riley, 2017). As a result, school leaders experience high levels of work-related stress, burnout, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Mahfouz, 2020; Riley et al., 2021; Skaalvik, 2020; Wells & Klocko, 2015).

The situation in the Canadian schooling landscape is very similar, with research pointing to an increase in stress and an overall decrease in school leaders' well-being (Ontario Principals' Council, 2017; Pollock & Wang, 2020; Pollock et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018, 2023). The major stressors associated with school principalship have been identified as long working hours, imposed government or union initiatives, lack of support, lack of work-life balance, and navigating funding and staffing issues. The challenging nature of principals' work and its potential negative effects on their well-being warrant "a pressing need to expand the existing knowledge about the occupational factors that play a role in their experiences of workplace well-being" (Collie et al., 2020, p. 417).

Interestingly, studies have also demonstrated high rates of overall job satisfaction and work enjoyment among school principals compared to the general population (Chung, 2019; Doyle Fosco, 2022; Goldring & Taie, 2018; Wang et al., 2018; Wylie, 2017). Many principals have indicated time and again that they are mostly fulfilled with their chosen profession and, if taken back in time, would still choose to be school principals. Research shows that principals are naturally highly motivated and resilient individuals

who display advanced problem-solving skills, optimism, and work ethic (Worthing & Paterson, 2013). These characteristics allow them to succeed despite challenges and to experience flourishing at work, which is characterized by optimal functioning, feeling good, and achieving a balanced life (Cherkowski et al., 2020). Moreover, there are principals who are recognized by various national and international awards as successful and outstanding. The fact that many school principals across the world are satisfied with what they do despite the tremendous challenges they face daily may lend itself to the importance of what they do and the impact they can have on future generations. The question then begs itself: how do successful and effective school principals draw on positive feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment to excel in their roles and flourish, at the same time having to constantly manage the inherent and imposed difficulties of their job?

Our exploratory study focused on national award-winning principals in the Canada's Outstanding Principals program, which recognized outstanding contributions of principals in publicly funded schools who demonstrated innovation and entrepreneurial spirit and had done something truly remarkable in public education (The Learning Partnership, 2019). Although no longer active since 2022, the inaugural Canada's Outstanding Principals program was established in 2004 by The Learning Partnership, in association with the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and the Canadian Association of Principals, as an annual leadership development program to celebrate, encourage, and support principals (Lowrey, 2014). In over 18 years of its existence, the program and its participants received relatively limited research attention, with only a few studies currently recorded undertaken through the lenses of leadership development, efficacy, and transformational leadership (see Lowrey, 2013, 2014, 2015).

In our study, we examined the perceptions of flourishing in the work lives of Canada's Outstanding Principals<sup>1</sup> through two research questions. First, how do outstanding principals experience the sense of flourishing? Second, what factors contribute to school working environments where flourishing is possible and sustainable and where its antecedents can be better understood? An electronic survey was used to glean award-winning principals' perceptions in relation to the following constructs in the overall flourishing: *flow*, *thriving*, *resilience*, and *grit*. In this article, after a brief review of relevant literature and research methodology, we describe findings from both the quantitative (closed) and qualitative (open-ended) survey questions, along with the correlation analysis of the constructs. We conclude by consolidating findings and offering implications for further research.

## Literature Review: Flourishing in School Leadership

Our study was grounded in the theoretical framework of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) (Carr, 2004; Roberts & Dutton, 2009). Scholarship in this field demonstrates that focusing on positive attitudes in organizations can increase resilience, vitality, and happiness; decrease stress, anxiety, and depression; and result in general well-being—which, in turn, has been associated with success and other positive outcomes (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Critical in this regard is positive leadership that stems from positivity, goodness, virtuousness, and strengths (Cameron, 2012) but is also grounded in quality relations, purpose and meaningfulness, and ethical work (Cherkowski et al., 2020; Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014; Quinn & Quinn, 2015). Reciprocal in nature, positive leadership and positive managerial practices tend to result in an increased sense of well-being for leaders themselves and for those with whom they work (Kelloway et al., 2013; Zbierowski & Góra, 2014). In turn, studies have highlighted the effect of leaders' state of well-being on the work environment and, subsequently, the followers' well-being (Inceoglu et al., 2018; Kim & Beehr, 2018; Skakon et al., 2010). While research has been more traditionally dedicated to understanding the relationship between leader and follower, less is known about how leaders cultivate and sustain positive well-being themselves (Weiss et al., 2018).

Well-being is considered to be a highly malleable state and heavily influenced by contextual and societal variables, with work being one of the most important (Diener et al., 2017). As a key concept in POS, subjective well-being has been described to consist of five main elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2018). This model, also known as PERMA, has become the foundation of human flourishing studies due to its holistic approach to understanding what allows individuals to have a sense of well-being in their lives. Understood as the pinnacle of human functioning (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Gable & Haidt, 2005), flourishing is often

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the term *Canada's Outstanding Principals* will refer exclusively to the award-winning principals in the Canada's Outstanding Principals program.

interconnected with constructs like resilience, self-fulfillment, contentment, and happiness (Haybron, 2008; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Seligman, 2011). Keyes (2016) defined flourishing as “the achievement of a balanced life in which individuals feel good about lives in which they are functioning well” (p. 101). Flourishing, therefore, is more than pursuing inner happiness (emotional well-being); it concerns positive positioning of oneself toward life (psychological well-being) and in relation to other individuals (social well-being). Whereas “self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy” signify positive psychological functioning, “social coherence, social actualization, social integration, social acceptance, and social contribution” represent aspects of positive social functioning (Keyes, 2002, pp. 108–109).

Flourishing in school principalship is a complex phenomenon consisting of “creating conditions for teachers, students and others in the school to work together toward shared goals in climates of care, connection, trust, innovation and improvement, fun and laughter” (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016, p. 385). School leaders can experience flourishing and promote it in their roles for teachers, students, and other stakeholders when they are first able to create these conditions for themselves. Only recently has investigating flourishing and its underpinnings in schools sparked interest among scholars, with particular emphasis on fostering flourishing school climates (Adams & Lohndorf, 2013; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016, 2018; Cherkowski et al., 2018). Given that an agreed-upon definition of flourishing within the school context in general, and within school leadership in particular, remains absent from the literature (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016), we considered the interrelationship between such concepts as flow, thriving, resilience, and grit as inner components of a composite construct of a flourishing school leader. Taken together, these concepts allow individuals to flourish and experience well-being in schools and beyond. The following is an overview of the conceptual and empirical studies on each of the aforementioned components of flourishing for leaders in a variety of contexts and sectors.

### *Flow*

Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when people act with total involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). It is the “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Csikszentmihalyi’s work focused not only on flow as it relates to enjoying one’s experience but also on “getting control of life ... [because] in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4).

There are eight characteristics of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2014; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). The first three are basic prerequisites, while the other five address the subjective experience during activity in flow: (a) complete concentration on the task, (b) clarity of goals and immediate feedback, (c) balance of challenge and skills level, (d) control, (e) effortlessness, (f) altered perception of time, (g) intrinsic reward, and (h) amalgamation of action and consciousness. The characteristics of flow and the conditions leading to it may be more complex than they appear. According to Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2009), reaching a state of flow creates a sense of psychological balance or “an ordered state of consciousness” where “thoughts, feelings, wishes and actions are in harmony” (p. 197). One of the most important conditions for entering a state of flow is “perceived challenges or opportunities for an action that stretch but do not overmatch existing skills” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 195). As such, being challenged is perhaps the most important catalyst for achieving a sense of flow, as long as the individual remains in control of the task and feels capable of completing it.

### *Thriving*

Thriving has traditionally been defined as a state of post-traumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). The contemporary meaning of thriving lends itself to the study of positive psychology and the resulting fundamental shift from “victimology” to “psychology” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). With the birth of the positive psychology movement, the concept of thriving morphed into personal growth in ordinary, low-risk, and non-extreme life circumstances. Thriving implies pursuing optimal conditions of human development (Bundick et al., 2010) and is commonly described as a state in which individuals experience a momentum of satisfaction and fulfillment throughout their lives (Seligman & Csikszentmi-

halyi, 2000).

In a professional sense, thriving is described as the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Individuals who thrive at work experience progress and momentum, develop a sense of deep satisfaction, and continue to learn something new on a regular basis (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). In this sense, thriving is “a desirable subjective experience that allows individuals to gauge whether what they are doing and how they are doing it is helping them to developing a positive direction” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 1). Together, learning and vitality can create conditions whereby individuals are able to sustain a momentum of thriving. For example, individuals may thrive at work if they are able to grow meaningful relationships built on trust and mutual respect while simultaneously acquiring and applying valuable skills. As thriving has been linked to important performance-related outcomes at work, it is important that organizations create conditions that foster and support thriving for its members (Kleine et al., 2019), including leadership opportunities.

### *Resilience*

Resilience is usually defined as the capacity to bounce back from adversity and failure (Luthans, 2002). Resilient leaders “do more than bounce back—they bounce forward.... Not only do resilient leaders quickly get their mojo back, but because they understand that the status quo is unsustainable, they also use it to move mountains” (Allison, 2011, p. 80). Scholars consider resilience to be one of the key building blocks of a person’s well-being (Armitage et al., 2021). Resilience is an ever-present characteristic of a flourishing leader as resilience “promotes growth, where the leader thrives as a visionary role model for others” (Stagman-Tyrer, 2014, p. 47). When armed with resilience, leaders can protect their well-being and that of their followers as they continue to navigate through adversity and challenging situations (Förster & Duchek, 2017).

The adversities that school leaders face significantly and negatively impact their interpersonal relationships as well as their physical and emotional well-being (Pollock et al., 2014; Zeisner, 2016). Schools are perhaps the most challenging environments to lead because of the often less-than-realistic expectations governmental policies impose (Maulding et al., 2012; Steward, 2014). Principalship is often an emotionally charged practice; therefore, it is increasingly important for school principals to be resilient to maintain their well-being. In fact, resilience has been consistently identified in research as one of the most important traits of successful principals (Lazaridou, 2020) because it provides them with the ability to overcome failure quickly, learn from adversity, and become stronger (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). As a result, resilience allows school leaders to develop the capacity to remain organized and maintain the structure within their organization during turbulent times and to thrive in the face of adversity (Patterson et al., 2009).

### *Grit*

Successful leaders are individuals of tenacity; they bend but do not break. They are tough spirits steadfastly breaking through storms, never giving up no matter how difficult it may become. These traits have been typically described as grit:

[Grit] entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays on course. (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087–1088)

What may truly determine goal achievement and success among individuals is not simply intelligence, talent, or personality traits but perseverance and level of commitment, purposefulness, stamina, and sustained effort (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2011). Therefore, being gritty means more than just having a strong work ethic (Meriac et al., 2015) or possessing hardiness to endure setbacks (Maddi et al., 2012). Grit is an individual’s ability to maintain passion despite a lack of positive feedback, which is important for success in leadership (Caza & Posner, 2019). It has been identified as the dominant

and most frequently present leadership trait among many leaders (Parthasarathy & Chakraborty, 2014), as gritty leaders may have the capacity to empower others and model this behaviour as well (Caza & Posner, 2019). However, the concept of grit as it stands today appears to be developing as research continues to examine this trait in a variety of contexts, especially among professional aspects of leadership. Traditionally, descriptions of grittiness lack attention to aspects like generosity, respect, integrity, and truth; therefore, the study of gritty leaders can also attend to skills that are more human and genuine instead of just exploring what is behind the mask of professionalism (Sudbrink, 2016).

## Methodology

In this study of flourishing among the national award-winning principals in the Canada's Outstanding Principals program, we combined a survey and interviews in a mixed-method design to allow for elaboration on themes and triangulation of data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This article presents data exclusively from the online survey that we developed based on a systematic review of the literature and adaptations of relevant instruments (Bakker, 2008; Duckworth et al., 2007; Patterson et al., 2009; Spreitzer et al., 2005). After being piloted among school principals, the final version of the survey included 62 closed and 12 open-ended questions that were thematically organized into the following categories: flow, flourishing and thriving, resilience, grit, and well-being. The survey was administered through Qualtrics.

In collaboration with The Learning Partnership, we invited all recipients of the Canada's Outstanding Principals award in 2019 to participate in the survey. We followed all ethical guidelines throughout data collection and analysis. Before we analyzed the data using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28), we removed unusable data (i.e., incomplete or partially completed survey responses), which resulted in 73 usable survey results. We obtained descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations) for all applicable demographic and Likert-scale questions. For open-ended questions, we analyzed the data qualitatively, employing a mix of a priori (i.e., a deductive approach based on survey categories) and open (i.e., an inductive approach based on emergent themes) coding using appropriate codes from the literature (Bingham & Witkowski, 2022). We then grouped the codes gathered from the participants' responses into themes. The research findings are presented below, with qualitative data complementing and expanding on the results of the quantitative analysis.

The demographic questions in the online survey included age, gender, province/territory, education, years of experience as an educator, years of experience as a principal, and training in mental health or well-being. The participants' mean age was 54 years ( $SD = 8.01$ ). There was an almost equal split in gender representation, with 37 participants (51%) identifying as female and 36 respondents (49%) identifying as male. The majority of the participants were from Ontario (36%), followed by Manitoba (7%), Alberta (7%), and Quebec (6%). All provinces and territories, except for Yukon, were represented in the sample (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Province/Territory of Location*

Province/Territory	n	%
Alberta	7	10
British Columbia	5	7
Manitoba	7	10
New Brunswick	5	7
Newfoundland	1	1
Northwest Territories	5	7
Nova Scotia	3	4
Nunavut	2	3
Ontario	26	36
Prince Edward Island	1	1

Province/Territory	n	%
Quebec	6	8
Saskatchewan	4	5
Yukon	0	0
Other	1	1

*Note.* The respondent in Other was living in the United States when the survey was conducted but was working as a principal in Canada at the time of receiving the award.

**Table 2**  
*Years of Experience*

Years as educator	n	%	Years as principal	n	%
10 or less	0	0	5 or less	6	8
11 to 20	8	11	6 to 10	16	22
21 to 30	41	56	11 to 15	24	33
31 or more	24	33	16 or more	27	37

In terms of the participants' highest academic qualification, over 60% had a master's degree in education while 16% had a bachelor's degree in education. The majority of the participants (56%) indicated that they had 21–30 years of experience as an educator (Table 2). This result is not surprising considering most principals enter education as a teacher and then move to administration with experience. The majority of the participants (70%) had been a principal for 11 years or more. Given that the participants were recipients of the Canada's Outstanding Principals award, this higher end of experience as a principal was expected as the award was rarely given to new principals. Finally, 75% of the participants responded that they had some form of training in mental health or well-being.

## Research Findings

In the following section, we present key research findings grouped thematically according to the constructs of flow, thriving, resilience, and grit. Each subsection provides an overview of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the pertinent survey data. The correlation analysis of the constructs concludes this section.

### *Flow*

Flow was defined for participants as a state in which people are so absorbed in a task that they lose sense of time and continue to be involved in that task for the sheer joy of it. The results showed that flow in the workplace was high among the participants, who indicated a high level of focus while working, enjoyment and feelings of happiness in their work, freedom of decision making, sense of intrinsic motivation, confidence in their abilities, and a sense of autonomy in their work (Table 3). The items with the highest mean related to the perceived importance ( $M = 5.39$ ) and meaningfulness ( $M = 5.26$ ) of work for principals, as well as confidence about the ability to do the job ( $M = 5.15$ ) and self-assurance of capabilities to perform work activities ( $M = 5.05$ ). In terms of items with the lowest levels of agreement, the responses showed that principals rarely considered their work to be for their own benefit ( $M = 3.47$ ) and only sometimes thought of nothing else while working ( $M = 3.96$ ).

**Table 3**  
*Experiences of Flow (n=73)*

Question	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
When I am working, I think about nothing else.	4	8	19	26	41	2	3.96	1.17
I get carried away by my work.	0	2	19	27	41	11	4.41	0.97
When I am working, I forget everything else around me.	4	18	27	23	26	2	3.53	1.21
I am totally immersed in my work.	0	7	16	32	37	8	4.23	1.05
My work gives me a good feeling.	0	0	14	22	43	21	4.71	0.96
I do my work with a lot of enjoyment.	0	0	11	20	44	25	4.82	0.93
I feel happy during my work.	0	1	8	28	44	19	4.71	0.92
The work I do is very important to me.	0	0	1	13	32	54	5.39	0.76
The work I do is meaningful to me.	0	0	3	14	37	46	5.26	0.80
I would still do this work, even if I received less pay.	4	14	10	25	21	26	4.42	1.51
I find that I also want to work in my free time.	3	5	21	37	19	15	4.10	1.22
I work because I enjoy it.	0	0	17	14	37	32	4.85	1.06
When I am working on something, I am doing it for myself.	3	25	27	19	21	5	3.47	1.29
I get my motivation from the work itself, not from the reward of it.	3	1	8	22	41	25	4.71	1.14
I am confident about my ability to do my job.	0	0	6	8	52	34	5.15	0.79
I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities.	0	0	5	14	51	30	5.05	0.81



Question	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I have mastered the skills necessary for my job.	0	0	10	21	49	20	4.81	0.88
I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work.	0	1	5	20	49	25	4.90	0.88
I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job.	0	3	12	21	42	22	4.68	1.04

In their responses to the open-ended survey questions, the participants collectively highlighted several key elements that shaped their sense of flow. A combination of these five elements resulted into the feeling of flow in their work: *sense of immersion, joy, command, synergy, and accomplishment*.

The participating school principals considered a sense of immersion or “timelessness” as a contributing factor to their sense of flow. They often described it as a sensation that “time flies.” A sense of joy, or “exhilaration,” “empowerment,” “satisfaction,” “fulfillment,” and “love for the job” as the participants described, highlighted the intrinsic rewards they experienced as a result of doing a given task, giving them a sense of bliss, pride, and comfort. Additionally, the participants identified feeling confident and in control, or being “on top of things,” a significant determinant of their overall sense of flow. For the participating principals, a sense of command was not only about being in control of one’s work and the direction it is taking but also feeling competent—that “you are good at it.”

A sense of accomplishment, or self-actualization, seemed to be the most highlighted contributor to the participants’ sense of flow. In its simplest form, a sense of accomplishment indicated achieving goals. However, the participants’ narratives of their sense of accomplishment, more often than not, were centred around the learning, growth, and engagement of the teachers and students along with their own. Feeling that they have done something important and that they have a positive impact as leaders also contributed to their overall sense of accomplishment. Finally, synergy denoted the principals’ concept of being a part of a harmonic group. The participants characterized it as collaborative teamwork and an element related to caring for and valuing others. To one participant, synergy was about a school that “is functioning as a family where [the principal is] a positive family member.”

It is important to note that these five aspects did not appear to exist in a vacuum; the participants described them as part of a holistic experience. Therefore, it was hard at times to isolate these experiences. Overall, these feelings, when experienced together, contributed to the participants’ sense of flow. The quote below from one of the participants best summarizes the aggregate nature of flow:

The people around me are secure to do their jobs well. I am happy, confident that I know that what I am doing is making a difference. I am actually getting things accomplished and moving forward with initiatives. I have time to have important conversations with people (i.e., not always rushed). I have work-life balance. I might get positive feedback about the school. I am sleeping well, less stressed.

### *Thriving*

Thriving was defined for participants as a state where individuals experience a momentum of satisfaction and fulfillment throughout their lives. The participants’ responses pointed to a high sense of thriving in the workplace, characterized by high levels of vitality, energy, and spirit, as well as a positive outlook on their personal growth, development, learning, and improvement as an individual in the workplace (Table 4). The items with the highest mean showed the principals’ continuous learning with time ( $M = 5.13$ ) and positive progression of views ( $M = 5.00$ ). The item with the lowest level of agreement, albeit still high, related to their ability to often feel alert and awake.

**Table 4**  
*Experiences of Thriving (n=67)*

Question	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I feel alive and vital.	0	0	14	24	49	13	4.63	0.88
I have energy and spirit.	0	0	9	23	50	18	4.78	0.85
I look forward to each new day.	0	0	9	22	47	22	4.82	0.89
I feel alert and awake.	0	2	12	28	46	12	4.55	0.91
I am experiencing considerable personal growth.	1	3	9	30	33	24	4.61	1.13
I am growing in positive ways.	1	1	12	26	39	21	4.61	1.09
I enjoy seeing how my views have progressed.	0	0	2	25	45	28	5.00	0.78
I continue to learn more as time goes by.	0	1	0	23	36	40	5.13	0.87
I am finding new ways to develop.	0	1	8	26	35	30	4.85	1.00
I see myself continually improving.	0	1	3	22	44	30	4.97	0.89

The themes of learning and vitality were woven through the participants' open-ended responses when they were asked to reflect on their experience of thriving at work. The participants referred not only to their own learning and vitality but also to learning and vitality in others when experiencing thriving at work. They seemed to attribute their own thriving to when others, such as teachers and students, are able to learn and experience vitality. To that end, the principals' thriving appeared to be largely interrelated to and dependent on teachers' and students' thriving. For one of the participants, thriving resembled the following:

It looks like a balanced day where there is working meetings with a task at hand, a common understanding of that task, people laughing and contributing to that task and beyond and an energy of excitement to try the new task! It sounds like a noisy creative play day where laughter runs supreme, and everyone knows what they need to do and how to do it. And it feels like a happy functioning family where we all know our roles and skills and LOVE working with each other. It makes our hearts grow as we work to positively change the trajectories of student and staff lives! It feels serene and calming froth with excitement!

Upon further analysis, thriving at work for this group of exceptional school leaders appeared to be more nuanced. A closer look further scaffolded these notions, showing that learning for them involved continuous growth, continuous challenge, feeling of engagement, and progress. As one participant noted:

As an experienced school leader, [I thrive] when I feel that I am still able to contribute to important regional committees or mentoring opportunities then it allows me to believe that

I can still make a difference for the programs and people I am responsible for in education. Ultimately, if I can continue to learn ways in which to positively impact student learning and achievement, then that in itself energizes me.

Vitality, having constituted a larger number of responses, consisted of cultivating positive and constructive relationships with others and having a sense of purpose. One principal posited, “[I thrive when] I have a deep sense of fulfilment; I feel connected to my students, staff, parents; I have confidence in my ability to achieve the school goals and [to strengthen] relationships while doing so.” Together, factors like having positive and collaborative relationships; feeling energized, motivated, and fulfilled; and staying focused and purposeful appeared to facilitate a sense of vitality in these principals.

### *Resilience*

Resilience was defined for participants as the ability to bounce back after experiencing an adversity in life. The participants’ responses showed a consistent trend of high agreement with statements regarding their perceptions of resilience (Table 5). The results indicated an overall high level of persistence, adaptability, optimism, confidence, and perseverance, as well as the ability to learn from adversity and grow with each challenge. The items with the highest mean included principals feeling confident that they could learn something from adversity to help them be stronger in the future ( $M = 5.11$ ) and persistently refusing to give up in overcoming adversity unless all realistic strategies have been exhausted ( $M = 5.05$ ). Likewise, the principals’ resilience was strengthened through high levels of optimism ( $M = 4.95$ ) and adaptability ( $M = 4.94$ ) in their leadership roles.

Several items were not as overwhelmingly positive and received much lower levels of agreement. For instance, responses showed that during adversity, the principals struggled with allocating sufficient time and space for renewing their spirit ( $M = 3.69$ ) and with having a deep sense of spiritual gratitude for the opportunity to pursue a calling of leadership ( $M = 3.69$ ). The data indicated that the principals did not feel like they sought current and research-based information about sustaining healthy living in stressful times often enough.

**Table 5**

*Experiences of Resilience (n=65)*

Question	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I turn to personal reflection and introspection to steady myself during adversity.	0	0	23	26	37	14	4.42	1.00
When adversity strikes, I take action until I’ve sufficiently gained control of my emotions.	0	0	23	25	35	17	4.46	1.03
I pay attention to external forces that could limit what I would like to accomplish ideally.	0	3	15	25	45	12	4.48	1.00
I allocate sufficient time and space for renewing my spirit.	6	16	28	18	18	14	3.69	1.46

Question	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I demonstrate an understanding of my emotions during adversity and how these emotions affect my leadership performance.	0	0	20	26	40	14	4.48	0.97
During adversity, I feel a deep sense of spiritual gratitude for the opportunity to pursue a calling of leadership.	6	19	21	19	26	9	3.68	1.44
I expect that good things can come out of an adverse situation.	0	6	15	17	36	26	4.60	1.21
I demonstrate an overall strength of optimism in my leadership role.	0	1	3	22	48	26	4.94	0.86
I persistently refuse to give up in overcoming adversity, unless it's absolutely clear all realistic strategies have been exhausted.	0	0	6	15	46	33	5.05	0.86
I am determined to be more persevering than before when confronted with the next round of adversity.	0	0	11	22	49	18	4.75	0.88
When adversity strikes, I try to learn from the experiences of others who faced similar circumstances.	0	1	6	26	42	25	4.82	0.93
I demonstrate an overall strength of adaptability in my leadership role.	0	1.5	1.5	22	50	25	4.95	0.82
I am confident I can learn something from my adversity to help me be stronger in the future.	0	0	2	18	48	32	5.11	0.75
I quickly change course, as needed, to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.	0	0	7	25	49	19	4.78	0.84

Question	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I seek the most current, research-based information about how to sustain healthy living in stressful times.	2	12	17	35	25	9	2.94	1.10

In open-ended questions, we asked the participants to describe what helped them develop resilience as school leaders. Their responses showed four main behaviours: *seeking support*, *connecting with people*, *self-care*, and *mindful leading*. For most participants, developing resilience required pulling from a combination of resources and attitudes that, together, allowed them to proceed in their role with resilience.

Seeking support when facing challenges was perceived to help develop resilience in principals. Specifically, mentors, colleagues, a “strong leadership team,” and “key administrators” were identified as important individuals in this regard. Approaching colleagues and attempting to unpack and solve problems with them, asking for their help and opinions, seeking advice from trusted and like-minded individuals, as well as reaching out to mentors were some of the initiatives that helped principals be resilient. In a few instances, some participants identified supporting others as a way to boost their own resilience.

Connecting with people appeared to be a significant contributor to the participants’ sense of resilience. “Checking in with people,” “having a tight inner circle,” and “collaborating and sharing with colleagues” are some examples of the relationships these participants considered important for developing resilience. However, the essence of connecting with people seemed to be about having a community of people that the principals trusted, respected, and felt safe to share ideas with and talk to. Indicative of many of the responses, one participant had this to say about growing resilience from authentic connections:

I put personal time and energy into maintaining strong relationships both inside and outside of my work life. I have a strong family that I can rely on. I have close working relationships with key administrators that I trust and bounce ideas off of on a regular basis.

Equally important to cultivating resilience appeared to be self-care, or a series of actions such as exercising, taking time off work, engaging in enjoyable activities, taking breaks at work, eating well, sleeping enough, embracing humor, practising reflection and mindfulness, and prioritizing holistic well-being. Based on the number and volume of responses, this theme appears to be considerably important to participants as almost all of them alluded to self-care initiatives or spoke explicitly about them. According to one participant, “[To be resilient], I stay physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially fit.”

Mindful leading entailed presence in the moment, awareness of the situation, reflection, and sound assessment of what is required from them in terms of decision making and types of support to resolve challenges in schools. These notions appeared to be woven significantly into the participants’ narratives of their resilience. For example, one participant described the calmness arising from mindful practice of leadership:

[I try to] put things into perspective, understand the scope of what is happening, know that I have limited time and resources and that all I can do is the best I can do and most importantly, be able to let it go and realize that I cannot fix everything.

At the same time, leading mindfully included taking accountability for themselves and their teams and acknowledging the importance of being grounded in their decision making for the best interests of children.

### Grit

Grit was defined for participants as the ability to be steadfast when facing challenges and staying on course toward realizing goals without losing momentum. Most of the participants highlighted steadfastness in goal achievement, hard work, and goal orientation and in overcoming setbacks—all aspects indicative of high levels of grit (Table 6). The most prominent responses related to principals' hard work ( $M = 5.43$ ), diligence ( $M = 5.28$ ), and completion of tasks ( $M = 5.03$ ). Lower agreement was ascribed to items that could negatively affect the school leaders' grit. The participants did not lose interest in what they started ( $M = 2.40$ ), maintained focus on long-term projects ( $M = 2.65$ ), and pursued the set goals ( $M = 2.69$ ).

**Table 6**  
*Experiences of Grit (n = 65)*

Question	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Always	M	SD
I get distracted by new ideas and projects in my daily work.	0	45	34	6	14	1	2.94	1.10
I do not easily give up in achieving goals.	0	8	2	22	50	18	4.71	1.04
I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.	3	52	25	14	5	1	2.69	1.01
I am a hard worker.	0	0	2	11	30	57	5.43	0.75
I have difficulty maintain my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.	6	55	18	11	6	4	2.65	1.15
I finish whatever I begin.	0	0	2	23	46	29	5.03	0.77
My interests change from year to year.	3	37	31	12	12	5	3.08	1.24
I am diligent.	0	0	1	14	40	45	5.28	0.76
I become obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but then lose interest.	8	68	11	6	6	1	2.40	1.04
I overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.	0	0	6	26	54	14	4.75	0.77

In the open-ended responses, participants were asked to reflect on a time when they failed as a leader and what helped them bounce back from that failure (i.e., displaying grit). Three main themes emerged: *reflecting and learning*, *persisting*, and *reaching out and mending*. It is important to note that these themes appeared as a continuum rather than in isolation, and almost all participants associated grit with more than one theme. They described their grit as a series of steps comprised of the themes above.

For the participants, the most important step in becoming a gritty individual was reflecting and learning. For them, reflecting encapsulated the idea of acknowledging and accepting one's mistake and

“owning it,” followed by unpacking the situation to understand the root of the problem. Such approach allowed the participants to assess what could have been done to avoid the mistake to keep them from repeating said mistake. Some participants also mentioned reflective exercises, such as practising mindfulness and keeping a journal, as useful strategies to reflect, learn, and move on from adverse situations. As one principal shared, “You need to grow from that experience. If it didn’t teach you something you need to go back and re-evaluate.”

The notions of persisting in the face of adversities and not giving up after the failure formed the basis of the participants’ perceptions of grit. According to a participant:

FAIL stands for First Attempt In Learning ... so to me failure is simply a step in learning and therefore upon a failed project/initiative, I simply reflect upon it (personally and with the team) to extract any positives and then move forward to a better plan.

Persistence, in the words of another participant, was grounded in “the idea that in order to improve and learn from one’s mistakes, at times people have to fail. At times, when taking risks, [one has] to feel comfortable with failure.” Refocusing on what is important and beginning again was key in this regard.

Moreover, the participants identified reaching out (i.e., seeking help and guidance from others) and mending (i.e., taking the steps necessary to fix mistakes) as part of their gritty behaviour. One response vividly demonstrated this approach:

After a time to reflect on the situation, I took ownership of my actions and reached out to the staff members who I may have unintentionally caused frustration or disappointment. I apologized and invited them in to clarify my decision and did my best to repair the damage to the relationship I may have caused. I promised to do a better job communicating it in the future.

Debriefing with mentors, conversing with significant others, using advice of “critical friends,” and transparent communication were helpful practices for developing the participants’ grit.

### *Correlation Analysis*

We further analyzed the correlations between the constructs of flow, thriving, resilience, and grit. We calculated the following total scores for each construct based on the items in each corresponding survey section: (a) for flow, 19 was the lowest possible score and 114 was the highest possible score; (b) for thriving, 10 was the lowest possible score and 60 was the highest possible score; (c) for resilience, 15 was the lowest possible score and 90 was the highest possible score; and (d) for grit, 10 was the lowest possible score and 60 was the highest possible score. The participants’ average score was 86.66 ( $SD = 11.7$ ) for flow, 43.95 ( $SD = 15.21$ ) for thriving, 60.63 ( $SD = 23.34$ ) for resilience, and 34.68 ( $SD = 13.123$ ) for grit.

Multiple Pearson’s product moment correlation (two-tailed) coefficients were computed between the results for the totals of flow, thriving, resilience, and grit (Table 7). The findings revealed that there was a significant medium positive correlation between flow and thriving ( $r = 0.313, n = 73, p = 0.007$ ), a significant small positive correlation between flow and resilience ( $r = 0.259, n = 73, p = 0.027$ ), a significant large positive correlation between thriving and resilience ( $r = 0.814, n = 73, p = 0.001$ ), a significant large positive correlation between thriving and grit ( $r = 0.706, n = 73, p = 0.001$ ), and a significant large positive correlation between resilience and grit ( $r = 0.881, n = 73, p = 0.001$ ).

**Table 7**  
*Correlation Results*

	Flow	Thriving	Resilience	Grit
Flow	1	0.313**	0.259*	0.154
Thriving		1	0.814**	0.706**
Resilience			1	0.881**
Grit				1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

## Discussion

The findings of this study show that flourishing for Canada's Outstanding Principals is a complex phenomenon, with the concepts of flow, thriving, resilience, and grit in varying degrees but positively correlated with each other. Data analysis showed that the flourishing of school leaders is a prerequisite of an overall sense of flourishing in their schools. Considering the important influence of school principals in transforming schools (Leithwood et al., 2010), school leaders are then key to a positive school culture where others can experience well-being and flourishing (Roffey, 2008).

Yet, for school leaders to be able to support others in experiencing and developing these capacities, they need to experience and develop them first (Dutton et al., 2006). When school leaders flourish, they can help teachers, staff, and students achieve their fullest potential and flourish as well. They need to embody and be true examples of flourishing to first show and then support positive impact in schools (Cherkowski et al., 2020). This phenomenon is called a positive social contagion (Cameron et al., 2011; Wilderom, 2011), where one's flourishing causes or leads to others' flourishing, creating an upward spiral (Fredrickson et al., 2021; Sekerka et al., 2011). Relationally rich positive practices, with positive emotions underlying the interactions between members, enable the social and emotional contagion that promotes the flourishing of all within an organization (Cameron et al., 2011).

Flourishing has more to do with other people than it does with the person (Nelson et al., 2016). Roffey (2012) argued that positive school relationships can make a significant difference on many levels, in many areas, and to all stakeholders. However, the school leader and the leadership team have the most powerful influence on relational quality within a school (Roffey, 2012). The idea of having strong relationships with seniors, staff, teachers, and even students echoed throughout the participants' narratives of flourishing. For flow, it was the idea of synergy or the ability to work in harmony with others. A sense of vitality, one of the two pillars of thriving, consisted of developing relationships that would in turn allow principals to flourish. Connecting with people was identified as a major contributor to the principals' resilience. The ability to be gritty required principals to reach out to others to better understand how they can learn from adversities. As such, the idea of interpersonal relationships appeared to form a fundamental part of overall principal well-being. This is not surprising, as studies have demonstrated that positive relationships play a key role in flourishing not only in the workplace (Colbert et al., 2016) but also in life in general (VanderWeele et al., 2019). Relationships and human connection appeared to overtake principals' overall descriptions of their sense of flourishing, emerging in all four concepts examined in this study. However, there are nuanced aspects within each concept when compared to the existing literature.

Examining the notion of flow allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of award-winning principals who have managed to flourish amid the challenging conditions of the school system. Flow manifested through high levels of focus while working, enjoyment and feelings of happiness in their work, freedom of decision making, a sense of intrinsic motivation, confidence in their abilities, and a sense of autonomy in their work. The presence of these and other aspects, such as immersion, command, joy, synergy, and accomplishment, were consistent with the characteristics of flow within its theoretical boundary. For example, immersion aligns with one of the characteristics of flow, which has been highlighted as the altered perception of time and characterized by the transformation of time (i.e., speeding up or slowing down) (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A sense of control, traditionally defined as a



“sense of participation in determining the content of life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4), is important for leaders’ flourishing (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). However, the participants of the present study coupled that with self-actualization or the knowledge that they were making a difference. Moreover, according to the findings of this research, other characteristics of flow among leaders may include doing moral good, trust, and a sense of belonging (MacNeil & Cavanagh, 2013) and self-empowerment and teamwork (Betty, 2000), coinciding with the findings of the current study.

Grounded in the socially embedded thriving model (Spreitzer et al., 2005), high levels of vitality, energy, and spirit, as well as a positive outlook on their personal growth, development, learning, and improvement as an individual in the workplace, were indicators of thriving among the participating principals. Furthermore, learning and vitality formed the basis of thriving at work for the participating principals; those who were able to experience and sustain a sense of learning and vitality in their workplace viewed themselves as thriving individuals. Collaborative relationships, which the participants perceived as an important antecedent of thriving, can be strongly connected to a sense of shared commitment and vision, which can in turn increase collective thriving (Walumbwa et al., 2018). One study suggested that being challenged by the tasks presented at work as a way to learn and grow, which was also one of the findings of the current study, can have a positive impact on learning but not have the same impact on overall thriving as it may reduce a sense of vitality (Prem et al., 2017). Individuals who thrive at work experience deep satisfaction and continue to learn something new regularly. In that sense, thriving is “a desirable subjective experience that allows individuals to gauge whether what they are doing and how they are doing it is helping them to developing a positive direction” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 1).

Resilience in school leaders and their ability to foster resilience in others are essential to the overall sustainability of a healthy organization (Förster & Ducheck, 2017). The participants in this study, who were highly experienced and effective school leaders, demonstrated an overall high level of resilience, persistence, adaptability, optimism, confidence, and perseverance, as well as the ability to learn from adversity and grow with each challenge. Research has shown that more experienced principals, having worked under pressure and continuing demands, can better withstand adverse situations; develop stronger resilience to deal with emotionally draining situations; and protect personal free time, health, and general physical well-being (Lazaridou & Beka, 2015; Wang et al., 2023).

Learning and developing were two of the participants’ strategies to develop resilience, which are supported by a large body of literature as an important part of resilience (Arond-Thomas, 2004; Clayton, 2012; Faustenhammer & Gössler, 2011; Shambaugh, 2010). In the present study, resilience was connected to multiple constructs, such as connecting with people, asking them for help, caring for oneself, and leading mindfully. These findings highlight and support the importance of intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics for resilience in school leaders (Lazaridou, 2020; Ledesma, 2014; Phillips et al., 2014).

Resilience in leadership has been associated with a spectrum of interactive factors, such as self-worth or self-compassion (Steward, 2014), as well as self-awareness and authenticity (Bossman et al., 2016; Dyess et al., 2015; Elkington & Breen, 2015; Martin, 2017; Stagman-Tyrer, 2014; Sudbrink, 2016). Mindful leadership, as a process of commitment, compassion, good decision, and awareness (Wongkom et al., 2019), is associated with resilience (Lange et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2009). Mindful leadership and resilience are important for high-effectiveness and high-reliability schools (Gilbert, 2019; Kearney et al., 2013). Mindful leadership orientation can enhance trust in school leadership, increase the capacity for school leaders to create a climate of success, and promote organizational commitment to resilience (Kruse, 2020).

Our findings highlight persistence and steadfastness in goal achievement, hard work and goal orientation, and overcoming setbacks as aspects indicative of high levels of grit among Canada’s Outstanding Principals. As scholars have previously suggested (Duckworth et al., 2007), individuals’ level of commitment, purposefulness, stamina, passion, and sustained effort determine their goal achievement rather than intelligence and personality traits. The enduring focus on long-term outcomes reflects the forward-looking orientation that distinguishes effective leaders (Caza & Posner, 2019; Iles et al., 2006). In line with this future-oriented perspective, the current study draws on additional characteristics of grit that may not be fully captured by the grit framework, such as reflecting and learning, persisting, and reaching out and mending, which were represented as a continuum and positioned leaders’ grit development as a stepwise progression. That may be because grit, within its traditional definition, has been shown to have limited impact on several positive work-related outcomes (Credé et al., 2017; Ion et al.,

2017). The results of this study showed additional components of grit that may facilitate a more holistic characterization and complement its respective framework.

The school leaders who participated in this study acknowledged that while they possessed a desire to be resilient before they fostered it in others, their resilience was bolstered when the people in their lives were also resilient. Resilience helps school leaders protect their well-being and that of their followers in times of adversity and challenging work situations (Dos-Santos Mendes & Kutsyuruba, 2022). This added layer promotes the concept that emotional states are contagious and that resilience is transferable from one individual to another.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

It is important to outline the assumptions and limitations of the study that highlighted some of the conditions, behaviours, mindsets, and characteristics that may shape flourishing for Canada's Outstanding Principals and, by extension, school leaders in general. Given that our study involved successful, award-winning school administrators, one assumption might be that they flourish all the time. However, as the results showed, this disposition is flawed, and the participants' flourishing occurred when certain factors were present in their work. We recommend that contextual nuances be taken into consideration when applying the findings of this study to the school leadership community as a whole.

In terms of limitations, we are cognizant of the small sample of participants. Only 73 principals responded to the survey. While that may seem adequate, this number of respondents makes some quantitative analysis (i.e., factor analysis) difficult to interpret due to the size of the questionnaire (62 closed questions used for quantitative analysis) and the total number of factors looking to be extracted (a total of four factors). Many quantitative papers (Cattell, 1978; Everill, 1975; Nunnally, 1967) suggest a range of 3–10 participants for every question when computing a factor analysis.

When we conducted an exploratory factor analysis, we were unable to interpret the results due to few respondents. The small sample size compromised the stability and generalizability of the rotated factor matrix. Hence, it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the structure of the data. Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure, which assesses the suitability of the data for factor analysis, yielded a value of 0.545. This value falls below the recommended threshold of 0.6 (Field, 2017), indicating that the data may not be adequately suited for factor analysis, which is likely due to the limited sample size.

Hence, while the factor analysis offered insights into potential underlying patterns within the data, the small sample size of 73 posed a significant limitation and was neither included in the analysis of this work nor presented in this article. The unstable nature of factors, coupled with the KMO value falling below the recommended threshold, raised concerns about the reliability and generalizability of the extracted factors. To achieve more robust and meaningful results, a larger sample size would be needed. As such, factor analysis was not applied to the survey data. Instead, the questions were grouped based on the literature used to develop the questionnaire.

### **Conclusion**

Our study sought to examine flourishing as an overall positive concept by bringing together other independently identified positive notions of flow, thriving, resilience, and grit. We strived to understand how these notions may intersect and relate to one another. While these concepts have been drawing some attention in the past two decades and studied individually in a variety of contexts using a variety of methods, seldom have they been brought together, compared, and contrasted—even more so for school leaders.

The results of this study demonstrated that successful school leaders see themselves as key stewards of fostering a positive educational environment for students, teachers, and school staff. They carry the responsibility of enabling other individuals to have a fulfilling learning and working experience, where they can enjoy what they do, experience growth and exuberance, bounce back and gain strength from challenges, and develop tenacity. Therefore, developing a positive environment in schools is more important than ever as there is a reciprocal relationship between the school leader and other members of the school.

The reciprocal nature of flourishing—when administrators attend to creating conditions and struc-

tures for others in the school to flourish—can lead to increased principal well-being in return and result in a growing sense of flourishing among all individuals in a school setting (Kutsyuruba et al., 2021). However, for principals to be able to support others in experiencing and developing these capacities, they need to experience and develop them first. A key implication of these findings is that developing and implementing school policies and practices that directly address the principals' well-being and needs, support their development, and encourage collaboration in schools can enable leaders to better manage their work-life balance and thus remain well.

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