

Novice Principal Burnout: Exploring Secondary Trauma, Working Conditions, and Coping Strategies in an Urban District

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Abstract

Steady school leadership can support student achievement and equity-related outcomes, but the principalship is becoming more stressful with increasing demands, duties, and expectations. Burnout is one of several factors that contribute to principal turnover which often destabilizes a school community. Individual and organizational factors contribute to principal burnout, but remain relatively unexamined. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to analyze the factors that contribute to burnout among novice principals in one large urban school district in the Southwestern U.S. Findings highlight the impact of secondary trauma, working conditions, and coping strategies on principal burnout.

Introduction

Principals contribute to student achievement and equity-related outcomes by fostering an inclusive environment centered on high-quality instruction and inquiry, building teacher capacity, monitoring and supporting the implementation of effective and culturally responsive teaching practices, and collaboratively interrogating data with teachers and families to make important decisions (Author, 2018; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Steady leadership is a requirement in schools because it takes time to learn about a campus, build capacity, cultivate relationships, and foster positive working conditions which contribute to school improvement. Yet, many principals in low-performing schools do not stay in their positions for very long. As a consequence, many low-performing schools have inexperienced and relatively ineffective principals. In schools serving high percentages of

low-income students, more than 20% of principals left their school in 2016 (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Researchers have found that novice principals improve as they gain experience at their schools (Bartanen, 2019), but when they exit their school quickly, their school may likely be led by yet another less experienced principal. Ineffective school leadership then translates into limited outcomes for students (Grissom, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2015).

Burnout is one of several factors that contribute to principal turnover (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Yan, 2020). Burnout is a multidimensional concept defined as a “psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, which is experienced in response to chronic job stresses” (Leither & Maslach, 2003, p. 93). Numerous studies document principal stress related to heavy workloads and long hours, erratic and unpredictable problems of practice, and lack of control and autonomy (Author, 2018; Mahfouz, 2018; Oplatka, 2017; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Researchers have become increasingly interested in principal burnout (Author, 2018; Combs, Edmondson, Jackson, & Greenville, 2009; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Gmelch & Torelli, 1994; Mahfouz, 2018; Oplatka, 2002; Tomic & Tomic, 2008), but few studies simultaneously consider the complexity of burnout and its relationship with professional experiences, working conditions, and coping behaviors.

We believe investigating principal burnout with a focus on individual and organizational contributing factors is critical to understanding and addressing novice principal turnover, particularly in districts with many low-performing schools. The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to analyze the factors that contribute to burnout among novice principals in one large urban school district in the Southwestern U.S. Specifically, we asked three questions:

- (1) What are the rates of burnout among novice and experienced principals and how do they compare with other human-services professionals (e.g., nurses, social workers, doctors, counselors)?
- (2) How do secondary trauma and working conditions contribute to novice principal burnout?
- (3) What are the lived experiences of novice principals experiencing and coping with the stresses of the principalship?

In what follows, we present a brief review of literature on novice principals and a theoretical framework centered on burnout and its correlates. Then, we describe our study’s methods and present quantitative and qualitative findings related to our three research questions. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of findings and recommendations for principal preparation and in-service development as well as future research.

Background: Novice Principals

All principals begin as novices and advance through several stages throughout their career (e.g., survival, control, stability, educational leadership, professional actualization (Parkay, Currie, & Rhodes, 1992), with each stage having differences in attitudes, behaviors, expectations, and professional development needs (Oplatka, 2001). Research on novice principals primarily focuses on preparation, in-service development, challenges, and socialization processes (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Bogotch & Riedlinger, 1993; Bullock, James, & Jamieson, 1995; Daresh & Male, 2000; Duncan & Seguin, 2002; O’Doherty & Ovando, 2013; Osterman & Sullivan, 1996; Parkay et al., 1992; Pardo Tuma & Spillane, 2019; Shirrell, 2016; Slater, Garcia, & Gorosave, 2008; Slegers, Wassink, van Veen, & Imants, 2009; Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010; Vilorio, Volpe, Guajardo, & Kyle, 2019; Weiner & Woulfin, 2017) (for literature reviews see: Crow, 2006; Kılınç, A. Ç., & Gümüş 2020; Oplatka, 2012). Few studies investigate novice principal burnout and how they cope with the stress of their jobs (Author, 2019).

Given that many low-performing schools have inexperienced principals that often exit their schools within a few years, we are concerned with novice principals’ burnout and how they cope with the personal, social, and organizational aspects of their job. Walker and Quian (2006) likened serving as a novice principal as “balancing at the top of the greasy pole” given the “slipping, sliding, and uncertainty” (p. 297). Spillane and Lee (2014) detailed how a cohort of novice Chicago Public School principals underwent a major “reality shock” as they confronted numerous, diverse, and unpredictable problems of practice. Other researchers have documented how novice principals struggled with the legacy of their predecessor, motivating people to change, and balancing the multiple complexities of the principalship (O’Doherty & Ovando, 2013).

In a review of literature focused on novice principals experiences, Oplatka (2012) identified five early career experiences: (1) a sense of shock or surprise as novice principals gain a full understanding of what it means to be a principal; (2) an overemphasis on technical aspects of the principalship at the expense of instruction, which can result in frustration and limited professional fulfillment; (3) confusion, frustration, and exhaustion while dealing with multiple tasks and unexpected negative events; (4) feelings of enthusiasm for their job coupled with high levels of stress, loneliness, professional insecurity, and fears of failure and losing their legitimacy; and (5) a sense of uncertainty, which can bolster suspicion toward staff. Oplatka (2012) also found that coping effectively with stress, frustration, and related emotions associated with the principalship was critical to novice principal success. In a multi-year study of first- and second-year principals, researchers found that high-stakes accountability policies socialized principals to focus on technical rather than relational aspects of school leadership (Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008). Some of the principals struggled (1) implementing systems to improve instruction and discipline; (2) managing challenging, negative, or ineffective faculty and staff; (3) building strong relationships with diverse stakeholders; and (4) cultivating a trust and improvement-oriented school culture. Other studies documented how novice principals were impacted by internal and external factors associated with complex bureaucracies (Osterman & Sullivan, 1996).

Novice principals can struggle to make sense of demands from external stakeholders or perceive external demands as conflicting with their own beliefs (Pardo Tuma & Spillane, 2019). Decision-making, delegation, and interpersonal relationships are likely to be more challenging for novice principals because they can: (1) struggle to make decisions and establish priorities due to a lack of situational knowledge; (2) resist delegation of tasks resulting in feeling overwhelmed; and (3) avoid necessary conflict with personnel in order to “settle in” to their new roles (Bullock et al, 1995). In time, principals may come to terms with taking an unpopular position, setting priorities that everyone may not agree with, or modifying their own expectations about the job (Pardo Tuma & Spillane, 2019), but as novices they may experience higher levels of stress.

Novice principals, learning their craft, can experience frustration and loneliness (Author, 2018; Stephenon & Bauer, 2010). For novice principals learning on the job is partly a process of role socialization. Several studies highlight that novice principals benefit from mentoring and induction programs as they are provided with opportunities for further skill development, advice from seasoned administrators, and opportunities to reflect with a qualified mentor (Alsburry & Hackmann, 2006; James-Ward, 2013; Lochmiller, 2014; Oplatka & Lapidot, 2018; Simieou, Decman, Grigsby, & Schumacher, 2010). These practices provide some basis for how novice principals may cope with the stresses of their job. In sum, research on novice principals highlight the benefit of self-reflection, talking with supportive mentors, and building a positive self-image and sense of legitimacy, but the field has mostly relied on survey data to assess principal burnout. Few studies have examined novice principal burnout and how novice principals cope with stress.

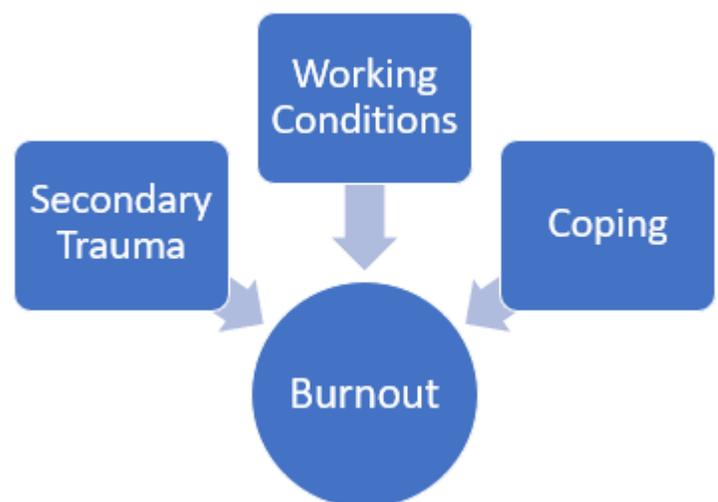
Theoretical Framework

Principals are professionals leading human-service institutions, which means they need to complete the job functions of the principalship but also manage the personal and social dimensions of leading an organization designed to support students, teachers, families, and staff.

Thus, to understand how novice principals experience and cope with burnout, our theoretical framework focuses on burnout, but also secondary trauma, workplace conditions, and coping.

Figure 1 depicts how secondary trauma, working conditions, and coping contribute to levels of burnout.

Figure 1. Factors Contributing to Burnout



Burnout

Burnout can be understood as an occupational hazard because it can affect personal and professional well-being. Burnout is related to feelings of hopelessness, which can impact one's ability to be successful at work (Stamm, 2010). Burnout has also been described as a psychological phenomenon in which "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment can occur among individuals who do 'people work'..." (Maslach & Jackson, 1986, p. 1). Emotional exhaustion has been described as feeling overextended, drained, and a sense of depleted emotional resources. Depersonalization is a related construct that includes cynical and detached attitudes toward other people. Personal accomplishment refers to feelings of competence and a tendency to evaluate oneself positively concerning one's work with others (Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, & Schaufeli, 2000).

Since burnout is a multidimensional construct (Maslach & Jackson, 1986), individual, school, and district factors (e.g., school size, parent trust/mistrust, principal role clarity, mentoring/support) influence principal burnout levels (Gmelch & Gates, 1998; Ozer, 2013). Several studies have examined principal burnout, although these studies primarily focus broadly on burnout rather than on its personal, social, and organizational correlates (Author, 2018; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Friedman, 1995; Gmelch & Gates, 1998; Gmelch & Torelli, 1994; Mahfouz, 2018; Tomic & Tomic, 2008; Whitaker, 1996). Some researchers have found that years of principal experience are not related to burnout (Combs et al., 2009) while others have found higher levels of burnout for novice principals (Author, 2018). Negative experiences can impact principal self-efficacy and job satisfaction, which contribute to burnout and a principal's desire to exit their position (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Principals who find incongruity between their own expectations of their role or their values about their role and that of district administrators, teachers, parents, or other stakeholders are also more likely to experience burnout (Gmelch & Torelli, 1994). Relatedly, personal and professional experiences and values specific to individual principals may also influence burnout. For example, Tomic and Tomic (2008) found that a lack of principal job-related existential fulfillment was a burnout determinant.

Secondary Trauma

One experience that can contribute to burnout is secondary traumatic stress, which is often referred to or associated with compassion fatigue (Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Stamm, 2010). Secondary traumatic stress has been defined as "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another" (NCTSN, 2018, p. 1). A similar term, compassion fatigue has been defined as "stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (Figley, 1995, p. 7), or as a "reduced empathetic capacity or client interest manifested through behavior and emotional reactions to traumatizing experiences of others" (Cieslak, Shoji, Douglas, Melville, Luszczynska, & Benight, 2014, p. 76). Principals who experience secondary trauma and compassion fatigue may experience higher levels of burnout. However, individuals working in helping professions can also find their work rewarding. Compassion satisfaction has been described as "the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well" and can be a balancing construct to compassion fatigue and burnout (Stamm, 2010, p. 12). Researchers in the mental health field have found evidence that professionals with higher levels of compassion satisfaction also have increased experience, specialized training, and positive coping and career-sustaining behaviors (e.g., spending time with family, taking regular vacations; Craig & Sprang, 2010).

Few studies focused on how principals experience secondary trauma, despite the principal's role in the community and working with families. Author (2018) identified high-levels of secondary trauma among some urban principals along the U.S.-Mexico border. During interviews, these principals identified how "acute and chronic problems outside of their immediate control" (e.g., students with home-life issues in Mexico, children exposed to physical and sexual abuse and still suffering with trauma; students separated from parents or family due to deportation) contributed to burnout while "acute and chronic problems that could be remedied" (e.g., students who needed basic access to health care for glasses, students needing attention and positive relationships, students struggling academically) was associated with higher levels of principal compassion satisfaction, or positive feelings derived from being successful at work. This aforementioned study highlighted how secondary trauma can contribute to burnout.

Working Conditions

Traditionally, burnout has been understood as a bottom-up phenomenon starting with the individual rather than fully considering the conditions within the workplace. In response to this conceptualization of burnout, researchers and practitioners typically focus attention and resources to support individuals. However, organizational conditions also influence burnout. Many organizational risk factors have been identified across occupations and contexts (see Maslach, Schaunfeld, & Leiter, 2001). Leiter and Maslach (2003) identified six domains that are organizational correlates to burnout:

- **Workload:** related to when people have too much work to do with too little time. While people can recover from an acute work overload (e.g., a short-term crisis), people who experience chronic work overload cannot rest, recover, or restore balance. As a consequence, exhaustion can lead to a deterioration of the quality of work and challenges with collegial relationships.
- **Control:** An individual's perceived ability to influence decisions that impact their work, to exercise autonomy, and gain access to needed resources to problem-solve. According to Leiter and Maslach (2003), "control problems occur when workers have insufficient authority over their work or are unable to shape the work environment to be consistent with their values" (p. 96). Burnout is likely to increase when individuals feel that circumstances or powerful people are constraining their opportunity to work effectively.
- **Reward:** Monetary, social, and intrinsic rewards that provide recognition for work by colleagues, managers, and other external stakeholders. Individuals are likely to have feelings of inefficacy when they feel neglected by the material and/or social reward system within an organization. The intrinsic rewards (pride in doing one's work) keeps people feeling a sense of pleasure and satisfaction, which contributes to well-being and physical health as well as recognition from others.
- **Community:** Social support and quality of social interactions at work. Individuals are likely to do well in communities when they receive praise, feel a sense of happiness and comfort, and believe that people like and respect them. Chronic and unresolved conflict with others produces negative feelings of frustration, which is likely to contribute to burnout.
- **Fairness:** The extent that decisions are perceived by an individual as fair and communicates respect and self-worth. Unfairness may relate to inequity in workload or pay, instances of cheating, when evaluations or promotions are perceived as inappropriate, or when due process and dispute resolution are considered to be biased. Individuals who perceive supervisors as being fair and supportive are less likely to burnout and more able to adapt to organizational changes.
- **Values:** Ideals and motivations that initially attracted individuals to their jobs, which extend beyond the utilitarian exchange of work for money or career success. Values conflicts in the workplace can undermine people's work engagement. Conflicting values can create tensions. Some conflicts are within an organization (e.g., lofty vision not reflected in practice) while others exist when individual aspirations differ from organizational values.

Leiter and Maslach (2003) argued that burnout is partly related to the degree of experienced congruence between the six domains within the work context and the individual. In sum, the greater the individual's perceived gap in the six domains, the greater chance of burnout.

Principal turnover research provides evidence that working conditions covers multiple domains, including principal autonomy and rewards, impacts principal retention (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Yan, 2020).

Coping

Stress is a normal phenomenon that people face when experiencing disturbances in everyday life. More specifically, it can be described as "responses a person makes to stimulus events that disturb his or her equilibrium and tax or exceed his or her ability to cope" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 829). While life disturbances vary greatly in severity, how individuals cope with them reflects their level of resilience and has a strong determination in the level of stress that they will experience. The concept of resilience can be described personal traits that allow an individual to

successfully adapt to adversity or a disruptive life event (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Obradovic, 2006), and is central to understanding how stress is experienced. In their meta analytic review, Lee and colleagues (2013) provided evidence that healthy coping strategies that facilitate increased resilience and the ability to self-regulate emotions during and after stressful situations can be improved by increasing protective factors such as self-efficacy, positive affect and self-esteem. While preventive behaviors such as developing non-judgmental professional relationships (e.g., supervisory or mentor relationships) can facilitate the growth of these protective factors and increased resiliency, positive responses to traumatic events can also lead to psychological growth and increased resilience. Post traumatic growth (PTG) can be described as positive psychological gain (e.g., increased future resilience) that results from experienced trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Factors contributing to PTG include the ability to disclose personal concerns about a traumatic event in the context of a non-judgmental relationship.

Individuals who experience severe types of stress such as post-traumatic stress or secondary trauma often cope via basic “fight or flight” strategies which involve the disproportional arousal of specific brain structures and systems. These include the amygdala and right hemisphere functioning, and also sympathetic nervous system (SNS) responses such as elevated heart rate, increased respiration, dilated pupils, freezing response, slowing/stopping of digestion, and constricting blood vessels (Cozolino, 2017; Luke, 2020). While these responses are appropriate during life threatening situations, chronic overstimulation of the amygdala and SNS can lead to chronic exhaustion, anxiety and a decline in overall health (Luke, 2020). Secondary traumatic stress (or post-traumatic stress) activates the SNS as a response to “perceived threat” rather than an actual threat. Healthy coping includes an ability to interpret accurately actual and perceived threats, which in turn leads to effective responses. Research into Posttraumatic Stress (PTSD) treatment has provided robust findings that support the broad effectiveness of psychotherapeutic interventions (Benish, Imel & Wampold, 2008; Erford et al., 2016). Generally, these interventions promote self-regulation (or simply self-relaxation) where individuals have both a cognitive awareness and a degree of emotional/bodily regulation. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of these types of interventions are not always known to professionals in the workplace or are not accessible through their places of employment. Specifically, little is known about principal coping mechanisms given that few studies have investigated the topic.

Methods

In this study, we used a mixed-methods design which involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data first and then exploring the implications of the quantitative data with a qualitative survey (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In the first phase, survey data were collected from the population of principals in one large urban school district in the Southwestern U.S. to assess levels of burnout, secondary trauma, and workplace attributes. We used three tools to measure the intended constructs in this study. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) Educator Survey (ES) is a 22-item survey that includes three subscales (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment).¹ The Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL 5) (Stamm, 2010) is a 30-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure both positive and negative aspects of providing care to individuals who have experienced traumatic stressors.² The Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS) is a 29-item survey that measures six factors: (1) workload (2) control (3) reward (4) community (5) fairness, and (6) values.³ In the second, qualitative phase we used an open-ended survey with all

¹ Maslach & Jackson, 1981) has been cited as the most frequent survey used measure of professional burnout (Volpe et al., 2014; Worley, Vasser, Wheeler, & Barnes, 2008). For the purposes of this study, only the emotional exhaustion subscale was used a separate dimension of burnout. The items that are scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *never* (0) to (6) *every day*. The development of the MBI yielded good reliability for the emotional exhaustion subscale ($\alpha = .89$)

² The ProQOL assesses the constructs of compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue across three unique subscales: *burnout*, *secondary traumatic stress*, and *compassion satisfaction*. Cronbach's alpha values on the three subscales ranged from .75 to .88, respectively in the most recent published version of the survey (Stamm, 2010).

³ Recent research using the AWS with secondary school teachers have scale reliability coefficients ranging from .66 to .80 (Masluk et al., 2018). Higher scores on AWS scales reflect positive work experiences.

principals to better understand how working conditions, secondary trauma, and coping strategies related to burnout. The qualitative survey included a set of open-ended questions to take principal leadership experiences “out of the shadows” to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences within contexts (Hallinger, 2018). The qualitative survey was the primary data collection tool to investigate coping strategies.

Setting and Selection

The School District South (SDS) has approximately 160,000 students with over 200 schools in total. The majority of students in SDS are Hispanic (70%). Black (21%), White (5%), multi-racial (2%), and Asian (1%) students comprise the rest of the student body. More than 80 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL), although socioeconomic segregation is apparent across the district as some schools enroll virtually no students eligible for FRL, while others enroll solely students receiving FRL. Forty percent of the students are considered English Language Learners (ELLs). According to a state rating system, 28 campuses received a rating of “A,” 97 campuses received a “B,” 76 received a “C,” 12 received a “D,” and only 8 received an accreditation rating below a “D.”⁴ SDS was selected because it represents one of the largest and most socioeconomically diverse school districts in the U.S. The size of SDS allowed us to collect a large sample of data, but also to look across principals with varying years of experience. SDS had 220 schools with 210 principals.⁵ Seventy-five principals were considered novice with 0-3 years of experience as a principal.

Analytic Sample

Data collection occurred from June 2019 through February 2020. After obtaining district approval, we attended a districtwide principal meeting to distribute surveys. ProQOL, MBI-ES, AWS, and qualitative survey data were collected from 203 of the district’s 210 principals (96.6%). Four principals were eliminated due to incomplete data. The final analytic sample consisted of 199 principals. We used STATA to merge and clean responses across all three surveys to allow for a standardized comparison of variables.

In an effort to simplify analysis and the interpretation of results, several variables from our data are transformed and recoded. We created z-score transformations for each outcome burnout measure as well as each independent variable. Using this approach, we effectively standardized each variable which allowed us to interpret results for variables across different surveys. Thus, we can interpret our outcomes in terms of changes in standard deviations above or below the distribution of each variable (Lavrakas, 2008). In line with the focus of the analysis to explore burnout in novice principals, we created novice and experienced variables to indicate principal experience cut points. A “novice” principal is in their first three years as a principal (n=72), and an “experienced” principal who has more than three years of experience as a principal (n=126).

Table 1 displays background characteristics of all principals included in our sample. Table 2 displays differences in burnout and other related variables of interest between novice principals and experienced principals. Each of the factors in Table 2 represent Likert scale responses for the various measures shown. The first two

	Novice		Experienced		All	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean
Female	71	0.65	123	0.72	195	0.69
Experience	72	1.68	118	4.25	191	3.28
Black	72	0.42	126	0.40	199	0.41
Asian	72	0.01	126	0.01	199	0.01
Hispanic	72	0.33	126	0.35	199	0.34
White	72	0.22	126	0.16	199	0.19
Total staff	71	72.6	120	72.6	192	72.5
Total students	72	700	119	704	192	701
Secondary	72	0.28	126	0.36	199	0.32

⁴ Add information about VAM models

⁵ Some principals were assigned to multiple campuses, which explains why the district had 220 schools but only 210 principals.

factors shown (burnout & secondary trauma) are composite variables created by summing separate questions from the ProQOL. As such, they have a greater raw-total value compared with the rest of the outcome variables shown in Table 2. For each of these measures, we followed instructions from the survey manual when calculating final scores for principals.

Qualitative Data Analysis

For the qualitative part of the study, each principal completed a 4-page open-ended survey that took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Survey questions were derived from our conceptual framework and focused on burnout, secondary trauma, working conditions, and coping strategies. Data were coded using Dedoose software in multiple phases. First, we read survey data several times and organized data by principal to track how each novice principal experienced burnout. The initial coding phase involved low-inference codes derived from our conceptual framework (e.g., *stressful situations, frustration, coping behavior, district working conditions, school working conditions*). Next, we reviewed these codes and wrote analytical memos to facilitate our understandings of our initial analysis and engage in a critical discussion. Then, we looked to identify all the unique instances or experiences that contributed to burnout and stress, so we sought to identify examples and sub-categories in the following areas: *working conditions and duties, emotional exhaustion, and coping strategies*. This coding process allowed us to identify the many difference experiences of principals, but also how common or similar their experiences were across the district. Finally, we applied a member checking strategy to validate findings by having follow up interviews with principals who participated in this study. In addition, we called upon current principals in other districts to review and offer reactions to our interpretation of data. We used triangulation between prior surveys and the open-ended survey to better understand how the participants experience burnout and related constructs.

Findings

Novice Principal Burnout

Initial comparisons between novice and experienced principals showed no statistically significant differences on the variables of interest. The largest observed difference was in feelings of burnout. Novice principals reported slightly elevated levels of burnout compared to experienced principals. Further comparisons also showed that to a lesser degree, experienced principals reported slightly more positive feelings about their workload and their sense of community at work. Finally, novice principals showed slightly stronger feelings of values (i.e., ideals & motivation) related to their work. The remaining variables of interest showed no discernable differences between novice and experienced principals. See table 2 for all variable comparisons between novice and experienced principals.

	Novice		Experienced	
	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>N</i>	Mean
Burnout	70	19.6	122	18.2
Secondary trauma	69	18.7	119	18.9
Workload	72	2.29	120	2.54
Control	72	3.45	122	3.52
Reward	72	3.43	122	3.43
Community	71	3.79	118	3.98
Fairness	69	3.24	120	3.13
Values	71	4.28	122	4.10

In the next phase of our analysis, we modeled predictors of burnout using multivariate regression (see Table 3) for novice principals. We used regression models to predict burnout using secondary trauma and principals' perceived workplace satisfaction or well-being (i.e., control, reward, fairness, values, workload)⁶. Each model also contains a set of covariates which allowed us to control for personal background and school-level factors which may be associated with principals' feelings of burnout. We controlled for gender, race/ethnicity, school size (total students and staff), and school level.

The results of the regression models show that secondary trauma is the strongest and the only significant predictor of burnout ($B = .47$) for novice principals. Other variables that showed weaker non-significant relationships with burnout were community ($B = -.16$) and workload ($B = -.14$). This implies that the more novice principals experience feelings related to secondary trauma, the more they are also likely to experience feelings of burnout. To a lesser degree, the analysis also shows positive feelings of community and workload may be a negative predictor for burnout in novice principals. However, the relationships between burnout and community and workload should be interpreted with caution as these relationships were not significant. The variables related to work conditions (reward, control, values & fairness) showed regression coefficients that fell below .08, which implied that they had a negligible relationship with burnout for novice principals.⁷

Table 3. Predictors of Burnout for Novice Principals

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Secondary Trauma	0.47***	0.10
Control	-0.02	0.12
Reward	-0.06	0.10
Fairness	-0.07	0.11
Values	-0.03	0.13
Workload	-0.14	0.11
Community	-0.16	0.09
Female	-0.18	0.19
African American	-0.27	0.24
Asian	-0.21	0.70
Hispanic	0.02	0.24
Total Staff	0.01	0.01
R-squared		0.75
<i>N</i>		60

Note. All outcomes variables and main predictors of interest shown were converted to z-scores for ease of interpretation. Associations for a total students variable and secondary principal dummy variable were not shown here because coefficients were less than 0.000 in magnitude. All demographic covariates were entered into the model in their unstandardized format. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.001$

Emotional Exhaustion

Novice and experienced principals reported a wide array of emotionally exhausting aspects of their job on the qualitative survey. Only about 5% (4/75) of novice principals reported that no particular aspect of their job was emotionally exhausting. In response to being prompted to identify aspects of their job that makes them feel drained, overextended, or emotionally depleted, one principal noted, "Nothing! 95% of the job is amazing. 5% is really tough and you have to learn to thrive through the 5%." However, all other principals reported emotionally exhausting aspects of their job. The most common responses reported include, (1) teacher behavior and interpersonal conflict; (2) teacher deficit perspectives; (3) conflicting messages from district administrators; (4) parent concerns: lack of engagement/support, child abuse, inability to help families dealing with external challenges; and (5) constant communication with all stakeholders. Several types of tasks were specifically identified as emotionally exhausting, such as problem-solving, juggling multiple demands, having limited time to complete many tasks, and seeking out resources.

⁶ In all models, outcome variables and predictors of interest were converted to z-scores for ease of comparison.

⁷ We also created a graph plot to illustrate how the predictor variables related to burnout in comparison to each other. The predictors were converted into Z-scores to standardize the interpretation of them. Appendix 1 shows that secondary trauma is the strongest predictor to burnout, with control and reward having a smaller but still significant predictive impact on burnout. This graph provides a more illustrative view of the degree to which secondary trauma and the work life variables relate to burnout in secondary trauma.

Seventy-three percent (55/75) of principals reported that school culture related issues were the most emotionally exhausting aspects of their job. Based on principal responses, school culture issues included “having critical conversations with teachers” to address “interpersonal conflict among teachers,” “confronting teacher deficit perspectives,” and addressing a lack of “teacher motivation” to improve or change their practice.” A second-year elementary school principal reported, “The most exhausting part of my job is trying to get veteran teachers to change how they teach when they have seen proven results in the past. I am encouraging them to try new things... the way our district is now teaching us.” Another principal reported that she was emotionally exhausted by “dealing with the emotional/mental health issues with the staff with no training or support.” Several principals reported struggling to help teachers take responsibility for all students learning. A third-year principal noted, “The time I spend focused on helping a teacher understand it’s their job to serve all students, should be spent somewhere else... Why do I have to tell teachers this?” Similar comments were reported and could be associated with working conditions within the school and building histories that likely extended to the prior principal’s leadership.

Stressors related to school context and unique circumstances emerged in survey responses as responsible for burnout and emotional exhaustion. For example, a small group of principals identified campus or community specific issues, such as a lack of resources, buildings in disrepair requiring constant maintenance, or a problematic teacher or parent. While not specific to any one context, almost half the principals (48%, 36/75) reported feeling exhausted by having to constantly be engaged in relationship building. Specifically, relationship building included meeting families and community members, building rapport with teachers and staff, listening to teacher and staff concerns, and as one principal noted, “picking your battles... so people won’t be offended.” Several principals understood that relationship building was part of the job for any new principal. They also expressed that being engaged in “constant communication” could be physically exhausting.

Working Conditions and Work Duties

Principals reported a wide array time-consuming duties. The most common duties reported by all principals (novice and veteran) as taking up most of their time were: (1) instructional support: classroom observations and feedback, professional learning community (PLC) and data meetings, and coaching or giving feedback to teachers; (2) campus administrative work: emails, administrative meetings, completing district reports/paperwork; (3) parent concerns; and (4) student discipline. Novice principals reported similar time-consuming work duties as veteran principals, although novice principals commonly reported three specific work duties as most time consuming. Roughly 90% (67/75) of the novice principals spent a high percentage of time on instructional support. A second-year principal noted, “I spend so much time in classrooms and talking with teachers that at the end of the day I take home hours of paperwork... It can be exhausting.” About 60% of principals reported that they spent a great deal of time on student discipline (44/75) and meetings with parents and staff (46/75). Several novice principals also noted “problem-solving,” “trouble-shooting,” and “defusing” or “managing” difficult situations or challenges were very time consuming. A first-year principal noted, “I’ve learned my job is mostly about fixing other people’s problems.” Finally, a group of novice principals reported spending a significant amount of time planning and preparing for meetings while few more experienced identified either as time consuming.

Both novice and experienced principal reported context-specific issues that were both time-consuming and stressful, such as interpersonal conflict between teachers, dealing with absent teachers/staff, managing building operations and maintenance, and removing a troublesome teacher. The principals noted that these events were context/circumstance specific. For example, a second-year principal’s school was old and in disrepair, which meant she was constantly dealing with the district and with having building issues fixed. She reported feeling stressed because she could not focus on instruction, faculty, and students because she was making sure the school had heat or did not have a leaky roof. She asked, “How can you get anything else done when your build doesn’t have heat?” Another novice principal reported “in-fighting” between teachers on the same grade-level team or “clique” behaviors stopped her from addressing instructional issues. In-fighting meant teachers were not working together to plan, analyze data, and collaborate. Sometimes, principals reported that just one individual could disrupt a group, waste significant time, and cause high levels of stress. A first-year principal noted her frustration with a “problematic” teacher that took up a significant amount of time on a daily basis. She reported, “I spend time every day just dealing with this one person.”

The principal reported having to provide support to the teacher, “write ups” for disciplinary purposes, and “communicating with district” about the ongoing problems as part of having the teacher removed.

The common duties that novice principals reported taking up all or most of their time were not always viewed as stressful or emotionally exhausting. A small group of principals felt dealing with conflict, upset parents, and other emergent issues was, as one principal noted, “What I signed up for.” However, several principals used words like “nuisance,” “distraction,” and “frustrating” to describe how non-instructional issues were frustrating and took their attention away from other priorities they deemed more important. Many novice principals reported that they “loved their work” or felt they had an “amazing job”, but this was in spite of these less-appealing experiences of being a principal. While the most time-consuming issues were often not the most stressful, novice principals did report feeling emotionally exhausted by certain tasks or aspects of their job, especially related to traumatic experiences of their students.

Secondary Trauma

A majority of principals (52%, 39/75) reported that working to address mental health related issues of students was the most or one of the most emotionally exhausting parts of their job, which included their efforts to support children dealing with emotional disturbances or abuse. The principals reported instances where they learned about students exposed to acute or chronic physical or mental abuse. They also reported learning about how a lack of stable housing, fears related to immigration and deportation, and financial stability created fear and uncertainty in the lives of their students. Several principals expressed concern that community violence had impacted students’ families or neighborhood, which made them worry about the well-being and long-term development of their students. One first-year principal reported, “There is just so much going on, it’s hard for me to process as an adult. I IMAGINE that for a child.” A third-year principal noted, “Students are exposed to death, violence, abuse, and then they come to us.” While these comments might be explained by a deficit viewpoint of schools and families in low-income communities of color, many of the principals’ survey responses highlighted the high-levels of community violence, domestic violence, and immigration enforcement that were prevalent in some of the city’s Black and Latinx communities.

The emotions described by the principals relate to secondary trauma, which reflect previous findings from the MBI-ES and ProQuol. The principals reported learning about student trauma, working to help students, and feeling empathy, fear, disillusionment and other emotional responses. For example, one principal reported supporting a child with mental health issues, “Many [parents] don’t want counselors involved and learning about their business they are reluctant to sign students up. Knowing the trauma [students] carry with them and the fight to get them help is exhausting.” An elementary school principal noted that “trauma-suicide, [and] abuse” were among the most emotionally exhausting aspects of her job. Other principals noted that getting “support for emotionally disturbed students” was depleting because of the lack of resources available.

Principals reported feeling hurt or upset by knowing that students were suffering although the principals reported feeling worse when they tried to intervene but had limited success. One principal reported, “Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.” Her comment reflected that sometimes her school was able to help a child, but in other instances the child continued to be exposed to ongoing trauma or was unable to cope with unhealthy prior experiences. These reported experiences reflect a mixture between secondary trauma and working conditions where principals have limited control or access to resources to make a difference in a given situation. For example, one principal reported feeling “Knowing you made a difference” after helping a child’s family receive support from the city’s family services department. However, another principal expressed ongoing concern and sadness having tried to intervene without success when a child was consistently having “emotional breakdowns” due to his psychological condition.

Coping Behaviors

The principals in this study reported numerous ways for coping with burnout, although no principal reported receiving any pre-service or in-service professional development on the topic. Only one principal specifically reached out for help from their district when they struggled with their own emotional difficulties. With the exception of three

principals, each participant reported specific coping strategies. A second-year elementary school principal reported, “I do not have time to cope with the stress of being a principal. It is a 24/7 job – I work weekends too.” The second principal recorded, “Not Applicable.” Four principals also provided very general, work-related coping behaviors, such as “lean on team,” create “to-do lists,” “try to delegate,” and “see the big picture.”

The rest of the principals reported a broad variety of coping behaviors. The six most common coping behaviors were: (1) spending time with family/children; (2) talking/networking with other principals; (3) exercising; (4) meditating; and (5) attending church, praying, engaging in spirituality. A complete list of principal coping activities include: none, alone time, relaxing at home, family/children, cooking, time with friends, watching television, taking hot baths, not taking work home, spending time outdoors, talking/networking with other principals, creating a to-do list, exercising, drinking alcohol, eating healthy and/or unhealthy food, delegating work, gambling, and going to church/praying/having faith.

Even principals who described using healthy coping behaviors (exercising, spending time with friends and family) reported struggling to manage their stress. One principal noted, “It is difficult for me to fully decompress sometimes, as the work is always still on my mind.” Several principals gave examples of specific traumatic or stressful experiences and how they coped in response. For example, a first-year elementary school principal noted that she “talked with a mentor about the stress. I used EAP [Employee Assistance Program] after one of our students was killed. I bought myself a cricut [machine used to make designs] to make pretty things and have time to unplug from school.” EAP is a program paid for by employers to assist employees with personal or work-related problems that can impact job performance, health, and mental and emotional well-being. Another first year principal relied on her home life for support. She reported, “Home provides me the support that I need or look for. My family. My pets, playing with them when I can, helps me to relieve anxiety.” Several principals also reported attending church, praying, and engaging in other spiritual practices to either let go of stress, take their mind out of work, or try to heal from the physical and emotional toll of the job.

Coping strategies were frequently described as ongoing behaviors that principals utilized with some degree of regularity. For example, several principals reported attending happy hours with other principals at the end of the week or going to the gym in the morning before work once or twice a week. One principal played basketball once a week at night to “blow off steam.” Regular principal meetings with were also opportunities for principals to cope with their job and share their emotions. Twenty principals specifically noted that talking to peers or supervisor at regularly scheduled principal meetings helped them cope with their job. A second-year principal reported, “It helps to share what you are going through and hear from others that what you experience is normal.” While most principals shared that they had some level of consistency in coping with their emotions, many also noted that they could also get off schedule and not cope with their stress. Many surveys included evidence that principal schedules and family responsibilities disrupted their opportunities to go to the gym, eat healthy, spend time with family, or consistently engage in activities that helped them cope.

Discussion

Principal burnout is a critical equity issue confronting schools across the nation, particularly because principal turnover is increasing and disproportionality impacts schools serving low-income students of color (Grissom, Bartanen, & Mitani, 2019). This mixed-methods study examined principal burnout in one large urban school district that mostly serves low-income students of color. Within the district, approximately 40 percent of principals were in their first three years on the job. We found that burnout was slightly higher in novice principals when compared to veteran principals with both groups generally scoring in the low range of burnout. Previous research into burnout on the US-Mexico Border reported higher rates of burnout than the novice principals in this study (Author, 2018). While the average scores of burnout for novice principals were only slightly elevated, we did identify a group of novice principals with higher levels of burnout, which indicates that a subgroup of principals were highly stressed, emotionally exhausted, and struggling on the job. In comparison with other professions, the novice principals in this study scored lower on reported burnout than nurses (Wu, Singh-Carlson, Odell, Reynolds & Su, 2015), formal caregivers providing care to an

individual 65 years of age or older (Thorson-Olesen, Meinertz & Eckert, 2018), and slightly higher than childcare workers (Eastwood & Ecklund, 2008).

Drawing upon our three-pronged principal burnout framework, we also investigated how secondary trauma and working conditions contributed to novice principal burnout. The primary finding from the quantitative analysis is that secondary trauma plays a significant role in predicting burnout in novice principals. This finding is important because it connects the phenomenon of burnout (which is of primary interest to school districts) with the much more complex experience of secondary trauma. The strength of this relationship is also supported by the theoretical framework of the ProQOL that connects burnout and secondary trauma as distinct factors of compassion fatigue (Stamm, 2010). We also investigated working conditions, which is a multi-faceted construct that can impact principals' ability to manage effectively the demands of their job and persist in their roles on campus. While positive feelings about community and workload in novice principals also contributed to burnout, this relationship was small and should be viewed as having limited connection to burnout when compared to secondary trauma for the participants in this study.

The qualitative survey findings add much needed nuance to understanding principal burnout generally as well as the relationship between burnout and secondary trauma, working conditions, and coping strategies. Most veteran and novice principals reported a wide array of emotionally exhausting aspects of their job, which included dealing with teacher behaviors and deficit thinking, conflicting messages and policies from district leadership, parental concerns, and constant communication demands with members of the school and community. Novice principals specifically felt school culture related work and issues were exhausting. Tasks associated with these job roles included having difficult conversations, resolving interpersonal conflicts, and motivating teachers to improve their performance. While these tasks were generally challenging for novice principals, a smaller subset of principals reported frustration with more structural issues, such as buildings in disrepair or a lack of resources. These findings may indicate a need for additional role socialization and raise questions about the types of schools novice principals are initially placed in.

Working conditions and related job duties helped to explain principal frustrations with their job. The principals in this study reported spending most of their time on instructional support, campus administrative work, parental concerns, and discipline. At times, principals were frustrated with resolving problems got in the way of them doing work that supported teachers, instruction, and student achievement. However, our qualitative findings underscored how the experience of secondary trauma could be traumatic for principals, especially if they lacked resources or were persistently unsuccessful at resolving a trauma experienced by students. Similar to a prior study (Author, 2019), the principals expressed concern about community violence, deportation, and students with emotional disabilities. The principals reported learning about student trauma and feeling a range of emotions, including empathy, fear, disillusionment, and anger. Yet, principals also reported that at times, they knew they or their school has made a powerful difference. Successfully intervening to support a child experiencing trauma can be a powerful experience for principals and contribute to a sense of compassion satisfaction, which can reduce burnout.

This study highlighted the ways novice principals experience burnout, but also how they coped with their jobs. Almost every principal shared some way in which they cope with the stress of their job. Common coping strategies included spending time with family, talking with other principals, exercising, meditating, and attending church or engaging in some form of spirituality. The principals also shared unhealthy coping strategies, including drinking alcohol, eating unhealthy foods, and gambling. Some principals noted that they were not always able to engage in their preferred coping strategies due to work and family commitments. One of the most important findings related to coping, however, was the fact that not one principal reported any formal or structured coping strategies provided by their district. In other words, principals were left to cope with their job duties on their own and amongst each other rather than relying on district supports and structures. Thus, while almost all principals coped with the stress of their jobs to help them reduce burnout, the district likely missed opportunities to further reduce burnout through more structured interventions.

Conclusion and Implications

Principal burnout is a critical topic for research and preparation. Additional research is needed to understand how principal burnout manifests and how working conditions, secondary trauma, and coping strategies influences levels of

principal burnout. We recommend that educational leadership researchers engage in survey research using validated measures in other contexts, but also utilize qualitative methods to better understanding the lived experiences of principals from diverse racial backgrounds working in different educational contexts (rural, suburban, urban, high-performing/low-performing). As the nation wrestles with greater calls for racial equity in schools, new studies can investigate how principals experience anti-racist leadership and whether efforts to address racism and other forms of marginalization contribute to burnout and turnover. More research is needed to understand social dynamics related to burnout. Additional research might explore administrator burnout on a campus to include the principal and assistant principal or campus administrative team. Finally, additional research is needed to explore how principals can learn and increase their resilience from experiencing burnout and job difficulty. Post-traumatic growth has yet to be a concept meaningfully investigated for school leaders.

This study also has important implications for leadership development and practice. University-based preparation programs and district professional developments should explore research and best practices related to burnout and healthy coping mechanisms. Preparation programs can provide training on coping strategies throughout coursework and clinical experiences. Thus, when program graduates are hired, they will enter the profession recognizing signs of burnout and able to consistently utilize healthy coping strategies. A self-care professional standard can support a focus on healthy coping in both pre- and in-service leadership development. Districts would be wise to enact policies that promote healthy coping strategies for principals. Such efforts can draw upon existing district resources, such as asking school counselors to provide trainings or relying on a train the trainer model where principals can learn about healthy coping and work in small groups during in-service professional developments. Revised principal evaluation tools can also emphasize and assess evidence of healthy coping strategies. Finally, the principalship will remain a complex and difficult job, but the more principals and policymakers can understand and address burnout the more likely principals will remain healthy and persist in their critical roles.

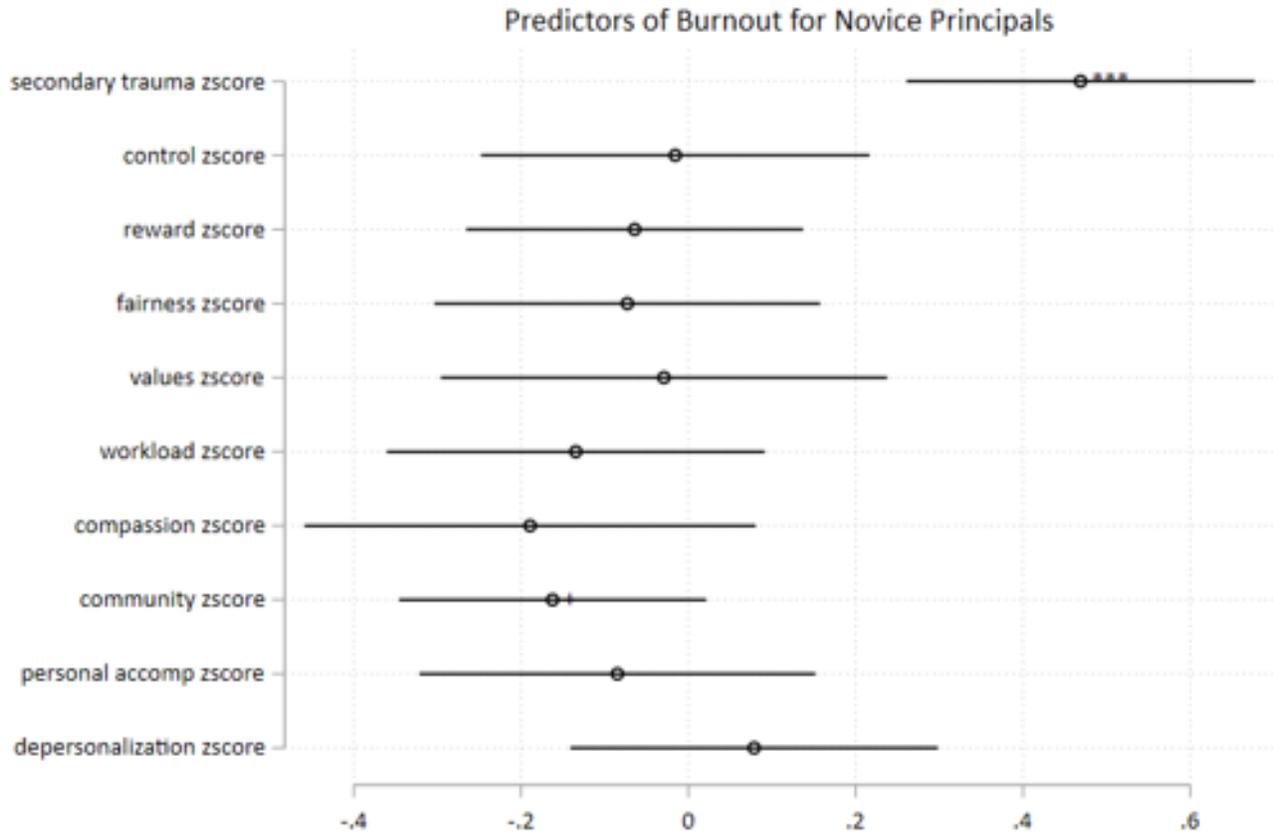
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Appendix 1. Predictors of Burnout for Novice Principals



The University of Texas at Austin ERC is a research center and P-20/Workforce Repository site which provides access to longitudinal, student-level data for scientific inquiry and policymaking purposes. Since its inception in 2008, the Texas ERC's goal is to bridge the gap between theory and policy by providing a cooperative research environment for study by both scholars and policy makers. As part of its mission, the ERC works with researchers, practitioners, state and federal agencies, and other policymakers to help inform upon critical issues relating to education today.

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