

Addressing Burnout in Educational Administrators

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ABSTRACT

Educational administrators play a pivotal role in shaping school climate, supporting teachers, and implementing policy, yet they often experience chronic stress and professional burnout. While teacher burnout has received considerable attention, the psychological toll on administrators remains underexplored. This qualitative study investigates how educational administrators experience and respond to burnout using a phenomenological approach. The research focuses on identifying emotional, organizational, and systemic contributors to burnout, such as workload, policy constraints, and lack of support, and explores how resilience, self-efficacy, and systemic interventions can mitigate these effects. The study reveals that burnout in administrators not only affects their well-being but also significantly impacts teacher morale, student outcomes, and school performance. By examining both personal coping mechanisms and institutional strategies, the research offers insights into sustainable practices that school districts and policymakers can implement to promote administrator well-being and retention. Ultimately, addressing administrative burnout is essential for fostering a supportive and thriving educational environment.

Keywords: Educational administrators, burnout, emotional exhaustion, school leadership, resilience, stress management, organizational support.

INTRODUCTION

Educational administrators are crucial for a school district's effectiveness, ensuring compliance with laws and policies, hiring staff, overseeing programs, and managing budgets. The pressures of accountability and reform often lead to stress and burnout, with many considering leaving the profession. While much has been studied about teacher stress, educational administrators' experiences are less explored, despite their significant influence on stakeholders' lives. Their wellness impacts not just themselves, but teachers, students, and the community. Understanding their behavioral abilities upon entering the field can inform needs assessments by colleges and districts. This study aims to investigate how educational administrators experience burnout and stress, and how they cope with these feelings. The primary research question is: 'In what ways do educational administrators contend with feelings of burnout and/or stress?' To explore this, qualitative methodology, particularly phenomenological interviews, is used, as prior research in this area is limited, making exploration essential [1, 2].

Understanding Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion that manifests as a reaction to chronic interpersonal stressors among professionals. Burnout is characterized by three clusters of symptoms: Emotional exhaustion is characterized by feelings of being overextended and drained of personal resources. Depersonalization involves a negative, cynical attitude toward one's clients and a lack of caring and empathy. Personal accomplishment involves a decline in feelings of competence and achievement in one's work with people. Chronically high levels of burnout in workers not only negatively impact those workers but also negatively affect their organizations' viability. A meta-analytic review of more than 50

studies, consisting of more than 30,000 participants across different professions, found that burnout is associated with job outcomes, such as job performance, absenteeism, turnover intent, and actual turnover. Administrative and supervisory support is critical in creating a supportive environment for educational administrators to minimize burnout and foster student success. There is a pressing need to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of educational administrators regarding burnout. An educational administrator is defined as a school-based decision maker with some formal authority over how resources are allocated, including principals and vice-principals. Educational administrators are under multiple and stressful demands, and their job stressors contribute to the high levels of burnout. A minimal understanding of educational administrators' burnout has led to sparse recruitment and retention policies in the education sector, impacting the number of workers available to assess student burnout in classrooms. School districts often have trouble finding or maintaining qualified instructional leaders needed to address teachers' and students' burnout. Schools are struggling to discern and solve problems before they cause harm to the students they serve [3, 4].

Definition of Burnout

Burnout was first studied in social service professions and is defined as a loss of energy, enthusiasm, and effectiveness in one's job. Some literature questions if burnout is a "Dutch" concept due to translation issues, while others argue that the core principles remain valid across cultures, supported by consistent statistical findings. Research has focused on burnout in various fields, including education and healthcare, particularly among teachers and administrators. Maslach's burnout model is often used in studies. Burnout stems from chronic workplace stressors and is deeply connected to organizational climate. In competitive industries, employees face intense pressure, impacting their well-being. The workplace climate influences both employee health and perception, reflecting the emotional aspects of its structure. Teachers' well-being is examined within workplace climate frameworks. Social cognition theory suggests that beliefs shape behavior and that experiences are filtered through these beliefs. When challenged, strong beliefs may lead to confusion and distress, although beliefs are often resistant to change despite being adaptable over time [5, 6].

Causes of Burnout

Burnout is often viewed as an individual issue, which overlooks its broader causes. This perspective neglects organizational and societal factors that contribute to burnout, categorized into three areas: organizational issues, administrative leadership styles, and teachers' personality traits. One significant organizational factor is work overload, where insufficient time and excessive demands foster frustration. Teachers face pressure to meticulously execute teaching duties without adequate time for preparation or resource gathering. Studies link burnout strongly to a lack of resources; even experienced teachers feel anxious and worn out when classroom supplies are inadequate. Furthermore, classroom climate and safety are organizational factors that exacerbate burnout. Continual disruptions and safety concerns can deteriorate classroom environments, leading teachers to become increasingly negative and cynical. Issues like fear of violence can undermine teachers' feelings of security. This deterioration impacts interactions with students; teachers may respond harshly to disruptive behaviors, fostering a hostile atmosphere. Additionally, the loss of autonomy in decision-making contributes to burnout. As standards-based instruction gains traction, teachers often feel restricted in their teaching methods and report a lack of control over their content. Many educational policies dictate how teachers must present material, forcing them to prioritize test preparation over creative instruction. This lack of choice can lead to feelings of depersonalization, making teachers feel ineffective and disillusioned [7, 8].

Symptoms of Burnout

Teaching has been a constant struggle with a few highs mixed right in with the lows. However, the majority of the time has been an uphill climb, constantly wondering how long the body can be drug down by everyone else's stress. It deserves increased clarity. My experience in the last three years has put him on the edge of not coming back. Being a teacher was not the reason for my burnout; the long hours, lack of support, pressure to learn ever-evolving rules as a teacher, lack of feedback on what is successful, and the never-ending stress of trying to be a successful teacher became the burnout. Very little sleep occurs due to worry and the craziness of every school day in a nightmare. Teaching will always be in the heart, and if ever blessed with being a leader in doing what the job says right by teachers and kids, I would love to have the summer off. There are hopes and dreams still in the heart, but the balance has tipped as it is

now called instead of being a teacher, just someone who gives a test and grades it to pass the time for a paycheck. The teacher's leaving, teacher two has not been in teacher two's room in three years. All of the reports written have been negative, and too many questions have been blown off. There are teachers getting points to leave, not a school that people want to stay at. Teacher two thought about quitting more than once, but it would just be in the same boat somewhere else, considering what about history or yelling at them to sit down, finally? Still being new, in some ways, to talk to teacher two feels like teacher one is trying to get fired; too much hope that just the next meeting will be what it is looking for, where one gets asked to be honest and then considered just in the wrong job. In student teaching, it was comforting to know that teachers are all learning together and working hard. But this place is fun, and being able to make kids laugh is priceless. On that note, it still questions how to prove oneself as a diligent worker with creative plans. Without any feedback on what is considered good or bad teaching and all the opinions of the masses...just having teachers' two's jokes called inappropriate and not clever would be nice instead of hearing nothing [9, 10].

The Impact of Burnout on Educational Administrators

Burnout emerged as a significant issue in human service professions during the early 1970s, characterized by prolonged responses to chronic job stressors and encompassing three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment. Educational administrators are confronted with unique stressors, prompting investigations into their burnout levels. Teachers enter the profession with enthusiasm, only to quickly encounter emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of ineffectiveness, catalyzed by factors like student discipline, heavy workloads, and personality clashes. Long-term stress can compel teachers to seek other employment or take breaks to recover. Despite the general perception that teaching is a desirable job, many teachers feel overwhelmed and ineffective after investing significant time and resources in their training. Past coping strategies may falter under ongoing stress, leading to negative interactions with students and colleagues. Administrators are increasingly interested in understanding teachers' burnout experiences to support their retention and well-being in the profession [11, 12].

Identifying Burnout in Educational Administrators

Burnout is a common trend across a variety of occupations. Teachers are losing sight of their passion, caring less, and feeling overwhelmed; in short, becoming burned out. The loss of enthusiasm toward students and learning can take a number of forms, including feelings of hopelessness or futility. Sometimes it may even manifest as outright hostility towards students. Educational administrators face many of the same stresses but deal with them in a much different fashion. At the secondary level, this includes monitoring policies and programs dictated by the district, making sure teachers have the tools they need to teach, and working with kids who sometimes have a difficult home life. Administrators today are not only dealing with the stresses on the educational level, but also pressures outside the walls of the school. Safety precautions in the event of school shootings, building maintenance and cleanliness, and staffing levels are just a few of many issues that were never considered in the past that have since taken hold of the attention of the administrator. Regardless of the level faced, it is easy to see how an administrator might feel overwhelmed. Even a belief that one is handling things well does not always equate to that same feeling in actuality. Types of positions, one may feel close to the ground compared to those at 30,000 feet, may also be of importance. Finding a system for self-checking and reflection is vital to understanding one's viewpoint. Handling the stresses of each day and reflecting on the management of them is equally important. Without a detailed understanding of feelings and views of stress, pressures, and burnout, the ability to help others through the same situation may be difficult, if not impossible. The rising concern for administrator burnout, or the slow fade out of energy and enthusiasm toward the day-to-day procedures, is a growing concern for both individuals and, in turn, the educational system [13, 14].

Strategies for Prevention

Given the negative consequences of job burnout, researchers are identifying strategies to address it. Many focus on increasing employee motivation to thrive despite challenges. Fostering resilience in staff can lead to a better ability to navigate workplace systems, reducing burnout. Studies indicate that resilient teachers experience less emotional drain, greater job satisfaction, and are generally more positive with colleagues. Increasing self-efficacy is also seen as a key component in combating burnout, as it helps

individuals cope with work stressors. Some researchers suggest that enhancing resilience and self-efficacy may be the most effective approaches to tackling burnout. Interventions have shown modest success in reducing burnout, especially when teaching personal coping skills or relaxation techniques, focusing specifically on emotional exhaustion. Organization-directed strategies, such as job training and continuing education, are effective in diminishing overall burnout. Administrators should prioritize strategies to prevent burnout, often overlooking the positive aspects of supporting mental health for employees. Emphasizing positive mental health approaches in educational settings is crucial for staff well-being. A supportive team environment is essential, where administrators collaborate to address collective needs without overwhelming any single individual. Promoting transparency fosters a culture of collective growth instead of competition. Allowing teachers autonomy in achieving curriculum goals fosters self-efficacy and empowers them in their roles. When staff feel valued, they can nurture a positive climate with students, initiating a cycle of self-selection that benefits the entire educational environment [15, 16].

Intervention Strategies for Burnout

While literature indicates strategies can reduce job burnout, many focus on increasing employee motivation to cope with work challenges. However, making employees happier isn't always effective against burnout's extensive nature. An alternative approach may enhance employees' ability to navigate their work environment, empowering them against burnout-inducing forces. In education, promoting resilience among teachers has shown positive effects, as resilient teachers experience less emotional drain, higher job satisfaction, and better coworker interactions. Creating a supportive cultural environment can help teachers tackle challenges with students, parents, and administration. Moreover, fostering self-efficacy among educational staff may bolster resilience and reduce burnout. High self-efficacy correlates with lower emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, leading some researchers to suggest that enhancing resilience and self-efficacy is vital for addressing job burnout. Although direct interventions can reduce burnout among practitioners, the effect sizes tend to be small. Teaching personal coping skills and relaxation techniques is effective for diminishing emotional exhaustion, while organization-directed strategies like job training and continuing education have proven most effective in reducing overall burnout feelings [17, 18].

Role of School Districts in Addressing Burnout

In examining the relationship between administrative support and burnout more generally, it is important to consider the role of school districts in addressing teacher turnover. Overall, there is considerable evidence that the role of school districts in addressing burnout is critical to improving teacher recruitment and retention. Moreover, school district effects in this area are likely to be quite large. Workload and pupil behavior are the two themes that should be prioritized, given that they significantly influence teachers' experiences of stressors. Among the districts in the current sample, workload is the greatest concern. Since it appears that small-scale efforts to alleviate teacher workload are nowhere in sight, it will be important for administrators to continue to look to larger, more systemic reforms, such as limits on standardized testing or longer terms for teacher contracts. Another significant concern is pupil behavior, especially lateness and absenteeism. The analyses indicate that a more positive pupil context is strongly associated with greater ratings of district-wide administrative support, as well as decreased emotional exhaustion and attrition. However, the study did not examine whether information about the association between pupil health and teacher attrition would be useful for policy efforts to prevent it. Efforts at reforming pupil behavior are likely to benefit from greater cooperation between districts and schools than with state- or national-level efforts. Studies have shown that problem-solving teams of school staff and family and social services professionals can contribute to improved pupil behavior, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Given that all districts in the current study had considerable numbers of schools in low-socioeconomic-status neighborhoods, national funding for reforming the general pupil context would likely pay dividends [19, 20].

Case Studies

To address the issue of burnout in educational administrators, two case studies focusing on administrators in different roles are presented. While each shares characteristics with the research population, important demographic differences influence the perceptions of burnout held by each group. The following case studies of a secondary school principal working in an urban setting and a district

administrative leader in a suburban area are highlighted. The primary purpose of this mixed-methods study was to assess the relationship between administrator support, burnout, and school climate in turnaround schools in a large metropolitan district. The school climate and burnout scales were used to assess school climate and burnout. The perceived administrator-level support questionnaire was developed. A descriptive mixed-methods design was used to collect data. Statistically significant relationships were found with respect to all hypotheses. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of high school teachers who have experienced burnout by seeking their narratives. The questions guiding this study included (a) In what ways do high school teachers perceive they have encountered burnout, and (b) What strategies do high school teachers employ to cope with burnout? Six teachers in various subject areas and from two separate districts participated in interviews. Participants encountered three thresholds in their stories: (a) Signal Ignored, (b) A Fallout Tragedy, and (c) Enough is Enough, leading them to seek coping strategies. Findings collectively reveal a deeper and richer understanding of secondary-level teacher burnout experiences and coping strategies from the direct perspective of teachers themselves [21, 22].

Future Directions for Research

There is an increasing recognition of the need for research about burnout in educational administrators. As principals move from teaching to administration, the risk for burnout increases because of isolation from peers, increased paperwork, and more difficult work-life balances. Future research should focus on the experiences of administrative burnout. This information is essential so that training programs can prepare future administrators and mentoring programs can support new administrators. A comparison of burnout rates between internal and external administrative candidates would contribute to this research base. There is a need for more qualitative studies to gather the lived experiences of education administrators suffering from burnout and the methods used to combat this burnout. Future research should collect data from larger pools of participants and sample participants from different countries. Educational systems vary widely across nations, and countries with similar deficits in resources could yield fascinating contrasts in self-reported burnout. Another research avenue could involve tracking teachers moving a step up into educational administration to explore how their perceptions change as they adopt their new roles. This would provide insight into how training programs could best support transition efforts. There would also be merit in repeating studies focusing specifically on female participants to explore the contributing factors of gender. The findings of this study have implications for practice. First, boards of education, district-level administrators, hiring committees, and university training programs must recognize that education administration is a different job with different knowledge, skills, and training. Much of the skill and knowledge set brought from the classroom does not transfer; thus, a steep learning curve is present. University programs should include training in time and energy management to help future administrators find the balance necessary to curb burnout. District mentoring programs could ensure that newly minted principals do not have to feel like they are lost on the rollercoaster ride alone. Mentors would be able to share knowledge regarding time and energy expenditures that keep seasoned administrators engaged and heartened in a profession that can easily overwhelm [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

Burnout among educational administrators is a critical issue that has long been overshadowed by the focus on teacher stress. However, administrators occupy uniquely demanding roles that expose them to intense and chronic stressors from policy enforcement and safety oversight to personnel management and systemic reform. This study underscores the urgent need for districts and education stakeholders to proactively address administrator burnout, not only as a matter of individual health but as a foundational element of school effectiveness. Supporting administrators through resilience training, fostering autonomy, creating a culture of feedback, and implementing systemic reforms to reduce workload and behavioral stressors can lead to healthier educational environments. Crucially, when administrators are equipped to thrive, they are better positioned to support teachers and students, creating a virtuous cycle of well-being and success throughout the school community. Acknowledging and addressing administrator burnout is not only a matter of professional ethics but a strategic investment in the future of education.

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