

The effects of a stressful school working on the principal's leadership of learning

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Abstract:

Purpose

The main objective of the study is to look into the factors that affect the mental health of school principals in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The purpose of the study is to identify the particular difficulties and pressures that lead to poor mental health among this province's school administrators.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The study will use a qualitative research methodology to examine the experiences of school principals. There are 7,000 school principals in KwaZulu-Natal, and 50 of them were selected as a sample size for in-depth interviews. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, and theme analysis was performed using NVivo 14 software.

Findings/Results

According to the study's findings, there are several important factors that negatively impact the mental health of KwaZulu-Natal school principals. High stress levels, financial strains, an overwhelming workload, and a lack of support systems were among them. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2019–2021 exacerbated these issues by increasing worry and exhaustion.

Practical Implications

The results of the study have significant ramifications for policy making and school administration. It is crucial to create and implement all-encompassing strategies to support school leaders' mental health. These strategies include reducing workload, making counseling services more accessible, and developing leaders with a focus on stress management and self-care. The student recognized that student outcomes and school leaders' ability is enhanced for effectively to lead schools by prioritizing their mental health.

Originality/Value

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the mental health of educational leaders. Focusing on KwaZulu-Natal's unique context, the study provides significant insights into the unique challenges encountered by school principals in the area. The findings can direct the development of targeted treatments meant to improve the wellbeing of school administrators and, ultimately, raise academic standards.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Principal Mental Health, School Leadership, Stress Factors, Teacher Well-being, Well-being.

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Introduction

The duties of a school administrator have evolved significantly over the past few decades, going beyond simple administrative tasks to encompass complex leadership responsibilities. As educational environments become increasingly complex, principals face a variety of challenges, including the social and emotional needs of students, demands for accountability, and academic expectations (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Because of this complicated work and the increasing demands and responsibilities, school principals may suffer from poor mental health and excessive levels of stress (Ray et al., 2020). The mental health of school administrators is one significant issue that has recently drawn increased attention. Numerous studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of stress and burnout on the well-being of school leaders (Aravena & González, 2021; Buonomo et al., 2020). When principals experience high levels of stress, they may struggle to effectively lead their schools, make sound decisions, and build positive relationships with staff, students, and parents (Jentsch et al., 2023). There may be detrimental effects on student performance and the overall school climate.

In South Africa, school principals face particularly challenging circumstances. Among the issues ailing the country's educational system are poverty, inequality, and a lack of financing. These challenges, together with the duties of their job, might exacerbate mental health problems among school principals (Walker, 2019). School leaders' stress and strain have also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 epidemic, which has led to a rise in anxiety and burnout (Hayes, Anderson, & Carpenter, 2022). Addressing the mental health issues of school leaders requires an understanding of the underlying reasons of their stress and exhaustion. By identifying these elements, can create efficient treatments to promote the wellbeing of school administrators and improve their ability to effectively run their institutions. This study aims to investigate the many pressures and difficulties that affect South African school principals' mental health. The study will employ a qualitative study methodology to investigate the experiences of school administrators in order to have a better understanding of the elements that lead to their mental health issues.

The findings of the study will provide crucial insight into the unique needs of school principals in South Africa. By identifying the primary stressors and challenges, may develop targeted interventions to support their well-being. Making mental health resources available, practicing stress-reduction strategies, and offering leadership development that prioritizes resilience and self-care are a few examples of these treatments. Ultimately, by prioritizing the mental health of school leaders, can create an educational system that is more supportive and durable. School administrators are more equipped to oversee their organizations, raise student achievement, and promote the overall well-being of the school community when they are healthy and receive the support they need.

Literature Review

Workload and Time Pressure

One of the main causes of school principals' mental health problems is an overwhelming amount of work and intense time constraints (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2023). Since the demands of the job have increased significantly in recent years, principals are required to juggle a wide range of responsibilities,

including curriculum development, instructional leadership, staff evaluation, student discipline, and community involvement (Elomaa et al., 2024). Work-life balance and personal well-being may suffer as a result of the constant demand, which occasionally results in long workdays that include weekends and evenings (Walker, 2019). Principals' time is further strained by the growing administrative load, which includes data collecting, reporting, and regulatory compliance (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018).

School principals may have more work to do as a result of implementing pedagogical and accountability improvements. For instance, it could take more time and effort to monitor student achievement, evaluate data, and put improvement initiatives into place when new curriculum frameworks, standardized testing, and performance-based accountability systems are implemented. Chronic stress, burnout, and a decline in job satisfaction can result from the ongoing pressure to perform well, fulfill deadlines, and live up to expectations (Jentsch et al., 2023). Principals' mental health may suffer as a result, which could result in physical health issues as well as symptoms like anxiety and sadness (Ray et al., 2020).

Lack of Support and Resources

The unavailability expected resources and assistance is a major component in the mental health issues that school principals experience (Elomaa et al., 2024). Especially at smaller or remote schools where access to professional development and collaborative opportunities may be limited, principals may feel alone and unsupported (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Principals may be responsible for tasks that may be delegated to other employees; therefore, their workload may be made even more challenging by a lack of administrative assistance. This could lead to feelings of irritation and resentment as well as decreased job satisfaction (Ray et al., 2020). Additionally, inadequate funding may limit the resources available to schools, making it difficult for administrators to meet the requirements of students and provide high-quality instruction (Walker, 2019).

The absence of effective support systems may also have an effect on the mental health of school leaders. If principals lack access to peer support groups, mentoring programs, or counseling services, they may struggle to manage the stress and challenges of their positions. This may lead to an increase in feelings of melancholy, anxiety, and loneliness (Jentsch et al., 2023). It is crucial to give schools enough money, invest in principals' professional development, and establish supportive school cultures that put the welfare of school administrators first in order to address the problem of a lack of resources and support. Leadership can lessen the stress and burnout that school administrators endure and enhance their general mental health by giving them the tools and assistance they need.

Accountability Pressure

The ever-growing demands of accountability have put school principals under a lot of stress, which has made their mental health problems worse. High-stakes testing, performance-based pay, and stringent accountability standards have all been used to create a culture of constant pressure and scrutiny (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2023). Even when outside variables like socioeconomic inequality and a lack of resources affect student achievements, principals are frequently held accountable for student accomplishment.

The curriculum may be constrained and options for creative teaching methods diminished by the heavy emphasis on standardized test scores (Denecker, 2019). Principals could experience pressure to prioritize test preparation over other important aspects of education, like social-emotional learning and critical thinking. Teachers may get dissatisfied and exhausted as they try to combine the demands of accountability with the need to provide their children with a well-rounded education.

Additionally, principals may face public scrutiny and criticism due to the public availability of school performance data. Negative media coverage, community criticism, and parental pressure can all have a serious effect on school administrators' mental health. The fear of failing and the constant threat of job insecurity can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and a decrease in job satisfaction. Policies that support a balanced approach to assessment and evaluation must be implemented in order to lessen the detrimental consequences of accountability pressure. This could entail lowering the frequency of high-stakes exams, increasing the range of assessment techniques, and giving school administrators the necessary assistance to handle the rigorous accountability environment. Policymakers should also take into account how accountability measures affect school leaders' mental health in order to lessen needless stress and strain.

Socio-emotional demands

As seen in Figure 1 below, school principals are required to manage the diverse social and emotional needs of parents, staff, and children (Hayes & Derrington, 2023). This could have a negative impact on their mental health, which can be a significant cause of stress. Managing issues with student conduct, including as bullying, violence, and drug use, may be quite demanding for principals. They may feel overburdened by the need to ensure the safety and well-being of their students, particularly in rigorous educational environments (Buonomo et al., 2020). School administrators may find it more difficult to support and guide kids who are experiencing anxiety, depression, or other mental health problems as a result of the rising incidence of mental health disorders among youth. School leaders may experience stress and fatigue as a result of the intricate relationships within their school communities. It could take a lot of time and work to resolve disputes between kids, parents, and staff. Principals may experience feelings of dissatisfaction and loneliness as a result of feeling torn between conflicting demands and expectations.

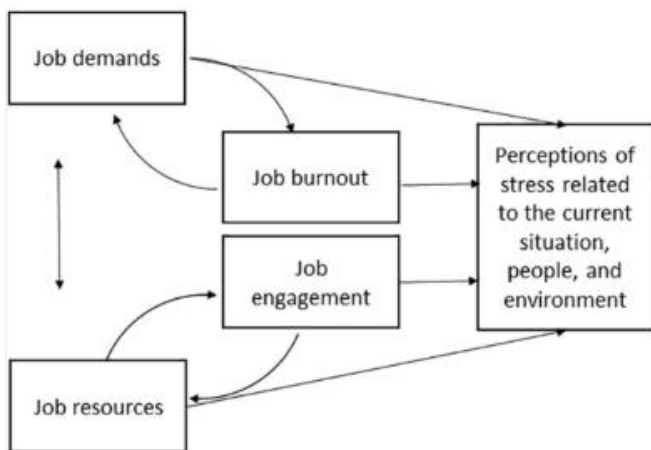


Figure 1: The effects of stress on school principals.

Source: Jentsch et al., 2023

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Job Demands-Resources (JD-R)

The workplace Demands-Resources (JD-R) model was developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) and provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between workplace stresses and employee well-being. This paradigm holds that job demands such as workload, role ambiguity, and emotional labor can lead to job strain and burnout. However, employment resources like control, autonomy, and social support can improve well-being and job satisfaction while reducing the negative effects of job demands. Principals may experience increased stress and burnout as a result of high job expectations in the context of school leadership, such as an excessive workload, long hours, and accountability constraints (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2023). Enough employment resources, like supportive coworkers, administrative support, and opportunities for professional development, can improve wellbeing and job satisfaction while reducing the negative consequences of these demands.

Resource Conservation (COR) Theory

People strive to get, protect, and maintain valuable resources, according to Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. These resources could be material (like money and time) or intangible (like social support and self-worth). When people think their resources are at jeopardy, they may experience stress and depression. In the context of school leadership, principals' well-being depends on resources like time, effort, and social support. If these resources are depleted due to an excessive workload, a lack of support, or other work-related stressors, principals may experience burnout and a decrease in job satisfaction (Ray et al., 2020).

Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which emphasizes how cognitive processes impact behavior, was created by Bandura in 1986. According to SCT, people's beliefs about their own abilities and the outcomes of their activities can have an impact on their motivation and conduct. Perceptions of principals' ability to manage stress and challenges in the context of school leadership may have an effect on their mental health. If principals believe they have the skills and resources necessary to handle the demands of their job, they are more likely to experience positive mental health outcomes. However, if people feel they don't have the necessary skills or tools, they may be more prone to stress and burnout (Jentsch et al., 2023).

Methodology

Research design

The study will use a qualitative research approach to examine the lived experiences of school principals in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences as they saw fit. Audio recordings of the interviews were directly transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the data, which provided insight into the challenges and demands faced by school principals. Using a qualitative approach, this study aims to provide a thorough and nuanced understanding of the several factors influencing the mental health of KwaZulu-Natal school principals.

Population and sample

There are 7,000 principals in KwaZulu-Natal, but 50 principals are needed for this qualitative investigation. Qualitative research places more emphasis on the richness and depth of data than on statistical significance. More thorough interviews and better analysis are made possible by a smaller sample size. A sample size of 50 is also frequently used to achieve saturation, so more participants would not substantially add new data. Selecting participants depending on how well they match the objectives of the study, purposeful sampling can improve the sample's representativeness. Conducting in-depth interviews and carefully choosing participants, researchers are able to produce rich, insightful data that can deepen our comprehension of the difficulties KwaZulu-Natal school principals face.

Data analysis

Data import and organization

The audio recordings were verbatim transcribed when the interviews were over. After that, the transcripts were loaded into the qualitative data analysis program NVivo 12. In order to preserve confidentiality and make data organization easier, each transcript was given a unique identification number. A hierarchical coding framework was used to methodically arrange the data. The research topics and developing themes served as the foundation for the first development of broad codes. To capture the subtleties of the data, these broad codes were then further broken down into more specific subcodes. A strict iterative methodology was used in the coding process, with codes being improved and modified as the study went on. Researchers were able to find patterns and trends in the data by using NVivo's robust search and filtering features. The software made it possible to create intricate theme tales and investigate the connections between various codes. The development of evidence-based therapies was made possible by the careful arrangement of the data in NVivo, which made it easier to identify the major variables affecting school principals' mental health.

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa)

Demographic Profile	N
Gender	
Male	25
Female	25

Age	
30-39	15
40-49	20
50+	15
Years of Experience	
1-5	10
6-10	15
11-15	15
16+	10
School Level	
Primary	15
Secondary	20
Combined Schools	15
Location	
Urban	20
Rural	30

The demographic profile of the 50 school principals who participated in this study is presented in Table 1 above. The sample comprised an equal distribution of principals, with 50% identifying as male and 50% as female. The participants' ages varied from 30 to 62 years. A significant portion of the participants, accounting for 40% of the total, was found in the 40 to 49 age range. Subsequently, individuals in the 30 to 39 age brackets represented 30%, alongside those aged 50 and older, who also constituted 30% of the total. The participants demonstrated a wide range of experience, varying from 1 to 25 years. A notable percentage of participants, precisely 30%, indicated that they possess between 6 and 10 years of experience. Subsequently, individuals with 1-5 years of experience accounted for 20%, while another 30% possessed 11-15 years of experience. Educational Level: The sample comprised administrators from elementary, middle, and high schools. The largest group of participants came from secondary schools, accounting for 40%, while primary and high schools each represented 30% of the participants. The participants were selected from a range of districts across the KwaZulu-Natal province, encompassing both urban and rural settings. A significant portion of participants hailed from rural regions, accounting for 60%, whereas 40% originated from urban locales.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Summary Table using NVivo 14 (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa)

Theme	Description	Potential Sub-themes	Data Source (Codes)
Workload and Time Pressure	This theme explores the impact of excessive workload and time constraints on the mental health of principals.	Excessive workload, Long working hours, Administrative burden, Curriculum development, Assessment and reporting, Parent-teacher conferences, Staff management	Workload, Time Management, Administrative Tasks, Curriculum, Assessment, Parent Engagement, Staff Management
Lack of Support and Resources	This theme examines the challenges faced by principals due to inadequate support and resources.	Insufficient staffing, Limited resources, Lack of professional development, Poor infrastructure, Inadequate administrative support	Staffing, Resources, Professional Development, Infrastructure, Administrative Support
Accountability Pressure	This theme investigates the impact of high-stakes accountability measures on the mental health of principals.	Standardized testing, Performance-based pay, School ratings, Public scrutiny	Accountability, Standardized Testing, Performance Evaluation, Public Perception
Socio-emotional Demands	This theme explores the emotional toll of dealing with complex social and emotional issues.	Student behavior problems, Parent conflicts, Staff conflicts, Crisis management, School climate	Student Behavior, Parent Relations, Staff Relations, Crisis Management, School Climate
Coping Strategies and Well-being	This theme examines the coping strategies employed by principals to manage stress and maintain their mental health.	Stress management techniques, Self-care practices, Social support, Mindfulness, Resilience	Stress Management, Self-Care, Social Support, Mindfulness, Resilience

The table presents Thematic Analysis Summary Table using NVivo version 14 analysis (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa). **Source:** Researcher collected data

The table 2 presents a thematic analysis conducted with NVivo 14, highlighting several significant themes that impact the mental health of school principals in KwaZulu-Natal. The mental health of school leaders has become a pressing issue, largely influenced by the demands of their workload and the limitations of time. The findings indicated that administrative responsibilities, extended hours, and increased workloads significantly elevate stress levels. The demands associated with these expectations may result in ongoing stress, exhaustion, and a decline in overall job satisfaction. One of the primary themes that emerged was the deficiency in

resources and support. School administrators frequently encounter obstacles stemming from a lack of administrative support, insufficient staffing, and constrained resources. Their mental well-being may be adversely affected by these factors, making it more challenging for them to effectively navigate their educational settings. Responsibility The external pressures significantly impact the stress levels experienced by school principals. The continuous demands to achieve performance benchmarks, enhance assessment results, and adhere to regulations can result in increased stress, burnout, and a decrease in job satisfaction.

Table 3: Coding Queries and Visualization in NVivo (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa)

Objective	Coding Query	Expected Visualization
Investigate Workload and Time Pressure	Codes: Workload, Time Management, Administrative Tasks, Curriculum, Assessment, Parent Engagement, Staff Management	Word Cloud: Depicting frequency of terms related to workload, time management, and administrative tasks.
Explore Lack of Support and Resources	Codes: Staffing, Resources, Professional Development, Infrastructure, Administrative Support	Network Diagram: Visualizing the relationships between codes related to staffing, resources, and administrative support.
Examine Accountability Pressure	Codes: Accountability, Standardized Testing, Performance Evaluation, Public Perception	Treemap: Representing the relative frequency of codes related to accountability and standardized testing.
Investigate Socio-emotional Demands	Codes: Student Behavior, Parent Relations, Staff Relations, Crisis Management, School Climate	Concept Map: Mapping the relationships between codes related to student behavior, parent relations, and staff relations.
Explore Coping Strategies and Well-being	Codes: Stress Management, Self-Care, Social Support, Mindfulness, Resilience	Cluster Analysis: Identifying potential groupings among codes related to stress management, self-care, and social support.

The table presents Coding Queries and Visualization in NVivo (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa). **Source:** Researcher collected data

The "Coding Queries and Visualization" table presents a detailed methodology for analyzing the data gathered from school principals in KwaZulu-Natal. The initial inquiry centers on workload and time constraints. Creating a word cloud allows for a visual identification of the most frequent terms associated with workload, time management, and administrative tasks. This visualization aids in comprehending the degree to which these factors influence principal stress. The second query investigates the absence of support and resources. A network diagram serves as a

tool to illustrate the connections among various elements, including staffing, resources, and administrative support. This can assist in pinpointing potential areas that may require further assistance. The third query examines Accountability Pressure. A treemap serves as a visual tool to illustrate the relative frequency of codes associated with accountability and standardized testing. This visualization aids in pinpointing the particular elements of accountability that pose the greatest stress for principals.

Table 4: Transcript Analysis Table using NVivo (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa)

Theme	Participant Quotes	Sub-themes
Workload and Time Pressure	<i>Participant 8 (Female, 45, Secondary School, Rural): "The sheer volume of paperwork and administrative tasks is overwhelming. I often work late into the night just to keep up."</i>	Excessive Workload, Administrative Burden
Lack of Support and Resources	<i>Participant 12 (Male, 38, Primary School, Urban): "We desperately need more support staff, especially in the classroom. The teacher shortage is crippling our ability to provide quality education."</i>	Staff Shortages, Resource Constraints
Accountability Pressure	<i>Participant 21 (Female, 52, Combined School, Urban): "The constant pressure to improve test scores is stressful. It feels like our schools are being judged solely on these metrics."</i>	Standardized Testing, Performance Pressure
Socio-emotional Demands	<i>Participant 10 (Male, 40, Secondary School, Rural): "Dealing with student behavior issues, especially those related to violence and substance abuse, is emotionally draining."</i>	Student Behavior Issues, School Safety
Coping Strategies and Well-being	<i>Participant 29 (Female, 35, Primary School, Urban): "I try to practice mindfulness techniques to manage stress and improve my focus."</i>	Mindfulness, Self-Care

The table presents Transcript analysis of teachers, learners, and school principals at (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa). **Source:** Researcher collected data

The analysis detailed in Table 4 of the study underscores various significant themes that play a role in the mental health difficulties faced by school principals in KwaZulu-Natal. The occurrence of Workload and Time Pressure has been recognized as an important theme. Participants often reported feeling inundated by a multitude of administrative responsibilities, the demands of curriculum development, and the challenges of engaging with parents. The ongoing demand to adhere to timelines and produce outcomes can result in persistent stress and exhaustion. The absence of support and resources emerged as a crucial theme. Principals emphasized that a lack of staffing, restricted resources, and poor infrastructure hinder their capacity to effectively lead their schools. The constraints present can obstruct initiatives aimed at fostering constructive educational settings and addressing the requirements of students. Responsibility Pressure has been recognized as a significant element affecting stress levels. The ongoing demand to enhance test scores, fulfill performance criteria, and adhere to regulations can result in heightened anxiety and burnout. School leaders frequently encounter significant pressure from public examinations, along with the anxiety that comes with the potential for unfavorable outcomes. The socio-emotional demands surfaced as a notable challenge. Addressing student behavior challenges, mediating parent disputes, and managing staff conflicts can greatly influence emotional well-being. Educational leaders might face challenges in fostering a positive environment and ensuring the well-being of both students and staff. The final theme examined

was Coping Strategies and Well-being. Participants engaged in a discussion about different coping strategies, including time management, self-care, and the importance of seeking social support. Nonetheless, numerous individuals conveyed a desire for enhanced support, encompassing opportunities for career advancement and mental health resources. Targeted approaches can be developed to enhance the mental health and overall well-being of school principals in KwaZulu-Natal. These approaches may involve minimizing workload, offering extra resources, facilitating professional growth opportunities, and fostering a nurturing and cooperative atmosphere.

Discussion

This study's findings offer important insights into the elements influencing the mental health challenges encountered by school principals in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The thematic analysis, bolstered by data from NVivo, uncovered several key themes that profoundly influence the well-being of these educational leaders. The theme of workload and time pressure has surfaced as significant. The responsibilities associated with the position, such as administrative duties, curriculum design, and interaction with parents, were frequently acknowledged as major factors contributing to stress (Walker, 2019). The considerable demands of the workload can result in extended working hours, a disruption of the work-life balance, and ultimately, the risk of burnout. The lack

of support and resources surfaced as another important theme emphasized in the study. Principals reported challenges related to inadequate staffing, limited resources, and a lack of sufficient administrative support. The existence of these factors might hinder their ability to manage their schools efficiently and could negatively impact their mental health. Responsibility It was determined that pressure serves as a considerable contributor to stress. The ongoing demand to enhance test scores, achieve performance benchmarks, and adhere to regulations can result in heightened anxiety, burnout, and a decline in job satisfaction. Socio-emotional demands emerged as an additional challenge. Dealing with student behavior issues, handling parent conflicts, and resolving staff disputes presents considerable emotional challenges for principals (Ray et al., 2020). The challenges linked to these expectations can result in increased stress, frustration, and a decrease in overall job satisfaction. The concluding theme explored was Coping Strategies and Well-being. Several principals employed coping strategies such as time management, self-care, and seeking social support; however, many expressed a need for additional support, including professional development opportunities and mental health services. The findings align with previous research highlighting the challenges faced by school principals (Aravena & González, 2021; Buonomo et al., 2020). The complex interplay between these factors can negatively impact the mental health and well-being of school leaders, subsequently affecting their ability to provide effective leadership and promote student learning.

Addressing these challenges requires the formulation of comprehensive strategies focused on improving the mental well-being of school principals. The subsequent strategies may be taken into account:

- a) Reducing Workload: Implementing strategies to decrease workload, such as delegating tasks, automating administrative duties, and providing additional support staff.
- b) Ensuring Sufficient Resources: Allocating adequate funding to educational institutions to fulfill staffing needs, improve infrastructure, and provide professional development opportunities.
- c) Promoting Work-Life Balance: Supporting flexible work arrangements, providing avenues for professional development, and encouraging self-care practices.
- d) Strengthening Social Support Networks: Fostering positive school climates, encouraging peer collaboration, and guaranteeing access to mental health resources.
- e) Advocating for Policy Revisions: Advocating for changes that reduce accountability pressures and foster a more equitable approach to education. Establishing a more supportive and sustainable working environment for school principals is feasible, which can ultimately improve student outcomes.

Practical Implications

Policymakers, administrators of school districts, and school leaders can all benefit greatly from the study's conclusions. First and foremost, legislators ought to think about enacting laws that lessen the administrative strain on school principals. This could entail lowering the frequency of standardized testing, simplifying reporting requirements, and increasing support staff resources. Second, by offering sufficient resources, like opportunities for professional growth and mental health services, school district

administrators can significantly contribute to the mental health of school leaders. Additionally, they can establish school cultures that are supportive and put school leaders' welfare first. Thirdly, by taking care of oneself, getting social support, and establishing boundaries between their personal and professional lives, school administrators can take action to enhance their own mental health. They can also collaborate with peers to address common issues and speak up for the needs of their staff and kids. By putting these tactics into practice, school principals can work in a more encouraging and long-lasting environment, which will eventually improve student outcomes.

Conclusion

This study examined the many facets that lead to the mental health issues that KwaZulu-Natal school principals encounter. With the help of NVivo data, the thematic analysis identified a number of important topics that significantly affect these educational leaders' well-being. Principals reported feeling overburdened and under time pressure, which resulted in burnout and a decline in job satisfaction. Furthermore, their difficulties were made worse by a lack of resources and assistance, especially in the areas of infrastructure and staffing (Elomaa et al., 2024). Principals' mental health has also suffered as a result of the ongoing pressure to achieve performance goals and raise test scores, as well as the public scrutiny brought on by accountability measures. Additionally, the role's socio-emotional obligations, such as handling staff conflicts, parent problems, and student behavior difficulties, can be emotionally taxing (Buonomo et al., 2020). A diversified strategy is required to solve these issues. Legislators ought to put policies in place that lessen administrative workloads, give schools enough money, and encourage flexible work schedules. When it comes to offering support services like counseling and professional development, school district administrators may be extremely helpful. Furthermore, school administrators themselves ought to put self-care first, look for outside assistance, and speak up for their own welfare (Ray et al., 2020). School principals can work in a more encouraging and long-lasting atmosphere if they address the underlying causes of stress and burnout. As a result, they will be able to manage their schools more skillfully, enhance student performance, and support the general health of the educational system.

Limitations and future studies

Although this study offers insightful information about the mental health issues KwaZulu-Natal school administrators experience, it is crucial to recognize its limits. Purposive sampling was used in the study, which might have limited how broadly the results can be applied. Furthermore, possible biases in data collection and analysis may have been introduced by the qualitative nature of the study. Future studies might examine school administrators' mental health across a range of school levels and in diverse situations, including urban and rural areas. A more thorough knowledge of the variables affecting main well-being might be possible with a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. Longitudinal studies could also monitor the long-term effects of burnout and stress on the health and productivity of principals. We can better grasp the intricate elements influencing school principals' mental health issues and create efficient solutions to promote their well-being by resolving these constraints and carrying out additional study.

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Data Availability Statement: Data for this study shall be kept safe for five years, and it shall then be disposed.

Disclaimer

Sentiments voiced in the article are those from authors and not for organizations or individuals interviewed

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