

Navigating Leadership Challenges: Stress and Coping Strategies Among Secondary School Principals

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the work-related stress and coping strategies of principals working in public secondary schools. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to conduct this research. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to collect data from secondary school principals. All public schools in the Multan district were considered the population for the study. In total, 40 principals, including twenty males and twenty females were selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data. The analysis found that principals are facing a variety of stressors at school, e.g., lack of school resources, lack of funds, non-cooperative behaviors of teachers and staff, pressure from authorities, anxiety and frustration, work pressures, poor job satisfaction and performance cause stress in school principals. As to coping strategies, power delegation and equal workload distribution is reducing the stress level, moreover, school principals also engage their teachers in healthy activities to provide a conducive environment in school, some highlighted the effective and efficient planning and time management reduce the level of stress, patience and effective listening, fairness and accountability, maintaining proper records of school also found useful coping strategies to reduce the stress among school principals.

Key Words

Secondary School Principal, Work-related Stress, Coping Strategies, Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Research

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Introduction

Secondary school principals in Pakistan are not only responsible for producing good academic results but also for handling administrative responsibilities and keeping relationships with students, staff, and stakeholders. Due to the high demands of job and authorities and society expectations it often caused high stress to school principals (Parveen, et al., [2021](#)). Principals at secondary schools are under a lot of work stress because of their administrative and instructional responsibilities (Asaloei, et al., [2020](#); Kanwal & Waheed, [2023](#)). Current research has focused on the pervasive issue of work-related stress experienced by secondary school administrators. Principals of secondary

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schools, in particular, deal with a lot of work-related stress because of their variety of duties, which include managing administrative duties, communicating with all stakeholders involved, and overseeing academic programs (Elomaa, et al., [2023](#)). Moreover, other factors which are required to meet the job demands e.g., limited physical and financial resources, change in policies, low performance of teachers and students, less enrollment, school results and society expectations also add to their level of stress (Maslach & Leiter, [2016](#)). Secondary school principals frequently endure significant levels of work-related stress and burnout as a result of the demanding nature of their duties, which can negatively impact their performance and general well-being (Lee et al., [2009](#)). These stressors are not different in Pakistani schools where secondary school principals face different kind of difficulties which is aligned with the above-mentioned challenges. Parveen and Adeinat ([2019](#)) highlighted that these problems include limited resources and heavy workload job targets. Pakistani is a developing country with a poor socio-economic status of the inhabitants who prefer to send their child to work instead to school. This affects the enrollment at school and those who are at school has also intention to leave it. Moreover, those teachers who are appointed in far flung areas are also facing challenges in their attendance. The socio-economic situation of the country is also affecting school funds and other required material resources. Thus, it is very difficult for principals to manage the school with low funds and often without funds. This causes stress for school principals to meet the required school goals and targets (Asaloei, et al., [2020](#)). Authors Gulzar and Rashid ([2020](#)) also linked these challenges with geopolitical location e.g., civil unrest, economic difficulties and political instability also caused stress to achieve school goals. Other authors Darmody and Smyth ([2016](#)); (Hussain et al., [2018](#)) highlighted the following challenges to school principal which cause stress for them e.g., resource constraints, administrative inefficiencies, political meddling, bureaucratic hurdles, and sociocultural expectations etc. Such job stressors affect the mental and physical well-being of the school principal, which ultimately affect their performance as well. Authors linked this situation to burnout, emotional tiredness and physical health of school principals (Kanwal & Waheed, [2023](#)).

To overcome these challenges school principals, adopt a variety of strategies to overcome these challenges and to enhance their work efficiency. Principals create a robust supporting system within the school community, prioritizing self-care routines, and using proactive problems solving techniques (Parveen & Adeinat, [2019](#); Shah et al., [2024](#)). Principals should focus on solutions, teamwork, active monitoring system and must reflect on achievement and failures. This will ultimately improve workflows and enhance their efficiency at school (Tamadoni, et al., [2024](#)). Building on the above, this issue is complex and multifaceted for school principals, ultimately affecting their performance at school. The purpose of this research is to explore the work-related stressors and coping strategies adopted by secondary school principals in Pakistani public schools.

Literature Review

School principals have an important role in maintaining the quality of education, school services, and the wellbeing of all the stakeholders at schools (Darwody & Smyth, 2016). However, their own well-being is equally important to run the system smoothly. Over the period, principals' responsibilities are increasing due to transformation and increasing challenges at schools (Beauseart et al., 2016). During these times, principals have to navigate various challenges and issues that cause stress for them, sometimes it is due to work pressures, short and challenging deadlines, human and material resources and working patterns etc. (Hussain et al., [2018](#)). These stressors cause problems for school principals and affect their health by increasing level of stress and anxiety that usually leads to affecting their overall well-being (Maxwell & Reiley, 2017).

Lindberg ([2012](#)) highlighted that principals are generally engaged in meeting the stakeholders' demands, school boards, teachers, and parents which often cause stress for them (Lindberg, [2012](#)). A National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2020) report states that the level of stress often increased due to a lack of

resources at school e.g., lack of teachers, lack of funds, poorly trained staff, discipline matters etc. The principal is the person who always has high responsibility and follows certain targets to enhance school efficiency. Next to this, it is also their prime responsibility to keep the staff motivated, maintain instructional standards at schools, taking care of all the stakeholders at school, meeting the demands of parents and achieving the expectations of authorities (Robinson et al., [2023](#)). This requires principals to be mentally fit and active to uphold the school standards and work efficiency. Another key stressors for the principals is maintaining accountability and teachers' performance at school. This is the main responsibility of the principals to evaluate the performance of teachers and prepare their performance appraisals. This is quite a daunting task for principals which often cause stress for them e.g., observing a classroom of a teacher, giving them feedback and taking follow-up from them. Conducting a fair assessment of teachers while preserving a favorable rapport with employees is not less than a challenge for school principals (Darling-Hammond, [2007](#)). The main purpose of schools is to provide quality education to children and to meet the needs of parents and society. When it is not happening, it raises concerns about school performance and the performance of school principals and teachers. When children are not achieving their goals, it means school is not working properly (Reeves, [2004](#)). Moreover, parents and society raise concerns on curriculum, instructional strategies, assessment and school leadership. Such situations cause serious concerns and stress for school principals (Mahfouz, [2022](#)).

Coping Strategies to Reduce Work-related Stress at School

School Principals use multiple coping strategies to manage these difficulties in an effective manner, with the goals of reducing work-related stress and improving their productivity and well-being. Delegating and effective time management are two distinctive coping strategies. Principals typically assign administrative duties to skilled and efficient teachers, enabling them to pay concentration on more strategic leadership initiatives. They may handle the workload and reduce their stress levels by setting priorities for their responsibilities and scheduling their workday well (Grissom et al., [2015](#)). School principals are better able to handle the difficulties of their jobs when they use time management techniques and practices including scheduling, prioritizing critical activities and realistic goal setting (Tehseen, & Hadi, [2015](#)). With this method, they may manage their daily routine work and their responsibilities in a balanced manner. Creating healthy peer and school community support networks is another important approach. In order to get advice, get emotional support, and exchange experiences, school principals generally rely on their connections with teachers, mentors, and other administrators.

School administrators also often use a more proactive technique to problem-solving as a coping strategy (Day et al., [2016](#)). School principals who plan in advance and create plans in anticipation of issues typically have lower stress levels than those who respond to difficulties as they come up (Epstein, [2018](#)). Creating a collaborative, team-oriented school atmosphere is another way to help reduce work-related stress. By nurturing a feeling of shared ownership among staff and teachers, school principals may make sure that problems are fixed collaboratively rather than putting the whole burden on the shoulders of the headship (Duignan, [2012](#)). Some school principals use therapy and counseling as coping strategies in more complex circumstances. It is becoming more widely recognized that getting professional support when suffering extreme stress or burnout is crucial for maintaining mental health (Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, [2014](#)). School administrators can voice their fears, consider solutions, and fortify their emotional strength by seeking therapy.

Next to these stressors, there are certain strategies identified in the literature to handle stress at school, e.g., effective and efficient time management, delegation of powers to team members, realistic problem-solving, professional development to handle pressures, counseling, and by developing a strong support system with the school community (Bauer, Brazer, & Johnson, [2020](#)). By putting these strategies into practice, you may not only advance their well-being but also student results and the general school atmosphere by supporting more effective

school leadership. Literature also reported that these strategies have proven and remained successful in all contexts, from developed to developing worlds (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). Working in collaborative settings motivates principals and teachers to feel more attached to one another, which will reduce their feeling of loneliness and will enhance work productivity and reduce problems (Zhu, Devos, & Li, 2020). Staff will take responsibility and will be accountable for their actions as well (Hallinger, 2011). Moreover, psychological care such as mindfulness and counseling therapies are also important for preserving both mental and physical well-being (Roeser et al., 2013). Principals who do physical exercise, mindfulness, or interests outside of work report feeling less stressed and more expressively stable (Parveen & Adeinat, 2019). In order to be strong and prolific over the long term in leadership careers, they maintain a healthy work-life balance through regular breaks, non-work-related hobbies, or meditation (Awa, Plaumann, & Walter, 2010). Furthermore, maintaining a healthy work-life balance, regular exercise and asking for support from mentors, fellow professionals and peers also help to reduce stress. The well-being of principals is crucial for school success (Reynolds et al., 2008).

Research Objectives

- ▶ To investigate the factors causing stress for principals working in public secondary school.
- ▶ To explore the coping strategies of principals to handle with stressors at public secondary schools.

Research Methodology

Research Procedure

This research aims to explore the work stressors and related coping strategies adopted by principals working at public secondary schools. A qualitative research method was used to conduct this research. Qualitative research allows researchers to dig out the phenomenon under study. By focusing on the factual experiences of these educational leaders, the study required to identify the stressors they face as well as practical techniques that may be useful to reduce stress and improve their general well-being and work satisfaction. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to interview 40 school principals selected through purposive sampling techniques. Thematic analysis was carried out to draw out the results from collected data. All the ethical concerns were ensured to conduct this research.

Population and Sampling

There are 234 public secondary schools located in Multan district. Out of these schools, there were 169 male schools and 65 female schools. Thus, the population of this research consisted of 234 public secondary schools. Considering the time, efforts and resources for this research, purposive sampling technique was adopted to select the sample of 20 male and 20 female school principals. However, the geographical locations and the diversity were considered while approaching these schools. It was ensured that these schools cover the public schools from all over the district Multan not from a particular area or locality.

Interview Protocol

To develop an interview protocol, a thorough literature was explored to identify the key stressors faced by school principals. After a deliberation with the supervisor an interview guide was prepared for school principals. There was a total of 12 questions including the general question about the introduction of the participants. Some of the sample questions are presented below: (a) *Reflecting on your career, have there been periods where work-related stress reached a critical level?* (b) *When you face pressures from authorities in terms of enrollment, results, and funds how do you handle that pressure?*

Data Collection

Researchers interviewed the school principals after obtaining their consent to participate in this research. The interview guide helped to interview the principals. Twenty male and twenty female school principals were invited for interviews. Meetings were set up with them to interview in a comfortable environment to get their focused response to the questions. In total, forty schools were involved in this research.

Thirty-four out of the forty principals were involved in person interviews, while six were interviewed via phone call. Interviews were planned according to the convenience of the participants and availability considering their hectic routines. The interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. The demographic information of the participants is mentioned in the result section. Participants were ensured about the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviews data. All the interviews were recorded from analysis perspective.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis found the best suit for this data. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis was managed manually. Initially, interviews were in Urdu, allowing participants to share their responses in the language they feel comfortable. Later, we translated all the interviews in English for better presentation and reporting. It was ensured that all the data were reproduced with the same meaning and intent. When researchers transcribed the data, they got familiar with the data to identify the codes. After preparing a list of codes, themes were identified. A list of themes was prepared, and then similar themes were merged for better understanding and clarity. Later, sub-themes were clustered under each theme to move reporting the data. Thus, all the steps of thematic analysis were followed carefully to define themes and sub-themes. These themes reflect the diverse ways in which school principals face stressors and deal with those stresses. The interrater reliability of the code was also ensured after taking help from someone who was not familiar with this research. He was asked to code five interviews. The interrater reliability was calculated 80% which is aligned with the benchmarks set by Miles and Huberman (1984).

Results

The following section is reporting the results inferred from thematic analysis with the support of interview quotes. First the demographic information of the participants will be reported. Later, the themes and sub-themes in view of each interview question will be presented.

Demographic Information of the Participants

Forty principals from public secondary school were involved in this study. Out of this sample, 15 female school principals and 17 male school principals constituted the sample. Their average years of experience ranged from 01-15 years. As to their educational background they were holding a variety of degrees, the average qualification ranged between master's to M. Phil both for male and female participants. Notably, one of the female participants was holding a PhD degree.

Lack of School Resources

The majority of the respondents highlighted that lack of resources caused stress for them. Authorities expect results from us on the given targets but lack of resources e.g., funds and infrastructure sometime now allow us to complete the targets. This mounts the stress on us. As to teachers and staff, we also lack human resources as there is a shortage of teachers and staff which is a big challenge for us. *"A major stressor for me is the shortage of staff and insufficient funds. Moreover, there are not sufficient funds to pay even school electricity bills. This always kept me under pressure. Being a principal, I have to manage all this but sometimes it is not manageable, and no one is there to help us in the challenging time."* Another respondent shared that *"Lack of school resources is a major challenge for me. There are*

few teachers in my school, and it is very difficult to manage all classes and lectures. This affects our overall school performance."

One school principal also complained about the non-cooperation of the teachers and staff which creates stress for them. *"It usually happened when there is a high workload on staff, thus some time they do not cooperate because they feel burdened."*

Pressure from Authorities

Data analysis revealed that pressure from authorities is another major concern of the school principals. Mainly female principals feel high stress due to pressure from authorities specially when they send some sudden targets and orders. One of the female principals shared, *"school authorities send directions with short deadline to do the needful which is often stressful for me. As teachers are not cooperative enough to achieve such targets."* Another principal explained, *"There are often directives from higher authorities with a short deadline. This adds into our stress because achieving targets usually depends on teamwork. When team is not cooperative it is very difficult to achieve the targets."*

Stress Causes Anxiety and Frustration

The majority of the respondents shared that stress cause anxiety and frustration which ultimately affect our performance. Data analysis revealed that male principals feel more pressure and anxiety than their counterparts. Stress and workload often make them tired and stressed. A very few principals also shared that they take antidepressants to manage their level of stress. *"A principal shared, stress and work pressures affect our health. Being a school head, there are a lot of pressures on us which affect our health and wellbeing. I always try to handle things in a wise and calm manner, yet there are difficult situations which cause stress for us."* Another said, *"due to stress, my blood pressure remains high, and it caused anxiety and tension for me and my family. Ultimately, it affects my job performance."* Another principal shared, *"high stress affect well-being. There are always certain things from teachers and authorities which cause stress and affect my well-being. When I cannot achieve targets, I keep thinking about it and it keeps me stressed."*

Job Satisfaction and Performance

On the other hand, it was identified that the majority of the female respondents identified that work related stress has no effect on their overall well-being and job performance. They reported that *"I am fine with job demands and targets. No job can be done without targets and expectations. Such things keep us motivated."* Another female principal said, *"I usually assign tasks to my team and that distribute the workload. This helps to achieve tasks on time and reduces stress."* However, a male teacher shared, *"high work pressures often affect my work performance, teachers are not ready to take the responsibility and ultimately all responsibility comes on my shoulder. I feel pressures and stress."*

Experience of Critical Situation which Caused Stress

We asked the school principals if they could mention a situation when their level of stress reaches a critical level, or they had experienced a very stressful situation in their schools. We have found the following themes in relation to this question. The majority of the male and female respondents shared that they never experienced such situations, they are routines which they are doing, and they never experience such a hard situation. A principal shared, *"Since I am working on this position, I never experienced such situation."* Another said, *"no such incident happened which cause high amount of stress in me."* Interestingly, one of the principals shared, *"I have experienced a lot of such situations in my career, once my teacher shouted at a student, next day they reported the incident to the media. However, I intervene in it immediately and resolved the issue."* Many of the respondents shared that, *"they experienced critical situations with parents during PTMs, it is very difficult to realize the parents that their child is on mistake."* Some said *"they experienced interference during exams, and some said "I suffer the disciplinary problems in schools and sometime there are*

harsh situations when external e.g., parents, media and authorities intervene. It is then a matter of embarrassment for me as a principal.”

Coping Strategies to Handle Stress

Next to asking stressors faced by school principals, we also asked them how they cope with these stressors. Five questions were asked about coping strategies. The following section will report the results of these questions.

Power Delegation and Equal Workload Distribution

Most of the principals shared that they delegate their powers to the staff to achieve school goals. Most of the male principals adopt this strategy to reduce their burden and improve work efficiency however their female colleague also opts the same strategy to run the school functions effectively. One of the principals shared, *“I assigned duties to my teachers, and this helps to reduce my work and stress. But I am always there for support and listening their concerns.”* Other principals shared, *“We are a team; thus, we work collaboratively to achieve targets. This is the best strategy to run school efficiently. Everyone must work together and fulfill his/her responsibilities.* One more principal said, *“I believe in democratic leadership, and this is the best strategy to handle work pressures. I have constituted committees which help to achieve work goals.”*

Engagement in Healthy Activities

An equal number of principals highlighted that they engage their teachers in a variety of activities. By doing so, they keep engaged in healthy activities and they enhance their performance as well. For example, a principal shared, *“I appreciate my teachers when achieve targets, they show motivation. This reduces my work stress as well because ultimately, we all are progressing.* Another principal shared, *“in school we all are like a family, when we have targets, we focus, and we try to help each other to improve school performance.”*

Effective and Efficient Planning and time Management

Many school principals highlighted that they focus on effective planning and time management. Effective planning reduces errors and manages time effectively. When I plan carefully, I assign tasks to my teachers and also take care of their workload. This reduces my stress and enhances work efficiency. One of the principals said, *“I think, effective time management is the key in any organization. To be successful, you need to plan effectively and set certain goals to achieve targets.”* Another shared, *“I use to discuss issues with my teachers, I listen to them, and we jointly solve the school problem. Our school has a large number of students, it is very difficult to manage timetable and to adjust the classes but with negotiations and sharing we solve such problems amicably.”*

Patient Listening

Data revealed that principals are facing a variety of challenges in schools, but they have certain coping strategies to hand in these problems. A male principal shared, *“there are always problems and challenges in school for example, parents and stakeholders criticize us, but I listen to them patiently and try to sort out their problems with logic and practical solutions. If their criticism is genuine, I handle constructively, and all support my teachers in such issues. It reduces their stress and my stress.”* Another said, *parents in this area are not educated, they do not use proper language with us however I show patience and handle them politely. Some time, we need to consider ground realities to handle the issue.”* Another said, *“sometime parents criticize the performance of teachers. I also listen to my teachers and try to resolve the issue.”* Another said, *there are always concerns from the community members and parents. We do pay attention to their concerns and try to resolve them maximum.”*

Fairness and Efficiency at Workplace

This was another important stress coping strategy highlighted after the analysis. Many principals reported that they try to ensure compliance with rules and regulations, work ethics that bring fairness and work efficiency at school. This call structures, if these structures are good and in practice, it resolves a lot of problems. They further said, honestly is the best policy, one must be honest and sincere in their work. A principal said, if I remain honest and fair in my work, this gives message to my teachers. By adopting such standards, we can enhance work efficiency and reduce stress. Other principals shared during the interview, *"fairness can reduce the stress of accountability in school."*

Maintaining Proper Records of School

Many principals emphasize the need to maintain school records to reduce their stress. They told us that most of the data required by the authorities are related to school records. If we maintain the school record efficiently, we can provide such data to the authorities. A principal share, *"being a head of the school, I must be skillful enough to maintain school record and understand the working procedures. This will reduce work stress and enhance our efficiency."* Another said, *"I always instruct my staff to manage the records of everything and at the time of need, it is very easy to locate it and share it with the authorities. I have registers for all tasks at schools, and we maintain these records on regular basis."*

Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the factors that cause stress for school principals and the related coping strategies principals apply to handle the stress. The findings of the research are being discussed with existing research. Our results confirm that one of the key stressors for school principals was lack of resources and lack of cooperation from school staff. The study results of Maas et al. (2022) also aligned with our results, their research was conducted in school context with the same variables. The findings of this study show that work related stress cause mental and mental illness. These findings are in accordance with the work of Burk et al., (2022) who conducted research with school principals to explore their well-being and resilience.

They also identified that continuous stress causes frustration and mental illness among school principals. It was found that being fair and accountable is the most challenging task for school principals and this causes stress for them. Earlier research also identified the same results as Sogunro (2012) conducted study in school context to identify the stressors and coping strategies. The study results of Mathibe (2007) found that effective time management techniques can make school principal successful in their jobs and reduce their job-related stress which is in line with our study findings. Beausaert et al. (2016) found that support from teachers and stakeholders reduces the stress of school principals. This is in accordance with our study results. Support from school principals to teachers and support from teachers to school principal reduces stress among school principals. Similarly, the study results of Elomaa et al., (2023) are also align with this study results and found the same coping strategies that we have identified in this research.

Limitations and Recommendations

This research also acknowledges its limitations and suggests pathways for future research. This research was qualitative in nature based on just interviews. We recommend future research to conduct mixed-method research to design some structured questions to identify the actual causes and coping strategies of school principals. Engaging school teachers along with their parents can be a good idea to see the impact of stress on teachers and to determine how teachers are adding in the stress level of principals. This also enriches the data analysis and findings of the study. Moreover, this will allow us to broaden the sample to further schools and this will enhance the generalizability of the study results. The results must be communicated to school authorities to make them

realize the situation of schools and school stakeholders because the level of stress ultimately affects school performance and school standing. The study is limited by its research design. Combining a qualitative approach with a quantitative one could lead to more accurate and generalizable conclusions after in-depth analysis.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this research was to explore the factors causing stress among school principals and coping strategies that they employ to handle the stress. The following conclusions can be drawn based on the research findings. This study found that principals are facing a variety of stressors at school, e.g., lack of school resources, lack of funds, non-cooperative behaviors of teachers and staff, pressure from authorities, anxiety and frustration, work pressures, poor job satisfaction and performance cause stress in school principals. As to coping strategies, power delegation and equal workload distribution is reducing the stress level, moreover, school principals also engage their teachers in healthy activities to provide a conducive environment in school, some highlighted the effective and efficient planning and time management reduce the level of stress, patience and effective listening, fairness and accountability, maintaining proper records of school also found useful coping strategies to reduce the stress among school principals.

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