

A Mixed Method Approach to the Understanding of the Impact of Stress, Gender, Acting or Confirmed Appointment Status on Burnout

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Abstract

The research aims to determine: (1) what are the symptoms of burnout and what preventative measures can be implemented; (2) what are the current factors public school administrators experience that contribute to burnout; (3) to what extent does burnout affect public school administrators in Trinidad and Tobago; (4) to what extent does gender affect burnout among public school administrators in Trinidad and Tobago; (5) to what extent does having a confirmed status as a public school administrator lead to burnout among school administrators; (6) what framework and measures can be put in place to detect and mitigate the effects of burnout among public school administrators. This is a mixed method research design where convenient sampling was used for the quantitative component and purposive sampling for the qualitative. The questionnaire and interviews were done face to face with 352 participants for the quantitative and 32 participants for the qualitative. The findings noticeably indicated that gender did not significantly impact burnout. Moreover, acting and confirmed status had a significant impact on burnout. Furthermore, burnout was seen as evident among public school administrators with personal accomplishment remaining high. The perception of the respondents emphasised the importance of alleviating burnout through mentorship programmes, recognition of achievements, maintaining manageable workloads, fostering peer collaborations and social interactions among school administrators.

Keywords: burnout, acting and confirmed status, depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment

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Introduction

In these rapidly changing times in education, school administrators are faced with greater demands and fewer resources. As researchers continue to study burnout, it has been accepted as an occupational hazard for workers in professions of education, human services, and healthcare (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). School administrators are at high risk for workplace burnout since they are required to do more with less as their demands increase but their resources are continuously reduced. Burnout among school administrators is a grave problem as it does not only affect the administrators but the entire school as a whole. Maslach et al. (2001) positions that burnout has been linked with various forms of job withdrawal—absenteeism, intention to leave the job, and actual turnover. Subsequently, for individuals that remain on the job, burnout leads to lower productivity and efficiency at work. As a result, it causes a decline in job satisfaction and a reduced commitment to the job or the organization. Additionally, this is supported by Wells and Klocko (2018) who declares that when school administrators experience burnout, school productivity declines, which can in turn cause student achievement and morale to plunge. Administrators can diminish the negative aspects of stress and circumvent the risk of burnout and even improve their performance, by learning how to manage stress and channel it in positive directions (Brock & Grady, 2002). The role of school administration is very important in the organizational climate of the school, the performance of teachers and students as well as for implementation of change to take place. Whilst there is a multitude of information on burnout, there is little to no information on burnout among school administrators in the Trinidad and Tobago as well as the Caribbean.

Literature Review

The concept of burnout started out as a social issue rather than a scholarly theory (Schaufeli et al., 2017) and it was initially shaped by logic rather than academic concerns. The term “burnout” was coined in the 1970s by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger and he used it to describe the consequences of severe stress and high ideals in “helping” professions (Schaufeli, 2017). At that same time Christina Maslach was also focused on how persons responded to crises was able to increase the theoretical development and integrate the burnout concept with other conceptual frameworks. Whilst burnout has been studied since the early 1970's, there remains ongoing argument in the professional literature and among some practitioners concerning its definition, etiology, and the stages of development (Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996). However, there is an overall agreement that burnout is a multi-stage process (Schwarzer & Kleiber, 1996).

Multidimensional Theory of Burnout

Traditionally, burnout is measured as a three-dimensional syndrome; emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment which can be measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services. Emotional exhaustion, refers to feelings of being emotionally strained and exhausted by others. Maslach and Jackson (1981) illustrates the first dimension of burnout, emotional exhaustion, as a perceived state of emotional and occasionally physical exhaustion, where the professional no longer feels in control of their emotional capacity to serve (i.e., deal with parents and teachers, take part in school district meeting, etc.) as was once possible. The emotional exhaustion component denotes the basic individual stress dimension of burnout. Depersonalisation, referring to negative, cynical, or excessively detached responses to other people at work. Finally, reduced personal accomplishment refers to feelings of decline in one's competence and productivity, and to

one's lowered sense of efficacy (Maslach, 1998). This lowered sense of self-efficacy has been connected to depression and an inability to cope with the demands of the job, it can be aggravated by a lack of social support and of opportunities to develop professionally (Cooper, 1998). This dimension of burnout is more complex than emotional exhaustion or depersonalization as it can appear as a function of either of the other two domains or a combination of the two (Byrne, 1994). It is challenging for an employee to feel a sense of accomplishment when they are also feeling exhausted or helping people toward whom one is indifferent (Maslach et al., 2001).

Burnout and Public-School Administrators

Cooper (1998) stated that burnout has been accepted as an occupational hazard for people-oriented professions such as human services, education and health care. When individuals in an organisation cannot exercise their authority, then the organisation cannot function effectively. Research has shown that school administrators experience problems caused by school supervisors, teachers, students, parents, organisational structure and climate, school budget, work overload, physical conditions of the school, and the school environment (Demirtas et al., 2007). Additionally, school administrators have a tendency to avoid using their authority because of several factors such as; limited resources, legal constraints, the absence of support by senior management, and disapproval from teachers and parents on decisions taken or having more responsibilities than authority (Ekinci, 2015). These problems make school administration a prime candidate for high stress levels. Hence, the reason researchers believe that school administrators suffer from medical illnesses caused by their jobs; they are distressed, and experience burnout (Yildirim & Ozkahraman, 2011). In a recent definition of burnout, Maslach et al. (2001) purported that burnout is characterised as a psychological response to chronic exposure to emotionally-demanding job demands. Administrators in distress, can negatively affect outcomes across a whole school. Another difficulty school administrators face is executive isolation, the fact that leadership can be a lonely, isolating job (Berg & Boyland, 2011). School administrators are expected to be knowledgeable and strong, as well as confident in their abilities to create a shared vision for the betterment of the school, and to lead stakeholders in a concerted effort to meet that vision. School administrators expected characteristics include empathy, grace, and expectations that they are always dependable, leaving these administrators without the ability to vent, express self-doubt, or show emotion, which is a constant source of managerial stress (Batista et al., 2016). Prolonged feelings of loneliness can lead to burnout, as isolation triggers the brain's pain mechanisms in ways that mimic the effect of actual physical pain (Robinson & Marentette, 2014).

Job Insecurity/Acting or Confirmed Status and Burnout

As per the Public service commission regulations act of Trinidad and Tobago, "acting appointment" means the temporary appointment of an officer to a higher office or otherwise whether that office is vacant or not. "appointment" means the placing of a person in an office in the public service. Rosenblatt & Ruvio (1996) refers to job insecurity as anxiety about the future existence of the job, whereas (Heaney et al., 1994) considered it as threats to the continuity of the job. Job insecurity generates numerous negative consequences such as fear, anxiety, demotivation and job loss. Therefore, when employees are not certain about their jobs and their future in they can resist taking on new responsibilities and stop learning personal and academic new developments. Çetin and Çolak (2020) conducted a study on 224 teachers working in the public sector in Turkey. Moreover, Draper and McMichael (2003)

suggested that acting heads may find themselves in an unusual situation as a leader which is seen as completing the assigned roles and responsibilities with little expectations of long term involvement leading to signs of burnout.

Methodology

This study attempts to determine the effect of burnout among school administrators in T&T. The mixed method typology, which has been developing over the past years, has been labelled the third wave of research methodology because it combines the objective reality of quantitative positivist paradigms with the qualitative subjective reality of post positivism (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). There is extensive agreement that mixing different types of methods can strengthen a study (Greene & Caracelli, 1997).

Research Design

The study utilised a convenient sampling method for the quantitative component. The MBI-HSS was developed by Maslach and Jackson in 1981. This is considered as one of the leading measures of burnout and was originally used in research in the United States and Canada (Maslach et al., 1997). The original MBI was designed for professionals in the human-services field and consists of 22 questions that measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Responses for the MBI-HSS were recorded on a seven-point Likert-type scale that ranges from never to every day. Responses were as follows: Never = 0, A few times per year or less = 1, Once per month or less = 2, A few times per month = 3, Once per week = 4, A few times per week = 5, and Every day = 6. The emotional exhaustion (EE) subscale, which accesses feelings of emotional exhaustion at work, consists of nine items. Depersonalization (DP) subscale comprises of five items and illustrates feelings of impersonal responses to co-workers. The personal accomplishment (PA) subscale, which depicts feelings of competence and success about personal achievements, comprises of eight items (Maslach et al., 1997). Mean scores from each subscale determined the degree of burnout and scores ranged from high to low. The higher the mean scores of the depersonalization and emotional exhaustion constructs the greater the level of burnout. The emotional exhaustion scores ranges were high (27 or above), moderate (17-26), or low (0-16). The score ranges for depersonalization were high (13 or above), moderate (7-12), or low (0-6). The score ranges for personal accomplishment were high (0-31), moderate (32-38), or low (39 or above) (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005). The greater the mean scores of the depersonalization and emotional exhaustion subscales, the higher the level of burnout. A low degree of burnout is exhibited when there is a low score on depersonalization and emotional exhaustion and a high score on the personal accomplishment subscales. If the participant has an average of all three subscales, then this suggests a moderate level of burnout (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005). The estimated time of completion for the MBI-HSS was 10 minutes. Permission from Mind Garden.

Purposive sampling was used for the qualitative component. In this research, the case study approach was used. Creswell et al. (2003) noted that though it was the choice of the person conducting the study, it was typical to interview no more than four or five persons when undertaking the case study approach. Moreover, Creswell et al.'s recommendation along with the fact that the sample respondents were scattered throughout Trinidad and Tobago to complete each interview that was also recorded then transcribed. Furthermore, Patton (2002) further justifies a sample size of ten persons is sufficient to undertake case study research. Patton's justification for supporting a sample size of ten persons lay in the fact that thematic

saturation can occur where no new themes emerge. The participants were chosen from existing school administrators within the secondary schools of Trinidad and Tobago. This was done using purposeful sampling technique. Sayre (2001) states that sample size for qualitative research depends on considerations of the researcher related to the purpose of the study. The selected cases were judged according to the purpose of the study and their relevance in answering the research questions on the phenomenon investigated. Joint displays were used for the interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Research Findings

A total of 352 responses were collected from the main study. Once the final dataset was coded in SPSS at the end of the data collection period, the data was examined for missing data and outliers. This involved the extraction of descriptive statistics comprising frequency distributions, means, standard deviations and measures of dispersion. Based on the extraction of the descriptive scores a total of 352 questionnaires were received and there were 4 missing cases $n = 348$. The case method was used and the average was used to complete the missing case section. Of the 352 participants, majority were female with 70.2% representing 247 persons, while males represented 29.8% with 105 respondents.

For the sample most respondents were married representing 65.6%. 4.0% were in common law relationships, 8.5% divorced, 1.1% separated and lastly 20.7% sampled were single. A greater percentage of the sample came from the age group 41-50 (43.3%, $n = 352$) and minority of the sample were in the age group of 30-40 years at only 18.7% or 66 participants. Further with regards to administrative job title, the majority of the participants were deans accounting for 38.2% of the data or 135 participants. The minority of participants were principals accounting for 10.8% or 38 participants. Lastly, 58.1% of the participants in the survey confirmed they were acting or 205 participants and 41.6% were confirmed in their position or 147 participants of the administrators surveyed.

The scales for the variables in the study – Maslach Burnout comprised of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment; therefore, Confirmatory Factor Analysis was completed for each dimension. For each scale, KMO and Bartlett's test was executed, and the total variance explained, communalities, rotated component matrix (varimax rotation) and Cronbach Alpha was analysed. For the KMO measure of Sampling Adequacy, a value of 0.8 and above was considered meritorious and below 0.5 was unacceptable (Hair et al., 2015).

Confirmed Status Impact on School Administrators' Burnout

The impact of confirmed status whether acting or confirmed was tested using ANOVA analysis on administrative employee exhaustion. This was reported significant as the alpha level was below .05 with the results of .001.

Discussion of Findings of Both Quantitative and Quantitative

Emotional Exhaustion

This is the first attribute of the multi-dimensional construct of burnout in the Multidimensional theory of burnout (Maslach, 1998). In this study emotional exhaustion levels among school administrators were high. Item 1 which asked the respondent to rate

their levels of emotional exhaustion with respect to if they feel emotionally drained from their work. The mean for emotional exhaustion was 3.97. According to Maslach (1998) inventory scale 3.5 is high. The average school administrators were likely to endorse feeling he or she is emotionally drained, used up, frustrated and may be feeling as though they are working too hard weekly or more. This finding was also supported with item 2, item 3, item 8 and item 13 respectively. Furthermore, Item 2 mean was a staggering 4.23 and asked the respondents if they feel used up at the end of the work day. Moreover, Item 3 mean was 3.98 and also asked the respondents if they feel fatigued when they get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job. Additionally, Item 8 mean was 3.64 and asked respondents if they feel burnout from their work. Lastly, Item 13 was 3.31 which measured how frustrated the respondents were about their job. It can be concluded that administrators felt used, fatigued and burnout from their work and are frustrated. Moreover, the qualitative findings also support some aspects of emotional exhaustion and were depicted in the coded themes. For example, stressful work environment and heavy work load. "Ridiculous workload with insufficient pay and limited resources a highly stressful environment." Respondent 3 assigned to a Public Secondary School "Management of the school with limited resources it is a highly stressful environment as there are so many stakeholders to please." Respondent 5 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "A very heavy work load which entails managing the day-to-day operations of the school as well as dealing with student infractions and parents. It can be a highly stressful environment at times." Respondent 6 assigned to a Public Secondary School "Heavy workload with limited resources the work environment is stressful as there are too many variables a person has to deal with at any given time." Respondent 16 assigned to a Public Secondary School.

Depersonalisation

This is the second attribute of the multi-dimensional construct of burnout in the Multidimensional theory of burnout (Maslach, 1998). Depersonalisation which is a coping mechanism in response to emotional exhaustion aforementioned results in persons becoming negative and cynical or excessively detached from other people at work (Maslach et al., 2001). In other words, after emotional exhaustion a person may begin to detach from others and may even lose interest. In this study depersonalisation levels among school administrators were experienced. Item 11 which asked the respondent to rate their levels of depersonalisation with respect to if the job is hardening them emotionally. The mean was 2.95. According to Maslach (1998), inventory scale 2.95 showed that the participants are experiencing some aspects of depersonalisation. It should be noted that the bar graph of the respondent for item 11 showed the highest frequency occurring was 4. This meant that depersonalisation was at least experienced once a week. It can be concluded that administrators may be negative, cynical or excessively detached from people at work. Moreover, the qualitative findings also support some aspects of depersonalisation and are depicted in the interviewed respondents' statements as well as the coded themes. Moreover, theme absenteeism and punctuality are a response to depersonalisation. "Persons have lost their human touch when dealing with situations." Respondent 1 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "Persons are detached from the job and tend to be short with students and colleagues." Respondent 5 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "Tired all the time not motivated and not involved in school activities." Respondent 12 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "Tardy all the time frequently absent do not participate in school activities and not interested in being at school." Respondent 26 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "Always late and tends to be absent a lot overwhelmed easily and takes out frustration on others." Respondent 27 assigned to a Public Secondary School.

Personal Accomplishment

Personal accomplishment is the third and final attribute of the multi-dimensional construct of burnout in the Multidimensional theory of burnout (Maslach, 1998). Personal achievement was purported by Maslach (1998) as persons experiencing a decline in competency and productivity and a lowered sense of efficacy. Moreover, personal achievement should be low. Contrary to existing studies personal accomplishment was very high among school administrators. Item 4 asked the respondents if they can easily understand how their coworkers feel about things. The mean was 4.62. According to Maslach (1998), inventory scale 3.5 is high. Item 17 asked the respondents if they can easily create a relax atmosphere with their coworkers. The mean was 3.88, which was also shockingly high among school administrators. Item 19 asked the respondents if they have accomplished many worthwhile things on the job. The mean was 4.25 which was also very high. The average school administrators may be seen as productive, competent and having a sense of efficacy which contradicts Maslach's 1998 findings. This is a significant contribution to extant literature on burnout theory in the small island developing context. Moreover, the qualitative findings also support some aspects of personal achievement and are depicted in the theme rewarding. For example, the interview statements below support personal achievement. The workload is reasonable and while it can be stressful at times it is a very rewarding profession. Respondent 4 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "It is not an 8 to 2:30 job work starts before 8am and ends when I go to bed it can be stressful but very rewarding at the same time." Respondent 17 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "Too many to list as I deal with management of the school parents, teachers, students, after school activities and functions with little to no resources. It can be a stressful environment but a very rewarding job." Respondent 24 assigned to a Public Secondary School. "A multifaceted job that can be rewarding at times but highly stressful." Respondent 26 assigned to a Public Secondary School. Further Quantitative Discussions of Hypothesized Relationships. Gender was seen as having a significant impact on burnout by Theorell et al. (2014). Moreover, men and women were seen as having different levels of exposure to work and non-work stressors. Contrastingly, Maslach et al. (2001) stated that gender is not a strong predictor of burnout. Moreover, assumptions that burnout occurs more often among women are not unusual. To this end, this study investigated the impact of gender on three dimensions on burnout namely emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment. Moreover, the study finding found that there was no significant relationship between gender and emotional exhaustion as the reported p level was 0.146. With respect to depersonalisation the reported p level was 0.432 which was not significant. Lastly, personal accomplishment was 0.157 which was also not significant. It can be therefore inferred that from the sample of respondent's gender was not a predictor of burnout.

Results of Confirmed and Acting Status

Acting appointments was seen in the literature as a temporary appointment of an officer to a higher office in the workplace. Moreover, a confirmed appointment is the placing of a person in an office in the public service. Draper and McMichael (2003) suggested that the stressful demands of being a school administrator created a disadvantage for the administrator due to having an acting appointment. Moreover, the stressful demands were seen as having to work long hours in the weekends and holidays. It can be therefore stated that an acting status can lead to burnout. There was little research that investigated the impact of acting or confirmed status on burnout. This study finding with respect to acting or confirmed status on burnout three dimensions; emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment was

significant. Moreover, the impact of acting or confirmed status on emotional exhaustion was 0.001 which is significant. Furthermore, the impact of acting or confirmed status on depersonalisation was 0.00, which is very significant. Lastly, the impact of personal accomplishment was 0.00, which is very significant. These results suggest that acting or confirmed status play an important role in exacerbating burnout levels among public school administrators. Qualitative findings to support active and confirmed status leading to burnout was seen in the statements below, “Ministry of Education is very slow to upgrade persons to the position that they are in. I am acting in my position for years now and when asked about my upgrade it’s always a paperwork scenario.” Respondent 16 assigned to a Public Secondary School. “I cannot get the right salary despite being upgraded and working in the position.” Respondent 21 assigned to a Public Secondary School.

With respect to the demographic analysis, majority sample respondents were female. Furthermore, 65% of the sampled administrators were married and 43.3% were between the ages of 41 -50. Moreover, majority of the participants were acting in an administrative post which represented 58.1% of the sampled participants. Differences among means with respect to gender and acting or confirmed status were analysed. There were some statistically significant differences among group means with respect to active or confirmed status. However, there was no statistical significance with respect to gender and burnout. Additionally, burnout was measured with three dimensions being emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment. The findings supported burnout among school administrators in Trinidad and Tobago Public Secondary Schools. Interestingly, even though the study sample showed emotional and depersonalisation high levels of burnout, personal accomplishment was high. However, it is noted from burnout theory that normally personal accomplishment should be low. These results reinforce how critical this study’s contribution is to the existing body of theoretical and empirical research.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to utilize a mixed method approach to understand the impact of stress, gender, acting or confirmed appointment status on burnout among public secondary school administrators. To this end four research objectives were identified comprising the effect of burnout on school administrators. Moreover, the impact of demographical factors and its influence on burnout among school administrators. Furthermore, burnout levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment levels among school administrators are underpinned by the guiding theories of the Multidimensional theory of burnout and Managerial Stress Cycle theory.

The findings of this research provide several managerial implications for educators and secondary schools operating in T&T and the wider region. Firstly, burnout levels that are high need to be mitigated and brought down to allow for better job satisfaction and retention of school administrators. Visser et al. (2003) suggested that organizational factors and personal factors are important in managing both stress and job satisfaction because these factors shield against the adverse consequences of work stress. Recommendations were made from school administrators in the qualitative phase of the study. This was seen as conclusively signaling the introduction of a mentorship programme and the celebration of achievements and milestones in public secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. “Having a mentorship programme and some support from staff. We need to foster a work culture that allows us to be open and discuss the issues before they become unbearable. You may not have the answer but someone else might have a solution.” Respondent 13 assigned to a Public

Secondary School. “Recognize the accomplishment of the staff so that they are motivated to continue” Respondent 14 assigned to a Public Secondary School. “A mentorship programme for incoming persons into a post will help alleviate a lot of issues” Respondent 24 assigned to a Public Secondary School “Recognize achievements no matter how small.” Respondent 32 assigned to a Public Secondary School (McFadden & Altamirano, 2020) suggested that teacher’s burnout can negatively impact the education sector. Moreover, the education sector is experiencing a high rate of job turnover as a result of burnout. Furthermore, to address this research problem, McFadden and Altamirano (2020) made several recommendations to eliminate burnout which support the qualitative response from the public-school administrators respondents. Firstly, there are two approaches to alleviate burnout. One focuses on fixing the person the other focuses on fixing the work environment. In fixing the person it was recommended that teachers or administrators pay attention to their health and fitness levels, relaxation techniques, understand one self, coping skills and taking part social support activities. In fixing the environment management can have a sustainable workload, provide a supportive community, provide recognition and reward deserving employees. Furthermore, these strategies purported by McFadden and Altamirano (2020) were seen as possibly alleviating workplace burnout because job satisfaction would be improved and may be high as a result. Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) stated that organization should address the issue of adjusting heavy workloads and also provide support groups and interventions to deal with a heavy workload. For this study it was also recommended by participants that heavy workloads be adjusted to a more manageable workload. Lastly, Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) suggested that mentorship programmes were seen as an effective tool to deal with the stress teachers or administrators experience. The mentorship programme can foster peer collaboration and promote positive social interaction which can prevent or reduce burnout. The second practical contribution of this study shows that active and confirmed status had a positive effect on burnout. This emphasized the importance of understanding the specific attributes that influence public secondary school administrators burnout levels.

This study focused and was limited to public secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. However, it would be interesting to investigate the impact of burnout on school administrators in private and denominational schools. Moreover, the study found a significant relationship between acting or confirmed status and burnout, future studies could investigate other organizational outcomes such as job embeddedness, job turnover and organizational sabotage. Additionally, contrary to the literature results showed that personal accomplishment was high, future research can investigate why this outcome is different in the small island developing context.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to identify and test an empirical framework to gain an understanding of the levels of burnout among public school administrators by utilizing the guiding theory of Maslach Multidimensional Burnout theory. Moreover, the effects of demographic factors on burnout levels were also investigated. To test the research objectives, a sample survey questionnaire was developed with the approval of the ethics committee and interview questions, which was then distributed in person over a 3-month period. A total of 352 school administrators that fell within the age group of 30-50+ years took part in this study. Additionally, 32 interviews were conducted to explain what are the symptoms of burnout and what preventative measures can be implemented. The general literature shows that burnout levels are high amongst school administrators. The study findings confirmed these finding of Friedman (1991) and Maslach (1998). Burnout was high on all levels of

burnout as measured using the Maslach Burnout inventory scale. However, this study found that despite high levels of burnout school administrators were still high performers.

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