



Principal Burnout: How Urban School Leaders Experience Secondary Trauma

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Acknowledgements

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This working paper is now forthcoming in the journal *Leadership and Policy in Schools* and should be cited as follows:

DeMatthews, D. E., Carrola, P. A., Izquierdo, E., & Knight, D. S. (Forthcoming). Principal burnout: How urban school leaders experience secondary trauma. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*.

Abstract

The mental health needs of school principals have been consistently overlooked in the field of educational leadership and in the preparation and professional development of principals. This mixed-method study compares rates of burnout and secondary trauma of principals in one urban school district along the U.S.-Mexico border with other human service professionals and provides examples of how two principals experienced burnout and secondary trauma. Most principals reported low rates of burnout and secondary trauma, but follow-up interviews with two newer principals revealed significant exposure to trauma. Findings inform new directions for research and new emphases for preparation.

Principal Burnout: How Urban School Leaders Experience Secondary Trauma

More than 10 million children in the U.S. endure trauma, abuse, violence, natural disasters and adverse events that trigger significant social and behavioral problems (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2011). In a recent study of 4,000 children ages 0 to 17 years old in the U.S., 37.3% of children experienced a physical assault in the previous year (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015). Almost five percent of girls 14 to 17 years old experienced sexual assault or abuse and 15.2% of children experience maltreatment by a caregiver, including physical abuse (5.0%). The world is also witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record, which has profound impacts on immigrant communities, children, and public schools. (Lemke, 2017). More 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from their homes, and more than half the world's 22.5 million refugees are under the age of 18 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2016).

Along the U.S. Mexico-Border, many women, children, and unaccompanied minors from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have entered the U.S. to escape violence. Displaced children from these countries often report being affected by violence from organized armed criminal actors (e.g., drug cartels, gangs), from abuse and violence within their homes, or because of being recruited into and exploited by the industry of human smuggling (UNHCR, 2014). In a report titled, *Addressing the Mental Health Problems of Border and Immigrant Youth*, Flores and Kaplan (2009) described the broad range of trauma, substance abuse, and mental health concerns that are related to the border region and its challenging socioeconomic, environmental, and political conditions. The report highlighted that many children in the borderlands live in relative insecurity, anxiety, and fear given their potential exposure to drug-related violence in Mexico as they or their family immigrated to the U.S. A problematic

immigration system causes further trauma through broken connections within families.

Moreover, the inability of undocumented immigrants to move freely between the border creates emotional distance between children and their families. The El Paso, Texas – Ciudad Juarez, Mexico border region is a section of North America that has been at the epicenter of violence from a large-scale drug war in Mexico and harmful U.S. immigration policies. Schools in El Paso enroll thousands of students who live in Ciudad Juarez and commute over one of four bridges daily to attend U.S. public schools (Cave, 2011).

Individuals who work in human service institutions and in “helping professions” like education are often expected to spend time helping people solve difficult psychological, social, and physical problems that are a result of past trauma (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In public schools, principals work with staff to understand and address problems confronted by students and families. By engaging in problem-solving activities, principals like other helping professionals, learn about student trauma secondhand and can become frustrated with the difficulties of resolving complex problems. Exposure to secondhand trauma or “secondary trauma” can take a serious emotional toll on professionals working in human service institutions (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011). Any individual working to help students and families dealing with trauma over a continued period can become stressed or desensitized to people's feelings, lose a sense of hope and purpose, and be at risk of burnout.

The effects of secondary trauma and burnout for principals have been largely ignored in the field of educational leadership and administration. In a recent study (Authors, 2017) focused on school improvement in the El Paso metropolitan area, the authors of this manuscript documented some effects of burnout and secondary trauma on principals. Consequently, we initiated this study to investigate burnout and secondary trauma in the El Paso area. We asked

two questions:

- What are the rates of burnout and secondary trauma in principals and how do they compare with other human services professionals (e.g., teachers, social workers, medical professionals, mental health providers)?
- What examples of burnout and secondary trauma do principals experience and how do they understand and cope with these experiences?

We used an explanatory sequential mixed-method design that involved collecting quantitative survey data first and then explaining and expanding the quantitative data with in-depth interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The Professional Quality of Life Survey (ProQOL) (Stamm, 2010) and Maslach Burnout Inventory Educator Survey (MBI-ES) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) were used to measure the presence of secondary trauma and burnout in one district. In the second qualitative phase of the study, we used in-depth interviews with 2 Mexican American female elementary principals to identify examples of burnout and secondary trauma. The qualitative phase of this study was not intended to reflect a representative sampling of principal experiences, but instead to document and describe physical, social, and emotional challenges that have been under-represented in the literature. In what follows, we set the context of the El Paso – Ciudad Juarez borderlands and then present a theoretical framework describing secondary trauma and burnout and how it relates to the principalship. Then, we describe the study's methods and present quantitative and qualitative findings. We conclude with a discussion of findings and implications for research and recommendations for pre- and in-service professional development.

El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

El Paso, Texas is situated along the U.S.-Mexico border adjacent to Ciudad Juarez,

Chihuahua, Mexico and has about 690,000 residents (80% Hispanic, mostly of Mexican descent, 14.2% White, 3.1% Black, 1.4% Asian). The city is part of a large international metropolitan area of 2.7 million people (El Paso-Las Cruces, New Mexico, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico). El Paso has a long history of racial injustice, discrimination, and pervasive inequalities. Racial and economic segregation is a mainstay in El Paso. Approximately 20% of households earn less than \$25,000 per year, with the majority of these householders being geographically isolated between U.S. Interstate 10, the city's downtown, and the U.S.-Mexico border (US Census, 2017). Many immigrant communities lack access to healthcare and healthy foods. Chronic poverty, a lack of insurance, and high rates of unemployment contribute to public health problems. Several census tracts on the border have the highest Community Need Index (CNI) risk score (EPCH, 2014). In one community represented in this study, the household income in 2014 was \$14,302 per year, the unemployment rate was about 18%, almost 35% of families did not have any form of health insurance, and more than 70% of children lived below the poverty line (US Census, 2017).

While El Paso is one of the U.S.'s safest cities, Ciudad Juarez has been one of the world's most dangerous. The city is known as "the ghastly, premier center of female homicides in the twenty-first century with a contested 370 female murder victims from 1993 to 2003 (Staudt, 2008, p. 1). Many of the female murder victims were found to be raped and mutilated. Staudt (2008) and other critical scholars have argued that high female murder rates in Juarez are partly tied to institutional flaws in political and criminal justice systems in Mexico as well as economic and political power asymmetry between the U.S. and Mexico. Ciudad Juarez was named the world's most violent city in 2010 with an estimated rate of 200 murders per 100,000 people (Moran, 2012). Between 2008 and 2013, more than 10,000 murders were documented in the city. Bowden (2011) captured how violence intersects with the daily life of children:

A man found against the metal bars of a window, arms spread in the crucifixion style, feet firmly on the ground, his face hidden by a pig mask. Children walk past on their way to school. A few days later, a man is found at dawn dangling from a bridge. His severed head is located wrapped in a black plastic bag at the Juarez monument to newsboys in the Plaza of the Journalist. (p. 230).

Extreme violence in Juarez had been subsiding, but murder is again rising as Mexico experienced its most deadly year recorded in 2017 with over 29,168 murders (Meixler, 2018).

Ciudad Juarez is Mexico's fifth largest city with an estimated population of 1.3 million and the home to industrial plants, colonias, and significant income and standard of living gaps between rich and poor (Quinones, 2016). Colonias are unincorporated and unregulated settlements with substandard housing and living conditions. They often have high proportions of adult illiteracy, lack access to quality public schools, struggle with severe poverty and multiple forms of violence (e.g., domestic, community, gang/cartel), and are underserved by government due to malaise and corruption (Bejarano, 2002; Hernandez & Grineski, 2012; Heyman & Campbell, 2004).

The border between El Paso-Ciudad Juarez is relatively porous in that 34,596 passenger vehicles and 19,268 pedestrians cross into El Paso from Mexico on a daily basis (PDN Uno, 2018). Thousands of children commute back and forth and many children who live in Juarez attend public schools in El Paso. Many of El Paso's students are at-risk to lose a parent or guardian from deportation, which can cause severe disruption to their academic and psychosocial functioning (Sulkowski, 2017). President Trump campaigned that he would protect "Dreamers" and undocumented school-aged children protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), but while in office he has signed numerous executive orders that have targeted immigrant communities and stimulated fear in borderland immigrant communities (Lemke, 2017). The state of Texas passed anti-sanctuary city legislation that threatens police chiefs and

sheriffs with jail time if they refuse to honor federal immigration detainers. The political rhetoric, changes in community policing policies, and the deportation of loved ones exposes students to fear, uncertainty, and other traumatic experiences. Consequently, El Paso schools are expected to not only work with students who are struggling with poverty and limited access to resources in some of the city's poorest and isolated communities, but they must also serve a student population that has been exposed to violence, trauma, and a severe form of poverty produced by vast inequalities and broken economic and political systems in Mexico.

Theoretical Framework: Principal Burnout and Secondary Trauma

School mental health professionals (e.g., school counselors, psychologists, and social workers) play an essential role in safeguarding children and detecting abuse and trauma, referring students for treatment, or directly providing therapy to students and families. The nature of this work is demanding given “the emotional nature of the work, the severity and complexity of cases, and the high levels of organizational demand and workload” (Salloum, Kondrat, Johnco, & Olson, 2015, p. 54). These professionals are trained in self-care to protect against the effects of secondary trauma and burnout (Rudaz, Twohig, Ong, & Levin, 2017). Principals are responsible for safeguarding children and ensuring they receive necessary supports. They can serve as conduits and advocates with different community organizations, non-profits, and governmental agencies, especially when students and families are not receiving the support they need. Principals are often knowledgeable about community resources and maintain community networks that help students gain access to needed resources.

Principals are positioned to support to students, families, and counselors, but in doing so are exposed to trauma. The general duties and responsibilities of the principal have been described as demanding, stressful, and a contributing factor to principal turnover (Friedman,

2002). Unlike mental health professionals, principals rarely receive training on self-care (Crawford, Arnold, & Brown, 2014). In what follows, we examine the literature on burnout and secondary trauma to conceptualize how school context and daily work may affect principals. Then, we review the literature on principal emotions to provide insight into how secondary trauma and burnout may influence the emotions and leadership capabilities of principals.

Burnout and Secondary Trauma

Burnout can be viewed as an occupational hazard that impacts one's personal and professional well-being. Burnout is also associated with feelings of hopelessness and can impact one's ability to do their job (Stamm, 2010). Burnout has also been described as a psychological phenomenon where "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind" (Maslach & Jackson, 1986, p. 1). Emotional exhaustion describes feeling drained, over-extended, and a sense of depleted emotional resources that can impact job performance. Depersonalization is related to negative, cynical, and detached attitudes towards other people. Personal accomplishment refers to one's feelings of competence and a tendency to evaluate oneself positively concerning one's work with others (Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, & Schaufeli, 2000).

One experience or set of experiences that contribute to burnout is secondary traumatic stress, which is often referred to as compassion fatigue. Secondary traumatic stress has been described as "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another" (NCTSN, 2011, p. 1). Figley (1995) described compassion fatigue as "stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p. 7). Some scholars conceptualize secondary trauma within the parameters of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because symptoms are often parallel to those exposed to first-hand trauma

(Bride et al., 2004). Similarly, compassion fatigue is defined as “a reduced empathetic capacity or client interest manifested through behavior and emotional reactions to traumatizing experiences of others” (Cieslak, 2014, et al., p. 76). Compassion fatigue has been operationalized to include aspects of both secondary trauma and burnout (i.e., “feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or in doing your job effectively” (Stamm, 2010, p. 13).

Working to help others can also be rewarding. One positive outcome of such work is known as compassion satisfaction, which is described as “the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well” (Stamm, 2010, p. 12). Compassion satisfaction has conceptually been described as an opposing balancing construct to compassion fatigue and burnout (Stamm, 2010). Research with behavioral and mental health professionals has associated variables such as increased age and experience, specialized trauma training, the use of evidence-based practices, and career-sustaining behaviors (e.g., positive self-talk, spending time with family & taking regular vacations) with higher levels of compassion satisfaction (Craig & Sprang, 2010; Lawson & Myers, 2011; Sprang, Clark & Whitt-Woosley, 2007).

Principal Burnout

Emotions and stress are omnipresent in all human activity but have been marginalized in discourse and research in the field of educational leadership. As Louder (1997) noted more than 20 years ago in a personal reflection of his principalship: “Leadership has its highs and lows, its successes and failures. Principals cry, laugh, dream and become suspicious. There are times when principals do want the fairy godmothers to come and save them” (p. 3). Principals are in a position that is filled with stress and a sense of urgency to address pressing problems (Borg & Riding, 1993; Combs, Edmonson, Jackson, & Greenville, 2009; Nhundu, 1999). Unfortunately, few studies examine burnout or the effects of secondary trauma on principals. Sarros (1988)

found that, on average, principals confronted lower levels of burnout in comparison to mental health professionals, but working conditions (e.g., work overload, lack of recognition, problematic interpersonal relationships) most likely contributed to burnout where it existed. Friedman (2002) surveyed 821 Israeli principals using a questionnaire developed from the MBI to assess fatigue (mental, cognitive, and physical), depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Principals reported pressures from parents and community members with unreasonable demands, overload from too many meetings and unrelenting job expectations, unsatisfactory or underperforming teachers, and uncooperative or incompetent administrative support staff. Pressures associated with teachers were most salient in predicting principal burnout. Seidman's study did not find students or student achievement as stressors.

In a study of 3,675 principals and assistant principals in Australia, researchers used the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire to assess a range of dimensions associated with the school environment and leader well-being with a focus on social support resources (Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riles, 2016). Burnout was measured by four items that focused on physical and emotional exhaustion. The data provided strong evidence that a lack of school and community social support led to stress and burnout and that positive social support within schools buffer principals from burnout. One unexpected finding from the study was that the more support principals received from their broader community, the more likely they felt burnout. The researchers hypothesized that when principals felt more connected to their community, they were more vulnerable to community stress.

Research focused on principals and the effects of secondary trauma is relatively non-existent. We found no studies that measured burnout and secondary trauma together. A lack of research in this area is concerning given a growing emphasis on the principal's role in creating

socially just schools that meet the diverse academic, social, and emotional needs of students and the countervailing pressures related to leadership that addresses equity issues (Theoharis, 2007). Education and public policy researchers have also underscored how community issues and outside-of-school factors significantly impact students' wellbeing and their schooling outcomes, which therefore need to be addressed by principals (Author, 2018; Berliner, 2013). In many high-poverty schools, principals struggle to meet all of these demands due to a lack of resources and fractured relationships with families and communities (Author, 2012). Limited resources and fractured family and community relationships perhaps add additional stress for principals.

Principal Emotions

Research on principal emotions provides insight into how principals experience burnout and secondary trauma. Emotions are an essential aspect of leadership because emotions are precursors to future emotions and behaviors; and emotions are indicators of coping with global and local issues (Berkovich & Eyal, 2014). Researchers have studied principal emotions from a variety of perspectives, including how gendered sociocultural power relations affect women in leadership roles (Blackmore, 1996; Oplatka, 2002), the stresses of managing self-control and legitimacy (Beatty, 2000; Crawford, 2007; Maxwell & Riley, 2016), coping with aspects of leadership life related to vulnerability, isolation, fear, and power (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004), and how accountability and performativity policies and academic achievement impact principal emotions (Blackmore, 1996; Tschannen- Moran & Gareis, 2004).

In the qualitative side of this study, two Mexican American female principals discuss their emotions and the effects of burnout and secondary trauma. Research on Latina school leaders is insightful to their experiences. Many Latina principals report a lack mentorship and confront the “double burden” of racial and gender bias (Enomoto, Gardiner, & Grogan, 2000;

Méndez-Morse, 2004). Women in the principalship may also be managing dual roles by maintaining households and family needs as well as the needs of the school (Murakami-Ramalho, 2009). Latina school leaders are often deeply committed to improving school working conditions, have enhanced instructional leadership skills, and demonstrate strong political consciousness and an advocacy-oriented nature within their schools and communities (Méndez-Morse, Murakami, Byrne-Jimenez, & Hernandez, 2015). They may draw upon what Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) conceptualized as "mestiza consciousness," which reflects an understanding of how Chicanas continue to regularly experience the effects of multiple colonizations (e.g., Spanish legacy, U.S. imperialism, Mexican nationalism, and global patriarchy and heterosexism). Mestiza consciousness is tied to resilience, self-empowerment, and collective action. Chicana and Mexicana principals with such consciousness can work to create new cultural ways of knowing, value cultural and asset-based approaches to education, and recognize the brilliance and integrity of their communities (Elenes, Gonzalez, Bernal, & Villenas, 2001). This consciousness can increase the emotional investment of Chicana principals and also lead to increased feelings of compassion satisfaction.

Several studies have discussed the notion of the "wounded leader" and how leaders make sense of critical events as well as the stories they tell themselves to heal and move forward (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Yamamoto, Gardiner, & Tenuto, 2014). Chicana feminist scholarship in educational leadership has documented the multiple forms of oppression confronted by Latina leaders and how, in spite of opposition, these leaders show unrecognized strength as they challenge and change institutional structures, policies, and practices that marginalize women and people of color (Méndez-Morse, 2003). We find this research relevant because of the focus on "school leaders who have experienced a serious conflict, dilemmas or

critical event in their leadership practice” (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 217) and the profound ways they described being “wounded” while fighting to improve their schools and the lives of students. Across these studies, principals talked about new understandings and realizations about their leadership roles, power, and control as well as the responsibility they had to help others. When these realizations surface, some leaders made sense of them in constructive ways while others continued to be distressed or veered into ineffective practices. Sometimes, critical events helped principals build closer relationships with faculty and staff to reduce burnout while other events created anger, resentment, and frustration.

Methods

An explanatory sequential mixed-method design guided the study, which involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data first and then further exploring the implications of the quantitative results with in-depth interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In the first, quantitative phase of the study, survey data were collected from a sample of principals within one large urban school district along the U.S.-Mexico border to assess whether secondary trauma, burnout, and personal accomplishment were related to school context, student demographics, and principal demographics. We used the ProQOL surveys to measure burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion satisfaction. We coupled this survey with the MBI-ES, which assess emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment.¹ The second, qualitative phase was conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative phase to identify critical events and cases that affected principal emotions.

Data Collection and Analysis

¹ The MBI-ES measures emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment while the ProQOL measures compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma. The survey uses prompts and Likert scales, for example: “I feel emotionally drained from my work” and “I feel depressed because of the traumatic experiences of the people I [help].”

Data collection occurred from November 2016 to July 2017. After obtaining district approval, we attended monthly principal professional developments to distribute surveys. Survey data included 86 principals, representing 92% of principals in the district. Surveys were analyzed to identify principals with different levels of secondary trauma, burnout, and personal accomplishment. Surveys were analyzed to identify principals with different levels of secondary trauma, burnout, and personal accomplishment. We compared principal survey data with different demographic features of the school and leader. For the qualitative part of the study, each principal was interviewed once for approximately one-hour. Interviews were transcribed and each principal had the opportunity to make corrections to the transcripts. A shorter interview was conducted to follow up on each principal's initial interview, to address misconceptions, and to understand the principal's emotions and experiences better. NVivo9 software was used to analyze data. Codes were developed deductively and through the study's theoretical framework. Finally, each principal reviewed the qualitative findings presented in this study to ensure their feelings and experiences were accurately expressed.

Setting and Selection

The majority of Border City Public Schools' (BCPS) 60,000 students are Hispanic (82% Hispanic, 5% African American, 10% White).² While the district reported race as Hispanic and not country of origin, U.S. Census data for the area suggests the overwhelming majority of those identified as Hispanic by the district are of Mexican descent (U.S. Census, 2017). More than 65% of students are identified as economically disadvantaged while 26% and 60% are identified as English language learners and "at-risk" (a term used by the state of Texas with established criteria to determine students at risk of dropping out of school) respectively. BCPS was selected

² All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

based on its proximity to the US-Mexico border and because of anecdotal data from a previous study revealed principals experiencing burnout and secondary trauma. Two principals were selected for the qualitative side of this study based on the following criteria: (a) the principal had at least two years in their schools but was not a veteran principal (5 years or more); (b) the principal served a high population of students who recently immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico (evidenced by border proximity/walking distance from school to border, student demographics, neighborhood demographics based on census tract data); (c) the principal survey results were representative of the sample (e.g., low or average for secondary trauma and burnout, high for compassion satisfaction); and (d) the principal was willing to participate.

Quantitative Findings

In this section, we discuss findings from the ProQOL and MBI-ES surveys provided to our sample of principals in BCISD. We began using school and principal demographic data to identify how these characteristics might be related to principal burnout and secondary trauma. The data showed that the percent of free and reduced lunch (FRL) students at the school was not correlated with principal burnout.³ However, principals' overall years of experience was negatively correlated with burnout, while the number of years a principal spent at a particular school was positively correlated with burnout. We, therefore, identified four potential principal groups based on analysis of our survey data: (a) Veteran principals (more than five years of experience) who are new to their school; (b) veteran principals with more than two years of experience in their school; (c) new principals (five or fewer years of experience as a principal) with more than two years of experience in their school; and (d) new principals new to their

³ The Texas Education Agency uses the term "economically disadvantaged" to describe a student who is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or eligible for other public assistance. We use the term free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) in this article because economically disadvantaged is not a nationally or internationally recognized term.

school. Despite a lack of relationship between burnout and the percent of FRL students, we also used school demographics as a selection criterion given past literature on principal turnover and student demographics (e.g., Loeb, Kalogrides, & Hornig, 2010; Rice, 2010).

Results in Relation to Other Professions

ProQOL survey results are often compared to national norms to determine the extent to which the population under study differs from other groups nationally (Stamm, 2010). As described in the background to the region, we hypothesized that principals working on the U.S.-Mexico border might show higher levels of burnout and secondary trauma, but have high rates of compassion satisfaction compared to individuals in other professions or local contexts. Our survey data primarily aligned with these hypotheses. The average raw scores for burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion satisfaction were 22.04, 22.23, and 41.73, respectively. We were unable to identify previous research using the ProQOL with principals. However, child care workers have shown lower rates of burnout (18.95), secondary trauma (17.50) and compassion satisfaction (40.32) when compared with the present study results (Eastwood & Ecklund, 2008).

The current ProQOL results are aligned with data collected by Stamm (2010), which found that teachers experience the highest compassion satisfaction and that professionals who work with children and families experience higher levels of burnout. According to Stamm (2010), individuals that fit the profile of the participants in the current study – average burnout and secondary trauma coupled with high compassion satisfaction (relative to other common groups classified as “helping professions”) – are more likely to be effective in their roles, may have identified successful coping strategies, and may benefit from engagement and opportunities for continuing education (Stamm, 2010).

Results from the MBI-ES showed mean scores on the following subscales emotional

exhaustion (19.4), depersonalization (3.6), and personal accomplishment (39.4). These scores are interpreted by the MBI Manuel as *moderate* for emotional exhaustion, *low* for depersonalization and *high* for personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, Leiter, Schaufeli & Schwab, 1986). When compared to other groups, the principals in this study scored lower than teachers in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and higher in feelings of personal accomplishment (Wegner, 2011; Williams, 2015). Compared to counselors who work in community and correctional settings, principals (a) scored lower than both groups on the depersonalization and personal accomplishment scales (b) scored higher than community counselors on the emotional exhaustion scale and (c) scored lower than correctional counselors on the emotional exhaustion scale (Author B 2016; Lent, 2012). Comparisons from both the ProQOL and MBI-ES results with other studies suggest that principals share some similar consequences from their work with both teachers and professionals outside of the educational field whose work focuses on trauma and other mental health needs.

Differences in Burnout and Secondary Trauma within the Sample

The top panel of Table 1 shows Pearson correlation coefficients between each of the principal survey constructs, for both the ProQOL (compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary trauma) and the MBI-ES (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). Compassion satisfaction is negatively correlated with burnout, secondary trauma, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization, but positively correlated with personal accomplishment. Similarly, burnout and secondary trauma have a positive, significant correlation of 0.61. The bottom panel of Table 1 shows correlations between principal emotion constructs and principal experience and school characteristics.

TABLE 1

Summary statistics and correlations among principal trauma variables and principal and school

characteristics

A. Correlations among principal trauma variables

	Comp. satis.	Burnout	Secondary trauma	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonal.	Personal accomp.
Compassion satisfaction	1					
Burnout	-0.715* (0.000)	1				
Secondary trauma	-0.361* (0.002)	0.611* (0.000)	1			
Emotional exhaustion	-0.525* (0.000)	0.754* (0.000)	0.590* (0.000)	1		
Depersonalization	-0.430* (0.000)	0.576* (0.000)	0.415* (0.000)	0.494* (0.000)	1	
Personal accomplishment	0.526* (0.000)	-0.562* (0.000)	-0.407* (0.000)	-0.277* (0.013)	-0.555* (0.000)	1

B. Correlations among principal trauma and other variables

Experience as a principal	0.200+ (0.076)	-0.232* (0.039)	-0.122 (0.303)	-0.278* (0.013)	-0.073 (0.524)	0.019 (0.865)
% FRL	0.034 (0.791)	-0.123 (0.342)	-0.126 (0.351)	-0.051 (0.695)	-0.024 (0.856)	0.145 (0.261)
% ELL	0.028 (0.833)	-0.071 (0.585)	-0.083 (0.544)	0.054 (0.679)	0.038 (0.773)	0.220+ (0.088)
% in Bilingual Ed.	0.133 (0.311)	-0.237+ (0.069)	-0.084 (0.543)	-0.065 (0.620)	-0.125 (0.341)	0.279* (0.031)
% in ESL	-0.245 (0.101)	0.357* (0.015)	-0.023 (0.886)	0.180 (0.230)	0.321* (0.030)	-0.182 (0.226)

Note. Compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary trauma are based on the ProQOL survey and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment taken based on the MBI-ES. The sample includes 86 principals. Student demographic data is based on school-level data provided publically by the Texas Education Agency. P-values are shown in parentheses. FRL stands for free/reduced price lunch; ELL stands for English language learner; % Bilingual Ed. and % ESL refers to the proportion of students in the school enrolled in bilingual education and English as a second language, respectively. * p<.05, +p<.1.

Although this appears to contrast with previous meta-analytic research that did not report years of experience as a moderator between studies that examined relationships between burnout and classroom management (Aloe, Amo & Shanhan, 2014), it is consistent with findings from disciplines outside of education such as critical care and trauma nurses that found years of experience to predict levels of burnout (Hinderer et al., 2014; Sacco, Ciurzynski, Harry & Ingersoll, 2015). The relationship between years of experience and burnout in the current study is largely driven by lower levels of burnout among the most experienced principals in our sample.

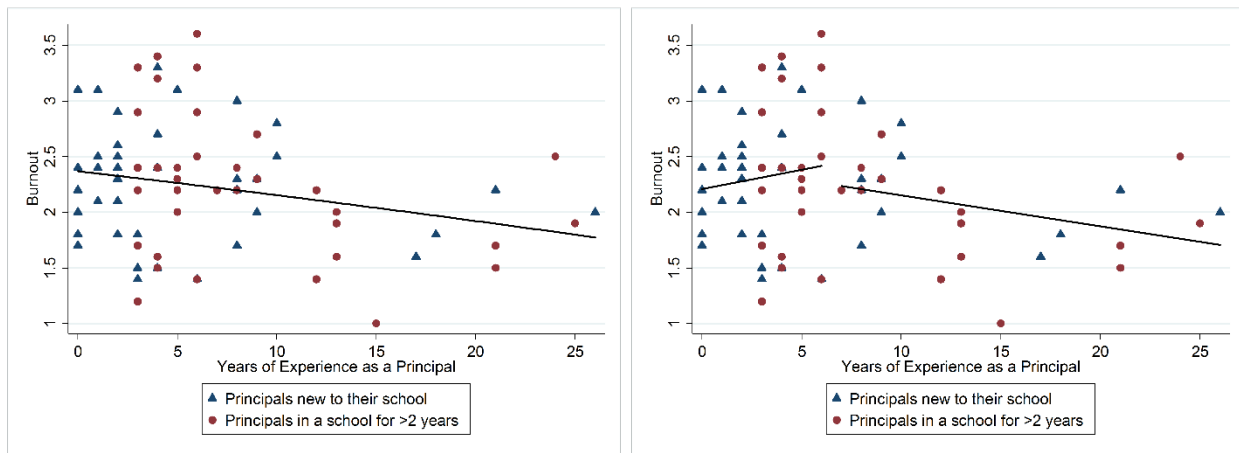
In contrast, early career principals exhibited far greater variation in burnout. On average burnout tended to increase across experience levels among early career principals, but decrease over increasing experience levels for later career principal (exhibiting an inverted U-shaped relationship). This relationship is shown in Figure 1. The pattern likely reflects attrition of principals with the highest levels of burnout. Veteran principals may be more resilient, and therefore remain in the profession and report lower levels of burnout later in their careers. At the same time, several of the variables we expected to find relationships with measures of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary trauma were not identified, including the percent of students in poverty, the percent of students classified as ELLs, and the percent of students classified as “at risk,” a measure specific to Texas that is based on a set of 13 indicators considered risk factors in Texas (e.g., foster youth, homelessness, etc.).

FIGURE 1

The relationship between principal experience and burnout

Panel A. Principal experience and burnout
(A negative overall relationship with experience)

Panel B. Principal experience and burnout
(Burnout increases, then decreases with experience)



Note. Each triangle or dot represents a principal (n=86).

Qualitative Findings

Interviews were used to identify examples of principal burnout and secondary trauma and to understand how they cope with these feelings and experiences. We begin with a brief description of the two principals interviewed and their schools (Principal Alvarez at Villa Elementary Schools (ES) and Principal Hernandez at Lombardi ES). Then, we describe one example of secondary trauma experienced by each principal. We conclude with other examples of secondary trauma and coping strategies the principals described during interviews.

Principal Alvarez: Critical Example

Principal Alvarez is a Mexican American woman in her mid-forties from the border. She was hired as principal at Villa ES for the 2014-15 school year and had experience working as an assistant principal and bilingual educator. She believed she was the right person for Villa, noting: "I'm an English language learner myself. I've taught ELLs along the border...I'm where I'm supposed to be." Per the ProQOL survey, Principal Alvarez scored in the low or average range for secondary trauma and burnout and in the high range for compassion satisfaction. Villa ES is within walking distance to the U.S.-Mexico border and an international bridge. Many families immigrated from Mexico into the school community and most residents used Spanish. Many families lived in a large, nearby housing project supported by a handful of local community organizations. Poverty was a significant challenge in the neighborhood (average household income under \$14,000 dollars a year) (U.S. Census, 2017).⁴

At the beginning of the 2016-17 school year, Principal Alvarez reported being emotionally connected to a 3rd grade Mexican American female student. She described Maria as "bright," "shy," and "pretty." Principal Alvarez worried about Maria because her mother struggled with drug addiction and was not providing consistent supervision. Maria often stayed

⁴ According to the 2018 federal poverty guidelines, the federal poverty threshold for a family of four is \$25,100.

with relatives in El Paso and Juarez. Principal Alvarez learned that a family member sexually assaulted Maria several times. No charges were filed because he lived in Mexico and local police could not address a crime committed in another country. Principal Alvarez said, "I have kept my eye on her and I see she's not the same, how could she be?" However, what upset Principal Alvarez the most was her uncertain future: "I know what happens to girls like her, it's sad to say. I mean hopefully not, but she's been through a lot and it's not like things are changing for the better." She frequently saw Maria on the street at 8 pm or 9 pm without adult supervision. She gave Maria rides home or to a grandparent's house and talked to her about being safe. Principal Alvarez tried to intervene, "I talked with social services on numerous occasions. They told me, well basically they told me, things aren't bad enough to remove her from home, that there is a waiting list, and that group homes, you know, aren't the greatest place for kids... I guess they are saying it could be worse."

Principal Alvarez said students like Maria give her "nightmares." She said, "I actually think about her at night, when I'm driving home or with my family... I wonder how happy she could be or who she could grow up to be if this wasn't her life, if my son and her changed places and she was my daughter." Making predictions about Maria's future was painful. "I look at her and I almost know, she will be pregnant in her early teens, or she will have a life on the streets. It's horrible that I can look at a little girl and think that, but I've seen so much of it. It's just a reality here." Principal Alvarez began to cry and shared that she prayed for Maria. She said she felt the world could be "cruel and unfair." When asked how students like Maria made her feel, Principal Alvarez said "powerless" and an "embarrassment." She explained that she felt powerless because she did not know what else to do and embarrassed because she felt as an adult she should have answers and be able to help. Principal Alvarez powerfully stated, "Maria looks

at me trying to help and she knows it's a farce, that nobody really loves her. It's so painful to know she knows. I am trying to help her, but she's still falling through the cracks. She's the child, I'm the adult... We are failing her and she knows it... That's the worst part of my job, in a nutshell." Principal Alvarez collaborated with other teachers and a school counselor to help students like Maria, but she reported that many students need help and there "isn't enough time to give."

Principal Hernandez: Critical Example

Principal Hernandez is a Mexican American woman in her mid-forties from El Paso with family also living in Ciudad Juarez. She has been principal at Lombardi ES since the 2013-14 school year and has more than 20 years working as a bilingual educator and assistant principal. Principal Hernandez described being motivated to work where a significant portion of families lived in homeless shelters or were recent immigrants. She said, "When you see how difficult life can be for some people, you feel lucky. I feel like I have a responsibility to help since my life has been so blessed." Like Villa ES, the school was close to the U.S.-Mexico border and to an international bridge. The school was connected with nearby homeless shelters and was implementing a community schools model that engaged parents in governance and adult education classes. Per the ProQOL survey, Principal Hernandez scored in the low or average range for secondary trauma and burnout and in the high range for compassion satisfaction.

Principal Hernandez reported an emotional connection to Raul, an 11-year-old fourth-grade boy who moved from Ciudad Juarez 2 years ago. Raul had been out of school for six months before enrolling. His father was murdered in Juarez with one of his uncles. She said, "So here is this boy, behind and out of school, whose father and uncle were murdered. He speaks very little English and his academic Spanish writing is not so good. He moves around because

his mother can't afford her own place... The mere fact that he arrives at school each day with a smile on his face is a miracle." She described Raul as "happy" and "outgoing" with adults, but who can be a bully with peers. She reported that Raul frequently fought students and was disrespectful to teachers. He received counseling and the school worked with his mother to help find a stable home. While Principal Hernandez does not know for sure, she believes Raul's mother is undocumented. Recently, a close family member and male role model for Raul who was living in El Paso was deported. At the end of the school year, Raul ended up in a homeless shelter. Principal Hernandez explained, "Raul was coming to school dirty, with dirty clothes...Landing in the shelter was actually a good thing. He started making it to school on time and with clean clothes."

Principal Hernandez stated that she developed a close relationship with Raul, since he was frequently in trouble. The relationship grew when Raul confided in her about her father. She said, "Raul wasn't talking with his counselor or his teacher, but he shared with me that the cartel killed his dad and uncle. He told me he wanted to get revenge... I imagined the pain he must be going through and it hurt. He's just a little boy, but he has to deal with a lot." She spoke to Raul's counselor about the conversation. When Raul learned Principal Hernandez talked to his counselor, he felt she violated his trust. Principal Hernandez said, "I wish I knew how to better handle these situations, but really, what can I do? I'm not trained to help him, but he chose to confide in me... It hurts me because I feel like I let him down." Principal Hernandez believed Raul was "going down a very troubled road." She stated, "He's this wonderful boy to me, with so much potential...but, after what he's been through, there is a lot of issues he needs to work through... if his mother can't gain permanent residency here, he could go back to Juarez and be reinserted into a place where violence is everywhere... It's scary to think what might happen."

Raul made Principal Hernandez reflect on her job as principal. On the one hand, she reported how working with Raul provided her with a sense that her work was impacting the lives of her students. She said, "When I go home at night and I'm just beat, I know I'm doing my best... I'm trying to make a difference." On the other hand, she reckoned with powerful forces beyond her control that negatively affected students. She explained, "As a principal, there is only so much I can do. I can't change the neighborhood or his home situation. I just have to move on." She understood Raul could move back to Juarez or change schools and she would never see him again. This uncertainty was difficult and made her feel conflicted. She said, "Sometimes I worry that we aren't making enough difference here."

A Closer Look at Secondary Trauma

Helpful or powerless. Principals Alvarez and Hernandez described their job as both positive and negative. During interviews, the principals used "rewarding," "fulfilling," "energizing," "connected," and "love" to describe how they felt about their job and serving their school community. Principal Hernandez stated, "I am doing something to help" and Principal Alvarez felt she was "Serving a greater purpose." The positive feelings the two principals felt emerged as they told stories about how they used school resources or their own expertise and time to work with a student and/or family. Principal Alvarez described working with the U.S. Consulate and other agencies to help families who lost a loved one to deportation. Deportation within a family was a major disruption for students. Principal Hernandez said, "Pulling a parent, a relative, or a sibling out of a young child's life, without any notice or goodbyes. It's horrifying for a young child to process." Principal Alvarez helped families by connecting them with community organizations and resources. Both principals worked with community organizations and non-profits that helped with families after deportations. While Principal Alvarez noted this

work added to her workload, she knew it was impactful. She said, “This type of work, it benefits the child because a child won’t do well if there is fear and uncertainty at home or where mom is going to be, but it’s also just about social justice. It’s about helping people who need help.”

The principals also talked about a darker side of their work, which was emotionally draining. The principals used the words “exhausted,” “heartbreaking,” “non-stop,” “frustrating,” “tiring” and “disappointing” to describe how they felt about student trauma and family challenges beyond their control. Principal Hernandez described a situation where a family was homeless and moving from shelter to shelter. Two of the families’ children were enrolled at her school and struggled with transiency and uncertainty. She described how she worked with her assistant principal and a community activist to find places for families to stay, but with little success. She said, “As a leader, you feel horrible when you lead a team to try and help and you fail... It’s hard to feel legitimate as a principal when you fail sometimes.” These collaborative attempts pulled her closer with faculty, but she struggled with the loss of legitimacy when failing to intercede positively.

Addressing emergent issues was unpredictable and carried on into after-hours. Principal Hernandez said, “You think tonight you are going home on time...I call my husband tell him, and then the phone rings... When these issues arise and there is nobody around or nobody else, you just stay late no matter what it does to your family.” She said sometimes she felt “defeated.” When discussing an issue where a student’s family needed help after a long day, she said: “Sometimes, I just want to give up and not come to work.” Principal Alvarez shared a story of a child being physically and sexually abused. She received details from a detective, cooperated with the investigation, and met with social service agencies and counselors after the child was removed from the home. She explained, “It’s absolutely chilling. You feel so powerless. There is

not always something you can do to help or fix the pain. And they look at you needing help, they've suffered so much... I've never felt so angry and weak at the same time."

Experiencing traumatic events. Both principals reported a broad range of traumatic events experienced by their students, including neglect, domestic violence, community violence, sexual assault, deportation of a family member, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, and incarceration. We classified these events into two categories: *acute or chronic problems that could be remedied by the principal and school* and *acute or chronic problems outside of their immediate control*. Table 2 lists examples of these problems as identified by Principals Alvarez and Hernandez. Acute or chronic problems that could be remedied by the principal or school were problems that required collaboration between the school and social service agencies. For example, Principal Hernandez reported how a child was not eating or able to study due to a lack of food in the home. She investigated the situation after learning about issues from her school's counselor, found that an agency was supposed to be conducting ongoing supervision but was not, and contacted the agency's supervisor. Principal Hernandez felt personally validated by ensuring basic needs were met. She said, "It's empowering as a leader to get a child the basic things they need... I mean, I know it's not me that's doing it, but just holding people accountable for doing what's right for kids. That's my job as a principal I think." Sometimes problems were chronic, but could be remedied by the principal through supervision or new systems and protocols (e.g., assigning staff to do home visits and follow-ups with social service agencies).

Acute or chronic problems outside of the principal's control were more stressful for Principals Alvarez and Hernandez. We found that these were more traumatic for principals to experience. Principal Hernandez struggled emotionally after learning about the sexual assault of

TABLE 2

Problems Types Associated with Secondary Trauma

<p><i>Acute and chronic problems that could be remedied by the principal or school</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disconnected youth • Acting out in class for intention/lack of family support from home • Students who are not eating at home • Students who need basic access to healthcare (e.g., glasses, physical examination, etc) • Students who are tending to siblings/students feeling stressed • Students who need attention, love, connection • Students struggling academically
<p><i>Acute Chronic problems outside of their immediate control.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with home-life issues in Mexico • Students with home-life issues that social services have not worked to address/lack of response • Child exposed to physical abuse and suffering (sexual assault, physical assault, lose of loved one) • Students and families in need of in-house counseling, mental health support that can be provided by the school • Students in need of food or medical attention in the short-term • Students/families in need of housing • Students in need of adult care, and social services fails to respond or respond adequately • Parents/family are separated due to deportation, immigration, or legal matters

a female student. She learned details from the school's counselor and conversations with a police detective. The student was exhibiting many anti-social behaviors and was struggling in school. Principal Hernandez reported that "She was in a free fall" caused by the abuse. She watched the child struggle and knew she could still be victimized based on conversations with the police detective. She felt her inability to change the child's situation was "depressing" and caused her to question her ability as a principal and her faith in God.

Leadership related stressors. Administrative and instructional issues added to principal burnout. Both principals worked in schools that did not perform well on standardized tests and

were under pressure to improve student achievement, although both schools performed above average when compared to schools with similar demographics. Both principals believed academic success was necessary for students' long-term success and happiness. Thus, both principals reported a strong sense of pressure to improve test scores, but also to address the barriers to learning. Both principals noted that they had ongoing discussions with their superintendent to increase student achievement. What was frustrating was the district's narrow focus on achievement. Principal Alvarez said her superintendent "demanded" a certain percent rise in test scores. She thought: "This is just stupid and arbitrary. Do you know what we deal with here? What we are trying to do? We are trying to teach as much as we can while at the same time providing love, family support, guidance, and all the other things we do because we are a school in a community like this." She added, "To have my superintendent, a Mexican American man tell me, I need test scores. That's the priority, given what these kids and families are dealing with? It's hard to want to do this job." Principal Hernandez felt similar pressure from her supervisor, who she said "... expected results no matter what... And, not because she needs them or because the results mean anything, no, because it's all about her and her career." Principal Hernandez alluded that her supervisor was seeking a promotion through test score improvements.

Both principals reported how the district spoke publicly about the importance of bilingual education, social and emotional learning, and building strong family partnerships. Principals Alvarez and Hernandez viewed these goals as valuable. However, both considered the emphases as hypocritical and naïve. Principal Alvarez described one hypocritical situation: "We are now implementing dual language, but the research says it takes years to improve. Collier and Thomas [leading dual language researchers] say it could be six years. I'm all for it, I was a bilingual

teacher, but you can't say implement dual and then in a year or two demand testing results." Principal Hernandez's school served a high proportion of students living in homeless shelters. Her school prioritized helping families. Principal Hernandez worked to bring social workers, community organizations, dentists, healthcare professionals, and adult education programs into the school. She felt she needed to ask the district for resources constantly. She described the hypocrisy as she saw it: "If we ask for teachers to go to a training on a reading intervention, we usually get it, but if we ask for more support to help families, I end up asking and asking and usually get nothing in return... I know these are bigger investments, but how can we do anything if our children don't have their basic needs met?" Supervisors not understanding the critical social and emotional needs of the community created frustration for the principals.

Coping. Principals Hernandez and Alvarez described some of the ways they coped with their stress. We classified coping strategies into four categories: internalizing, disclosure and consultation, justification, and emotional reactivity (e.g., anger). Internalizing meant the principal was not finding sufficient ways to process, understand, and let go of trauma. Principal Alvarez described crying and drinking alcohol as coping strategies. She explained that these strategies were not in response to any one issue, but rather a result of the "ongoing stuff that just never stops when you are the principal." Principal Hernandez also said that she cried many nights at home and in the bathroom while her husband was sleeping. She said her primary coping mechanism was to keep working: "I mean, I just work through it all. I'm too busy to think about it and I just stay focused on being the best leader I can be and trying to care and keep it personal. Like, I work and act to help make this school a better place as if my kids went here." Principal Hernandez acknowledged working too much also added to her stress level.

Processing one's feelings through disclosure with a friend, loved one, or consultation

with a trained professional (i.e., current or former school counselor) also emerged as a coping strategy. Principal Hernandez shared that she had a friend who was also a counselor. Her friend informed her that it was important to talk about her feelings. Principal Hernandez shared her feelings with her spouse, children, and parents. She recognized she could be more open about challenges. She said, “I do know I need to reflect and let some of this go. I think I am better at it than some other people, but I also think I do bottle a lot of it up.” Principal Alvarez confided in her assistant principal, who had been a school counselor. She said,

Well, she [the assistant principal] noticed how stressed I was... We became close and we handle a lot of tough things here. She told me I have to process it... I usually tell her to leave me alone [laughs], but I know she checks in on me and makes me talk.

Principal Alvarez acknowledged that sharing her feelings was helpful and she should do it more.

Principals Alvarez and Hernandez also coped by constructing a narrative that justified their leadership decisions, behaviors, and priorities. After a difficult conversation with her superintendent about test scores, Principal Alvarez said, “I know what I’m doing here. I know what matters most. Do you think I’m going to let him define me and say she’s a bad principal?” She also described being worried about a child who was often on the street late at night. Principal Alvarez said,

I feel really bad because I know what will probably happen to that child... It won’t be good... But, I stay positive because I know two things. First, you know you never know what seeds you plant as an educator and what happens. It might all click for her and she might beat the odds... Second, I have to put her into perspective. There is always another student to fight for. You just have to do your best and then be okay with moving on.

Her statements reflect a recognition that she was not in control of what happened to students, that her work had long-term value, that she should remain hopeful, and that she felt validation from doing her best. Principal Hernandez justified her leadership decisions, behaviors, and priorities along similar lines. She stated, “Being a principal in the barrio is not easy... You can’t let people

get you down. You have to have a short-memory and commit yourself. I do the best job I can so I'm okay."

Emotional reactivity (e.g., anger) also emerged as a coping strategy. Both principals reported having a small group of teachers who were inconsiderate of students' situations, maintained low expectations, or were not committed to all students. Principal Alvarez described anger toward a teacher she viewed as a bully. She described how she responded to a teacher in a faculty meeting who called a child a "little devil" and said, "her family doesn't care about her one bit." Principal Alvarez said, "I almost lost it, like really. I almost lost my job. I wanted to just reach out and grab this teacher and say what the hell are you doing here? Why are you here? Why show up to work?" She told the teacher her comments were inappropriate during a one-on-one meeting. She also told her she should "look for a job elsewhere." Principal Hernandez described faculty who expressed deficit views of students that evoked deep anger. She acknowledged how teachers were stressed and sometimes said things they did not mean. Principal Hernandez was angered more by the district's testing priorities. She said,

I don't care about fidelity to [a district initiative] or if a child masters a TEK (Texas curriculum standard). Who cares? It's stupid for adults, professional educators, whoever, to go around caring about that when basic needs aren't being met or a child needs counseling after being abused... Anyone who tells me my priorities are misplaced or that test scores are most important, I say... Well, I'm not going to tell you what I say to myself.

Discussion

Our quantitative survey results suggest that most principals experienced slightly lower rates of burnout and secondary trauma and high rates of compassion satisfaction in comparison to human service fields. Many principals felt a strong sense of purpose in their work which likely buffered them from burnout and allowed them to deal well with secondary trauma. We found no relationships between the percent of students in poverty, the percent of students classified as

ELLs, and the percent of students classified as “at risk,” despite the wide range of poverty and ELL concentrations across schools. Poverty, ELL, and at-risk classifications are imperfect descriptors that may not accurately depict student experiences and exposure to trauma, or principals’ exposure to secondary trauma. For example, low-poverty schools may serve one or two students who experience extreme hardship or trauma and seek out the principal or other school staff for support. In contrast, principals in high-poverty schools might not necessarily interact individually with students experiencing trauma, and therefore may not experience a large degree of secondary trauma.

Principals in this study with more experience on average had lower levels of burnout, which has been supported by previous research (Hinderer et al., 2014). We suspect that early career principals are experiencing higher levels of burnout and exiting the principalship sooner while a group of veteran principals effectively cope with secondary trauma and other stressors and as a result can persist on the job. Principal turnover is a growing problem and the tenure of principals in many large urban districts has been shortening (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Ni, Sun, & Rorrer, 2015; Whitaker, 1996). While many researchers attribute principal burnout and the shortening of principal tenure to the negative effects of high-stakes accountability, it may also be likely that exposure to secondary trauma is a contributing factor. Whether principals stay or leave, it seems less likely that unhealthy principals will be able to foster a healthy school and learning environment for teachers and students (Dadacynski & Paulus, 2015). Principals with short-tenure will most likely be unable to address student trauma because they have not developed community partnerships and organizational processes that support healthy schools.

Our qualitative findings come from interviews with two Mexican American female principals. Their feelings and experiences, while not generalizable, highlight some of the stress

and emotions associated with the principalship. As Latina school leaders, both principals noted that they struggled to manage their family life with their work commitments, but yet they remained focused and found ways to persist. These findings are in line with prior research on women in school leadership positions (Murakami-Ramalho, 2009) and also reflect a Mestiza consciousness of the various equity issues confronting Mexican and Mexican American students. These principals both described persisting in their efforts despite the physical and emotional toll it took. While this study is focused on burnout and secondary trauma, it is clear that the two principals demonstrated a heartfelt commitment to addressing social justice issues in their school and community and maintained an ability to endure despite a lack of resources and support.

Previous research has documented the notion of the “wounded leader” and how critical events shape the emotional experience of the principalship (Yamamoto, Gardiner, & Tenuto, 2014). Principals Alvarez and Hernandez continually learned about the first-hand traumatic experiences of their students and could be described as “wounded.” Principal Alvarez shared her experiences with Maria, a 3rd-grade student who had been sexually assaulted by a relative. Often, Principal Alvarez saw this child out on the street at night and she worried about her long-term wellbeing. Principal Hernandez shared her experiences with Raul, a 4th-grade student struggling with the aftermath of his father and uncle being murdered. These incidents were painful for the principals because they did not have easy answers or solutions, but they also gained satisfaction in trying to help others and extend the school’s impact beyond test scores. Few studies consider how such harsh realities affect principals or empower them to continuing their work on behalf of students and families. The mixed-method design allowed us to not only highlight that principals were exposed to some degree of secondary trauma and burnout, but also describe some of the actual cases principals confront. Our findings revealed how the border region added complexity

to some of the forms and persistence of trauma in the lives of students, which caused frustration and a sense of powerlessness.

The lived experiences of principals dealing with student trauma were further revealed during interviews. Principal Alvarez reported having nightmares and described how she made predictions about Maria's future. She was not proud of her predictions and was sad for foreseeing a tough life for a child she felt responsible for. Principal Hernandez imagined Raul's pain, was hurt when Raul felt she breached his trust, and worried he would change schools. Yet, both principals also described how helping students and families empowered them, gave them purpose, and allowed them to persist. They described what we classified as two categories of traumatic events: *acute or chronic problems that could be remedied* and *acute or chronic problems that were outside of their immediate control*. Those problems outside of their control were the most frustrating. We found evidence that principals internalized these failures and dealt with a personal sense of anger and loss of self-legitimacy. The principals reported crying, talking to their families, and trying to block out feelings of pain and sorrow. At times, Principals Alvarez and Hernandez internalized trauma and sometimes had outbursts directed at teachers and their families.

Conclusions and Implications

Given our limited survey and interview sample size, we recognize a greater need for researchers, perhaps in collaboration with local school districts and multiple disciplines within local universities, to engage in similar studies focused on principal burnout. Additional research is needed to understand how secondary trauma and burnout impact principals as well as what supports can be provided to help maintain healthy lifestyles to persist on the job. We recommend educational leadership scholars draw upon a wide array of research methodologies and

approaches to capture the individual voices and experiences of principals as well as conducting larger, quantitative analyses that might provide greater insight into principal mental health in a given region, state, nation, or border region. Further qualitative research can focus not only on burnout and the effects of secondary trauma, but also on how principal identity and commitments to social justice contribute to compassion satisfaction and a commitment to helping others. We also recognize a need for more research on how principals make sense of the complexity of trauma experienced by students. In this study, Principal Alvarez noted that she worried about a student who was on the street late at night. This student was previously a victim of sexual assault. Further investigation into how principals understand and act to address sexual assault and other trauma that impact students behaviors and wellbeing is necessary.

This study also has implications for future and current principals. First, districts must take a proactive approach to supporting the mental health needs of principals. The two surveys utilized were of little cost and could quickly be completed by principals during a staff meeting. Survey results could immediately trigger a response from the district, especially if principals are showing signs of burnout. Whether districts are proactive, university-based principal preparation programs should reconsider their curriculum and how principals might be exposed to secondary trauma. Universities and districts can partner to engage in such efforts. Research on best-practices within principal preparation programs consistently highlights the importance of district-university partnerships. These relationships are necessary for providing pre-service training on mental health issues. Districts might encourage collaboration between principals and school counselors to address burnout and secondary trauma through professional development training. Lastly, we implore state and national associations that develop or oversee the publication of professional standards, research symposiums, and research/practitioner-oriented journals to draw

attention to the mental health needs of principals. We felt the trauma of the principals who participated in our study and we are now compelled to work on their behalf. We hope others will join in this battle as well.

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