



The influence of work-related stress on emotional and psychological well-being and performance of secondary school leadership in Vulindlela Circuit



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated high rates of school leaders' work-related stress that apparently culminates in mental illness and death. The primary objective was to investigate the influence of work-related stress on emotional and psychological well-being and performance of school leaders in Vulindlela Circuit. The study is located within interpretivism, and we used interviews as a qualitative technique to elicit data from 25 secondary school leaders about their reflections and experiences with work-related stress. The interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo version 14, a program for qualitative data analysis, analysing recurrent themes and patterns of the study, supplemented with narratives. The study found that role conflict, role ambiguity, and overload are common workplace stressors affecting the emotional and psychological well-being of school leaders. The findings are important in serving to raise awareness and mitigating school leaders' work-related stress. The study recommends the rolling out of tailored wellness programmes that promote mental wellness, and support well-being and stress-reduction techniques through increased task clarity. This study contributes to research on school leadership workplace stressors in Vulindlela Circuit and the larger South African context by laying the groundwork for future studies on interventions to improve school leaders' performance and well-being.

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Introduction

Research shows that school leadership is second to classroom teaching in influencing student learning (Neufiels, 2014, Bush,). In contrast, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) question the second position of school leadership in student learning and maintains that its effect is underestimated. We concur with Leithwood et al (2004) that “the total direct and indirect effects of leadership on student learning account for a quarter of total school effects. Moreover, research shows that school leaders perform a multiplicity of roles (Bush and Glover, 2016, Mestry, 2017), ranging from difficult decision-making to administrative responsibilities. This panoply of responsibilities has a detrimental effect on their well-being.

In support of the depth of the role of school leaders, Day, Sammons and Gorgen (2020: 5) argue that “school leaders have a key role to play in setting direction, creating and sustaining a positive school culture.” In executing their duties, the school leaders require support from the Department of Education in terms of school resourcing that cuts across staffing, mentoring, conducive working environment and allocation of adequate material resources. If school leaders do not receive such support, they get tired, building into emotional and psychological stress. Research shows that toxic working environments, low teacher morale and inadequate school provisioning influence teachers and school leaders and further cause psychological stress (Thaba-Nkadimene, 2020).

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We reiterate that student learning is significantly impacted by school leadership, that faces challenges of dealing with emotional and psychological stress that impact their mental health. School leaders' emotional and psychological stress that cause mental health problems emanate from toxic workplaces, heavy workloads, strained interpersonal connections, and a lack of support from parents, teachers, and districts. Other emotional and psychological stress and burnout factors were identified as a risk aspect that threatens teachers' and school leaders' mental health, leading to anxiety and depression (Agyapong, Obuobi-Donkor, Burbach & Wei, 2022).

Research shows a distinct correlation between the high stress levels associated with their jobs and the bad health outcomes of school leaders (Agyapong et al. (2022, Bui, Zackula, Dugan & Ablah, 2021). Apart from toxic workplace, increased workload, inadequacies of school resources problems, including substance addiction, heart disease, mental anguish, and hypertension have been linked to work stress in a number of recent studies (Du Toit, Van Deventer & Mestry, 2023).

In the main, toxic working conditions marred by shattered relationships, inadequate mentoring and support by stakeholders are stress risk factors in schools. Research suggests that toxic workplaces make it more difficult for leaders to manage schools effectively (Sonmez & Adiguzel, 2020). As Brackett (2019) put it, "emotional labour" emphasizes the enormous effort that goes into controlling and repressing one's emotions at work, which is a major obstacle for school leaders. As the school leader's capacity for both personal and professional performance may be hampered by chronic stress (Thorsteinsson, Brown & Richards, 2014), it is imperative to provide a productive work environment that gives district offices, parents, and teachers the support they need (Du Toit et al., 2023).

The primary objective of the study was to investigate the influence of work-related stress on emotional and psychological well-being and performance of school leaders in Vulindlela Circuit. The study contributes to education research in general and school leadership and workplace stressors that cause their emotional and psychological stress that compromises their mental health in particular. The study answers the research question: What work-related factors influence emotional and psychological well-being and performance of school leaders in Vulindlela Circuit?

Literature Review

In the twenty-first century, school leaders face a wide range of duties and issues that negatively impact their mental and emotional health. As a result, their work becomes increasingly complex. This review of literature examines several crucial aspects of modern school leadership.

For a start, the review addresses the increased complexities of school leadership. According to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020) educators must balance several job responsibilities and a frequently busy, stressful work environment, that will help address high stress levels and burnout among school leaders.

The discussion then turns to the emotional and psychic price which most school leaders have to pay for meeting a myriad of responsibilities that may place them under constant stress. Due to this stress, the personal and professional aspects of school leaders' life may become threatened.

Another significant topic is the availability and efficacy of support networks for school leaders. The review investigates how strong support networks and resources might help alleviate the negative consequences of heavy workloads and intense job expectations. The function of both external assistance from education authorities, as well as internal support from inside the school community, are considered.

Lastly, the review explores the very important link between school leadership's psychological well-being and the environment in which they work professionally. It examines how stressful work environments with unpleasant dynamics and harmful work cultures may be mitigated by more caring, responsive and encouraging workplaces.

School leadership in the twenty first century

School leaders face distinct challenges in the twenty-first century. According to Bhamjee (2021), *diverse job demands* contribute to the growing complexity of school leadership's tasks. Kafele (2021, p. 54), emphasizes the *emotionally and physically burdensome* aspect of school leadership, harping on this intricacy even further. As suggested by Bhamjee's (2021), the rise in unhealthy stress among school leaders is fast becoming a developing concern. Stress is increased by the modern classroom's fast-paced environment. A school leader's typical workday is described by Riley (2018), who notes that there are many deadlines to meet, learner cases, unscheduled meetings, and frequent interruptions. The impact of constant pressure is emphasized by Harber and Mncube (2011), who contend that the school leader's mental health and leadership practices are compromised due to increased job demand and workload. These detrimental effects could affect school leaders' personal and family lives in addition to the school setting. According to research, there is a significant gap in the South African Department of Education's support for school leaders' emotional and psychological well-being, even though the department could potentially offer developmental help, especially for newly appointed school leaders. By examining the primary stressors and generating practical ways to promote a more encouraging and healthy work environment, this study extends this conversation.

Emotional and psychological stress

Emotional and psychological stress is a significant outcome of the complex interaction between work demands and major support systems. Mahfouz's (2020) study highlights the variety of pressures faced by school leadership while also acknowledging the lack of coping strategies available to them. This mismatch could lead to a persistent state of psychological and emotional strain. Mestry (2017) sheds lighter on school leadership experiences by arguing that the "multiplicity of tasks" that are part of the work may contribute to stress. In a similar vein, Onderi & Makori (2013) examine the "issues and challenges" that secondary school leaders in Kenya face, emphasizing the potential for stressful situations relative to school leadership. There are several ways that stress can manifest. When coping mechanisms are used to manage stress, there can be a significant emotional and psychological cost (Ntoumanis et al., 2009). The numerous ways that emotional and psychological stress impact principals need to be further investigated. This could entail investigating potential detrimental effects on physical health, in addition to investigating the risk of burnout, anxiety, or despair.

School leadership support systems

School leadership support mechanisms are essential in lowering the stress caused by work expectations. Demerouti & Bakker's (2011) research indicates that strong support networks can lessen the negative effects of workload. This demonstrates how important resources are to their job demands-resources model. Rules on school leadership support in South Africa are provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2015). These specifications focus on opportunities for professional development or mentorship programmes (Musarapasi and Garanti, 2020) state that there are a number of variables that could affect how well these support systems work. Since supportive leadership behaviours highlight the positive benefits of effective school leadership on teacher attitudes, Duyar et al. (2013) suggest that school leaders may also benefit from these actions. Farmer (2020) highlights the detrimental impact of stress on teacher attrition and proposes that school leaders' wellbeing has an indirect effect on teacher retention. This highlights the potential for a cascading effect, whereby robust school leadership support networks could improve the educational atmosphere in schools for all staff members.

Workload demands

One of the main sources of stress for school leaders is the demands of their workload. There is a lot of citation about this complex subject in literature. Studies by Bakker & Demerouti (2007) and Chen et al. (2022) highlight the connection between stress and workload, suggesting that having too many obligations may be bad for mental health. Creagh et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review in the context of school leadership, focusing on the workload, labour intensity, and time shortages among school leaders. Their findings align with Bhamjee's research (2021) on managing school leadership stress, which highlights the potential responsibilities of school leaders' roles. These demands involve multiple tasks. Bush & Glover's (2016) evaluation of South African school leadership research demonstrates the range of challenges faced by experts in that field. Coleman (2001) looks at the experiences of female headmasters in Wales and England, showing how the demands of their positions vary depending on the situation. Further research is needed to ascertain which specific workload demands have the biggest influence on primary stress.

Work environment and psychological well-being

The working environment of school leaders has a significant impact on their mental and emotional well-being. Research suggests that while a toxic work environment might exacerbate stress, one that encourages cooperation and support may act as a buffer against it. Beausaert et al. (2016) and Day et al. (2000) highlight the role that support from peers and supervisors plays in lowering stress levels and promoting wellness in school leaders. The relationships that exist among the school community are another crucial component. The study by Sonmez et al., (2020) emphasizes how leaders are negatively impacted by workplace toxicity. This toxicity may originate from dysfunctional interactions with parents, teachers, or even the district administration. The emotional labour associated with managing these challenging relationships can be a significant source of stress for school leaders (Brackett, 2019). Workplace physical characteristics may also affect an individual's well-being. Bush and Glover (2016) acknowledge that a number of challenges, including classroom overcrowding and a lack of resources assail South African school leaders. These components could increase feelings of overload and complicate a school leadership's job of managing their school.

Research & Methodology

The study is premised within interpretivism paradigm to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Data gathered and analysed considered the participants' specific context, viewpoints and values. Husam and Abraham (2020) argue that interpretivism considers different factors such as behavioural aspects based on the participants' experiences and help to describe reality given the assumptions, beliefs and cultural factors of participants. This enables the researcher to focus on the whole experience rather than considering certain parts of it and further explore the depth of individual experiences through informal discussions and interviews. We used qualitative case study methodology to "provide tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts" as recommended by Baxter and Jack (2008: 544).

This qualitative study examines school leaderships' real experiences with emotional and psychological stress through semi-structured focus groups. Two focus groups were organised at a central location, with an invitation made to all 25 primary and secondary school leaders. Participants received an email ahead of time with a set of open-ended questions to help guide the conversation. Topics included personal experiences with workplace dynamics, critical support systems, workload pressures, and the resulting emotional and psychological stress. To encourage candid conversation, participants were divided into smaller groups of five during the focus groups. The researcher ensured that all opinions were heard. We videotaped the entire focus group conversation to capture the nuanced and intricate dialogue. The last meeting allowed the entire group to discuss any recurring themes.

The study used a structured focus group interview methodology, utilising the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to investigate the ways in which work environment dynamics, workload demands, and support networks from school leadership affect stress. Thematic analysis of the interview data was utilized to identify recurring themes and get a full understanding of the variables driving school leadership stress and potential pathways for establishing a more supportive and healthier work environment. The study population is school leaderships in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa's Vulindlela Circuit, with a sample size of 25 school leaders judged suitable given the qualitative orientation of the research.

Data analysis and presentation

Coding Queries and Visualisation in NVivo

Table 2: Coding Queries and Visualisation for School leadership Interviews in NVivo

Objective	Coding Query	Expected Visualization
Explore specific workload demands linked to exhaustion	Codes: Workload demands (e.g., overtime, administrative tasks) - Codes: Exhaustion, frustration	Word cloud: Depicting frequency of workload terms (overtime, tasks) alongside exhaustion and frustration.
Identify types of support systems fostering competence	Codes: Support systems (e.g., mentorship programmes, collaboration) - Codes: Competence, feeling prepared	Concept map: Illustrating connections between specific support systems (mentorship, collaboration) and feelings of competence.
Investigate work environment factors impacting autonomy	Codes: Work environment dynamics (e.g., micromanagement, decision-making) - Codes: Autonomy, feeling empowered	Bar chart: Comparing frequency of autonomy-related codes across different work environment dynamics (micromanagement vs. empowerment).

Source: Authors

The table 2 above displays Coding Queries and Visualisation for School leadership Interviews in NVivo

Following the initial thematic analysis, NVivo's advanced functionalities were harnessed to explore the interview data and illuminate the school leaderships' specific experiences. Coding queries acted as precise search tools, allowing us to target and extract interview excerpts that directly address the research objectives. A query was designed to identify instances where participants discussed feelings of exhaustion explicitly linked to workload pressures. Executing this query, NVivo efficiently located relevant interview segments, enabling us to pinpoint the exact aspects of workload that contribute most significantly to school leadership stress. Similarly, queries were formulated to explore the specific types of support systems that school leaders find most beneficial or the aspects of the work environment that foster feelings of autonomy and competence. These targeted searches ensured the thematic analysis remained firmly grounded in the lived experiences of the school leaders, focusing on aspects directly related to the research objectives.

Furthermore, NVivo's visualization tools offered a complementary approach to data exploration. Word clouds or concept maps were generated to depict the frequency of key terms associated with the identified themes. For example, a word cloud might confirmed that terms like "overtime," "administrative tasks," and "exhaustion" frequently co-occurred within the "Work Overload and Emotional Exhaustion" theme. These visual representations provided a clear and concise snapshot of the data, highlighting the most prominent themes and connections between workload demands and school leadership well-being. By strategically employing coding queries and visualizations alongside the thematic analysis, we gained a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges and support systems that shape the lived experiences of school leaderships in the Vulindlela Circuit. This moved us beyond simply identifying themes to a deeper exploration of the factors that contribute most significantly to school leadership stress and potential avenues for fostering a more supportive work environment.

Thematic Analysis using NVivo version 14 analysis software

Table 1: Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Potential Sub-themes	Data Source (Codes)
Work Overload and Emotional Exhaustion	This theme explored the impact of excessive workload demands on school leaderships' emotional well-being.	- Specific workload pressures (e.g., standardised testing, administrative tasks) - Impact on different aspects of well-being (e.g., emotional exhaustion, feelings of cynicism)	Workload demands (overtime, administrative burden) - Exhaustion, frustration
Supportive Networks and School leadership Well-being	This theme examined how access to supportive systems (mentorship, collaboration) contributes to school leaderships' sense of competence and motivation.	- Types of support systems (e.g., mentorship programs, collaboration with colleagues) - Impact on feelings of competence and motivation	Support systems (mentorship programs, collaboration) - Competence, motivation

Source: Authors

The table 1 above presents a starting point for the thematic analysis using NVivo. The Data Source (Codes) column lists potential codes associated with each theme.

The thematic analysis, conducted within NVivo, embarked on a journey to identify the core themes woven into the fabric of the interview data. The 25 coded transcripts from the school leaderships, categorized by workload demands, support systems, work environment dynamics, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, established recurring patterns and connections. For instance, codes capturing workload pressures (overtime, administrative burden) frequently co-occurred with codes for exhaustion or frustration. This co-occurrence suggested a potential theme "Work Overload and Emotional Exhaustion." NVivo's powerful search and retrieval capabilities was harnessed to identify specific interview excerpts that illuminated this theme. Similarly, codes for support systems (mentorship programs, collaboration) were found alongside codes signifying competence and motivation, suggesting a potential theme – "Supportive Networks and School leadership Well-being." NVivo's visualization tools were subsequently utilised to create word clouds depicting the frequency of key terms associated with these themes, providing a clear visual representation of the data.

As the analysis progressed, sub-themes also emerged within the broader categories. Work Overload and Emotional Exhaustion, theme connected sub-themes related to specific workload pressures (standardised testing, administrative tasks) or the impact on different aspects of well-being (emotional exhaustion, feelings of cynicism). Through this process of coding, searching, visualising, and memoing within NVivo, the analysis uncovered a variety of themes related to the study. This analysis offered a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing school leadership stress and potential avenues for fostering a more supportive work environment.

Transcript analysis of the participants

Table 3: Transcript analysis of the participants School leadership Interviews in NVivo

Theme	Participant Quotes	Sub-themes
Work Overload and Emotional Exhaustion	Participants 1, 4, 6, 12, 17: Feeling overwhelmed by administrative tasks. Participants 3, 19: Pressure of standardised testing as a stressor. Participants 8, 22: Long hours and "always on" feeling contributing to exhaustion.	Specific workload pressures (e.g., standardized testing, administrative tasks) Impact on different aspects of well-being (e.g., emotional exhaustion, feeling overwhelmed)
Supportive Networks and School leadership Well-being	Participant 7: Mentorship programme fostering competence. Participants 14, 21: Collaboration with colleagues valued for motivation and best practices (support system codes).	Types of support systems (e.g., mentorship programmes, collaboration) - Impact on feelings of competence and motivation
Work Environment and Autonomy	Participant 4: Micromanaging supervisor leading to disempowerment. Participants 1, 10: Supportive and collaborative cultures fostering autonomy.	Work environment dynamics (e.g., micromanagement, collaboration) Impact on feelings of autonomy and empowerment
Sub-themes	Participants 6, 15: Specific demands of managing standardised testing.	Variations in workload pressures Variations in perceived effectiveness of support systems

Participants 18, 23: Emotional toll of limited resources.

Participant 7: Mentorship most valuable for support.

Participants 11, 25: Collaborative problem-solving valued with colleagues.

The table presents Coding Queries and Visualisation for School leadership Interviews in NVivo

Source: Researcher data

Findings

Analysis of School leaderships Stress using NVivo

The study used the NVivo software version 14 program. We set out to understand the lived experiences of school leaders about emotional and psychological stress in the Vulindlela Circuit. The following section proffers key findings derived from the analysis of the 25 transcripts of interviews, augmented with the voices of the participants:

Workplace Overload and Emotional Fatigue

Several school leaders (Participants 1, 4, 6, 12, and 17) indicated that they were perpetually overwhelmed by their administrative duties; Participants 3 and 19 also mentioned the stress that comes with taking standardized tests. Fatigue was partly caused by long hours and a sense of being "always on," according to participants 8 and 22. This was corroborated by the phrases that frequently appeared in NVivo's word cloud visualisation, including "exhaustion," "administrative burden," and "overtime."

Robust Support Networks and School leadership Well-Being

The results confirm that support systems have a significant impact. While Participants 7 ascribed the development of a sense of competence to a strong mentorship program, Participants 14 and 21 (identified by support system codes) emphasized the value of working with colleagues to exchange best practices and maintain motivation. The advantageous connections between these codes and how they impact wellbeing were illustrated by NVivo concept maps.

Work Environment

Research results in this study show that the work environment plays a significant role in determining school leadership autonomy. The fourth participant (autonomy code) described a micromanaging employer who left them feeling helpless. Conversely, participants 1 and 10 highlighted supportive and cooperative learning environments that fostered a sense of independence and decision-making authority. Bar charts that display the frequency of these codes across different work environment categories provide a clear visual representation of this link.

Sub-themes

The software NVivo simplified the process of exploring sub-themes that go beyond the primary ones. Participants 6 and 15 went into detail on the particular requirements of handling standardised testing, while Participants 18 and 23 talked about the psychological toll of managing limited resources. On the other hand, the "Supportive Networks and School leadership Well-Being" theme established variations in the perceived benefits of different support systems among participants. For example, participant 7 believed that mentorship was the most beneficial, while participants 11 and 25 highlighted the importance of problem-solving collaboration.

Member Verification and Credibility

A small subset of participating school leaders took part in member checking to ensure the validity of the results. Their feedback strengthened the validity of the study by confirming the themes and sub-themes identified. A contemplative journal exposed the investigator's personal biases throughout the process, promoting a more detached evaluation of the data. Utilising NVivo's characteristics and participant experience analysis, this study provided a detailed understanding of the factors impacting stress among school leaderships. It became evident how the school leaders's well-being ultimately connected with the demands of the task, the support systems, and the dynamics of the workplace. These insights can direct the development of targeted interventions that could ameliorate the working circumstances of school leaders and, as a result, boost student learning by creating a more encouraging work environment.

Discussion

Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, the factors influencing the emotional and psychological stress of school leaders in the Vulindlela Circuit were demonstrated through an examination of their lived experiences. The theme analysis confirmed a distinct relationship between the demands of the workload, the support systems, the dynamics of the work environment, and the well-being of the school leadership. A recurrent topic emerged around "Work Overload and Emotional Exhaustion." Many participants (1, 4, 6, 12, 17) reported feeling overwhelmed by administrative tasks, which is consistent with the statements made by those who indicated

that standardised testing (3, 19) was a significant source of stress. Long hours and the necessity to constantly be "on" (8, 22) contributed to exhaustion, as seen by the terms' frequent occurrence in NVivo's word cloud display. Nevertheless, the theme of "Supportive Networks and School leadership Well-being" held out some hope. School leaders reported feeling more capable and motivated when they mentioned having access to strong support networks, such as mentorship programmes (7) or peer collaboration (14, 21). NVivo concept maps illustrate these positive connections between wellness and support systems. The investigation also highlighted the significance of "Work Environment and Autonomy." Micromanaging supervisors were linked to a sense of disempowerment (4), while cooperative and encouraging school cultures (1, 10) encouraged a sense of ownership and decision-making authority. Bar charts that displayed the frequency of these codes across different work environment categories provided a clear visual representation of this link.

Exploring the NVivo made it simpler to investigate sub-themes within these broader categories. The paper "Workload Overload and Emotional Exhaustion" shed light on the nuances of stresses related to workload. Participants (18, 23) talked on the psychological effects of limited resources, while respondents (6, 15) elaborated on the particular difficulties involved in giving standardized tests. Similarly, the "Supportive Networks and School leadership Well-Being" subject brought attention to variations in perceived efficacy. While working together to address difficulties struck a deeper chord with colleagues, others (7) believed that mentorship was the most useful approach (11, 25).

These findings offer valuable information for lowering significant stress and fostering a more positive work environment. Workload needs must be addressed, particularly those pertaining to administrative duties and standardised testing. However, the analysis emphasizes how important it is to offer support systems, such as joint venture opportunities and mentoring programs. In addition, creating an environment at work where school leaders have autonomy and decision-making power can significantly improve their wellbeing. Placing a high premium on these areas, we can go beyond simply identifying school leadership stress and create a system that enhances school leadership well-being and ultimately student development.

Practical Implications

Our analysis of the experiences of Vulindlela Circuit school leaderships established a robust relationship between the demands of their jobs, their emotional well-being, and the environments and support systems they face at work. Due to standardised testing pressure and an overwhelming amount of paperwork, school leaders were exhausted. Nonetheless, motivating work environments, coworker collaboration, and robust mentoring programs enhanced views of competence and drive.

The school leadership's well-being could be improved by using these findings. Reducing administrative requirements and reevaluating standardized testing, workload-related stress may be mitigated. A strong support network can be established by encouraging school leaders to communicate with one another and by funding mentorship programmes. Ultimately, fostering educational settings that grant school leaderships independence and decision-making power can significantly improve their general welfare. Using these strategies could help us create a more supportive environment for school leaderships, which would ultimately lead to improved leadership and improved student learning.

Conclusions

This study employed NVivo qualitative data analysis software to provide an image of the factors influencing the emotional and psychological stress of school leaders in the Vulindlela Circuit. The theme analysis confirmed a distinct relationship between the demands of the workload, the support systems, the dynamics of the work environment, and the well-being of the school leadership. The significance of supportive networks and conducive work settings is emphasized by these findings, which also corroborate earlier research (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) that demonstrated the impact of workload on educator stress. Concerns over workload expectations raised by the National Association of Secondary School leaderships are consistent with the primary problem of "Work Overload and Emotional Exhaustion" (National Association of Secondary School leaderships, 2023). However, the research also identified a number of potential solutions. The theme of "Supportive Networks and School Leadership Well-Being" suggests that mentorship programmes and opportunities for collaboration can cultivate feelings of competence and motivation, which aligns with the Wallace Foundation's recommendations to invest in school leadership development (The Wallace Foundation, 2018). "Work Environment and Autonomy" emphasizes the significance of school cultures that uphold the distributed leadership models put out by Robinson et al. (2008) and provide school leaders the freedom to make their own decisions.

This study explored these themes and sub-themes in greater detail than only major stress. It offers shrewd counsel on mitigating this issue and fostering a more positive work environment. By addressing workload expectations, especially those associated with administrative and standardised testing obligations, and by investing in mentorship programs, collaborative opportunities, and empowered school cultures, we may create a system that supports the well-being of principled educators. In the end, this can benefit students' learning and produce better leaders (Leithwood et al., 2004). Subsequent research endeavours employing diverse methods and encompassing broader geographical domains could potentially reinforce these findings and facilitate the development of more targeted interventions that facilitate school leaders in a more motivating setting.

Recommendations

Based on the investigations made regarding the effects of work-related stress on the emotional and psychological well-being and performance of secondary school leadership in Vulindlela Circuit, the study recommends:

- i. Wellness programmes should be instituted. The results of this study indicate that school leaders need tailored wellness programmes. Programs targeting psychological wellness, giving support to these leaders, and teaching them how to handle stress are important. The Department of Education should take the lead in formulating and implementing these programs to ensure that the school leaders are well.
- ii. Create Work Environments that support school leaders. As important as toxic interpersonal relationships and a general lack of support that characterised school leaders' biggest causes of stress, it is important to create an environment that maintains a positive work environment where the district, parents, and educators respect and esteem school leaders. A supportive work environment would come from building strong support networks, working towards teams, and opening avenues for professional development.
- iii. Meet the Demands of Workload: School leadership mostly attributed stress to the demands of heavy work. The creation of efficient time management systems, having enough resources, and taking care in the work distribution of the workload are some of the actions that need to be taken to deal with the task demands. This could help ensure the emotional health and general performance of the school leaders in making sure they have suitable duties.

Limitations and future studies

Although this study sheds light on some of the factors influencing primary stress, it is not without limitations. Its application may be limited because the data is based on a specific circuit. Additionally, it's possible that the interview's structure left out some of the variety of experiences. Future studies should look at these trends across a wider geographic region and consider merging different approaches, such as surveys and observations, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the primary stressors and potential solutions.

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