Understanding and Preventing Compassion Fatigue Among Principals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Study Context

The 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California’s educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that ultimately improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, it is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education, the California Subject Matter Projects and seven Regional Academies across the state.
7 Regions and their Lead Agencies

- Shasta - Chico State Enterprises
- Sonoma - Sonoma County Office of Education
- Placer & Sacramento - Sacramento County Office of Education
- Alameda - UC Berkeley
- Tulare - Madera County Office of the Superintendent
- Kern - Los Angeles County Office of Education
- Riverside & San Diego - Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP)
Overview: Principal Resilience Study

Main Research Question:
How do California principals describe the stress and support they experienced in the workplace?

❖ **Goals:**
  ➢ To identify significant stressors
  ➢ To understand school leaders’ psychological and professional wellbeing
  ➢ To identify risk and resilience factors contributing to the wellbeing of principals

❖ **Methodology:** Large scale multi-wave survey of practicing California school principals

❖ **Timeline:** February 2021- June 2023

❖ **Progress:** 1st wave (Feb 2021) → 2nd wave (Fall 2021) → 3rd wave (Fall 2022)
Background

1 in 5 principals leave their position every year nationally (Levin et al., 2020)

- High levels of stress
- Risk of secondary traumatic stress
- Immense workload (Sehorn, 2020)

35% of principals stayed in their school for less than 2 years

11% remained at their school for over 10 years
School Principals had to:
● Ensure the distance learning outcomes
● Attend to emotional needs from teachers
● Face stress from districts, states, and federal policies (Harris & Jones, 2020)

45% of principals shared the acceleration of their plans to leave the profession due to the pandemic working conditions, according to a poll in August 2020 (Havens, 2020)
Research Gap

Lack of research examining

- The impacts of professional support and efficacy beliefs on principal well-being during the pandemic
- How they concurrently and interactively influence principal psychological well-being

This study examined

- Concurrent influences of principal self-efficacy of school- and district-level improvement and professional support on their compassion fatigue
- Moderating effects of self-efficacy on the relationship between professional support and compassion fatigue controlling for principals' individual and school-level variables.
Main Research Hypotheses

- Self-Efficacy
- Professional Support

Diagram showing relationships:
- Self-Efficacy to Professional Support
- Professional Support to Self-Efficacy (negative correlation)
- Professional Support to Professional Support (negative correlation)
Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001)

PERSON (Efficacy) → BEHAVIOR (Self-Regulation) → ENVIRONMENT (Professional Support)
Theoretical Framework

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017)

Job Demands (Stress)

Job Resources
(Professional Support)

Personal Resources
(Efficacy Beliefs)
Theoretical Framework

Job and Personal Resources Interaction

Reciprocal & Joint Relationship
(Xanthopoulou et al., 2009)

Resource Substitution
(Hobfoll & Leiberman, 1987)
Methods

Data Collection:
- 1st wave survey collected in Feb 2021

Participants:
- 289 participants were eligible for participation
- 231 participants completed the survey without any missing values
Years of Experience

- 1-2 years: 46
- 3-5 years: 71
- 6-10 years: 76
- 11 years and above: 37

School Level

- Elementary: 85
- Middle: 30
- High: 43
- K-8: 34
- Other: 38

School Type

- Public: 180 (78.3%)
- Non-Public: 50 (21.7%)

School Environment

- Rural: 100
- Urban: 35
- Suburban: 95
Demographics of Principal Participants

**IEP Rate**
- 200 (87.0%)
- 30 (13.0%)

**Free or Reduced Lunch Rate**
- 89 (38.7%)
- 56 (24.3%)
- 44 (19.1%)
- 41 (17.8%)

**ELL Rate**
- 123 (53.5%)
- 76 (33.0%)
- 31 (13.5%)

**School Enrollment**
- 74 (32.2%)
- 54 (23.5%)
- 46 (20.0%)
- 27 (11.7%)
- 29 (12.6%)
Methods: Measures

Professional Support
(Self-developed 10-item likert scale)
- **Authority** (e.g., “reach out to mentors”)
- **Funding and opportunity** (e.g., “Use school funds to obtain the help I need”)
- **Peer Support** (e.g., “Reach out to peer colleagues who will assist me”)

Principal Self Efficacy
(7-item likert scale)
- **School Level** (e.g., “generate enthusiasm for a shared vision of the school”)
- **District Level** (e.g., “Our district has successfully recruited, retained, and supported high-quality teachers”)

Compassion Fatigue
(Modified Vicarious Trauma Scale (Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008)
- **Secondary traumatic stress** (e.g., “I find myself distressed when listening to my students’/families’/communities’ stories and situations”)
- **Burnout** (e.g., “It can be hard for me to stay positive and optimistic given some of the things I encounter”)

Principal Self Efficacy
Data Analysis Procedure

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Descriptive Analysis

4 Sequential Multiple Linear Regression Models
- Model 1: Demographic variables
- Model 2: Professional support
- Model 3: Principal Self Efficacy (both levels)
- Model 4a: PSE-district x professional support
- Model 4b: PSE-school x professional support
Results

Demographic Variables

No other demographic variables were significantly associated with compassion fatigue.

Main and Interactive Effects

- Professional Support: -0.28***
- PSE at District Level: -0.17*
- PSE at School Level: -0.08
- PSE(school) x Professional Support: 0.23**
- PSE(district) x Professional Support: 0.19*
Moderation Effect of Principal Self Efficacy in the Association between Professional Support and Compassion Fatigue
Moderation Effect of Principal Self Efficacy at District Level in the Association between Professional Support and Compassion Fatigue
Limitations and Future Research Directions

● Generalizability of the findings to the larger principal population
  ○ A more representative sample
  ○ Longitudinal studies and qualitative studies to further explore the mechanism of principal compassion fatigue and long-term effects of psychological factors

● Measurement development on measuring principal compassion fatigue
Practical Implications

- Self-Efficacy matters.
- Professional support matters.
- Contextual factors affect psychological beliefs that contribute to principals’ well-being.
- Principals manage public and social crisis through both personal resources and job resources.
- Systematic training is needed to support principals’ well-being.
Thank you!

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Questions or Comments?