

## **Is it just me?**

### **The organizational implications of individual and collective burnout in schools**

#### **Abstract**

*Purpose:* This paper explores how individual and collective burnout has become an organizational concern for school leaders, why burnout matters, and what might be done to address the problems individual and organizational burnout generates.

*Design:* This paper presents an analysis of the current literature regarding individual and collective burnout, identifies contributing factors, and explores the impacts of each. Following a discussion and synthesis of the research literature, implications for practice are presented.

*Findings:* Highlighting exhaustion as a factor in burnout, and as a significant consequence of stress, the paper proposes specific individual teacher and leader actions focused on addressing broad organizational responses with the potential to address the consequences of burnout including depersonalization, cynicism, emotional and compassion fatigue, and a loss of individual and collective efficacy. We argue that for burnout to be successfully mitigated, URGENT strategic and focused organizational responses are essential to identify, track, and counter individual and collective burnout.

*Originality:* Much of the existing BURNOUT literature ~~about burnout~~ focuses on the individual as the locus of experience and inquiry. We contend that this predominant focus on individual experience is insufficient to address systemic organizational issues, problems, and concerns facing educational organizations that, perpetuates and accelerates the experience of individuals.

Our contribution elevates conceptions of and discussions about burnout to the organizational level and reframes the conversation by focusing on organizational responses.

*Key words:* Burnout, exhaustion, job-demands, educational leadership

## Introduction

This special issue is devoted to conceptualizing innovative school-level organizational frameworks that better recognize and address the complexities of our times. In our contribution, we explore how schools as organizations are susceptible to and can address the challenges emerging from the individual and collective burnout of teachers and school leaders (Capone *et al.*, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2019; Van Droogenbroeck *et al.*, 2021). In this paper we analyze, synthesize, and employ the existing literature, highlighting how the term burnout has been used over time and underscore the pervasive nature of the problems it presents (Bunjak *et al.*, 2021; DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021; Lane *et al.*, 2021; Llorens *et al.*, 2022; Nielson *et al.*, 2021).

To accomplish this goal, we analyzed theoretical and empirical research about individual and collective burnout (Anzaldúa and Halpern, 2021; Herzberg, 1966; Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998; Weiss, 2020) and, to a lesser extent, organizational crisis leadership (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020; Nichols *et al.*, 2020) and resilience (Duckek, 2020; Hillmann and Guenther, 2021; Ungar, 2019). Additionally, and to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the phenomenon of individual and collective burnout, we purposefully sought research from countries other than the US and UK and beyond education.

In addition to research from the US and UK regarding school leaders (DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021; Lane *et al.*, 2021; Malfouz, 2020), we include studies of teachers in Italy (Capone *et al.*, 2019), Belgium (Van Droogenbroeck *et al.*, 2021), and Australia (Dorman, 2003); firefighters in Portugal (Llorens *et al.*, 2022); Danish postal system employees (Nielsen *et al.*, 2021); social service workers in China (Ng and Su, 2018); and project partners in the European Union (Leitao *et al.*, 2021). Striking to us, were the commonalities across this research. Commonalities

included construct definition (Figley, 1995; Herberg, 1966; WHO, 2019), measures (Freudenberger, 1974; Malach *et al.*, 2018; Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998), and agreement concerning the consequences of burnout (see for example, Bunjack *et al.*, 2021; DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021). Our argument highlights those commonalities, demonstrating how and why school leaders must be cognizant of and responsive to each.

Moreover, while individual burnout has been a focus of the literature in medicine (Anzaldúa and Halpern, 2021; Dazu *et al.*, 2018; Figley, 1995), education (Capone *et al.*, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2019; Van Droogenbroeck *et al.*, 2021), and other high-pressure organizations (Amis and Janz, 2020; Herberg, 1966; Llorens *et al.*, 2022), given the enduring and compounded nature of stressors facing organizational leaders, study of collective burnout is becoming increasingly prevalent (Urien *et al.*, 2021; Nielson *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, the literature has begun to focus on the collective and organization-level factors influencing individual experience or susceptibility to burnout (Bunjak *et al.*, 2021; Gonzalez-Morales *et al.*, 2012; Urien *et al.*, 2021). This potential for the consideration of collective burnout as a lens through which to examine school leadership is our focus.

### **Burnout—Definitions, Contributing Factors, and School Organizations**

As DeMatthews *et al.*, (2021), Lane *et al.*, (2021), and Mahfouz (2020) emphasize, job related, workplace stress has become exceedingly prevalent in schools. Knowing how to recognize burnout risk factors and symptoms matters, if school leaders are to respond to individuals with intention and care and organization-level strategic actions to address collective burnout. Additionally, considering the implications of collective burnout for change and

implementation programmes becomes an essential component of planning and strategic interventions.

The term burnout was introduced in the 1970s by Freudenberger (1974) in discussion and findings of a study of clinicians at a free clinic in New York City. Freudenberger suggested that burnout was the result of, “becoming exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources” in the workplace (p. 154). Since this foundational work, studies of burnout have proliferated. Demonstrating the rise of academic interest in burnout, Heinemann and Heinemann (2017) completed a comprehensive review of the PubMed database, locating 1,225 studies of burnout, published between 1978 and 2010. In their review, they noted that studies of causes and associated factors dominated the literature (N=629) with prevalence studies (N=337) a somewhat distant second (p. 5).

Concurrent with the rise of interest in burnout, and derived from empirical research, has been the identification of three constituent components, emotional exhaustion (i.e., psychological and physical depletion as a result of accumulated stress), depersonalization and cynicism (i.e., the development of a more callous, dehumanized perception of others, often paired with an inability to express empathy), and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment and efficacy (i.e., loss of feelings of confidence and competence, dissatisfaction regarding professional achievements) as a result of one’s work environment (Capone *et al.*, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2019). Of these, exhaustion has been suggested to be most damaging (Urien *et al.*, 2021) to individuals in the short- and long-term.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Maslach *et al.* (2001) stress this point by defining burnout as a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” (p. 398). While some studies of burnout explore the influence of caring for chronically ill loved ones (e.g., Gerain and Zech, 2020; Hubbell and Hubbell, 2002), the majority of burnout studies focus on workplace settings. In 2019, the World Health Organization (2019) defined burnout as, “a syndrome conceptualized from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” adding “burnout refers specifically to the phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other aspects of life” (p. 1). As table 1 illustrates, burnout, expressed as exhaustion, depersonalization and cynicism, and reduced self-efficacy, manifests in numerous ways. Yet, as the literature (Bakker *et al.*, 2022; Bunjak *et al.*, 2021; Capone *et al.*, 2019; Freudenberger, 1974; Leitao *et al.*, 2021; Maslach *et al.*, 2018; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Urien *et al.*, 2021) suggests, workplace burnout has consequences for leaders and their colleagues. In schools, this is particularly troubling because, as research (Kruse, 2023; Capone *et al.*, 2019; Dematthews *et al.*, 2021) suggests, teacher and leader behaviors are directly related to stUDENT achievement and success.

#### *Factors Contributing to Burnout: Individual and Organizational*

Studies of burnout separate contributing factors into two distinct categories, the individual (i.e., personal) and the situational (i.e., work environment). Early studies sought to identify who was most at risk of burnout and focused almost exclusively on individuals’ personality characteristics, coping styles, perfectionism, resilience, and sense of self-efficacy as determinants of burnout (Freudenberger, 1974; Herzberg, 1966). While we acknowledge that one’s personal traits and characteristics certainly affect an individuals’ susceptibility to burnout,

traits such as resilience are less dependent on innate individual characteristics. Rather, resilience is a product of the presence of multiple protective factors including supportive, connected relationships, a sense of belonging and place within one's larger community, as well as an individual's physical, financial, and emotional well-being (Masten, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2018; Ungar, 2019, 2021). No doubt, when resources are limited and stressors great, individuals are more likely to struggle than when resources are better balanced. Therefore, we argue that even as early research ascribed burnout to the individual, studies were also inadvertently measuring other external factors.

We also recognize that as the evidence base has grown, interest in determinate traits has hardly diminished. Even during the pandemic, scholars called on leaders to act in altruistic ways and "place the needs and interests of others above their own" (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020 p. 1), display deliberate calm and bounded optimism (D'Auria and Smet, 2020), and adapt boldly (Nichols *et al.*, 2020). No doubt, each of these traits may serve an individual school leader well. However, absent the necessary supportive environmental conditions, none would be sufficient to sustain individual or collective wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of burnout. Leading in stressful times is a bit like heading off into the wilderness. We can head out on our own, without supplies, bravely forging into the unknown. Or we can embark with proper clothing, a map, a first aid kit, a tent, and adequate food and water. In either instance, we might be successful. While our chances of success, even survival, are better when we come prepared, no matter how well-prepared the leader, context matters.

As will be no surprise to school leaders, in the case of burnout, the primary context of influence is the workplace. The burnout literature clearly articulates how multiple workplace

factors contribute to individual-level burnout including excessive work hours and workloads (Analdua and Halpern, 2021; Dazu *et al.*, 2018; Leitao *et al.*, 2021), task intensity and complexity (Bunjak *et al.*, 2021; Ford *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2018), autonomy, independence, interdependence and peer/social support and a sense of control of ones' work and work environment (Bunjak *et al.*, 2021; Dorman, 2003; Nielsen *et al.*, 2021), and leadership communication and transparency, the presence of trust (or distrust) in leadership and colleagues, and fairness (Amis and Janz, 2020; Ford *et al.*, 2019; Llorens *et al.*, 2022). In short, the workplace environment has been found to contribute to burnout in numerous ways irrespective of an individual's characteristics and traits. Likewise, no work environment, including that of schools, is immune to these factors. Perhaps even more importantly, the incentive to address or mitigate potential institutional factors contributing to individual experience of burnout remain in the background.

### *Individual Responsibility for Organizational Success*

As we developed this paper, growing discussion of the concept of 'quiet quitting' emerged in the popular press. At its core, quiet quitting is an approach to work that embodies simply 'doing the job' no more, no less. Consistent with the burnout literature in school settings (Capone *et al.*, 2019; DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021), quiet quitting presents a response to the chronic and symptomatic burnout experienced by individuals and their frustration as perceived inaction on the part of organizations who, at least on the surface, appear uninterested in individual wellbeing and commitment. While this movement has created waves of discussion and debate in the corporate sector, we believe quiet quitting creates a unique moment to consider the implications of individual and collective burnout in the public sector.



Education, health, and other public services have long been supported, if not sustained, by the sense of duty held by individual employees to go above and beyond. Teachers working beyond contractual hours to create the best learning opportunities for their students while contending with mounting accountability driven obligations, have ensured schools stay afloat. However, as we move into a post-COVID era, while still coping with the health, social and economic influence of the pandemic, school leaders are now facing increasingly challenging circumstances of duration, intensity, and pervasiveness. Coupled with the accelerated retirement and resignation rates of educators across many jurisdictions, fewer educators, and with remaining staff not willing or able to continually go ‘above and beyond’, our education systems may be facing dangerous futures as the human capital required to keep schools buoyant and successful wanes.

### *Unique Burnout Conditions Affecting School Organizations*

As we noted earlier, we have drawn from a wide variety of literatures to inform our thinking and propositions. However, not all organizations and work environments are alike nor are they guaranteed to provide consistent internal conditions within the entire organization or over time. We argue here that school organizations present significant, distinctive conditions that may substantially contribute to an individual’s exposure to burnout-inducing contexts. These include meeting accountability demands (Daly, 2009; Knapp and Feldman, 2012), maintaining self- and collective efficacy (Hesbol, 2019; Qadach *et al.*, 2020), responding to student need, trauma and discipline concerns (Van Droogenbroeck *et al.*, 2021; Ford *et al.*, 2019), and managing compassion fatigue (Anzaldúa and Halpern, 2021). We address each and draw

linkages to educator burnout with an eye to considering the implications for organization-wide actions and considerations to mitigate the influence of collective burnout.

Accountability pressures experienced by school-level professionals have been well documented (Knapp and Feldman, 2012; Mitani, 2018; Spillane and Kenney, 2012). School leaders contend with expectations to continually increase student achievement, drive school improvement, provide instructional leadership, and engage in expert problem-solving has been suggested to be a leading cause of work intensification (Wang *et al.*, 2018) and principal stress (Mahfouz, 2020). Similarly, teacher-focused accountability pressures linked to higher levels of burnout include those related to classroom environment, instructional demands, and interactions with parents and caregivers (Capone *et al.*, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2019).

Second, a reduction in self- and collective efficacy has been suggested to be a consequential outcome of burnout (Bunjak, *et al.*, 2021; Nielsen *et al.*, 2021; Urien *et al.*, 2021). However, for teachers and school leaders, a loss of efficacy brings additional consequences to the school organization (DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021; Dorman, 2003; Rosenberg and Anderson, 2021). As Ford *et al.* (2019) suggests, there is a significant relationship between teacher loss of efficacy and teacher engagement and job satisfaction. As Ronfelt *et al.* (2013) and Anzaldúa and Halpern (2021) note, as efficacy and satisfaction decrease, intent to leave increases as does commitment to the profession overall. The potential result these outcomes is that educators are not only leaving their schools, they are also leaving the profession either temporarily or permanently (Ford *et al.*, 2019). Equally troubling, Grayson and Alvarez (2008) found that a loss of teacher efficacy can impede student learning and decrease school effectiveness.

Third, responding to student trauma, need, and discipline concerns has also been suggested to contribute to educator burnout (Ronfelt *et al.*, 2013; Mahfouz, 2020). As Lane *et al.* (2021) suggest, attending to student trauma, need, and discipline concerns contributes to vicarious and adversarial stress, albeit in different ways. Vicarious stress occurs as teachers and school leaders work through student trauma in a supportive role. Adversarial stress occurs when educators directly confront difficult or confrontational events. Each takes its toll on the emotional and physical resilience and wellbeing of teachers and principals.

Finally, compassion fatigue, first identified among medical professionals, has been suggested to contribute to burnout (Anzaldúa and Halpern, 2021; Dzau *et al.*, 2018). Compassion fatigue can result from taking on others' stress or strongly identifying with others' trauma. Within education, compassion fatigue occurs when teachers and principals sacrifice their own needs in their efforts to help and support others. Interestingly, compassion fatigue can result in empathy overload where ones' emotional reserves become exhausted. As a result, professionals, including school leaders, may find themselves feeling disconnected from their own thoughts and emotions. In turn, they are less likely to respond with compassion and empathy when a situation requires it.

Yu *et al.* (2022) present teacher burnout and compassion fatigue as a phenomenon directly linked to the sustainability of human capital and academic growth. Yu and colleagues contest that, "As with any other type of fatigue, compassion fatigue reduces the ability or interest of helpers in bearing the pain of others, so it is often used to describe 'the cost of caring'" p. 6071. Symptoms of compassion fatigue in teachers include lowered concentration, numbness or feelings of helplessness, irritability, lack of self-satisfaction, withdrawal, aches and pains, or

work absenteeism. Each represents a significant challenge for school leaders to confront. Moreover, burnout is an iterative process as the relentlessness of confronting challenges can contribute to additional burnout. For school leaders, understanding this cycle is critically important if they are to sustain their own wellbeing and consider the organizational factors contributing to individual burnout. Perhaps most concerning is that burnout is often communicable (Urien *et al.*, 2021). As Gonzales *et al.* (2012) posit, burnout can act as a contagion, crossing over (Bakker *et al.*, 2009) between and among people within the same social environment. Rarely does only one member of a school staff feel stressed, disillusioned, or cynical. As table 1 illustrates, these individual and collective manifestations of burnout have significant consequences.

### **Collective Burnout and Exhaustion**

Research has identified exhaustion as a key factor in the development of burnout (Capone *et al.*, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2019). Exhaustion is a significant consequence of stress on its own. Indeed, as Dzau *et al.* (2018) and Lane *et al.* (2021), suggest exhaustion can be evidenced even in circumstances where individuals remain optimistic about and committed to work they identify as important and valuable. As Oplatka (2010) notes, when principals choose to leave the profession, they often do so with some regret. Yet, as Mahfouz (2020) argues, of those that remain, many experience significant stress because of job pressures and lack strategies to cope with the individual exhaustion that arises from those stressors.

Of course, detachment can, for short periods of time, help stem burnout and assist recovery. Even when suffering from burnout, it often remains possible to show up every day and do your job out of a sense of duty. However, we submit that showing up is not adequate for high-

quality education to occur. Nor does it contribute to happy, healthy educational professionals, contributions to positive school cultures, or engaging learning. Additionally, the conditions that contribute to individual burnout are pervasive and collective burnout is the result.

Admittedly, collective burnout and is less well studied than individual burnout. Initially described as “collective mood” (Bakker *et al.*, 2002, p. 466), collective burnout was posited to be the result of employee stress among workers with similar jobs or work contexts. Yet, as Urien *et al.* (2021) suggest, collective burnout does not necessarily arise from the same conditions for all people. Because everyone makes sense of situations from their own perspective (Weick, 2009), individuals may not agree on the exact reason they are feeling drained. However, they can agree that they are experiencing various stages of burnout. For educators, this suggests that while secondary principals may feel more stressed by the relentlessness of scheduled after school and evening activities, elementary principals may experience stress because of accountability reporting or parent demands. No matter the source of stress, a significant and increasing number of school leaders find the real and perceived demands of the job exhausting (DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021; Mahfouz, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, as research (Bakker *et al.*, 2002; Neilson *et al.*, 2021) suggests, collective burnout results from the convergence of individuals’ perceptions about the larger workplace environment even when the conditions of their individual workplaces differ.

These findings matter, because as Gonzales *et al.* (2012) demonstrate in their study of Spanish teachers, the influence of individual burnout on other organizational members can result in increased mistakes and errors and, in the face of absence from work, increased workload. In addition, Gonzales and colleagues suggest that collective burnout, when expressed as exhaustion and cynicism, may become part of the cultural fabric of an organization. They describe how in

cases of perceived collective burnout employees' informal and occasional communications centered on individual and shared exhaustion and depletion. As a result, colleagues were perceived as “cranky”, “drained”, and “wry.” In turn, they regarded their organization as a place where “people are used up” or “people are cynical” (Gonzales *et al.*, 2012, p. 46). In education, collective exhaustion has, we believe, become a systemic problem for education systems around the world and for school leaders to confront.

Like other systemic problems, collective burnout is impossible to fix without a systems perspective (Weiss, 2020). Zimbardo (2004, p. 47), when describing how social and organizational systems influence individuals' behavior, explains it this way:

While a few bad apples might spoil the barrel... a vinegar barrel will always transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles, regardless of the best intentions, resilience, and genetic nature of the cucumbers. So, does it make more sense to [direct] resources to... apples or to understand how vinegar works...?

Zimbardo's homily suggests that our actions are influenced by the situations in which we find ourselves. It suggests that in the workplace, context matters. Furthermore, when workplaces are pressure and stress filled, it is impossible for anyone to be immune. Zimbardo's observation requires that we look at the cucumber, vinegar, and the barrel if we are to fully understand how collective burnout happens.

Scholars of school organizations will not be surprised by this conclusion. As research (Bauer, 2019; Schechter and Shaked, 2019) suggests, school organizations cannot be reduced to their component structural parts. Nor can they be fully understood by examining how individual components operate. For example, observing how teaching happens in one classroom offers little evidence regarding how teaching happens throughout the school. Thus, it is only through

thinking about an organization as a system can its complexity be understood. As Schechter and Shaked (2020, p. 109) state, systems thinking is about, “seeing the whole beyond the parts and seeing the parts in the context of the whole.” Inasmuch as our current conceptions of burnout continue to bifurcate individuals from the larger collective, we contend that school leaders' ability to alleviate collective burnout remains limited. We now turn to exploring how organization influences this relationship.

### **Organization and Leadership**

Organizations exist for a purpose. Schools educate. Businesses develop and market products. Hospitals tend to the sick and injured. Regardless of the kind of organization, organizational purpose directs organizational goals and orients the primary work of the organization. No matter if goals are precise or vague, aspirational or unambitious, they serve to define why the organization exists and what work it is to accomplish. Furthermore, it is understood that within organizations people serve to complete that work. People may work individually or in teams, in classrooms or in district offices, however, it is expected that doing one's job includes some activity that contributes to an organization's goals.

In this way, individuals' tasks may vary in difficulty and scope (e.g., a teacher's work is quite different than that of a district business manager), nonetheless they are coordinated by way of organizational structures (Bauer, 2019; Weick, 2009). Furthermore, organizational structures are formal and informal, explicit, and tacit (Shaked and Schechter, 2020). Union contracts provide formal and explicit guidance regarding the task expectations of its members. The structures of organizational culture may be less easily ascertained. Nonetheless, as every high school principal knows, no matter how informal or tacit student cultural norms may be, they are

generally understood and (at times, surprisingly) faithfully followed. Finally, organizations exist in an environment. For schools, that environment includes the community, the region, the state, and the nation with all their attendant political, economic, and social consequences.

Furthermore, it is assumed that organizations are led. The management literature stresses the importance of managing agile change (Kotter, 2014; Naslund and Norrman, 2022), organizational resilience (Duckek, 2020; Hillmann and Guenther, 2021), and organizational learning (Antunes and Pinherio, 2020; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015) as key leadership responses in times of threat and crisis. Similarly, the education literature has focused on issues such as institutionalizing academic press (Geist and Hoy, 2004), professional development (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Knapp, 2003), and school reform (Lee and Seashore Louis, 2019; Harris, 2006) as institutional responses to enduring challenges. We recognize that recently, the research literature has taken on caring (Edge *et al.*, 2016; Ryu *et al.*, 2020; Seashore Louis *et al.*, 2017; Smylie *et al.*, 2016), belonging (Bowles and Scull, 2019; Gray *et al.*, 2018; Libbey, 2004), and developing positive teacher and principal leadership (Cherkowski, 2018; Murphy and Seashore Louis, 2018) as central to school leadership response. No matter the concern, school leaders are expected to respond. And the stresses triggered by those responses, adds up. Moreover, they collectively add up, in turn, weakening the potential for future action across the school organization.

However, to date, there has been little exploration of collective organization-wide burnout within education or schools more specifically. Beyond the evidence presented to this point, we contend that collective burnout has yet to enter the common vernacular of school leaders, policy makers, researchers and systems in ways that can potentially positively influence



the short- and long-term health and commitment of school-level educators. We now turn to that discussion.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Addressing Collective Burnout: Organizational Approaches**

We agree with DeMatthews *et al.* (2021) and Mahfouz (2020), our current systems and structures of leadership and organization are inadequate to reflect the demands on and meet the needs of educators. As the short- and long-term conditions that influence individual and collective burnout increase, the profession is increasingly at risk. Moreover, as Dewey (1915/1944) suggests, strong and well-lead schools are foundational to a thriving democracy. If we are to make inroads toward righting systemic inequality and injustice, a robust and durable system of schooling is an important societal and cultural location for that work. Yet, absent responsive and adaptive individual and collective system-level support, jurisdictions are unlikely to employ and retain the very workforce required to meet these goals. To return to Zimbardo's (2004) analogy, unless we start looking at the vinegar in which our educators are marinating, we cannot expect them to do more than they are currently able to bear. Moreover, we stress that burnout is not a result of a lack of persistence or proficiency but from the how traditional school organization structures influence the practice of school leadership. In addition, the willingness of wider education systems to continue to strive for improvement, create new initiatives, and demand increased productivity consistently ignores the depleted and exhausted state of the profession.

Based on our analysis and synthesis of current research regarding teachers (Capone *et al.*, 2019; Carver-Thomas *et al.*, 2021; Collie, 2022; Ford *et al.*, 2019; Grayson and Alvarez, 2008;

Van Droogenbroeck *et al*, 2021) and school leaders (DeMatthews *et al*, 2021; Edge *et al*, 2016; Lane *et al*, 2021; Mahfouz, 2020; Mitani, 2018; Oplatka, 2010; Wang *et al*, 2018), we submit that collective burnout is most often evidenced within schools as collective exhaustion. Certainly, schools are marked by significant evidence of depersonalization (Bowles and Scull, 2019; Ford *et al*, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Yu *et al*, 2002) and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment and efficacy (Capone *et al*, 2019; DeMatthews *et al*, 2021; Hesbol, 2019; Smylie *et al*, 2016; Wang *et al*, 2018). Yet, exhaustion is by far the most prevalent of the three factors that contribute to burnout (Bakker *et al*, 2009; Duckek, 2020; Weiss, 2020). As such, we focus our discussion on addressing individual and collective exhaustion however, we agree with research (Bunjak *et al*, 2021; Duckek, 2020; Maslach *et al*, 2001) that suggests that absent exhaustion, depersonalization and a loss of self- and communal efficacy is less likely to occur.

To this end and drawing on our read of the research, we offer insight into the signals and symptoms that may be present in schools where educators are suffering from collective burnout. While our proposed recommendations remain in their infancy, we call on school leaders to consider the implications of collective burnout on the overall quality of work, life, and learning in their organizations. We also encourage our research and policy colleagues to pause and recognize these signs and call for more research in support of refined analyses and targeted and meaningful, and not work intensive, solutions.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The response to teacher and school leader burnout should not be one that suggests the work of educators should be a 'labor of love' and that individuals ought to be able to rise to the challenges of schools today. Rather, the response should be to find ways to provide support for

and sustain individuals in ways that contribute to individual and organizational health and effectiveness. As table 2 illustrates, we contend that school leaders must coordinate their action within in two arenas. First, they must be able to recognize the signs of collective burnout at both individual and organizational levels. Second, school leaders should be supported by targeted and focused responses to identify, track, and counter collective burnout. Signals of burnout, at the individual level, include deterioration of personal autonomy and authority over work (Collie, 2022; Ford *et al*, 2019), a reduction in sense of accomplishment and efficacy leading to disengagement (Qadach *et al*, 2020; Wang *et al*, 2018), indications of vicarious and adversarial stress (Lane *et al*, 2021), the demonstration of emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue (Mitani, 2018; Yu *et al*, 2022), and increased displays of depersonalization and cynicism (Bowles and Scull, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020). In short, school leaders and other individuals within the school community, need to be able to identify when it is 'just us' and when the system has created conditions that fail to value individuals and the work that they do.

School leaders would be well served to identify and offer support to individuals exhibiting one or more of these signs. Here too, developing cultures with stronger systems for listening (Kruse, 2023) the recognition and celebration of expertise (Ungar, 2021), and identifying and remedying workload inequity and intensification (Wang *et al*, 2018) have the potential to mitigate individual and collective burnout. Responses might include the detection of tension, anxiety, and worry with the intent of compassionate response, mobilization of local expertise, collective knowledge, and communal wisdom, acceptance of and respect for individual limits and boundaries, the re-visioning of evaluation and reward structures, and the development of proactive systems and structures of support. Simply put, the development of social and

professional support and can serve as protection from burnout (Cherkowski, 2018; Leitao *et al*, 2021).

As Kruse (2023) and the research concerning belonging and caring (Cherkowski, 2018; Gray *et al*, 2018; Ryu *et al*, 2020; Smylie *et al*, 2016) suggests burnout can be best countered by developing shared purpose, a sense of compassion for self and others, and intentional behaviors that support mindful leadership action. At the organizational level, we contend that school leaders would be well served to identify, for example, the escalation of challenges and tensions, acknowledge the influence of power and privilege on individual agency, and the prevalence of institutional and structural inequities and inequalities, and be alert to signs of diminished collective efficacy evidenced by increasing patterns of adult illness, absenteeism, and resignation. We argue that by pro-actively attending to the quality of the work environment school leaders can create workspaces that are positive and fulfilling and characterized by compassion and caring (DeMatthews *et al*, 2021; Seashore Louis *et al*, 2017).

We suggest that attentive, proactive, and pre-emptive action can go far to reduce early burnout and inoculate against escalation. Moreover, we suggest that our recommendations serve dual purposes. By recognizing and reducing burnout early and intentionally acting to prevent it before it becomes insidious, leaders can protect both individuals and organizational culture and climate. Recommendations such as the re-visioning of evaluation and reward structures, offer potential avenues for increased professional community and organizational learning.

Moreover, leadership responses can be evidenced in many ways, including, for example, targeting meaningful communication that addresses tensions and structure, the clarification of differences between essential and non-essential work paired with structured workloads that

protect time and address chronic overwork, the adoption of coherent, purposeful, and fair key organizational values and goals, embedded and systemic support for consequential mentorship and coaching, and attention to targeted organizational learning that accepts the on-going nature of change and acknowledges the complexity of change in the face of collective burnout.

Likewise, recommendations that focus on organizational, rather than individual, response move beyond and are greater than buzzwords like self-care and well-being, they offer tangible evidence that leaders care, truly care, for themselves and others and are willing to create opportunities that foster connection and belonging (Kruse, 2023; Hillman and Guenther, 2021).

We contend that when paired and considered in tandem, responses to individual and collective burnout can foster happier and healthier workplaces. Happier because the reduction of individual and collective burnout lessens stress and anxiety, allowing people to recommit to their professional purposes and principles. Healthier because a reduction in individual and collective burnout offers substantive physical and mental benefit. In tandem, both can go far toward creating school environments in which learning and belonging is fostered and burnout diminished.

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Table 1. Components of burnout, definitions, manifestations in individuals and collectives (Bakker *et al.*, 2022; Bunjak *et al.*, 2021; Capone *et al.*, 2019; Freudenberger, 1974; Leitao *et al.*, 2021; Maslach *et al.*, 2018; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Urien *et al.*, 2021)

Component	Definition	Individual Manifestations	Collective Manifestations
Exhaustion	Psychological and physical depletion as a result of accumulated stress	Depression Headaches Lowered immunity Frequent illness Loss of sleep or appetite Increased isolation	Escalating tension and conflict  Reduced motivation in the face of communal challenges  Extensive increased absenteeism
Depersonalization and cynicism	The development of a more callous, dehumanized perception of others, often paired with an inability to express empathy	Disassociation Withdrawal Detachment Emotional distance Absence of positive emotions	Pervasive othering, marginalization, and disregard for the needs of students and families  Consistent, schoolwide increase in discipline referrals and punitive actions
Reduced self- and collective efficacy	Loss of feelings of confidence and competence, dissatisfaction regarding professional achievements	Loss of a sense of purpose Work or task avoidance Anxiety Focus on personal failings	Lack of trust and cohesion  Reduced cooperation and teamwork  Widespread opposition to new ideas and change



Table 2. Recognition of and responses to individual and collective burnout in schools and of school leaders

	<b>Recognition of signs of individual and collective burnout</b>	<b>Strategic and focused school-level responses to identify, track, and counter collective burnout</b>
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deterioration of personal autonomy and authority over work within schools</li> <li>• Reduction in sense of accomplishment and efficacy leading to disengagement among school leaders</li> <li>• Indications of vicarious and adversarial stress as they relate to school policies and practices</li> <li>• Demonstration of emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue as a result of principal work</li> <li>• Display of depersonalization and cynicism in regard to school community members, goals, and outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish early detection of tension, anxiety, and worry with the intent of compassionate responses to and for school personnel</li> <li>• Recognize and mobilize local expertise, collective knowledge, and communal wisdom with the intent of providing support and encouragement</li> <li>• Accept and respect individual limits and boundaries regarding work tasks and expectations</li> <li>• Re-vision evaluation and reward structures to acknowledge the difficulty of school leadership</li> <li>• Develop proactive systems and structures of support for leadership effort</li> </ul>

Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Escalation of challenges and tensions within the school, community, and broader society</li><li>• Insufficient recognition the influence of power and privilege on individual agency and its relation to leadership</li><li>• Prevalence of institutional and structural inequities and inequalities and the outcomes of each</li><li>• Diminished collective efficacy especially in relation to strategic goals and outcomes</li><li>• Increasing pattern of adult illness, absenteeism, and resignation among all members of the school organization</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Target meaningful communication to openly address tensions and structures within the school and district/province</li><li>• Recognize differences between essential and non-essential work and minimize secondary charges</li><li>• Structure workloads with protected time to address chronic overwork within and beyond the school day</li><li>• Adopt coherence, purpose, and fairness as key values and goals</li><li>• Embed systemic support for consequential mentorship and coaching for all school leaders</li><li>• Attend to organizational learning and accept that change becomes even more complex as collective burnout increases</li></ul>
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