'LIKE BEING CHASED BY A TRAIN': SCHOOL LEADERS' EXPERIENCES OF BURNOUT

DANIEL XERRI

Dr Daniel Xerri is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Malta, and the Chairperson of the ELT Council. He is the author of many publications on language education and has co-edited several volumes. His most recent book is Innovative Practices in Early English Language Education (2023, Palgrave Macmillan).

Introduction

Burnout can severely impair the wellbeing and performance of school leaders. Recognised as a syndrome consisting of the physical, emotional and mental exhaustion created by the prolonged stress and excessive demands of a job (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024), burnout affects an individual's productivity and wellbeing (McKay, 2020). It also has an effect on leaders' personal and professional relationships, and their life outside of work (Cunningham, 2023). School leaders who experience burnout may feel that what was once a meaningful career has become unsatisfying and pointless, and may even consider leaving their profession (Adams, 2023; Karaevli, 2024).

Since burnout can make them feel lonely and isolated (Hauseman, 2023), the provision of support is vital because of how this can help decrease stress and burnout in school leaders (Beausaert et al., 2016). In fact, research indicates that the support offered by a community of practice mitigates the effects of school leader burnout (Saltmarsh, 2024). Given the prevalence of the problem, urgent action is called for to ensure that leaders can benefit from support, a reduction in work-related risks, and the creation of a healthy work environment (Arnold et al., 2023; Doyle Fosco et al., 2024). This seems imperative given that a decrease in leaders' burnout boosts morale amongst other staff members of the school community, improves student achievement, and lowers the costs associated with leader turnover (West, 2018).

Despite the extensive literature on burnout, there have not been many studies on school leaders' experiences of this problem (Cunningham, 2023; DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Based on the results of a study conducted in Malta's private ELT sector, this article sheds light on what burnout means for school leaders, how they are affected by it, how they seek to mitigate its effects, and what practical advice they can give to their peers to help address the issue.

The Study

In order to investigate school leaders' experiences of burnout, a small-scale qualitative study was conducted in Malta's ELT sector. The latter consists of around 32 private language schools that cater to over 78,000 students from around the world and employ 620 teachers of English (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2024). Each school is led by a Head of School (HOS) – who is most often the owner – and a Director of Studies (DOS). Given that the sector is regulated by a legal notice (ELT Council, 2015), having a suitably qualified DOS on site during school operations is a legal obligation. The legal notice specifies that the DOS is responsible for all academic matters at the school, including anything concerning

language learners and teachers. Some DOSs occupy the position of HOS as well; most often this is the case when the school is owned by an international chain.

For the purposes of this study, the term 'school leader' refers to both HOSs and DOSs. The study sought to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of burnout of leaders working in ELT schools in Malta? To achieve this, a series of one-to-one semi-structured interviews with school leaders were organised in the first quarter of 2024. After gaining informed consent from the participants, the interviews were held on Zoom, video-recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes and the transcribed data was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Nine school leaders agreed to participate in the study, this number representing 28% of all DOSs in Malta. Each participant was given a pseudonym (e.g., SL1) so as to keep their identity confidential. Table 1 provides details on the participants' bio data.

Table 1: School Leaders' Bio Data

School Leader Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of Leadership Experience	Highest Qualification	Staff Population (Average to Peak)	Student Population (Average to Peak)
SL1	F	51	1	CELTA	30 to 70	150 to 700
SL2	F	48	12	Dip.TESOL	10 to 20	80 to 375
SL3	F	63	15	DELTA	40 to 120	600 to 1,400
SL4	F	43	14	DELTA	19 to 32	170 to 495
SL5	F	62	9	MBA	5 to 12	30 to 70
SL6	F	58	15	DELTA	11 to 16	70 to 196
SL7	M	35	12	MA	10 to 35	120 to 500
SL8	M	34	8	MA	58 to 133	600 to 1,800
SL9	M	40	10	DELTA	14 to 20	120 to 300

As evident from the above table, the school leaders who participated in this study ranged in experience and in terms of the size of the staff and student populations they were responsible for, however the majority held a qualification at Level 7 on the European Qualifications Framework (European Union, n.d.).

What Burnout Means

In order to form a better understanding of how these school leaders conceptualise burnout, they were asked to describe what it meant for them. In doing so, there were frequent references to physical and mental exhaustion, as well as to feeling overwhelmed by work demands and stress. For instance, one participant mentioned that burnout for her was tantamount to being "unable to compartmentalise and prioritise and efficiently manage my time […] the inability to say 'no' because I do not have the time to be able to do whatever it is that is being asked of me at the level that I would expect myself to deliver" (SL4). The subtle reference to setting oneself a high standard is indicative of this individual's passion for the job despite its excessive demands. Some research suggests that the more passionate school leaders are about their job, the higher their job satisfaction but the more likely they are to suffer from burnout (Horwood et al., 2021).

Concurring with her peers that periods with limited resources and excessive work are the main cause of burnout, another leader stated that "There was a point when we stopped looking at the schedule. You just go wild and just manage to see how to get along from time to time" (SL1). This sense of being overwhelmed by one's duties and responsibilities led another interviewee to compare burnout to "being chased by a train" (SL3). Feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work is recognised as one of the chief causes of stress and burnout in school leaders (Arnold et al., 2023).

Another common description of burnout consisted of the loss of work-life balance. One interviewee explained that when you experience burnout "You allow work to take over your life and don't prioritise the things you enjoy doing or the things that you need to be doing. In order to do a great job, you are not doing these things. Work is your main focus" (SL8). Adams (2023) suggests that when this phenomenon is left unchecked, the probability of school leader turnover is much higher. On the contrary, when the issue is properly addressed at a systemic level, the entire school community benefits (West, 2018).

Effects of Burnout

When asked to describe the effects of burnout, these school leaders referred to its impact on the emotional dimension and on physical and mental health. For instance, one participant declared, "I experience a kind of shutdown. I kind of freeze because there's too much to take on" (SL7), while one of his colleagues said, "It's my life outside of work that is mostly affected. I suffer when I get home and maybe I get sick or have migraines" (SL5). Burnout's impact on personal life and relationships was another common theme. One interviewee explained how "At home, I really don't have that much patience. I'm a very different person, I don't know what happens to me" (SL1). These leaders' experiences are comparable to the ones recorded by other studies that have demonstrated how burnout impinges on school leaders' health and personal lives (Cunningham, 2023).

While the participants seemed reluctant to concede that burnout affected them on a professional level, a few of them did admit that this happened sometimes. For example, an interviewee remarked, "I don't think I let it affect my behaviour towards other people at school. But after a period of intense stress, I feel less productive. There's a bit of a lull. I take it a bit easy when it comes to things that need to be done" (SL9). This is in line with research showing that school leaders' productivity is affected negatively when they experience intense stress and burnout (Hauseman, 2023). Crises exacerbate the issue and make it far more difficult to lead a school (Kelly, 2023).

Several participants referred to the immense challenges they experienced when running their schools remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic while at the same time seeking to safeguard teachers' income.

Mitigating the Effects

To mitigate the effects of burnout these school leaders opted for a range of strategies, some of them curative in nature with others preventative. Those leaders who had experienced chronic stress or burnout opted for yoga and meditation, diet regulation and the take-up of new sports and hobbies as a means of regenerating themselves. For instance, one interviewee spoke about how she started painting and took up sailing after an episode of burnout that almost forced her to quit her job as a DOS. This chimes with research showing that burnout leads certain school leaders to make plans to abandon the profession and leave the educational sector altogether (Karaevli, 2024).

Having learnt from their past experiences, the participants referred to how they implemented certain changes in their professional and personal life in order to prevent the re-emergence of burnout. These included establishing clear boundaries with their employer, nurturing a support system at work, planning ahead, and setting realistic goals and deadlines. One leader declared, "I have to be quite strict about my routine. I go home very early. And I make it a point that I've planned that with my employer. I leave at 4pm every day. Even in high season, we don't double bank. But it doesn't mean I don't work hard. It's just that I have a boundary" (SL2). Given that one of the causes of burnout consists of leaders' relationship with their superiors (McKay, 2020), having such boundaries and clarity over what is expected of them enabled this study's participants to safeguard their work-life balance, thus ensuring self-care and adequate time for personal and leisure activities (Doyle Fosco et al., 2023).

Advice for New School Leaders

Given their experience, these school leaders were asked what advice they would give in relation to burnout to anyone stepping into a similar role for the first time. For the interviewees, it was vital that new school leaders choose their employer very carefully and create a supportive team within their organisation (Xerri, 2024). For example, one participant claimed that it was fundamental to "Build your team carefully. Recruit people who are responsible for their own work, who don't

need hand-holding. I don't like to hire teachers who are super needy" (SL2). Similarly, one of her peers stated that "You definitely need to have a good structure in place in terms of immediate support at the school; people you can ask for support, ask for help, and people you can delegate to" (SL8). These suggestions are aligned with research findings underscoring the value of seeking support as a means of minimising stress (Beausaert et al., 2016), and the importance of creating a delegation plan to help prevent the occurrence of burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

> *Build your team carefully. Recruit people who are responsible for their own work, who don't need hand-holding.*

For these school leaders, it was also crucial to trust others, value one's learning, and listen to teachers. One participant stated, "Don't feel like you need to be the first person to speak in any interaction. Listen and learn because there are many people out there who are not out to get you" (SL4). For this interviewee, the peer support offered to her by other school leaders was instrumental in enabling her to ward off the reoccurrence of burnout. This chimes with the idea that a community of practice consisting of fellow school leaders can prove instructional and supportive for an individual (Saltmarsh, 2024).

Conclusion

The higher incidence of chronic stress and burnout amongst school leaders in different educational contexts around the world seems to be caused by the intensification of their role and its associated workload and emotional demands (Kelly, 2023). As shown by the present study, school leaders in the ELT sector are not exempt from experiencing the full-blown effects of this problem. To avert the occurrence of burnout, manage prolonged stress and enhance wellbeing, it is vital for schools and leaders to adopt a strategic approach that addresses the issue at a systemic level rather than merely dealing with the symptoms. This might involve measures that help to target leaders' workload, develop supportive structures aimed at their mental health and wellbeing, build community within a school and with their peers outside of school, and eliminate leaders' self-sabotage practices (Kelly, 2023).

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