

Crises of Care: School Leaders and Narratives of Compassion Fatigue

James Lane
University of Phoenix

Sarah Sally Everts
American College of Education

Yvonne Hefner
Georgia Gwinnett College

Ramona Phillips
University of Phoenix

Karyn Scott
University of Phoenix

This study examined school administrators' experiences with compassion fatigue. This study described negative effects that empathy and compassion may have on school leaders. Results of this study may be used to provide insight into ways that school leaders experience compassion fatigue as they navigate through ethically and emotionally challenging events. Such insight can be used to inform those preparing to become school leaders, those who shape training programs for school leaders at both the pre-service and staff development level, and leaders themselves as they seek to understand the significant and complex effects of their experiences.

Keywords: compassion fatigue, burnout, ethic of care, school leadership, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Compassion fatigue and professional burnout are common phenomena that afflict caregivers across the professional spectrum (Abraham-Cook, 2012; Barello, Palamenghi, & Graffigna, 2020; Figley, 1995; Leiter & Maslach, 2016; Maslach, 2017; Maslach, & Leiter, 2008; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Stamm, 1995; Stamm, 2010; Wardle & Mayorga, 2016; Winch, Henderson, & Jones, 2012). The phenomena occur when people become emotionally separated from their work. Key dimensions include exhaustion, cynicism, and detachment from the job (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Effects can include extreme depression, physical illness, relational breaches, and even separation from the profession (Stamm, 2010).

Although the problem of compassion fatigue among health caregivers, social workers, school counselors, and teachers has been well documented, little research exists on the problem of compassion

fatigue and burnout among school leaders (Klocko & Wells, 2015). Most school administrators can draw from experiential reservoirs of traumatic events they experienced while working with students, staff, or their school community. Research shows that such seminal and immersive experiences can create physical and emotional duress for the leader, often resulting in compassion fatigue (Bass, 2008; Leiter & Maslach, 2016; Maslach, 2017; Maslach, & Leiter, 2008; Stamm, 2010). Malen notes that interactions regarding traumatic events can be “a major source of stress for principals and a force that has organizational effects” (1994, p. 159). It is vital, therefore, to understand the lived experiences of school leaders in order to better understand their decision-making and improve the educational experiences of their students.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to describe and analyze stories of compassion fatigue from purposively chosen school administrators. We captured, described, and analyzed significant incidents that triggered compassion fatigue within them. We sought to understand the effects of that fatigue on his or her physical and emotional health, job performance, and career trajectory by identifying overarching categories, subcategories, and themes associated with their experiences.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1. What are significant experiences of school administrators that caused them to experience compassion fatigue?

RQ2. How did the experiences affect the school administrator psychologically, emotionally, and physically?

RQ3. How did the experiences shape the administrator’s job satisfaction and career path?

BACKGROUND

School leaders work in a milieu of people in crisis, including staff, students, and parents. Traumatic elements may include poverty, physical abuse, drug abuse, death, suicide, sexual assault, and imprisonment. In addition to or coupled with these, student issues may culminate in school expulsion and arrest. Instructional and non-instructional staff may commit infractions that threaten their employment. Wells (2013) notes the constant stressors under which principals work. These come from increased pressure to improve teacher instruction, raise student scores, to keep students, maintain teacher morale, and negotiate accountability and often conflicting demands from parents, community leaders, and government officials. While these pressures in the principalship have grown over the past two decades, they have more recently become amplified with the constant 24/7 access and exposure via email, texts, and omnipresent social media.

School leaders may experience emotional trauma through at least two contexts. One may occur vicariously as the leader works through the trauma with others by providing material, structural, and emotional resources to help the victim mitigate his or her personal crisis. In this mode the leader is assuming a supportive role. A second type of anxiety may occur when school leaders confront egregious actions of teachers or non-instructional staff. This context is often adversarial, although often includes supportive scaffolding designed to help the individual improve. Although the context is confrontational, the leader may often empathize with the individual and hope for the sake of the employee and other school stakeholders that the employee will succeed in altering his or her behavior. This process can create anxiety within the staff member and can ultimately lead to his or her dismissal.

Even if the leader believes the criticism is warranted and sanctions necessary, the application of power and authority may inflict on both leader and follower serious mental and physiological effects (Malen, 1994; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cosner, 2009) leading to compassion fatigue and burnout. Bagi (2015) describes leader burnout as “a point at which the person’s ability to function is severely impaired” (p. 263). Effects include exhaustion, cynicism, inefficacy, anxiety, depression, and a host of physiological maladies (Bagi, 2015).

Leiter and Maslach have written extensively on the phenomenon of worker burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 2004; Leiter & Maslach, 2016; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Maslach, 2017). They identify three basic dimensions of burnout:

Exhaustion (also described as wearing out, loss of energy, depletion, debilitation, and fatigue); feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job (also described as depersonalization, negative or inappropriate attitudes, detached concern, irRhondability, loss of idealism, and withdrawal); and a sense of professional inefficacy and lack of accomplishment (also described as reduced productivity or capability, low morale, and an inability to cope) (Leiter & Maslach, 2016, p. 89).

Maslach (2017) notes that burnout is often stigmatized as weakness, incompetence, or even mental illness. As a result, leaders are reluctant to share their emotions and experiences with others. The result can be what she calls “pluralistic ignorance” (p. 146), in which they suffer in silence, believing their peers do not have the same problems. Allowing these anxieties to fester can cause leader burnout.

Stamm (1995) and Figley (1995) conducted early work on the topics of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress among caregivers. Stamm (2010) describes compassion fatigue to describe the effects of caring. She explains,

Burnout is associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or in doing your job effectively.... These negative feelings can reflect the feeling that your efforts make no difference, or they can be associated with a very high workload or a non-supportive work environment (p. 13).

CARE AND COMPASSION

While school administrators are often considered disciplinarians, they generally frame their work and decisions through what researchers have described as an ethic of care. Noddings (1984) describes care as an essential aspect of the education process. She argues that humans innately feel sympathy for each other. From this naturally evolves an ethic of care that she argues manifests the care that teachers demonstrate for their students. She argues that teachers demonstrate this ethic by establishing caring relationships with their students and showing deep regard for their well-being. She acknowledges that such interactions can be dangerous for the care giver: “It is clear that my vulnerability is potentially increased when I care, for I can be hurt through the other as well as through myself” (1984, p. 33).

Beck (1992) expands the ethic of caring to the work of school administrators. She describes caring as a process that involves three activities: “Receiving the other’s perspective; responding to the awareness that comes from this reception; and remaining in the caring relationships for an appropriate length of time” (p. 462). She notes, “One of the foundations of an ethic of care is a belief in the intrinsic value of persons” (1992, p. 472). This model “emphasizes that students, teachers, and administrators deserve a supportive, nurturing educational environment” (p. 472).

Starratt (1991; 2004; 2012) also expands the concept of care to school administrators. He observes, “(Caring) honors the dignity and integrity of each person and desires to see that person enjoy a fully human life” (1994, p. 3). Like Beck (1992), Starratt centers the ethic of care on relationships. He notes,

This ethic places human persons in relationships of absolute value; each other enjoys an intrinsic dignity and worth. ... An ethic of caring requires fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are ... a loyalty and responsibility to the relationship (2012, p. 36).

Strike agrees that caring among administrators and staff focuses on relationships. “Caring aims at a society and at personal relationships in which nurturance and relationships are highly valued” (1999, p. 21).

He warns, however, that “unmediated caring ... may not be strong enough to bind people together” given the diversity of a typical school population (2003, p. 78). He continues, “Little in human experience suggests to me that people are likely to come to care deeply about those with whom they share little in the way of kinship, common culture, or common purpose” (2003, p. 78). These are the challenges that caring administrators face. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) propose that an ethic of care “asks that individuals consider the consequences of their decisions and actions ... Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today?” (2011, p. 18).

Begley has posed that care is in fact a mix of emotions and reason (2010). Bloom supports that view in an argument he makes against empathy (2016). He argues that most researchers and practitioners confuse empathy and compassion. He explains that in practicing empathy, “The act of feeling what you think others are feeling ... is different than being compassionate, from being kind, and most of all, from being good” (p. 4). He argues that we all would be better off applying rationality, rather than emotion, to problematic events. He distinguishes between empathy, which he says is fraught with emotion, and compassion as the urge to be kind to others and work to help them. He defines *burnout* as the result of “unmitigated communion ... the idea that you can feel too much of the suffering of others” (p. 137). He continues, “Unmitigated communion makes you suffer when faced with those who are suffering, which imposes costs on yourself and makes you less effective at helping” (p. 140). Using Bloom’s reasoning, school administrators experience compassion fatigue because they may have cared too deeply for those in their charge.

We don’t presume to argue that a school leader or anyone else can care too much. Indeed, a sense of overarching care is the basis of Nodding’s view of effective teachers, and Beck extends care as the fulcrum of effective administrators. None of the theorists mentioned above, however, including Strike and Starratt, address the problem of administrator compassion fatigue and burnout. We adopt the reasoning of Noddings (1984) and Beck (1992) and place care at the center of our framework for helping us to understand the experiences of our participants. Bloom may be correct in that those who feel fatigue and burnout do so because of their love for their students, their teachers, and their job. While some of our participants effectively balanced care and empathy, others paid a significant price for the depth of their care.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In constructing our conceptual framework, we drew from Stamm’s *Professional Quality of Life Scale* (2012), which measures individuals’ *Levels of Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue* according to self-rated emotions of *happiness, satisfaction, energy, productivity, satisfaction, and pride*. As we explain above, we placed *care* at the center of all emotions. We used these concepts as frames through which to view our participants’ responses. We show our conceptualization of the interactions of these emotions in the figure below.

FIGURE 1
COMPASSION FATIGUE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



METHODOLOGY

Researchers

We comprise a research team of five current or former educational leaders who have been affected by compassion fatigue in our careers as both leaders and subordinates. We include four women, two African Americans and two white. One of us is a white male. Our leadership experiences include large urban high schools, small charter schools, semi-rural middle schools, small rural elementary schools, and traditional and on-line universities. The schools we have led have been ethnically and financially diverse.

We acknowledge our involvement with our topic and our participants. While three of us knew one or more of our participants, two did not know any. We believe that our two outside researchers helped us to borrow a term from phenomenology to bracket the interpretations of our data (Saldana, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

We have chosen to write much of this article in first person because compassion fatigue is a personal experience, and we believe this point of view best reflects that intimacy. We see ourselves, as Clandinin explains, “in the midst of telling and retelling our stories” (2007, p. xvi). She notes, “Because narrative inquiry is an ongoing reflexive and reflective methodology, narrative inquirers need to continually inquire into their experiences before, during, and after each inquiry” (2013, p. 83). Throughout our analyses of the data we reacted in relation to our own personal experiences and tracked these with written reflections (Riessman, 2008). Near the end of this discussion some of us revisit those reflections.

Participants

We chose the sample population for the study through a process of purposive and snowball sampling. We interviewed eight current or former school administrators to capture and describe their significant experiences of compassion fatigue. We used semi-structured, open-ended questions in asking our participants to remember significant professional events that triggered feelings of compassion fatigue.

We purposefully chose our participants. They were friends or former colleagues whom we knew had experienced turbulent events in their careers. We believe that our participants represent a wide range of experiences. Six of our participants were women and two were men. All are white, and their ages ranged from 37 to 68. Their years of administrative experience ranged between four and 20 years, and their experiences included service at private, public, and charter schools at all grade levels. The sizes of the schools ranged between 300 and 1200 students. The poverty levels of their schools ranged between 10% and 90%, and the percentages of non-Caucasian students ranged between 5% and 90%. All had worked as an administrator at more than one school, and most had served at several. Most had served as both assistant principals and principals, and some included experience at their district office, outside consulting and training, and higher education. We show snapshots of their service in the table below. The numbers indicate the largest number or highest percentages experienced by each administrator.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTORS

Name	Age	Administrative Roles	Largest School size	Highest Poverty Percentage	Highest Non-White Percentage
Rhonda	68	4 Years middle school principal	700	90%	90%
Carla	55	5 years as private high school principal; 4 years as an administrator at schools in Germany and Botswana.	2700	10%	20%
Elise	37	6 years high school assistant principal; 4 years Director of Special Programs and Student Services	1400	50%	5%

Samantha	44	9 years elementary school principal; 5 years university professor and director of teacher education	900	75% 40%	55%
Florence		3 years Elementary Principal; Director of Curriculum for ESE Charter School Group	600	90%	90%
Linda	55	20 years as middle school assistant principal	1400	70%	45%
Calvin	45	15 year as principal of elementary, middle, high schools, and vocational magnet high school	1200	80%	20%
Jeremy	68	10 years as principal of elementary school; 10 as assistant superintendent; college professor	1200	85%	20%

Data Sources

The study utilized two instruments. The first was a preliminary survey designed to gather basic demographic information from participants, including gender, age, race, school level (e.g., elementary, middle, high), years of experience, and school/district poverty level. The second instrument was a list of semi-structured, open-ended questions to guide in-depth telephone interviews with the study participants. The interview questions were designed to elicit stories describing the participants' significant career experiences that caused them to experience compassion fatigue.

Prior to the interview we asked each participant to complete the *Professional Quality of Life Scale (PROQOL) Version 5* (Stamm, 2012), a self-scored protocol in which participants self-identify their levels of compassion satisfaction and fatigue. The ProQOL is a commonly used measure of the negative and positive effects of helping others who experience suffering and trauma. We chose the ProQol because it captures the concepts that we were searching to analyze. An added feature was that it is accessible online at no cost (ProQol, 2012). We did not collect our participants' scores but asked them to use the activity to stimulate their thinking prior to participating in the interview.

Narrative Analysis

We utilized the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry in which we asked participants to reconstruct significant formative experiences (Bruner 2002), tapping into their “continuing interpretation and reinterpretation” of their experience (Bruner, 1987, p. 12). The process of learning, sharing and analyzing personal stories has been described by several qualitative researchers (Bochner, 2014; Riessman, 2008; Clandinin, 2013; Chase, 2018, Cole & Knowles, 2001). We attempted to understand and describe the contexts of time and space in which the experiences occurred and to understand and share the ongoing implications of those events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Caine, et al, 2013). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) capture these concepts in their metaphor of “the *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space* and the ‘directions’ this framework allows our inquiries to travel – *inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place* (emphasis in the original, 2000, p. 49).

Two of us conducted each interview. We took notes, recorded each interview, and created a transcript from the recording and notes. We then sent the transcript to the participant for verification. We uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose to help facilitate coding. We first independently coded participant responses using our initial framework of care, happiness, satisfaction, energy, productivity, satisfaction, and pride. Individually and then collectively, we categorized specific statements and determined emergent themes using both inductive and deductive reasoning. Applying a modification of Colaizzi's (1978) analytic methodology, we first read to understand their feelings and emotions. We then identified and highlighted the words and phrases, and then broad categories and subcategories that emerged from our analyses.

Saldana describes what he calls *categories* that subsume several themes (2016, p. 14). We found this concept compatible with our interpretations of the data. Analyses of the stories revealed three primary categories that shaped participants' actions within the events and responses during and after the events. We defined these central categories as *Background*, *Causes/Seminal Events*, and *Effects*. We describe each category and underlying sub-categories more thoroughly below.

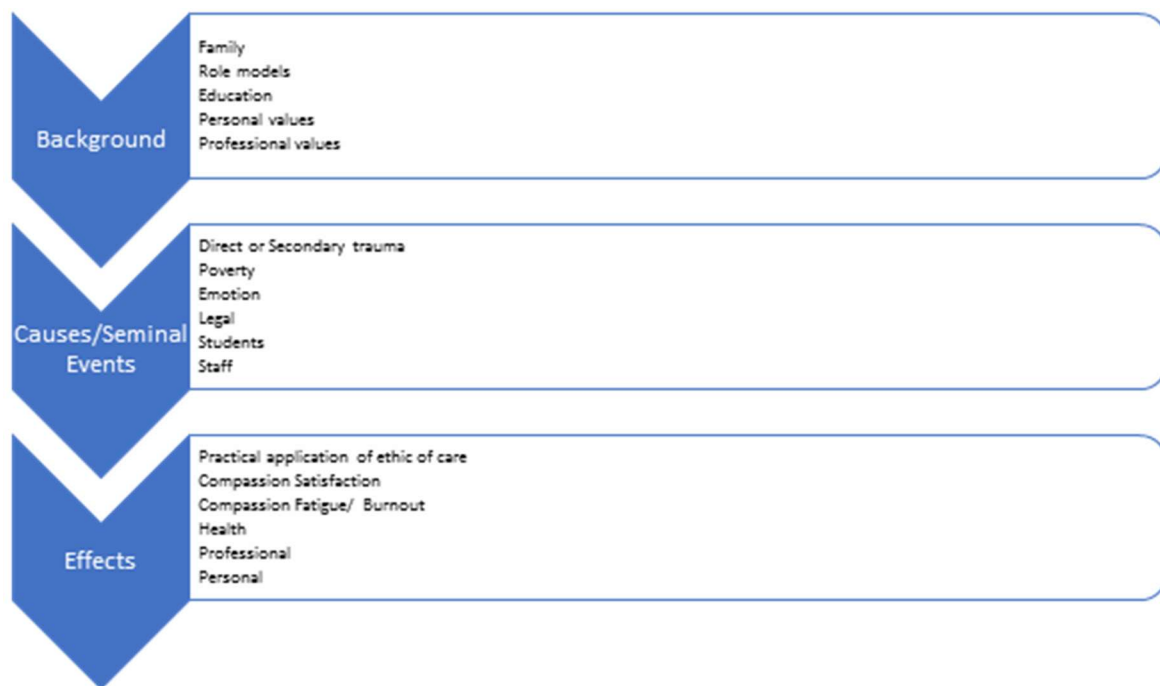
RESULTS

Through this study participants shared stories of their professional experiences that generated within them elements of compassion fatigue. Their stories were thoughtful, poignant, and often turbulent or traumatic. We found rich examples of the emotions of happiness, satisfaction, energy, productivity, and pride. The ethic of care emerged as an overarching theme that drove our administrators' decisions and was a basis for much of their angst. We identified three formative categories as *Background*, *Causes/Seminal Events*, and *Effects*.

We defined *Background* as social, emotional, cultural, and psychological factors that shape the way individuals respond to an event or series of events. Subcategories were Family, Role Models, Education, Personal Values, and Professional Values. We defined *Causes / Seminal Events* as actions that dig deeper into the event; repeatedly asking why the event occurred. Subcategories were *Direct* or *Secondary* trauma, *Poverty*, *Emotion*, *Legal Issues*, *Students*, and *Staff*. We defined *Effects* as changes in results or consequences of an action or non-relating cause. Subcategories were Compassion Fatigue, Compassion Satisfaction, Health, Personal, Practical application of the Ethic of Care, and Professional.

We began our study thinking that compassion fatigue incidents would result from administrators interacting with stakeholders; e.g., students, parents, community. What we saw was more complex. While interactions with those stakeholders were often precipitating events, *Compassion Fatigue* often was exacerbated by our participants' interactions with their administrative supervisors. We describe that in our reflections near the end of this discussion.

FIGURE 2
THREE MAJOR CATEGORIES



We provide a discussion of the application of these concepts below.

Background

As noted above, we defined *Background* as the social, emotional, cultural, and psychological factors that shape the way individuals respond to an event or series of events. Subcategories were *Family*, *Role Models*, *Education*, *Personal Values*, and *Professional Values*. We found these concepts consistent with Clandinin and Connelly's contention that actions are shaped and interpreted by previous influences.

Each participant was influenced by a sense of core values that in most cases centered on the importance of family members in shaping their attitudes. Some had a formal background that encouraged education. Calvin's father was a college professor. Most, however, were not the products of parents with college educations. They did, however, stress core values. Rhonda remembered, "My dad was a hard-core values guy." All stressed a passion for hard work. Carla's mother was a German immigrant who valued hard work. Elise noted, "I'm a work horse and not show horse. I get in the trenches to get things done."

Two mentioned religious background as a religious frame. Linda noted, "Coming from a tight family helped me as an educator with a sense of belonging. Spirituality, I discovered, not religion, but a different level on my spirit that gets me close to self-actualization that helps me help others." Florence was influenced by her grandmother. "She was very religious. Her beliefs were instilled in me and allowed me to move forward while giving me time to balance my educational goals of going to college and being a teacher."

Most came from traditional families, but not all. Rhonda recalled, "The reality is I came from a dysfunctional family and took care of my brothers." Florence was born in Puerto Rico and in second grade moved to New Jersey. She may best capture the importance of background on the actions of an educational leader:

I was having to assimilate to a new culture and language and very different ways of doing things as a child. Then in high school I was paralyzed for 5 years and was a homebound student. I had 15 knee surgeries to walk again. My background allowed me to be able to deal with stress and traumatic experiences I have dealt with because it taught me resilience and grit.

Causes/Seminal Events

There were many causes of compassion fatigue that the administrators we interviewed experienced. The causes included direct or secondary trauma. One of the causes was poverty. One administrator reported that there was a "lack of jobs in the town. Watching the students in the school where you work live in poverty is very emotionally draining."

Another cause of compassion fatigue was the array of emotions that administrators experienced through observing the trauma of their students and staff. One participant stated, "You know some things students experience at home, and that adds up over time through the stress of all of it." Another stated, "It was tough emotionally. I went through it, and I was okay. It was a learning experience." One administrator experienced the death of a student from her school and remembered the stress of helping the school, family and community deal with such overwhelming grief.

Calvin had been principal of a high school that was one the flagship school of the district, with the most affluent population and highest test scores. Over the past 20 years, the poverty rate of the school and community steadily increased and student performance declined. When the school earned an "F" rating in the state performance scoring system, the district decided to convert the school into a technical school. Many in the community were upset with this decision, which they saw as bringing an end to a once-proud community school. Calvin was given the responsibility of converting the school from a traditional high school to a vocational school. He recalled, "When things hit home with families, you stress for the kids with family problems. That year was challenging with a community losing their school.

Families completing stressed out. Parents wanted to help their child, and there were things not in our control that we would love to help out but couldn't.

Linda remembered,

I can say the hardest time I had as a school leader was when we were running through a series of bad things. The principal had a bad health condition and we were concerned if he was going to make it. One teacher died of cancer, and another passed away. We had a teacher who went to jail for having sexual relations with a student. It was difficult. Trying to be positive and lead the school and be compassionate about all these issues and their emotions left you drained because you're trying to be so strong because there is so much bad around you it depletes you.

Francis remembered,

I was walking by the boys' restroom and caught a teacher choking a student. Of course, we had to do an investigation. I had to pull that student and others and interview the children. And then when we placed the teacher on leave, the district did their investigate. The teacher had been there 20 years and the community revered the teacher. The community was angry at the school. I remember for the first time thinking what am I doing? Why did I become an administrator? It was not what I signed up for.

She continued,

Additional fatigue came from seeing what the children were going through and the lack of support and the dangerous situation. In three years, we had 3 parents shot within a few feet of the school and killed... crisis response and all that. I had a student whose father committed suicide on a bridge and the boy came to school the next day and the teacher sent him to the office for acting out... he was crying, and I had to comfort him. Situations like that happened too often. By the end of the second year, we had gotten rid of 4 teachers for putting their hands on children. One coming repeated with a significant alcohol level. It took us over an entire year to get rid of who were hurting children physically or showing up not ready. Dealing with that, parent concerns, behavior problems, meetings, deadlines, and all of that other stuff really didn't exhaust me but fighting the system for what was right. I would say that was the top thing that created the most stress. Secondly the additional fatigue came from seeing what the children were going through and the lack of support and the dangerous situation.

Samantha recalled,

It was a high poverty school with a lot of discipline problems. I felt like I couldn't keep my head above water. It was difficult because in high poverty you do see heartbreaking things. I had several extreme behavior issues that involved local media which is stressful as well. For example, I had a student attempt to build a bomb. It had batteries and wires and looked real. The news came the next day and I had a lot of parents that I had to try to calm. Several of those situations caused high stress because I had the school at heart and the negativity was stressful. Then I became a principal at another school with less poverty. The demands were higher for teacher accountability, and as the demands from the state increased. Those demands were hard on me. There was poor administration at the top. All I saw was negative, upset teachers, parents, demands of district office, and after a while, it wears you down. I'd get home, tend to my family and at 9:30-10 check school email and do that during the night or paperwork, and then I would do it on the weekend. I couldn't get away from it.

Rhonda recounted,

It was an accumulation of experiences that led to compassion fatigue and ultimately my retiring. We had a student killed in the fall. A mom fell asleep while driving. The girl was thrown out and killed. It was devastating to help the community with the loss. The mother was inconsolable.

In another incident, a father staged a large party with adults on one side of the house and young teenagers, including his daughter, on the other.

At the kids' party there were guns and alcohol. One girl took the gun and locked herself in the bathroom. I called the father and told him the story. He got irate and threatened to sue. He didn't seem to care that he had a girl who almost killed herself in his house.

Elise recalled,

The superintendent retired and they hired a new one. After she started, it became evident to me and those closest to working with her that she had an agenda to get rid of those closest to the former superintendent. For me it meant that immediately it became evident that she was not interested in getting to know me as a person or professional. She kept her distance. She would find ways to undermine me.

In another incident, Elise received a call from the superintendent that a student had threatened another student on social media.

The next day parents of 6th grade students were in our building and accusing us of being neglectful of students' concerns and putting their child in danger with him being in the building without proper supervision. That was not the case. There were issues that I couldn't share with the parents. As a result of this, one of the parents took it to social media and live on FB outside our building that we were not here for the kids and protecting bullying. The situation ended up on 3 local news stations. About 60 community members came to our Board of Education meeting. Parents came to PTO meetings demanding answers and making personal accusations about keeping their kids safe. It was the most traumatic thing I've been to as an educator and leader. The result was that the Board enacted a long-term suspension for the student.

She recalls,

I don't know in my heart of hearts it was the right thing to do for that kid, but it was for the district. I don't know if he was serious. I don't know if he had mental illness. I don't know if we did the right thing. I also had empathy for the parents because I could understand where they were coming from with their fear. I was empathetic for our staff and students who were constantly under fire from social media and media about our school not being safe. I didn't know if I could deal with feeling empathy and being strong enough with my own decisions.

Two administrators experienced fatigue from being bullied by their own bosses. Rhonda noted, "I think it would have been nice if the assistant superintendent trusted my decision-making skills." Carla described a scenario in which the owner of a private school where she was principal pressured her to grant the child of a school donor special favors. When she declined, he appointed his daughter with no educational

administration experience as her immediate supervisor. As a result, Rhonda retired and Carla resigned and secured an administrative position at another school.

EFFECTS

Practical Application of Ethic of Care

We found that a significant effect of administrative stress was the practical application of care. In effect, these administrators channeled the negative energy they were feeling into positive results for their students and staff. We found their decisions as pragmatic examples of caring but effective leadership strategies. Rhonda described an experience that we believe shows caring pragmatism. She remembered,

I took the third graders to lunch and one cafeteria worker stopped me and said about a student, “Look at her. She’s licking her tray. You need to tell her that’s not policy.” So I sat with her and learned that was the only meal she got for the day and she wasn’t going to lose it, so that’s why. I could have taken two paths - Stop that or be caring and ask the questions. I tried to help the lunch lady understand.

In another example of practical care, a few of Rhonda’s students were found with bags of marijuana. She decided not to legally prosecute them and instead, sent a letter home to all parents explaining the incident. She explained, “If I didn’t care about these kids, I could have had them arrested. The letter was a good example of the ethics of caring in how you handle things.”

Another practical effect of care was the joy our participants felt when they were helping others. Elise’s comments were representative. “I love to see teachers grow and flourish under my leadership and enjoy helping teachers become leaders as well. I love helping students and provide successful learning environment. I like to work with families and parents and make those connections and that the children’s best interest is at heart.” She explained, “I think that the ethic of care surfaces on how you handle things, questions you ask, and actions you take. It’s having the empathy for students, teachers, families, and community.” Linda described the most logistical effect of stress and application of care: “It drives every decision. It will always be from putting myself into someone else’s shoes. In dealing with parents, it’s about their child so how would I want someone to act to them.

All agreed that working with teachers requires another application of care. Linda posited, “I want to help them grow as both professionals and human beings I am always trying to put myself in their positions. I try to work with them if they have to take off work or have a challenging child or parent. I try to help meet their needs personally and develop them professionally because that will hopefully ensure that they can help others. Carla summarized, “Care is at the core and who I am. It’s based on my background. It impacts how I handle my job as an educational leader.”

Compassion Satisfaction

Closely linked with the practical application of care was what we called compassion satisfaction. A common expression was the feeling of joy and happiness within others and themselves. One noted, “For the people I interact with, I want to be positive, happy, laugh, and it’s good, then I can move on.” The emotion of happiness was closely related to those of *Pride*, *Self-worth*, *Self-efficacy*, and *Productivity*. Jeremy observed, “I like to work with families and parents and make those connections and that the children’s best interest is at heart.” He felt it important to “fight the system for what was right.”

All valued building positive relationships. Elise remembered that her negative experiences “made me question whether I was in the right field but have allowed me to continue the path but learn and grow from the situations. They have made me a better and stronger person and made me more adept at being an administrator.”

Compassion Fatigue/ Burnout

The ultimate effect of administrative compassion compounded with stress is compassion fatigue or burnout. We coded these reactions as *Depression*, *Unproductivity*, *Dissatisfaction*, *Hopelessness*, *Malaise*, and the sense of being overwhelmed. This is consistent with the work of Leiter & Maslach (2016) and other researchers noted above.

Florence remembered, "It wasn't until I left, to be honest, that I realized the toll the 3 years took on my life emotionally and physically. While I was in it, I was 110% committed 7 days a week. I thought I was fine and balancing everything fine. I was divorced, became a single mother. But I didn't feel the impact until I was out of the situation. Another noted, "In general, it was weight and sleep. My sleeping pattern changed. And I began to eat unhealthily. I didn't eat throughout the day. I'd be too tired to cook, so we'd stop to get fast food or eat out. My eating habits changed and caused significant weight gain."

Depression was also a common element. One noted the constant feeling of "embarrassment or shame that you let people down. Closely linked was unproductivity. Rhonda remembered that after she finally left her position, "It took weeks for me to get back to normal. It was devastating." Another remembered, "I felt broken down. It was emotionally and psychologically draining."

We also found that in many cases, the physical health of our participants was closely linked to their levels of fatigue. Samantha remembered, "I was stressed all the time and could not turn it off. I had a sick feeling in my stomach on Sunday evening because I didn't want to go to work because I knew what the week was going to be like... non-top exhausting week."

Linda recalled, "I'd have to take a muscle relaxer and go back to sleep. I went to a cardiologist. There were unknown causes, but the doctor said it's probably stress. I'd have to find solace. I've gotten better over the year."

Florence recalled, "I pride myself in saying I don't deal with stress, but those were big events that went on for months and I couldn't sleep. Two times, I had my eyes twitch for a month straight and I had a bald spot in my hair about half dollar. A doctor told me I had a condition induced by stress."

Elise remembered, "I was stressed all the time and could not turn it off. I had a sick feeling in my stomach on Sunday evening because I didn't want to go to work because I knew what the week was going to be like... non-top exhausting week."

Rhonda recounted that when she retired,

"I was drained. I felt like a blank slate processing information. It was devastating. I tried to keep my composure but it was hard; it was emotionally and psychologically draining. I was in such bad shape that my last day, I came home, sat in the chair and couldn't move. My husband called his brother and he came over. They physically got me in the car and took me to the hospital. They thought I had a stroke. I was physically, emotionally, and cognitively frozen.

Another common emotion was the sense of isolation associated with school administration. One noted, "You have to keep things to yourself and not share." Another remembered, "I wanted to crawl in the closet and shut the door and not let anyone know I was there." Rhonda recalled, "You don't have anybody that you can talk to unless you know another principal at another school. You can't go to the district office because they may think you can't handle the job. Florence summarized this common emotion:

I have never had a more lonely job than when I was a building principal. You know everybody's problems, but you can't talk to anybody because the moment you share and break confidence, all is gone. There is a very small circle. You have to keep things to yourself and not share. In my experience, when I share with family members, they don't understand.

Professional Implications

For several of our participants, feelings of fatigue were magnified by the ways they were treated by their supervisors. In some cases, they felt unsupported. In others, they felt they were victims of harassment and bullying. Samantha recalled, “I felt like he was micromanaging things. He would say to do this or that, and I would think, I’ve done that for years.” Carla remembered, “My professionalism and work was being undermined.” For Florence, the feelings remained long after she changed districts, observing, “I’m still fearful at any moment that anyone could turn on me.”

Each was embarrassed by the implication that they could not adequately perform their job. Florence remembered,

Loss of confidence equaled self-doubt. I began questioning my career path. As a young administrator it scared me. I didn’t know what the future would hold for me. I thought, ‘I’m making good money and my family relies on that,’ so I was feeling as though I’d let my family down if I didn’t pursue the career.

For Rhonda, self-doubt initiated her early retirement. She recalled, “The job satisfaction wasn’t there. I wish I’d stayed in the classroom and did my thing. When people said, ‘Wow! You’re a principal!’ I’d think, ‘Yes, I’m cursed.’”

Personal Implications

The importance of personal support resonated throughout our participants’ stories. Several reported that their families did not understand their job or the stress they were under. We found expressions of the emotions of *Happiness, Satisfaction, Energy, Productivity, Satisfaction, and Pride* embedded throughout the responses of our participants. At the same time, however, we found the emotions centered more prominently in specific categories. We found the emotion of *Pride* centered more heavily in the first category, *Background*. Participants were all proud of their career choices, of the preparation and experiences that shaped them, and of the values that guided their personal and professional decisions. Concomitantly, we found the emotions of *Satisfaction, Energy, Productivity, and Happiness* reflected more significantly in the last category, *Effects*. We think it interesting that these emotions were often reflected both positively and negatively. Thus, *Satisfaction* was sometimes also expressed as Dissatisfaction in an experience or a set of experiences. While *Energy* often appeared as the impetus for action, a profound lack of energy was a common result and characteristic of compassion fatigue. While participants were often proud of their work productivity and work ethic, a profound lack of productivity was often the result of a traumatic event. Some participants even suffered physical pain and disabilities. Finally, each participant expressed *Happiness* in many aspects of his or her job. A significant and poignant effect of a traumatic event or series of experiences was severe depression, in some cases causing participants to leave their profession.

As we noted earlier, we began thinking that compassion fatigue incidents would result from administrators interacting with key stakeholders; e.g., students, parents, community. What we saw was more complex. While interactions with those stakeholders were often precipitating events, *Compassion Fatigue* often was exacerbated by our participants’ interactions with their administrative supervisors. Carla was frustrated by the lack of support she received from the owner of her school. A new superintendent harassed Samantha and refused to grant her tenure. Linda was stymied by the lack of compassion from a peer, and then from her principal. Jeremy was outraged by stumbling blocks from district bureaucracy. All saw a need to be able to talk and share their frustrations with non-judging colleagues. When that opportunity did not exist, the effects and magnitude of their fatigue grew more acute.

In summary, results indicated that administrators approached their roles with pride and personal ethics of care that they applied to their professional experiences. Although they were aware intellectually that they would likely encounter traumatic events, they often encountered turbulent events for which they were educationally and experientially unprepared. All participants were driven by an overarching ethic of care – for their profession, their colleagues, and their students. This deep care caused these turbulent events often

to negatively affect their sense of happiness, well-being, physical health, and in some cases caused them to leave the profession.

Despite their negative experiences and significant experiences of compassion fatigue, each was proud of the work they had done and, for some, continued to do. Two comments summarize the positive facets of our administrators experiences of fatigue. Calvin summarized, “My experiences made me a stronger person. They exposed me to a world I heard about but had not lived in or experienced. I believe that allowed me to be more open minded and empathetic.” Linda shared, “I wouldn’t change anything for the world. Every barrier I ran across made me who I am today. It all worked out for my good and my family. I’m very thankful!

Researchers’ Personal Reflections

We purposefully selected friends and former colleagues whom we knew to have experienced significant turbulent events that may have triggered compassion fatigue. In addition, several of us were attracted to this study because we ourselves had experienced the same phenomena of compassion fatigue and burnout that were studying in our participants. Many researchers have identified personal involvement with field data as a potential element of critical qualitative research, and we embrace that as a conscious act (Denzin & Giardina, 2018; Dwnzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Clandinin and Connelly note, “Narrative inquiry is a relational inquiry as we ... move from field to field text, and from field text to research text” (2000, p. 60). ... It is impossible (or deliberately deceptive) as a researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self” (2000, p. 62).

Thus, through this study, several of us re-lived our own experiences of compassion fatigue and burnout as we recorded and analyzed the stories of our participants. One of us reflected on the process,

As a school administrator, the study inspired me to reflect on my own level of compassion fatigue or recognize that compassion fatigue existed in my daily living. I definitely became more astute to meeting own basic needs (physical, mental and spiritual) to perform my duties as the school leader in a healthy mindset that would support best practices for my school and community. Recognizing the impact of compassion fatigue has actually made me more productive and aware when I need to take a step back and breathe.

Another of us remembered several poignant experiences: sitting with the parents of a boy who had been decapitated while riding a four wheeler; facing angry parents after a teacher was arrested of sexually molesting a student; working with teachers and domestic upheavals and drug addiction; students suffering from teachers unable or unwilling to correct their unprofessional behaviors. One of us remembered one such encounter, “I was heartsick and couldn’t sleep. I saw (the teacher) falling apart and her career careening out of control. This was so hard, I thought, so painful for both of us.”

LIMITATIONS

We understand that our study is limited by the lack of racial diversity of our participants. We also understand that the purposeful selection of participants and the low number might also have skewed our results. Finally, we know that our personal involvement with the data may further skew our interpretations of our participants stories. We encourage future studies

SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE AND DISCUSSION

The cultural environment with education, and especially public education, is becoming increasingly contentious and fraught with conflict. Educators face increased pressure from legislative and community leaders, as well as parents. In addition, many families are in financial and emotional crisis. Children face each school day carrying increased personal burdens that impact their ability to learn. School leaders stand in the midst of this tempest. Leadership often exacts its own costs upon committed educators. Navigating

through these traumatic events can have a palpable effect on the emotional, psychological, and physical health and job satisfaction of both the key participant(s) and the administrator.

This discussion is being written as the United States is enmeshed in the grips of what one of our African American colleagues has identified as two pandemics. The first is an international pandemic that has caused significant disruptions within school systems and certainly instilled new triggers of compassion fatigue and burnout among the school ears responsible for designing and navigating new and shifting paradigms and protecting those students and staff under their charge. The second pandemic is the redux of a Black Lives Matter movement triggered by the deaths of several Black men at the hands of police. School administrators navigating the morass of turbulence caused by these events will certainly have significant experiences of compassion fatigue to share. Those experiences will provide ample fodder for future discussions.

In this study, educational leaders reflected upon their own formative experiences. By describing and analyzing their insights, researchers gained a better understanding of the ways that school administrators make sense of, learn to control, and respond to traumatic events. This may provide insight into the phenomenon of compassion fatigue. This understanding may enable current and future school administrators to anticipate the effects of emotionally traumatic events, to better understand their responses to those events, to retain better emotional, mental, and physiological health, and therefore to be more effective in their work, better serving parents, staff, and students in their charge.

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