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THE ETHICS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' SELF-CARE PRACTICES

L. A. Alhashim¹

¹, *College of Sciences and Human Studies, Prince Mohammad Bin Fahad University, Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia.*

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Corresponding author: L. A. Alhashim
(lalhashim@pmu.edu.sa)

ABSTRACT

School principals face increasing levels of stress and burnout, yet the ethical dimensions of how they care for themselves remain underexplored in educational leadership research. This study examines school principals' self-care practices and analyzes the moral rationales that inform their decisions. Guided by moral development theory, attachment theory, and Bossert's model of leadership, the study draws on qualitative literature published between 2013 and 2025, as well as professional observations and leadership experiences. Findings indicate that principals employ a range of self-care strategies to prevent or reduce stress, including time management, relationship building, humor, routine changes, and attention to physical health, vacations, and adequate sleep. These practices are ethically motivated by responsibility to the school district, professional credibility, and personal well-being, often negotiated in relation to expectations of the school community. The study highlights self-care as an ethical leadership responsibility rather than a purely personal choice and underscores its importance for sustaining principals' effectiveness, health, and school outcomes.

KEYWORDS: ethics, educational leadership, school principals, self-care, stress, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

School principals face increasing levels of stress and burnout, yet the ethical dimensions of how they care for themselves remain largely underexamined in educational leadership research. Research indicates that principals are experiencing stress and burnout at unprecedented levels, with significant implications for their health and school outcomes. This study focuses on the ethics of school principals' self-care, an issue of growing importance within contemporary educational leadership. This research investigates principals' self-care practices and analyzes the moral rationales that inform their decisions. Moral development theory, attachment theory, and Bossert's model of leadership provide the theoretical framework guiding the study. Findings identify several strategies principals use to reduce or prevent stress, including effective time management, relationship building, humor and routine changes, attention to physical health, vacations, and adequate sleep. These practices are motivated by ethical considerations related to responsibility to the school district, maintaining professional credibility, and personal well-being, often negotiated in alignment with school community expectations.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCHER

Principals' self-care is an ethical issue because school leaders hold a moral responsibility to sustain their own well-being in order to lead effectively, make sound decisions, and safeguard learning conditions for students and educators. Chronic stress and burnout diminish principals' capacity to act ethically and to model healthy professional practices, potentially affecting the entire school community. I hold a master's degree and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Early Childhood Education. My professional background includes experience in both traditional and Montessori classroom settings. I aspire to establish a Montessori early childhood school and serve as its principal, applying research-informed leadership practices that promote high-quality teaching, learning, and well-being. School leaders play a central role in shaping learning environments and fostering collaboration among teachers and families, which directly influences children's educational outcomes.

3. LITEATURE REVIEW

Self-care is rooted in the feminist movement of the 1970s and is powerfully reflected in Lorde's statement: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political

warfare" [8, p. 113]. From my religious background, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also emphasized the importance of self-care when he stated: *إن لنفسك عليك حقًا، ولأهلك عليك حقًا، ولضييفك عليك حقًا، فأعط كل ذي حق حقه* (translated as: "You have a duty to yourself, a duty to your family, and a duty to your guest; therefore, give each their due right"). Self-care is associated with self-worth, determination, resilience, and empowerment [8]. Caring "is not simply what the person caring intends and does, but also the extent to which the person cared for perceives that intention and action to be caring" [15], (p. 6).

When the term *caring* is used, it is often associated with caring for others rather than caring for oneself. However, when parents, teachers, school leaders, doctors, or caregivers prioritize themselves first, they gain greater capacity and motivation to care for others. This concept is comparable to airplane safety instructions that require passengers to put on their own oxygen masks before assisting others. Self-care includes any action that improves physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, social, and professional health [1]. It can also be understood as "a holistic approach to a healthy lifestyle" [8], (p. 112).

Leading schools is one of the most challenging professions and places school principals under significant stress. Research has shown that principals' stress levels are approximately 1.7 times higher than those of the general population [3]. Although not all principals experience the same level of stress, those who lack leadership experience or adequate preparation tend to experience higher levels of stress [16]. Principals' stress often stems from their school environments and their interactions with multiple stakeholders. For example, more than 73% of principals identified the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 as a major source of stress [16], (p. 681). Increased accountability pressures require educators to focus intensely on implementing best educational practices [15], which places principals in positions of responsibility for all students' academic outcomes, further increasing stress [16].

Student safety is consistently identified as one of the most stressful responsibilities of the principalship. One principal stated: "I feel very responsible for the safety and care of the children and staff here" [11], (p. 108). Stress also arises from relationships with teachers, as managing adults is often more challenging than working with children [16]. Additionally, "interactions with difficult parents were identified as the second-biggest source of stress in school administration" [16], (p. 681). Studies

indicate that when principals do not practice self-care, increased stress negatively affects school performance, student achievement, and relationships with teachers and parents [16].

Principals often struggle with self-care because they feel isolated and solely responsible for establishing or enforcing moral principles. As noted in the literature, principals may feel "alone and responsible for either the apprehension or creation of moral principles" [14], (p. 710). While it is important to encourage principals to practice self-care, it remains difficult for many to apply. One reason lies in how caring is conceptualized and taught from an early age. Data collected from teachers and parents in 33 school districts revealed that many prioritized developing caring children over personal happiness or academic achievement [15]. Teaching children to care for both others and themselves is essential [2], as "ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring" [14], (p. 699).

From my experience as an early childhood teacher, I intentionally incorporated caring into daily classroom activities by assigning children responsibility for classroom plants, teaching rules to protect one another, and encouraging students to write cards for sick classmates. Teaching self-care was equally important. For example, I provided a relaxation corner for children who felt tired and needed rest, and I taught breathing techniques to help children manage frustration or anger. I believe it is an ethical responsibility to teach self-care from a very young age.

During the Montessori Annual Conference, I attended a session titled *Leadership and Self-Care: A Delicate Balance* to learn practical self-care strategies. The principals who participated shared their experiences of stress and burnout. One female principal described keeping her phone on 24 hours a day in case teachers needed her, even when she was outside school hours. She explained that this constant availability eventually led to hospitalization due to stress-related health issues. Feedback from the session emphasized the importance of setting boundaries. After her diagnosis, the principal reported implementing clearer boundaries, which resulted in greater respect from teachers. This experience aligns with research indicating that interactions with teachers significantly contribute to principals' stress [16].

Teachers are not the only source of stress for principals; parents also play a role. As one study reported, "about 40% of the principals mentioned that perhaps because most parents have been through schools, they think they know how to run

schools better than principals and teachers do" [16], (p. 677). Research further indicates that principals experience negative emotions such as guilt, loneliness, unfairness, and disappointment due to stress arising from relationships, workload, and time demands [9]. Time-related stress is particularly significant, as more than 70% of principals reported unrealistic deadlines as a major stressor, especially during crises that require managing multiple tasks simultaneously [16], (p. 676).

Prolonged exposure to stress may result in serious health issues, including high blood pressure, weight gain, headaches, heart problems, stomach and breathing difficulties, sleep disturbances, depression [9], increased anger, and higher alcohol consumption [16]. One principal shared: "I feel my heart beating fast, and actually, I am on a diet for high blood pressure for the past year" [11], (p. 109). These physical, psychological, and socioemotional challenges affect not only principals' health but also their professional performance, leading to job impairment, reduced efficiency, and decreased school effectiveness [16], (p. 665).

When principals experience stress related to students' academic performance, relationships with teachers and students may suffer, resulting in lower educational outcomes. As educators push students toward success under high-stakes accountability systems, relationships with students and colleagues may deteriorate [15], (p. 4). Stress contributes to unhealthy school cultures, which are "obvious in many schools today" [16], (p. 665). Therefore, this research emphasizes preparing principals to engage in self-care practices that reduce and prevent stress, ultimately supporting principals' health and school performance.

Self-care is a critical topic in educational leadership because when leaders care for themselves, positive outcomes extend throughout the school community. This research aligns with my aspirations as a future Montessori school principal and enhances my understanding of the principalship and stress management. It may also provide leaders with practical strategies to improve self-care. As noted in the literature, "we want principals to be healthy and successful in school administration and building a level of coping capacity" [16], (p. 666). Following the completion of this research, I plan to share these findings with school principals through professional development sessions focused on the ethics of self-care and leadership practices. Ongoing professional development and group discussions may further prepare school leaders to become more confident and effective.

Well-prepared principals can support early childhood programs, encourage family involvement, and implement mixed-age group practices that positively influence children's cognitive, academic, and social development [4]. Additionally, professional development in early childhood education has been shown to promote personal growth and positive psychological responses to job experiences [8, p. 115]. This research may also inspire future studies examining the effectiveness of self-care strategies among principals experiencing high levels of stress. The three guiding research questions are: How do school principals take care of themselves? Why do school principals take care of themselves? What impact does principals' self-care have?

4. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study is informed by three theoretical perspectives. Bossert's model of leadership explains how principals' managerial behavior is shaped by personal characteristics and school context, influencing school climate and outcomes [17]. Kohlberg's theory of moral development is used to examine principals' ethical reasoning for practicing self-care, ranging from self-preservation to responsibility toward the broader school community. Attachment theory explains how principals' relationships and need for belonging influence their stress levels and self-care practices [2].

5. METHODOLOGY

In this research, all studies adopted a qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews observations and survey open-ended questions with school principals serving as the study sample. I included the articles published from 2013-2025 on school principals' ethics of caring in the field of educational leadership. I chose the time range because the most recent articles make more sense for the school principals to apply self-care strategies that might provide a real picture of the schools today. I used electronic search on terms and databases on Google Scholar, Google Search and Chat GPT. In my research, I found articles about school principals' stress, but I focused on finding strategies for school principals to practice self-care. Also, I focused on finding sources on the moral reasoning of applying self-care. I developed the inclusion criteria to find a broader range of articles to support the literature review. So, I did not limit my research to a specific school level or a certain country. All the practices the studies reviewed are based on leadership theories and perspectives. I excluded the practices that are different from caring. I also excluded the caring that is not by the school principals, such as teacher caring.

All of the articles are available in English. This research led to over 17,000 articles, including books. Even though I used the "school principal" term in my search, I found some articles related to nursing and patient care. After I located the caring school title, I looked at the abstract and the research findings. Then, I selected 18 studies that met my research interest. In the reviewed articles, the participants were school principals at all school levels (from kindergarten to high school). The search terms used in this study included principals, ethics, leaders, self-care, school, stress, leadership, practicing, applying, strategies, morals, and time. In addition, four resources from the Ethics and Educational Leadership course were utilized. Two of these resources informed the theoretical framework of the study. The first was a video addressing attachment theory [2], and the second was Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Two additional articles related to the ethics of care were also incorporated [14], [15]. Furthermore, Pinar's article, *The Method of Currere*, from a curriculum theory course was used to support the significance of the study [13]. This research presents strategies for school principals' self-care and examines the ethical reasons for implementing these practices

6. FINDINGS

Self-care is understood in this study as a set of intentional, action-oriented practices rather than passive emotional coping. Consistent definition of self-care as hardiness and action, the findings reveal that school principals actively engage in multiple strategies to both avoid stressors before they escalate and to reduce stress once it is experienced [8]. These strategies are shaped by the demands of the principalship, ethical responsibilities toward the school community, and principals' personal health needs. The findings are organized into two main categories: strategies to avoid stress and strategies to reduce stress.

6.1. Strategies to Avoid Stress.

6.1.1. Managing Time

Time management emerged as one of the most critical self-care strategies for school principals. Principals consistently reported that the heavy weight of responsibility inherent in their role significantly affects their well-being [5]. Many principals experience pressure from constant interruptions, urgent requests from teachers and parents, and unrealistic deadlines imposed by district-level expectations [16].

During a Montessori conference session, Dr. Kutt

introduced a task-prioritization framework that categorizes responsibilities into four types: urgent and important, urgent but not important, not urgent but important, and not urgent and not important. He emphasized that many leadership responsibilities fall into the “not urgent but important” category and that failure to prioritize these tasks often leads to unnecessary stress. Principals reported that learning to delay responses, set boundaries, and resist the expectation of constant availability significantly reduced their stress levels.

Research supports these practices, indicating that principals benefit from evaluating whether tasks are essential, prioritizing complex responsibilities first, and delegating non-core duties [16]. Saying “no” or suggesting alternative solutions was identified as an ethical boundary-setting practice that protects principals’ well-being while maintaining professional responsibility [14]. Recent studies also highlight the importance of systemic changes, such as simplifying documentation requirements, clarifying role expectations, and redistributing workloads, to reduce chronic overload [12] [5].

6.1.2. Building Relationships

Building strong, caring relationships was identified as another essential strategy for avoiding stress. Principals emphasized that positive relationships with teachers, students, parents, and supervisors foster emotional support and reduce feelings of isolation. Collaborative relationships with parents, in particular, were found to ease stress while supporting student success [16].

Principals also highlighted the emotional rewards of caring relationships with students. One principal explained that student happiness directly affected their own sense of fulfillment and well-being, reinforcing the ethical value of relational leadership [8]. Professional relationships with mentors, counselors, and peer principals were also critical. Mentorship provided guidance, reassurance, and practical problem-solving strategies, helping principals cope with leadership challenges [8] [16].

Recent research further underscores the importance of professional networks, peer supervision, and structured mentoring programs in reducing stress and enhancing principals’ emotional resilience [10] [12]. These relationships promote trust, encourage open discussion of stressors, and create safe spaces for sharing experiences and coping strategies.

6.2. Strategies to Reduce Stress.

6.2.1. Humour and Routine Changes

Humor emerged as an effective and accessible stress-reduction strategy. Research indicates that laughter reduces stress hormones and supports immune functioning [16]. Principals reported using humor intentionally, such as keeping humorous materials in their offices or sharing light moments with staff, to relieve tension and improve morale. Engaging in leisure activities with family also provides emotional support and helps restore social well-being, further reducing stress [18]. Additionally, religious or spiritual practices—including prayer, meditation, and inspirational readings—can help principals manage emotional stress and maintain psychological resilience [18].

6.2.2. Caring for Health

Principals frequently engage in physical activity and movement as a means of managing stress and sustaining overall well-being [7, & Carpenter, 2022]. Research indicates that self-care activities, including healthy routines and stress-relieving practices, help principals moderate stress, although their effects may be less substantial than problem-solving strategies [6]. As part of these routines, principals are encouraged to schedule physical exercise before, during, or after the workday. Activities ranging from short walks around the school to more intensive exercise, such as running, have been shown to lower blood pressure and improve physical health [16]. Even a brief 15–20 minute walk has been described as an effective strategy for preventing depression [1].

In addition to physical activity, relaxation techniques such as meditation and massage have been found to support stress reduction [16]. Principals can also apply brief, two-minute strategies every hour or two, including deep breathing and stretching exercises, to help regulate stress levels throughout the day [1]. Technology may assist in this process by providing reminders to pause work and engage in these practices. During breaks, principals are encouraged to engage in self-monitoring and self-discipline, listening to their feelings and reflecting honestly on their emotional state [16], (p. 687). Another strategy for promoting positive thinking involves beginning the day by mentally identifying five things for which they are grateful [1].

Recent qualitative research further highlights the importance of intentionally structuring time for rest and participation in pleasant activities to refresh both the body and mind [19]. Mindfulness practices were reported to reduce stress and enhance overall well-being, while physical activities such as yoga or running supported both physical and mental health by helping principals regain balance and experience a sense of achievement and pride [19]. Additionally,

engaging in meaningful small activities, such as playing a game or going for a morning run, provided psychological security through feelings of competence, control, and personal accomplishment [19].

6.3. Taking a Vacation:

From 415,400 education administrators employed in America in 2008, about 35% of them worked more than 40 hours a week [16], making the need to reduce the school principals working hours and have some free time to take vocation. It is essential to not work in the profession but to dedicate the time for themselves and relax. One of the strategies that the school principal can apply to avoid working for schools in their vocation is to organize their schedule to finish the projects and duties one week before the vacation and schedule their first week, when they go back to the school, to plan for the next project [1].

6.4. Sleeping Well

I addressed seeping well in the last strategy not because it is less important, but it is hard to apply when someone stresses and under the pusher. Thus, I suggested using the previous strategies first to put the school principals in better sleep. A study shows that many administrators suffer from sleep deprivation because more than 70% of them sleep late and wake up early [16]. The study also showed that the "average sleep is 5–6 hours every workday [which].. makes principals less effective in performing administrative tasks [16], (p.685). The golden advice is to be self-disciplined in maintaining adequate hours of sleep [16], (p.685).

7. WHY PRINCIPALS PRACTICE SELF-CARE

This section shows the ethical reasons and the school principals' moral stages of applying self-care. I connected the first stage of moral development theory (being moral to get a reward or avoid punishment) with the class discussions when some school principals focused their responses on

implementing the school district's policies and standards. Some principals want to learn more about leadership and care, not for their health or school community (society), but to keep their jobs and to receive funds for their school districts. The second and third stages identified in this study are drawn from research conducted with 17 elementary and middle school principals. The findings indicate that principals seek to reduce their stress levels by managing their emotions and presenting themselves as being in control. When principals remain calm, the overall school environment also becomes calmer [11]. I connected with the second stage because school principals sought to demonstrate to the school community that everything was going well and under control. The final finding suggests that principals viewed themselves as connected and supported by friends, staff, and family, while also feeling confident at work and physically healthy – not only for their own well-being but also for their professional responsibilities and school outcomes [11]. This final point aligns with the third and highest stage of moral development, in which principals demonstrate an understanding of self-care not only as a personal responsibility but also as an ethical commitment to their staff and the wider school community [11], (p. 114).

8. CONCLUSION

Care in educational leadership has traditionally focused on others, with limited attention to care for the self. This study highlights self-care as an ethically grounded leadership practice essential for sustaining principals' well-being, effectiveness, and school outcomes. Grounded in ethical development theory, attachment theory, and leadership models, the findings demonstrate that principals' self-care practices are motivated by moral responsibility and professional commitment. Recognizing ethical self-care as integral to educational leadership may encourage healthier school environments and inform future research on effective leadership practices.

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