



Leadership Anxiety Among Newly Appointed School Principals: The Role of Administrative Pressure and Policy Expectations

Naveed Ahmed

Department of Education, Iqra University, Karachi, Pakistan

E-mail: naveedahmedsayad18@gmail.com ORCID Record: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3965-3900>

Behzad Aslam

University of Turbat, Turbat, Balochistan, Pakistan

E-mail: behzadaslam050@gmail.com ORCID Record: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7115-2282>

Somaira Shambay

Department of Education, Iqra University, Karachi, Pakistan

E-mail: sumerabalochh@gmail.com ORCID Record: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0600-0843>

Musaib Karim

Department of Education, Balochistan University of Engineering and Technology, Sub-Campus Turbat, Pakistan

E-mail: musaibb676@gmail.com ORCID Record: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5533-5551>

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Newly appointed school principals often encounter significant challenges as they transition into leadership roles. Beyond occupational stress, leadership anxiety has emerged as a distinct psychological phenomenon characterized by concerns about leadership competence, decision-making, and accountability. However, limited qualitative research has explored how administrative pressure and policy expectations contribute to leadership anxiety, particularly in remote and under-resourced educational contexts. This study aimed to examine the experiences of newly appointed principals in District Kech, Balochistan, focusing on the influence of administrative pressure and policy expectations on leadership anxiety.

Methodology: A qualitative phenomenological design was employed to capture participants' lived experiences. Twelve newly appointed government school principals with between 0.3 and 2.8 years of leadership experience were selected through purposive criterion sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and thick description.

Results: Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) *Sinking in Files and Fear*, reflecting the pervasive nature of leadership anxiety; (2) *Chasing the Paper Across the District*, highlighting administrative burdens associated with reporting requirements, travel demands, and monitoring processes; (3) *Orders That Arrive but Never Explain*, illustrating the anxiety generated by unclear and frequently changing policy expectations; and (4) *Alone Between the Mountains and the Sea*, demonstrating how geographical isolation intensified both administrative and policy-related pressures. The findings revealed that policy ambiguity, rather than policy volume or complexity, was the most significant contributor to leadership anxiety. Limited access to guidance, delayed feedback, and inadequate institutional support further amplified principals' feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability.

Conclusion: Leadership anxiety among newly appointed principals in District Kech is shaped by a combination of administrative overload, policy ambiguity, and geographical isolation. The findings underscore the need for structured induction programs, mentoring systems, clearer policy communication, and context-sensitive support mechanisms to strengthen leadership capacity and improve principal well-being in remote educational settings.

Keywords: Leadership Anxiety, Newly Appointed Principals, Administrative Pressure, Policy Expectations, School Leadership, Phenomenology, District Kech, Balochistan.

Introduction

The management system of a school has undergone a significant change in the last 20 years. The modern principal is no longer an administrative manager with duties of building maintenance and supervision of staff, but is expected to be an instructional leader, data analyst, community liaison, compliance officer, crisis manager, and human resources administrator (Grissom et al., 2021). This change in roles has been accompanied by no decrease in the number of roles or expectations associated





with the position and has occurred in a context where the amount and complexity of expectations exceed the time and/or cognitive resources available for their fulfillment—the so-called "role overload" (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

This is especially true for principals in their first 3 years of service. Novice principals are lacking in the tacit knowledge, professional networks, and coping that develop with years of practice in leadership roles (Spillane & Lee, 2019). They are learning the job as they do the job, but they rarely receive systematic induction and mentoring. The research is consistent and shows that between 25% and 30% of new principals are likely to leave within the first 3 years, a time known as "reality shock" (Grissom & Mitani, 2020; Wang & Pollock, 2019).

This question comes at a time when principals are scarce worldwide, and the social conditions of the cities where they work are dire. Across various countries, such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, recruiting and retaining qualified principals is a challenge (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Stability of leadership is greatest in high-poverty, rural, and under-resourced schools, which is where it is most important (Bartanen et al., 2019). This is the case in the remote coastal district of Kech in Balochistan, where the population is spread out, roads are not adequate, and villages are far away from the district headquarters in Turbat and the border with Iran. It is therefore important to understand what's happening inside the heads of principals, which is what anxiety is, to understand why early principals are turning against the profession, and why it is educational justice as well as organizational health.

Although there has been considerable research on principal stress, burnout, and turnover (see Wang & Pollock, 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Mahfouz et al., 2020), the construct of leadership anxiety is under-researched, with much of the research being quantitative. Leadership anxiety is unique from stress or burnout because it involves ongoing feelings of inadequacy as a leader, fear of making important decisions that could have negative outcomes, and an awareness that there is a mismatch between the demands of the job and one's abilities (Bastian & Henry, 2022; Herman et al., 2020). Stress can exist in the absence of anxiety, but when anxiety is present, it is a future-oriented, apprehensive anticipation of threat or failure that can negatively affect decision-making and impact professional identity.

Administrative pressures have been correlated with principals' distress in quantitative studies, but the nature and mechanisms of how and why certain administrative tasks contribute to anxiety and how principals interpret policy expectations and respond to them in everyday practice have not been explained (Mahfouz, 2020). Leadership anxiety is not well studied – there is not much research that describes what it feels like, what sets it off, how principals deal with it, or what resources help to alleviate it. It is important to use a qualitative approach to capture these nuanced, context-dependent, and deeply personal experiences that can't be accessed through surveys.

The literature showed that there are three important gaps in the literature that this study aims to address. First, not many qualitative studies have been conducted that target newly appointed principals only. The majority of research studying novice principals includes experienced principals as well, making it difficult to discern the distinct challenges that exist during the first 36 months of principals' work (Hitt et al., 2022). Secondly, none of the published studies have distinctly investigated leadership anxiety in a phenomenological way in the context of rural Pakistan. Most research is conducted on anxiety as a part of a broader construct of 'stress' or 'burnout', without capturing the unique characteristics of anxiety. (O'Donnell et al., 2021) Third, the relationship between administrative pressures and policy expectations in the context of leadership anxiety has been examined quantitatively in more familiar settings, but not qualitatively in geographically distant contexts, and, as such, it is not fully understood how administrative pressures create leadership anxiety.

The remote districts of Balochistan are vastly different as far as concerns are related to accountability pressure and urban schools in the west, where geographical distance combined with 2–5 hours of travel to district offices, and communicating policies through WhatsApp messages sent after 9 PM, which were unavailable for questions, were the primary concerns (Grissom et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2020); in Balochistan there is no formal induction (Khanal & Ghimire, 2024), and there are significant infrastructure deficits (Balochistan Education Project, n.d.). These conditions will not simply



exacerbate the already existing stressors, but actually change their effects on pressure-induced anxiety fundamentally. A small policy problem that leaves a little confusion in the urban environment is a week of anxious nights in Kech, where the principal cannot come to school in two hours to ask a clarifying question. In this way, mechanisms found in Western studies (Kahn et al., 1964; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) are different, and this study is the first to record these context-specific pathways (Khanal & Ghimire, 2024; Majumdar & Baikady, 2024).

The psychological conditions mentioned are not only caused by the geographical isolation of District Kech but are also the root cause of that isolation. The concept of "socio-spatial" aspects of school work is gaining ground in the field of leadership in schools (Spillane, 2018). In Kech, isolation poses a "double bind" as principals are expected to put in place urbanly designed policies, but lack the infrastructure to support them. If they are unable to do so, they are afraid of punishment. They try to spend a lot of money on travel to fulfill obligations to schools, but fail to fulfill their own. The double bind is a driver of leadership anxiety – when any behavior has negative outcomes. While known stressors are exacerbated by geographical marginalization, it also installs qualitatively new stressors on people's psyches, ones which Western leadership models are not prepared for.

Objectives

To examine the level of leadership anxiety among newly appointed school principals in District Kech, Balochistan.

To identify the major sources of administrative pressure faced by newly appointed school principals in managing school responsibilities in District Kech.

To analyze the influence of policy expectations on the leadership anxiety of newly appointed school principals in District Kech.

To explore the relationship between administrative pressure, policy expectations, and leadership anxiety among newly appointed school principals in District Kech.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Leadership Anxiety

Although there is a vast body of literature on principal stress, burnout, and turnover, there is little research on that particular construct, leadership anxiety. To be studied, leadership anxiety has to be separated from other constructs to avoid confusion about what it is. Stress in the workplace is a general stress that is triggered by the demands of work and is typically associated with the experience of tension, physical fatigue, and irritability (Mahfouz et al., 2020). Burnout is a more severe form of strain and is the result of prolonged periods of untended stress, and involves feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and/or decreased personal accomplishment (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Leadership anxiety, on the other hand, is a more specific condition that involves continued doubts about one's leadership effectiveness, concerns about leadership mistakes with potential consequences, and a sense of lack of proficiency in the role (Bastian & Henry, 2022; Herman et al., 2020).

There are several distinguishing qualities between leadership anxiety and regular stress. The first difference is that leadership anxiety is future-oriented, characterized by worrying about what might go wrong or something that could pose a threat, whereas stress can be present-oriented and respond to what is going on right now. Second, the type of anxiety that can be associated with leadership is specific, focusing on one's identity as a leader, rather than strain in the work environment in general. A principal might be stressed in general at school, but have leadership anxiety when they are required to make a policy decision, which might expose their perception of inadequacy. Third, the fear of leadership can hinder decision-making at a time when a good decision is required, leading to a vicious cycle of indecision and uncertainty (O'Donnell et al., 2021).

School principals' work situation has been found to have many potential sources of unclear or negative outcome expectations that can stimulate the physiological stress reaction and trigger negative emotions of stress and discomfort (Mahfouz, 2020). These expectations go hand-in-hand with indicators that suggest a disconnect between personal resources and challenges, which are limiting principals' potential. As principals have taken on more roles and responsibilities, certain tensions between various



forms of accountability, distrust, and unclear principals' mandate and responsibility have been a contributing factor to principals' stressful expectations (Wang et al., 2022).

Measurement of anxiety related to leadership has largely been accomplished by using quantitative surveys. Bastian and Henry (2022) created a Leadership Anxiety Scale (LAS) that consisted of three sub-scales: Decision Anxiety, Evaluation Anxiety, and Competence Anxiety. These dimensions are also independent from the general stress measures, which supports the validity of leadership anxiety as a construct (Herman et al., 2020). But little qualitative work has been done that examines principals' experience of leadership anxiety. The study of principals' perception and experience of leadership anxiety has not yet been explored in Balochistan, and there is a lack of studies in one of the most marginalized educational contexts of Pakistan.

As a result, a critical analysis of current leadership models indicates that there is a missing element: an "anticipatory threat" that is a part of anxiety in situations of marginalization in rural areas. Transformational and instructional leadership models that are typical in the West rely on the underlying assumption that the organization is stable, there is consistent communication, and professional support networks are available (Spillane & Lee, 2019). The assumptions fall apart in places such as District Kech, where a question of policy can't be answered by the principal in less than a 2–5-hour drive, and where the dissemination of policy is being replaced by midnight WhatsApp messages. For a couple of reasons, in the current literature, there is very little theorizing of the anticipatory threat—threat in the anticipation of what may happen before it actually does, which is not enough, as most studies come from urban or well-resourced areas. This study fills that void by showing that role ambiguity experienced in a resource-limited, geographically dispersed environment is qualitatively different from role ambiguity experienced in an environment that is well connected.

Administrative Pressure as a Source of Role Overload

Administrative pressure is the combined pressure of running a school, such as compliance reporting, budget control, staff management, building maintenance, and dealing with parents. These are administrative responsibilities that can cause newly appointed principals a lot of role overload and are a direct contributor to principals' anxiety.

A study of novice principals has found that one of the "reality shocks" that novice principals experience is the feeling of ultimate responsibility (Grissom & Mitani, 2020). This sense will add to three fundamental issues: volume of tasks, diversity, and unpredictability. Whereas veteran principals have learned to prioritize and determine which demands are more urgent than others, novice principals may be subject to overwhelming role overload (Spillane & Lee, 2019) due to treating everything as an equally pressing demand.

When they take the helm, new school leaders often find themselves isolated, lonely, fearful, and disillusioned by the complexity of school organizations (DeMatthews et al., 2021). They are faced with intractable problems like teacher quality, working with poor budgets, diminishing parental involvement, and competing environmental pressures (Bartanen et al., 2019). External pressure groups exert a notable impact on administrative pressure, ranging from enrollments to teacher selection, transfer processes, and achieving academic success (Grissom et al., 2021). The pressure source of compliance reporting is defined as the amount of time spent on compliance-related tasks by principals, which was found to be 20 hours per week on average by Wang and Pollock (2019). DeMatthews et al (2021) found that compliance-related anxiety is a key predictor of principals' intention to turn over during their first year. However, in the remote areas of Balochistan, such as Kech, where administrative pressure is most acute, geographic isolation, inadequate road infrastructure, and internet connectivity have not yet been explored, and there is no study available on the effects these variables have on administrative pressure and the resulting leadership anxiety.

Policy Expectations and Role Ambiguity

An added anxiety that differs from administrative anxiety is policy expectations. Administrative pressure leads to feelings of anxiety when you are short of time or overwhelmed by the amount of work; policy expectations lead to feelings of anxiety when there is ambiguity about it, when it changes frequently, and when there is a gap in perceived feasibility.



Role ambiguity is when people do not have clear information regarding their roles, what they are expected to do, how they are expected to do it, and the outcomes of their behaviors (Kahn et al., 1964). The issue of policy ambiguity is problematic for school principals because they will implement policies at the school level, district principals will interpret the policies, and provincial governments will write the policies. Spillane (2018) noted that, as a process, the implementation of policies is essentially one of sensemaking, as the language of policy is understood differently in the context of the local level. This sensemaking process is especially anxiety-provoking for novice principals who are unfamiliar with the rules, regulations, and policies, and the interpretation thereof.

Policy changes have been determined to be an independent predictor of principal stress. Principals who suffered three or more significant policy changes in one year had significantly more anxiety, according to O'Donnell et al (2021). The mechanism seems to be a reset of competence: With each new policy, principals become novices again and thus lose the confidence they have gained in previous policies. Hitt et al (2022) found that new principals' self-efficacy is negatively related to policy churn, and that policy churn also results in a higher likelihood of principals leaving.

The third dimension of policy-related anxiety addresses the issue of policy feasibility, which is indicative of the perception of a lack of resources to meet policy needs. Herman et al (2020) found that principals who indicated that policies were "unrealistic" reported nearly double the anxiety levels of principals who said that policies were "feasible. Bartanen et al (2019) reported that there is a link between policy-practice gaps and moral distress, with principals feeling they are between a rock and a hard place when it comes to policy compliance and what they consider to be the best thing for the student. The impact of the policy environment in Balochistan, which is often dictated from Quetta without regard for the realities in the remote districts, has never been assessed.

Novice principals' transition experiences

One of the most challenging career changes in education is from teacher to principal. In the majority of occupations, new leaders are given extended apprenticeships, but with new principals, this is not the case; often these principals are given full responsibility and are placed in schools with high levels of challenge on their first day. (Grissom et al., 2021).

The first 24 months of principal induction are a time of "reality shock" when novice principals encounter the discrepancy between training and the expectations of their job. The first two years of principal induction are consistently known as a time of "reality shock" as novices come into contact with the difference between training and the expectations of their job. Eight out of 10 first-year principals, according to Wang and Pollock (2019), said they were completely unprepared for at least one "big event." The events are important incidents that affect principals' anxiety experiences.

The one skill identified as the most crucial in the successful induction of principals is mentoring. Principals who were mentor-fueled (structured weekly mentoring) had anxiety scores 40% lower and turnover rates 50% lower than principals who were mentor-informally mentored. (Grissom & Mitani, 2020) However, less than 40% of those mentors assigned met the plan for frequency in induction plans. The role of peer networks has not garnered as much attention, but Mahfouz (2020) found a decrease in principals' feelings of isolation and normalizing of anxiety experiences in facilitated peer support groups. There is no formal program of induction or mentoring in Balochistan, and no research has been conducted on the process of novice principals' transition without institutional support in their respective districts, such as Kech.

Relationships Between Administrative Pressure, Policy Expectations, And Leadership Anxieties

Few empirical studies have examined the relationship between administrative stress and policy expectations and leadership anxiety, though some studies indicate that these two stressors may be synergistic. DeMatthews et al (2021) suggested that there are two routes to overload, one quantitative (a result of administrative pressure) and one qualitative (a result of policy expectations). Anxiety can occur on both pathways, and different interventions are needed to address the different mechanisms.

There have been quantitative studies that document significant correlations between administrative pressure and principal anxiety, as well as policy ambiguity and principal anxiety. Bastian and Henry (2022) found that principals' anxiety in year one was more likely to be predicted by policy



ambiguity than administrative volume of tasks, with administrative volume more likely to predict anxiety in years two and three, indicating a development pathway.

Self-efficacy has been shown to mediate the relationship between the two. Herman et al (2020) showed that principals who had high leadership self-efficacy had less anxiety due to administrative pressure and policy ambiguity than those who had low leadership self-efficacy. This finding implies that interventions involving self-efficacy should help to decrease leadership anxiety even when role conditions are not manipulated. No study has ever explored this relationship in the context of Balochistan, where geographic isolation, scarcity of resources, and communication of policy expectations via WhatsApp messages at midnight could significantly affect the relationship between these three variables.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the integration of role theory (Kahn et al., 1964) and cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to understand how administrative pressure and policy expectations create leadership anxiety for newly appointed principals.

Role Theory. There are three types of role strain, according to role theory. Role conflict is when principals have conflicting expectations. Role ambiguity occurs when responsibilities and/or expectations of performance are unclear. Role overload is when demands are greater than the time, energy, or capacity available. These strains are more severe in remote areas such as Kech in Balochistan because the new principals are without a professional network and experience, and institutional support is limited.

Cognitive Appraisal Theory. This theory states that there is no direct link between stressors and anxiety. Primary appraisal is a judgment of the threat to competence or professional identity. Secondary appraisal involves a person's judgment of whether he/she has the ability, time, resources, and information to deal with the situation. Anxiety is experienced when coping resources are perceived to be inadequate. There is limited information for principals in Kech who lack mentoring, peer support, policy clarity, and reliable internet.

Both theories are complementary. No study to date has taken this approach with Baluchistan's education system.

Conceptual Framework

The two theories are combined into a single coherent theory. Structural sources of strain are role overload (from administrative pressure) and role ambiguity (from policy expectations) in role theory. The psychological mechanism is described and explained by cognitive appraisal theory, which includes two components: Primary appraisal (threat perception) and Secondary appraisal (resource evaluation). Leadership anxiety only develops when principals evaluate role strains as being more of a strain than they can cope with. When resources are adequate, there is no anxiety.

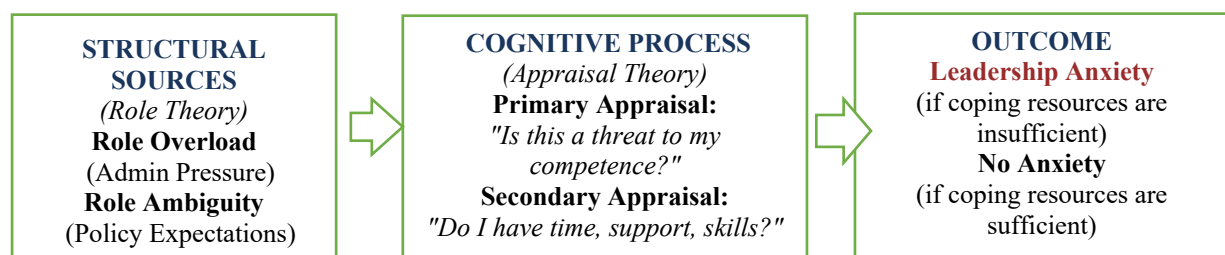


Figure 1. A unified conceptual model that is based on role theory and cognitive appraisal theory to explain the leadership anxiety of newly appointed principals. The methodology was based on this framework.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was of a qualitative nature using a phenomenological design. Phenomenology is a research approach that aims to capture the nature of an experience being lived, including administrative



and policy pressures and the lived experience of leadership anxiety (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is not as much a case study as it is a consideration of universal essence in many individuals. It is not like grounded theory, which seeks to produce a new theory, but rather it is a description of existing experience. The study in this paper has been formulated by the leadership anxiety of all newly appointed principals in District Kech; phenomenology would be suitable (van Manen, 2016). In the transcendental approach, it is necessary to suspend the researcher's preconceptions by engaging in reflexive journaling (Moustakas, 1994).

Participant Selection

Information-rich participants were selected using purposive criterion sampling from District Kech (Patton, 2015). This approach allows the perspective of others who have first-hand experiences with the phenomenon to be known.

The participants were selected by meeting the following criteria: (1) started as a principal in District Kech in the last 0.3 to 2.8 years (3.6 to 33.6 months), respectively; (2) currently serving as an active government school principal; (3) working in the Balochistan Education Department; and (4) eager to participate in two interviews for member checking. A sample size of 6 to 15 participants is in line with the requirements in phenomenology (Guest et al., 2020). The number of participants reached data saturation at the 10th participant. To ensure saturation in the sense that no new codes or themes emerged, participants 11 and 12 were interviewed specifically (Guest et al., 2020).

Table 1: *Demographic Profile of Participants*

Participant Code	Gender	School Level	Location	Years as Principal
P1	Female	Elementary	Urban (Turbat)	0.3
P2	Male	Middle	Rural	0.5
P3	Female	High	Urban (Turbat)	0.7
P4	Male	Elementary	Rural	0.9
P5	Female	Middle	Urban (Turbat)	1.1
P6	Female	High	Rural	1.3
P7	Male	Elementary	Rural	1.5
P8	Female	Middle	Urban (Turbat)	1.8
P9	Male	High	Rural	2.0
P10	Female	Elementary	Urban (Turbat)	2.2
P11	Male	Middle	Rural	2.5
P12	Female	High	Urban (Turbat)	2.8

Note: All 12 participants fall within the selection criterion range of 0.3 to 2.8 years (3.6 to 33.6 months) as stated in Section 3.2.

Data Collection





The principals from each of the schools in District Kech were interviewed individually. Interviews were also conducted at the DEDO at Turbat, where the participants gave their preference or convenience. Interviews provided an opportunity to observe nonverbal communication skills and culturally appropriate rapport-building techniques (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were arranged for the remote participants during their official visits to Turbat.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews were congruent with being flexible to cover emergent topics, as described by Kallio et al. (2016). The format was able to capture the answers of all participants to the essential questions while still enabling probing and follow-up questions. The interviews took 60 to 90 minutes each, allowing for the in-depth analysis of the phenomenon without fatigue.

This interview protocol had five phases of questions: warm-up questions in Balochi or Urdu, core questions on administrative pressure, core questions on policy expectations, questions on leadership anxiety experiences, and questions on coping strategies. Probes were used to elicit detailed narratives (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The interviews were audio-recorded with the interviewee's written consent and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of the interview. The interviews were done in Urdu or Balochi and translated to English, retaining cultural nuances. Non-verbal information and context were noted in field notes.

Balochi/Urdu were used in the interviews. Initial translations were done by a bilingual research assistant. 20% of the transcripts were back-translated by a second translator, of whom the researcher was unaware of the research focus. Original and back-translated versions were compared with respect to semantic and emotional equivalence. When there was any kind of discrepancy in such Urdu words or Balochi words that made them emotion-loaded, they were resolved by consensus. Two participants checked their translations to make sure emotional intensity was maintained.

Data Analysis

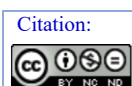
Braun and Clarke (2006) have outlined six phases of thematic analysis, which were followed in the data analysis process. The first step in Phase 1, familiarization, was to read each transcript three times and listen to the audio recordings. In Phase 2, initial coding, salient statements like "fear of compliance reporting" were labelled using open coding. Codes were related to each other for Phase 3 categories. During Phase 4, theme development, categories were combined into interpretive themes to respond to research questions. Themes were reviewed and refined in Phase 5 by examining the entire set of data with a search for disconfirming evidence. The final narratives with representative quotes were written in Phase 6 writing (Nowell et al., 2017). Coding and theme organization were carried out using NVivo 14 software.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The trustworthiness was determined by using the four criteria as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Prolonged involvement in the research context and triangulation between data sources and researchers were attained, as was member checking with 10 out of 12 participants. Thick description of the geographic features, administration, and policy context of District Kech supported transferability. Auditing and peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers with some knowledge of the education context in Balochistan ensured dependability. Reflexive journaling, reflecting on personal thoughts and assumptions, was used to confirm the data. Following Moustakas (1994), the researcher did systematic bracketing. Personal assumptions were recorded in a reflexive memo before the collection of data (e.g., the pressure put on principals causes stress). This memo was retrieved by the researcher following each coding session. Explicit questions in peer debriefing sessions included: What assumptions did you come to this theme with? This guaranteed that findings were based on participants' voices, and not on the researcher's assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

In respect of ethics, this study was conducted according to strict ethical procedures (Resnik, 2020). All participants gave written informed consent. All participants were told they could withdraw at any point. Identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms (P1 - P12) were used to protect confidentiality. All data were kept on the University's encrypted servers. Cultural sensitivity was noted regarding local customs. Before the data collection, all procedures were approved by the ethics committee and also by the Balochistan Education Department.





Results

The study investigated leadership anxiety of newly appointed principals in District Kech, Balochistan. The themes that arose were 'Sinking in Files and Fear' (level of anxiety), 'Chasing the Paper Across the District' (administrative pressure), 'Orders That Arrive but Never Explain' (policy expectations), and 'Alone Between the Mountains and the Sea' (relationship between pressures and anxiety). Findings are described using quotes from the participants (P1-P12) and years of experience.

Theme 1: Sinking in Files and Fear – The Level of Leadership Anxiety

Leaders' anxiety was a constant companion and shadowed them from home to school and back, as described by all 12 participants. The work stress mentioned was different from the usual work-related stress, as it does not stop when school is over; rather, some participants said they are awakened at night, and it is in their chest during the morning assembly. This theme focuses on the first objective: an investigation of the degree of leadership anxiety of newly appointed principals.

Subtheme 1.1: Anxiety that Does Not Sleep

The anxiety always seemed to be the worst when no colleague was present, at night; participants consistently described this. Participant P3 (0.7 years) said: "I think about that report at 2 a.m.—did I check the right box? If the DEO opens my file tomorrow and discovers something is wrong, what will happen? My husband says that I should go to bed, but my mind will not let go." Participant P7, who only had 1.5 years of experience, said, "Before it, I was sleeping like a stone, and the first thing that comes to mind is this heaviness in my chest. This is the anxiety that comes before opening my eyes".

After 2.0 years of experience, Participant P9 described physical symptoms: "Three times I have to fill a form because my handwriting becomes unreadable due to fear of making a mistake – my doctor gave me medicine for blood pressure, but I know that this is not blood pressure, it's this job." Participant P2, who had 0.5 years of experience, said from a remote area, "When I have a question, I can't simply drive to Turbat, the road is bad, and there is no money to afford gas, so I sit with my question for weeks and weeks wondering and worrying and I come to the DEO office with all sorts of worst case scenario possibilities."

Subtheme 1.2: The burden of ultimate responsibility

Participants explained that when they have anxiety, they know that they are solely responsible for all things in their school. Participant P8 (1.8 years of experience) explained, "In my days as a teacher, if something goes wrong it was on the principal's shoulder, now as a principal, if the student gets hurt it is on me, if a teacher is absent, it's on me, if a report is late, it's on me, that weight never leaves my shoulder."

Participant P10 reported a particular incident: "Last year we had a child that fell down the stairs, and when I saw him on the ground, my heart stopped, I thought for one second he was dead, that is what responsibility does to you, you make yourself afraid of everything because it's your responsibility."

Subtheme 1.3: Hiding Anxiety from Teachers

Participants reported that they cannot exhibit anxiety to their staff since they are expecting the principals to be calm and confident. Participant P10 said, "My teachers think that I have all the answers. They don't realize when I go into my office, I close the door and sit with my head in my hands for 10 minutes before I can look at them, and the distance between my head and my hands increases every day". Participant P1 added: "When the DEO calls me with a question that I don't know the answer to, I tell them 'I will check and call you back', but after I hang up, my heart starts pounding, I am afraid that one day somebody will see through me, and decide I am not fit for this job."

Theme 2: Chasing the Paper Across the District – Major Sources of Administrative Pressure

Everyone, from all 12, recognized some administrative activities that cause the most stress. Administrative burden in the District Kech was accentuated by the geography of the district, which has long distances and poor roads. The second objective is covered by this theme, which is "Recognize the main sources of administrative pressure."

Subtheme 2.1: The Journey of files and forms



In rural areas, principals have to travel from 2 to 5 hours to reach the District Education Office in Turbat to submit the documents. Participant P2 explained that: "I have to drive for two to three hours to Turbat, wait in line, submit my papers, and then drive back home and all the time I have to spend is taxing my body and I have to spend time away from my school and I have to put money into the gas tank for driving and then I have to drive home the next day, and then submit another file. It's the travel, it's the time away from my school, the gas cost that I have to put into my pocket."

Sometimes I send my files to Turbat with a bus driver as I can't afford to leave my school, but then I lie awake thinking if my files got there, or what if they got lost? What if the DEO claims that it was not received? "Better to be exposed in the open than in a locked car if what's going on is unknown." (Translator's note: The participant employed a local idiom between two opposing senses of visibility and comfort, i.e., clarity, and false comfort from structure. The translation brings out the essence of the poem: blind isolation in a closed environment adds to anxiety when the ultimate destination and the rules for the structure are entirely unclear.) Participant P9 shared: "Last month I went to Turbat four times a week, by the end of the week, I hadn't met any teachers or taught any lessons, I was just a delivery guy with files."

Subtheme 2.2: Reports for Every Direction

It was reported that the participants had to submit reports in various formats and timeframes to various authorities. Participant P12 said: "I have a notebook to keep track of which report goes to which office, one reporting to the DEO on the 5th, another one reporting to Quetta on the 10th – different columns, different attachments; if I send the wrong report to the wrong office, I get called and questioned – the pressure of keeping everything separate is exhausting."

Participant P4 continued: "Last month, I gave the same student data (same students, different forms three times) and no one told me why. I did it because I don't want to find out what will happen if I don't. Asking 'why' is considered disrespectful."

Subtheme 2.3: Monitoring Team Without Warning

The unexpected arrival of monitoring teams was one of the biggest sources of pressure, participants said. Participant P5 explained: "One day, a car came to my doorstep with four men from Quetta. I was not expecting them, and they wanted to see the kinds of files that I had made. They thought they could tell the quality of a year's work in an hour. I was shaking for weeks that followed, and I could not sleep over what I had said wrong." Participant P3 continued: "The monitoring teams don't understand what we're living in, they think that our school is like a city school; they don't know that we don't have the internet, we don't have a library, that our teachers have to travel two hours to get to school; it's too much pressure and if they found out that, they wouldn't have thought, she is a good principal."

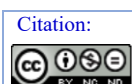
Theme 3: Orders that Arrive but Never Explain – Policy expectations and leadership anxiety.

Participants stated that they receive policy instructions either as a letter from the policy or a WhatsApp message without any explanation, context, or training. This confusion became the greatest concern related to policy. This theme examines the third objective, "To analyze how policy expectations affect leadership anxiety."

Subtheme 3.1: The WhatsApp Policy Orders

P4 said: "When it comes on WhatsApp around nine or ten at night, it says 'New directive attached. Implementation by Monday – no explanation, no training.' I read it, and my stomach drops, and I spend the weekend going, well, what is it? What do I do?" Participant P6 said, "I have posed questions in the WhatsApp group: 'Sir, can you please explain what this means?' I read the same policy letter ten times, and no one answers, so I'm stuck sitting here and wondering what it is that the department is looking for. The even worse part of it is that I do not have anyone answering me: I'm just sitting there and reading the same policy letter over and over again while guessing what the department is looking for".

Participant P10 commented, "Sometimes the messages are sent at midnight, and I have to check them; if I don't, I can't sleep because I've got to check them out and find out what might be new. My family tells me to turn my phone off, and they don't understand what I'm saying."





Subtheme 3.2: Policies for a different world

Participants said that the policies that are written in Quetta do not consider the realities of District Kech. Participant P8 commented: 'What online? The policy states that all teachers have to do this online training.' We don't have any Internet; students have to take computer-based assessments, and they have only 3 hours a day to work with the computer, but if the policy is not followed, I am going to get in trouble.

Participant P2 commented: "The policy says upload all reports online, I drive 3 hours to an internet café and spend 1500 rupees on petrol and upload a file, an internet café will look at it for 30 seconds, all the policy cares about is that I follow it. Participant P5 said, "The policy mandates parent meetings monthly, and my parents are farmers, so they go to work every day from sunup to sundown, and I just have to submit minutes, write down names, sign forms, and feel bad doing it because I am lying a little bit; I can't be honest because I don't want to be punished. The policy requires me to choose either to be honest or comply, and I choose compliance because I am afraid that I will not.

Subtheme 3.3: The Silence After Submitting

Participants expressed that they submit reports, but receive no feedback. There is an anxiety that arises out of this silence. Participant P7: "I submit a report, and after a week, two weeks, I have not been told if it is right or not, so I assume the worst, I assume that my name is on some list somewhere, the silence is worse than criticism, at least then I would know the problem. Participant P9 commented: "Last year I did a financial report and couldn't hear from them for three months – three months of worrying about teams of auditors coming round – then one day a clerk said, 'The report was fine, it was. Theme 4: Alone Between the Mountains and the Sea – The Relationship Between Pressures and Anxiety This theme uncovers how administration and policy create leadership anxiety, which is compounded by location. This theme focuses on the fourth goal: Administrative pressure, policy expectations, and leadership anxiety.

Subtheme 4.1: The Isolation That Multiplies Pressure

Participant P2 explained: "My nearest fellow principal is two hours away and I can't just call him, as the signal drops every few minutes, so when I have a problem I solve it on my own, and when I have a question, I guess the answer on my own, the loneliness of this job is very practical, I need somebody to look at my files and tell me whether they are right or not, but I don't have anybody in my village like that. Participant P1 commented: "We have a WhatsApp group, but it is for the orders, not for helping each other; when I ask a question, no one will respond; everyone is as stressed out as I am, and we all sink and float alone; the department has made us competitive, not cooperative.

Subtheme 4.2: The Cycle that Never Breaks

Participants reported that often there was a circular process of a policy coming in with no explanation, spending hours trying to understand it, consuming time trying to understand it instead of other work, a backlog of work, and then trying to understand it again. Participant P10 explained: "When a WhatsApp message comes, my heart is beating hard. I read it thrice, but I don't understand it. After spending two hours figuring it out, I am unable to concentrate on any other work and end up making mistakes. My anxiety from one message gets carried over to other work, too. One unclear policy spoils my whole week.

Participant P4 said: "The next message always precedes the last message I see, so the cycle never ends, because the anxiety builds on itself. Some days I don't know what to be doing as a principal, because helping children learn isn't the only thing I see, it's also helping with deadlines and reports and policy and policy and policy. Participant P9 ended by saying, "I have had no day where I have felt completely lost. No day.

Subtheme 4.3: Small Supports That Make a Difference

Participants, despite the many pressures, identified small and informal supports that enable participants to survive. Participant P8 commented: "One clerk in the DEO office is my lifeline when I go to Turbat. I find him, and he shows me what the department wants, and not what the circulars want. If he weren't here, then I would have lost my job by now."

There's one other principal in this district I can call —there's no solution for each other, but there's understanding. If I call him and say, "I can't do this anymore," he says, "I know. I can't do this anymore.





But we will do it anyway. That — that five-minute exchange gives me the strength to open the next file. Without that, I would have resigned months ago. There are times I needed to hear that from my father, when I was a principal before him, and he just knew the feeling. "My Baba, I am scared, I have made a mistake, I don't know how to do this, but I know that you were scared too. All principals were scared. The fear means you care.

Among newly appointed principals in District Kech, there is high, pervasive anxiety of leadership – as revealed by the four themes. Anxiety is caused by sleep issues, physical health issues, and long hours of traveling to submit files, multiple reports, unexpected visits to monitor, unclear midnight WhatsApp policy, and no response after submission. Isolation is a factor that accentuates this pressure. Informal supports—clerks, colleagues, and family are helpful to principals, and they live by them.

Discussion

The results suggest that the leadership anxiety experienced by newly appointed principals in District Kech is not a personal problem, but rather a natural reaction to this type of role overload, role ambiguity, and geographic isolation. The four themes illustrate the interplay between administrative pressure and policy expectations to create chronic anxiety in one of Pakistan's remote districts.

Perhaps the most interesting and theoretically important of the findings of this study is that both policy ambiguity and difficulty are associated with greater leadership anxiety than is policy volume. It builds on role theory (Kahn et al., 1964) by showing that role ambiguity is not just a role stressor in geographically isolated settings, but instead may be a recurring and enduring stressor of anticipatory anxiety. The principle is simple: a principal who has a lot of tasks to do can prioritize the work, but can't be sure of what he's supposed to do if he doesn't have clarifying information. In District Kech, which is a 2-5 hour walk to obtain clarification, there is a disconnect for weeks or months.

The principal's pervasive and anticipatory anxiety found in this study is consistent with prior studies on principal stress (Bastian & Henry, 2022; Herman et al., 2020). This study shows, however, that the anxiety experienced in District Kech is more intense than in the urban areas. As can be seen in Participant P7's response, "the anxiety is there before I even open my eyes," this is beyond reactive stress and is chronic. (Mahfouz, 2020) This difference is due to geographic isolation, so that a simple policy question requires a multi-hour trek to Turbat.

The geographical nature of District Kech is another factor that magnifies administrative pressure, which builds on the existing literature on principal stress and strain (Grissom et al., 2021; Wang & Pollock, 2019). Geography makes it a huge burden for Participant P2 to submit one file in three hours, and for Participant P5 to have to send his files with the bus drivers. Any policies that were formulated for Quetta or Karachi are basically not applicable to Kech.

The most notable result was the coupling of policy ambiguity with increased anxiety as compared to policy difficulty, which supports role theory (Kahn et al., 1964). Participant P4 said: "I tenfolded over the policy letter to see what they wanted. This study's contribution is unique as it sends the policies on WhatsApp at midnight without giving any time to ask questions, which also shows the issues in the implementation of the policies in remote areas of Pakistan.

Principals do not get a response when they submit reports, which in turn may result in a long period of anxiety. The absence of feedback is more detrimental than negative feedback (Schmidt et al., 2014) since it leads to a lack of closure and the inability to stop the anxiety-producing anticipation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In District Kech, this is accentuated further, with the principal having to walk to the DEO's office, which may take 2-5 hours. The WhatsApp policy order is issued; no one knows when, without any feedback, and principals are left in a state of uncertainty for weeks. Three months of worry and concern, and one principal (P9) found out a report was "fine" in three seconds.

The mechanism for role ambiguity to physical ailment is clear. Principals are given a non-explanatory WhatsApp policy order at midnight. They cannot ask questions to clarify the policy, and instead, they spend hours interpreting it themselves (primary appraisal). When there is no peer to consult (secondary appraisal shows lack of resources), anticipatory anxiety results in physical symptoms—such as sleeplessness, shaking hands, and higher blood pressure (P3, P7, P9). If there is no feedback, the cycle continues with the next policy anticipatory anxiety order. This vicious circle (policy ambiguity





→ blocked clarification → absent resources → anticipatory anxiety → physical symptoms → no feedback → repeat) explains why policy ambiguity causes more anxiety than policy volume.

When principals submit reports, no response is given, and this causes anxiety. Participant P9 took 3 months to find out that a report was "fine". According to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), principals have to carry out secondary appraisal without feedback. This "feedback absence" is more harmful than negative feedback (Schmidt et al., 2014).

Pressures interact cyclically, thus reinforcing the build-up of anxiety. Participant P4 said: "I always get the next message before I'm back from the previous message. Overload and ambiguity are two interdependent issues that must be both discussed and addressed for interventions to be effective.

In addition to formal mentoring, which is often inadequate (Grissom & Mitani, 2020), principals find informal supports, such as helpful clerks, sympathetic colleagues, and family, to be helpful. In District Kech, there is no formal mentoring, and principals built their own mentoring networks. Maintaining these informal networks might be easier than establishing formal programs that are costly. But a caveat is necessary; informal supports are valuable, but reliance on them risks absolving the state of its responsibility to provide formal institutional support. The helpful clerk, sympathetic colleague, or principal father should supplement, not replace, systematic mentoring, policy clarity, and professional development.

The role theory and cognitive appraisal theory have been integrated and supported in the theoretical framework. Explanations of the structural conditions are provided by role theory, while explanations of the emergence of anxiety in situations in which coping resources seem to be lacking are provided by cognitive appraisal theory. Small informal supports decrease anxiety through enhancing perceived coping resources.

These results contest Western-centric assumptions of school leadership. Euro-American literature on principal anxiety tends to conceptualize it as an individual psychological phenomenon that calls for individual coping strategies (Bastian & Henry, 2022; Herman et al., 2020). But this study finds that leadership anxiety in a collectivist, resource-poor society like Balochistan is fundamentally systemic. Anxiety was not perceived by participants as a personal fault to be addressed through therapy or resilience building. Instead, they described anxiety as a rational, predictable response to structural conditions such as unclear policies, lack of feedback, geographic isolation, and no mentoring. This difference suggests that the "locus" of intervention in Western contexts may be individual (e.g., stress management workshops), whereas in contexts like Kech, the locus must be structural (e.g., policy clarity protocols, acknowledgment of receipt, peer networks). Universalist assumptions about school management – that interventions that work in one context will work in another – are therefore unwarranted.

Limitations: Discovery was only made in District Kech. Data are self-reported. Even with reflexive journaling, the researcher might have some bias because of his/her prior experience.



Knowledge Contribution

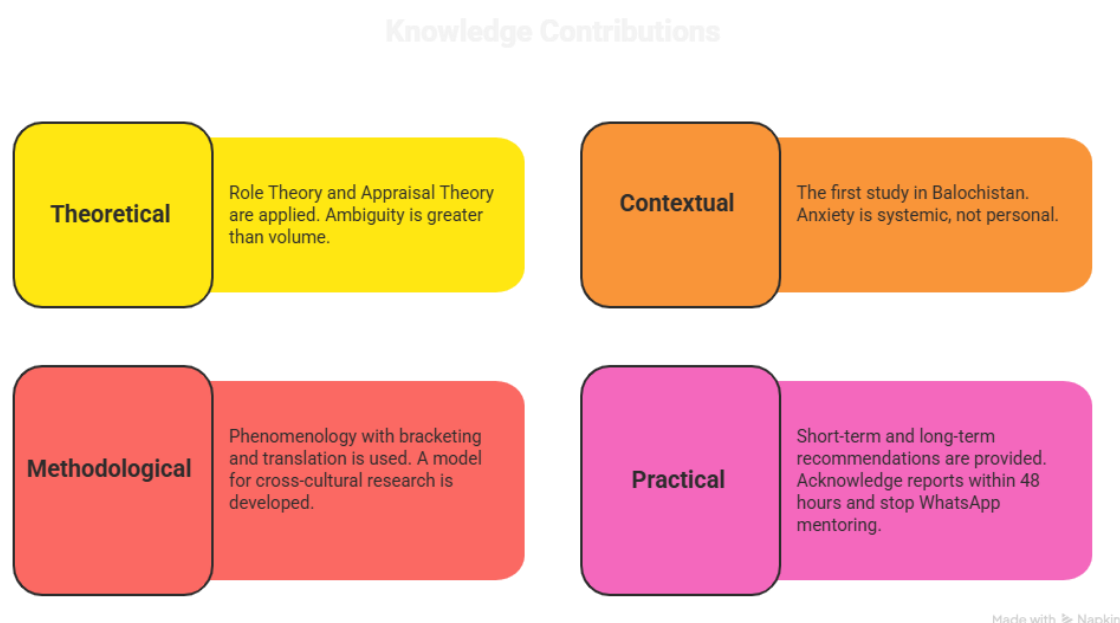


Figure 2. Knowledge contributions of the study

This study has five interrelated contributions. In theory, it combines role theory (Kahn et al., 1964) and cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) into one coherent model to explain why administrative pressure (role overload) and policy expectations (role ambiguity) lead to leadership anxiety in geographically distant settings and why policy ambiguity creates more anxiety than policy volume since the ambiguity cannot be solved without access to clarifying information, which takes 2-5 hours in District Kech. From contextually perspectives, it was the first qualitative phenomenological study of leadership anxiety in Balochistan, which challenges the assumption of Western societies that anxiety in these societies is individual, rather than systemic, and that this is a rational response to leadership-related challenges such as ambiguous policies, lack of feedback, geographic isolation, and no mentoring. In terms of methodology, it illustrates the contribution of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) through detailed bracketing (reflexive memo, systematic checking of assumptions, peer de-briefing), and by maintaining affective weight in cross-cultural research by incorporating three steps in translating the data (initial translation, 20% blind back-translation, participant verification). From a practical standpoint, it offers recommendations that can be implemented in the short term (acknowledge reports within 48 hours, defer WhatsApp policy orders, create a help desk, decrease duplicate reporting, geographic hardship allowances, full days on school to monitor issues) and can be achieved in the long term (or restructured) (plain language policy guides, formal peer support networks, stress management course in principal preparation programs, 2-year mentoring with weekly check-ins). It does so empirically, as shown by participant quotes (P3, P4, P7, P9, P10), including the vivid example of one principal waiting three months for the report to be “fine,” which showed that the absence of feedback is a more serious problem than the negative feedback (shown in Schmidt et al., 2014).

Conclusion

This phenomenological study was conducted to find out the anxiety related to leadership among 12 newly appointed principals of District Kech in Balochistan. Four themes emerged that were linked together. First, "Sinking in Files and Fear" showed that fear of "sleeping on it" and its impact on physical health was endemic, and that principals were often compelled to keep their fears secret from teachers. Secondly, “Chasing the Paper Across the District” highlighted the extra burden of being burdened by administration, geography, long distances to deliver files, multiple reports, and unexpected monitoring



visits. Third, "Orders That Arrive but Never Explain" showed that policy expectations create significant anxiety via midnight WhatsApp messages, policies created for urban settings, and after policies were submitted, no response. Fourthly, "Alone Between the Mountains and the Sea" showed an inescapable vicious circle, exacerbated by distance, of growing anxiety.

This study demonstrates that leadership anxiety among principals in District Kech is not a personal weakness, but rather it is a logical and normal reaction to role overload, role ambiguity, professional isolation, and a complete lack of formal mentoring. A district's geography exacerbates each of these pressures, with principals making multi-day journeys to submit files and having no ability to get peer support if they have questions.

But in the face of all this, principals make it somehow by means of the informal help that they receive from a clever clerk, a kind fellow principal, or a father who had been a principal. It is more important than any policy document: these human connections. If no systemic changes are made (such as clarity in policy, recognition of report receipt, and peer networks), then the task of bridging policy and practice will continue to fall to the shoulders of individual principals, and anxiety about leadership will remain a constant feature of the principalship in Balochistan's remote districts.

The findings are more broadly problematic of universalist extrapolations of models of school leadership from contexts with high resource levels and geographical density in urban areas to geographically isolated and resource-poor areas. Leadership anxiety in Balochistan is not simply a problem of the individual, and it's a systemic issue that is a product of policy systems that have been built without taking into account local realities.

Recommendations

Based on the results, the following recommendations are made:

Immediate Administrative Fixes (Short-Term)

- Accept any report within 48 hours
- Avoid sending messages on WhatsApp to communicate policies or instructions; Make policies and instructions via official channels at work or with a minimum of 1 week's notice for implementation.
- Establish a helpdesk system to be accessible on the phone at the District Education Office for the new principals.
- Reduce duplicate requests (e.g., student information – once rather than in three different formats)
- Favorable treatment for applications for geographic hardship allowances, such as extended deadlines, advance notification of monitoring visits, and fuel reimbursement.
- Have monitoring teams spend at least one full day in each school and interview principals about the local constraints

Structural Reforms (Long-Term)

- Supply straightforward and practical implementation guides with examples for each policy directive
- Establish formal peer support groups with monthly meetings (in person or by phone)
- Incorporate real-world components into principal preparation programs that address compliance reporting, policy execution, and anxiety management, including required stress management and emotional resilience courses.
- Provide all new principals with a mentor for the first 2 years, and have them meet weekly for the first year; mentors to be given a lighter workload and to share experiences of their own early principalship, and reduce anxiety; anxiety should be normalized.

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