

Article

Walking the Leadership Tightrope: Principals' Experience of Work–Life Balance

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Abstract

Principals experience high levels of anxiety, frustration, and stress, often struggling with their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Balancing work–life responsibilities is critical, yet we know little about how school principals understand and navigate work–life balance (WLB). Building on boundary and spillover theories, we employed an interpretive qualitative research design and interviewed 10 school principals in Missouri to better understand their experiences with WLB and its impact on their well-being. Our findings revealed that while principals themselves understand the importance of WLB, they shared that achieving it is challenging for individuals on their own. Instead, there is a need for a community of understanding and systematic support to help them achieve a better balance.

Keywords: work–life balance; school leadership; spillover; boundaries; principal

1. Introduction

In the years following the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing attention has been paid to rising rates of frustration, anxiety, burnout, and attrition among educators (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; Superville, 2023). Such a level of attention is merited when one considers the wave of educators leaving the profession. While the focus of this exodus is often on teachers, principals are not immune. For instance, among all public school principals in 2020–2021, a year after the pandemic, about 1 in 10 principals left their profession. Principals with 10 or more years of experience left their roles at twice the rates than those with fewer than three years of principalship (Taie & Lewis, 2023). Also highly problematic, the turnover rate of principals is much higher in schools that serves low-income students (DeMatthews et al., 2021b).

A 2021 National Association of Secondary Schools Principals survey of members indicated that job satisfaction among principals was at a dangerously low level, with only 35% of principals strongly agreeing that they are satisfied with their work. This number stands in stark contrast with 2019 survey results in which 63% of principal respondents indicated the same level of satisfaction (Havens, 2021). Interestingly, the most common response as to what principals felt would likely reduce stress and keep them in the profession was “improved work–life balance,” which ranked notably higher than increased compensation, respect for the profession, or improved staffing levels (Davis, 2022).

Research consistently underscores the importance of work–life balance. Studies have demonstrated an inverse correlation between perceived work–life balance and mental/emotional health issues including—though not limited to—anxiety and depression



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(Haar et al., 2014; Sprung & Rogers, 2020; Kotera et al., 2020). Such studies find that as the perception of work–life balance increases in employees, reported mental and emotional health challenges decrease. Research has also revealed positive correlations between perceived work–life balance and intent to persist in professions (Bodendieck et al., 2022), while at the same time, reporting poor work–life balance as a primary reason for turnover intentions (Yu, 2019). Additionally, work–life balance has even been shown to have a positive correlation to job performance (Susanto et al., 2022). Despite the positive impact healthy work–life balance can have on wellbeing and persistence in a profession, at present, we know little about the working principal’s actual experience of work–life balance.

To contribute to our knowledge and fill a gap in the literature, this study aimed to help us better understand the experience of working principals, specifically their perceptions and experiences of work–life balance (WLB) and its impact on their wellbeing and attitudes toward their work. The study draws on two central theoretical perspectives to understand the experience of these principals. First, the study engages boundary theory, which proposes that individuals create, maintain, and navigate role-specific boundaries of varied permeability and flexibility through processes of segmentation and integration (Ashforth et al., 2000). Second, the study engages spillover theory, which supposes bidirectional influence of attitudes, behaviors, and emotions between the separate spheres of work and home life (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Using these two theories as analytical lenses, we employed an interpretive design using qualitative methods and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews on 10 principals in Missouri, United States. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do principals understand WLB? (2) What challenges are principals experiencing in pursuit of WLB? (3) How does spillover happen and impact principals? (4) How are principals managing WLB?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Prevalence of Principal Stress and Connection to Work–Life Balance

The increasing levels of stress reported by principals (Horwood et al., 2021) are a significant contributing factor to both burnout and turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2021b). Still, the stressors associated with the principalship are not new; the work of a principal has always presented complex demands. Schools are multi-faceted organizations, and the principalship requires an individual to demonstrate knowledge of and capacity to promote success in all areas of the organization’s work. In a 2009 study, balancing the multiple responsibilities of the role was one of two factors most associated with the experience of high levels of stress and burnout (Combs et al., 2009). Even over twenty years ago in their book, *Keeping the Fire Alive*, authors Brock and Grady (2002) documented the realities of principals experiencing high levels of physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual stress leading to burnout. Put simply, the demanding nature of the work is no new phenomenon.

However, recent survey data points to a unique circumstance in which we must attentively consider the demands that are put upon principals and the impacts we are seeing in heightened stress, burnout, and turnover (Davis, 2022; Havens, 2021). Though schools are now a few years separated from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of that event on educators and school leaders cannot be underestimated. Survey data gathered by the RAND Corporation found that among principals surveyed in the 2020–2021 school year, just over 80 percent of principals reported “frequent” feelings of job-related stress, with roughly one-third of principals describing such feelings as “constant” stress (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Though concerning on its own merit, this statistic is more troublesome when considered against nationally representative data collected at the same time which indicated only 40 percent of working adults in the U.S. to be experiencing

frequent stress, and 11 percent reporting constant stress related to their work (Woo & Steiner, 2022). This data gives context to the findings of Kaufman et al. (2022), who, in a fall 2020 study sampling, found that 21% of principals surveyed indicated intent to leave their current jobs by the end of that school year; interestingly, the majority of the 21% indicated they had not considered leaving their jobs in pre-pandemic years. Taken together, data points such as these suggest that though the work of principals has always been arduous, today's principals are feeling a unique pressure that must be investigated and, ultimately, addressed.

Certainly, there are multiple factors contributing to the concerning levels of stress, burnout, and intent to leave principals are reporting. However, work–life balance should be considered as a prime factor if we are to support principals' health, wellness, success, and persistence in the profession (Yang, 2020). Beginning beyond education, the research base is replete with examples suggesting that improved work–life balance can promote better mental and emotional health (Bell et al., 2012; Karkoulian et al., 2016), increased job effectiveness (Bataineh, 2019; Khan et al., 2022), and retention of employees (Noor & Maad, 2008; Zainal et al., 2022).

In the realm of education, the same holds true. Sudibjo and Suwarli (2020) found in a study of high school teachers that work–life balance has a positive effect on teachers' job embeddedness, job satisfaction, and intention to stay in their job. Surveying teachers in the UK, Perryman and Calvert (2020) found that of those sampled, 75% of teachers who had left the profession had done so to improve work–life balance; among those who had stayed, 76% indicated work–life balance as a potential reason they may leave in the future. Abdulaziz et al. (2022) established that work–life balance has a direct and positive impact on teachers' commitment to the organization. In their study of Chilean educators, Lizana and Vega-Fernandez (2021) found that teachers who reported the greatest negative impact to their work–family balance during the pandemic also reported the most mental health impacts. Johari et al. (2018) established in their study of 302 teachers that work–life balance had a significant impact on participants' job performance. Such studies suggest that as in the wider research base, for educators, there is evidence that work–life balance is tied to wellness, performance, and retention. Additionally, the preponderance of work–life balance studies focusing on teachers rather than administrators underscores the importance of examining the need for investigation of the principals' experience.

We know that in addition to the fact that they work long hours, often facing public scrutiny and even legal threats, principals face a common challenge of setting boundaries that support healthy balance between their professional and personal lives (Klocko & Wells, 2018). Even over a decade ago in 2009, work–life balance was identified as one of the top six most frequent stressors principals reported facing; subsequent data collected in 2012 indicated a modest increase, putting work–life balance in the top four (Klocko & Wells, 2015). Accordingly, the importance of better understanding their experience should not be underestimated.

The fact that principals report work–life balance as a significant stressor is understandable even if one merely considers the demands the profession makes of an individual's time. Yan (2019) asserts that over 90% of principals work more than 50 h in a week; moreover, the same study claims over 60% of principals work more than 60 h per week on all school-related activities. Such a finding corresponds with many other data indicating how the work of a principal can routinely creep beyond the borders of the standard 40-h work week. For example, in a study of Arkansas school administrators, it was found that one of the greatest hindrances to self-care was the difficulty respondents expressed in "shutting off" work after hours; well over 80% indicated spending at least (if not more than) an extra half-hour per day outside of the work day on professional activity such as email, texting,

or phone conversations (Ray et al., 2020). In the same study, 70% of respondents indicated time with loved ones as a priority, yet over 80% reported less than three hours a day to spend on important non-work relationships, 20% reporting less than one hour (Ray et al., 2020). Data, such as this, suggests that in the push and pull between their professional and personal lives, many principals are choosing, actively or passively, to allow work duties to creep into their personal time to the point that it is intruding upon both their ability to care for themselves and to tend to non-work relationships.

In a qualitative study of principals, Mahfouz (2018) detailed the experiences of principals, recounting the excessive strain poor work–life balance put on participants' use of time, family interactions, psychological wellbeing, and physical health. Reid and Creed (2021) also found that principals were having to spend greater time outside of work performing work activities, to the point they describe the job as “unsustainable” and “not what they signed up for.” Given that principals experiencing stress levels, such as described, are far more likely to leave their jobs (Steiner et al., 2022) and that even if they do not leave, a stress-laden leader can create an unhealthy and dysfunctional school culture (Kelehear, 2004), one can see the need for a focus on principal work–life balance and how individually and systemically, we can better position principals for success, satisfaction, and longevity in their work.

In response, this study builds on previous research by further exploring the working principal's experience of work–life balance. Whereas other studies, often focusing on the stressors associated with the profession, point to factors contributing to or symptoms of “imbalance” for principals, this study focused specifically on exploring individual principals' lived experience of work–life balance. By doing so, the researchers gained a deeper understanding of what principals mean when they indicate that a primary factor that would reduce stress and keep them in the profession is “improved work–life balance” (Davis, 2022) as well as how they are experiencing and pursuing work–life balance.

2.2. Defining Work–Life Balance

Though individuals will undoubtedly have their own concept of the term, it is important to clarify how this study understands the term “work–life balance.” Definitions abound, but for the present purposes, three definitions centrally inform this study's general concept. Work–life balance has been defined as “the degree to which an individual is able to simultaneously balance the temporal, emotional, and behavioral demands of both paid work and family responsibilities” (Hill et al., 2001). Kalliath and Brough (2008) define it as “the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities.” Lastly, Noon et al. (2013) suggest that work–life balance is “the ability of individuals to pursue successfully their work and non-work lives, without undue pressures from one domain undermining the satisfactory experience of the other” (p. 342).

These three definitions establish key aspects of this study's perspective on work–life balance. First, they recognize that both spheres of life present unique demands and pressures through the varying roles each requires an individual to fulfill. Second, they affirm that each individual acts and experiences reality according to priorities, goals, aspirations, and values unique to them. Based on variance in such factors as well as one's stage in his or her life and career, what one principal perceives as “imbalance” may feel more like “balance” to another (Yang, 2020). A suitable understanding of the term must acknowledge the subjectivity of how an individual may interpret his or her experience of work–life balance and that an experience deemed “satisfactory” to one might not be described as such by another. It is important to recognize that in none of these definitions does the term denote “balance” in the sense of equal time spent in the work and non-work

environment. Rather, as these key definitions suggest, work–life balance refers to the uniquely perceived experiences of individuals in their attempt to negotiate the demands of and realize satisfactory, complementary, rewarding experiences in both work and non-work arenas of life.

3. Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

In its exploration of principal work–life balance, this study considers two theoretical perspectives of work–life balance: boundary theory and spillover theory. These two theoretical perspectives on work–life balance are selected as they offer the researcher a perspective on both of the following: how work and personal life influence one another and how individuals establish and maintain distinctions between the two spheres of life.

3.1. Boundary Theory

According to boundary theory, work–life balance is achieved through negotiating a continuum of segmentation and integration. Segmentation entails increased clarity and separation between domains and roles, while integration represents increased overlap and more blurring of boundaries. This continuum is important in that it recognizes the peril of both complete segmentation and complete integration. Whereas a pendulum swing toward segmentation (low flexibility and permeability) may increase role identification, it increases the difficulty in transitioning between roles and domains. Conversely, tilting toward complete integration would confuse role identification and “compromise the integrity of home, work, and third places” (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 488). This theoretical lens is important in the discussion at hand as principals must take seriously the demands of their work role and will, at times, be required to manage boundaries flexibly and permeably. For example, a principal may need to take a call from an employee experiencing a family emergency or be asked late in the day to step in and cover a supervisory duty at an evening event. Such occurrences will happen. However, it is worth exploring whether excessive levels of boundary flexibility and permeability that many principals have accepted risk undermining their ability to maintain a healthy balance between their work and non-work spheres of life.

3.2. Spillover Theory

The second theoretical lens engaged in this study is spillover theory, which supposes that each domain of life “spills over” onto one another. As Judge and Watanabe (1994) put it, “workers who have (dis)satisfying jobs also will have (dis)satisfying lives, and vice versa” (p. 102). Hence, the term “spillover” reflects the transfer of one’s mood, values, and behaviors in one arena (work or non-work) to the other; in turn, each sphere of life exerts influence upon and generates similarities in the other (Zedeck & Mosier, 1990). As such, numerous researchers have emphasized this influence as bidirectional, flowing from non-work to work as well as work to non-work (Zedeck & Mosier, 1990; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Lambert (1990) further categorizes spillover influences as direct (objective impact regardless of an individual’s subjective perception) and indirect (objective impact but only through subjective experience of the individual). Spillover theory supposes the relationship between mood, values, and behavior within the discrete spheres to be characterized by a positive correlation, even if the relationship represented in the spillover is itself negative or harmful to the individual (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000).

This theory is important to the present study as it informs the researcher’s understanding of how a principal’s experience of work carries over into and influences their non-work experience. For example, were a principal’s duties to routinely keep her out late, resulting in exhaustion that impacted the quality or quantity of time with her children, this would be

understood as direct spillover in that it is an objective impact of work onto non-work. The individual may assign meaning to the experience, but the impact itself is not dependent upon the principal's interpretation. In contrast, if a principal were to experience negative and hurtful interactions with parents or staff and then later (in a non-work setting) find themselves distracted and unable to detach from the emotions of those interactions, this would be understood as indirect negative spillover. In such an instance, the subjective experience of the work rather than the work itself spills over into and influences feelings and behavior in the non-work sphere.

The tandem use of these two theories could seem curious as spillover has been understood by some to be indicative of a "boundaryless" existence of the work and non-work domains (Zedeck & Mosier, 1990). However, the current study considers a complementary view of these theoretical approaches a fitting approach. Having acknowledged that the role of a working principal will entail some level of both segmentation and integration as well as negotiation of healthy levels of flexibility and permeability, this study proposes that aspects of boundary theory may be useful in exploring how individuals manage spillover, minimizing its negative impacts and maximizing the potential positive effects. For that reason, both theoretical lenses are considered in this study's effort to understand the school principal's experience of work-life balance.

4. Methods

To investigate the experience of working principals, the study employed an interpretive design, drawing on interviews with 10 public school principals in Missouri, United States. The study was, therefore, guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes there is no single reality; rather, individuals' realities are constructed by the meanings they interpret from and assign to language, symbols, and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In such studies, the researcher aims not to test a hypothesis but rather to make sense of the meaning participants have about their world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The interpretive nature of this study recognized and sought to respect the uniqueness of each participant's experience while incorporating each individual experience into our collective understanding of how principals experience and respond to work-life balance.

4.1. Data Collection and Sampling

To collect the data necessary to understand this experience, the study used semi-structured interviews of working principals. Each participant engaged in one interview (approximately one to one and a half hours) with follow-up opportunities requested/extended as needed. As Seidman (2019) suggests, interviewing is well-suited to studies in which the primary intent is not to test a hypothesis but rather to draw out and construct meaning from the stories of individuals. The use of a semi-structured protocol for interviews allowed for specific information pertinent to the primary research questions to be collected from all participants while also permitting the interviewer to be responsive to the unique perspectives and experiences of each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In creating the sample of participants, the researcher recruited ten working principals whose experience can inform the study's central research questions. To fulfill the aims of the study, the researcher sought to recruit lead principals with at least two years of experience in the position. This criterion was intended to ensure that participants have multiple years of experience on which to draw and are not speaking specifically from the experience of a brand-new principal or from the perspective of an assistant principal. To recruit participants, two purposeful sampling approaches were employed: convenience and snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initially, recruitment began with an

interest-gauging email sent to members of regional principals’ associations. This provided the initial recruitment pool for the study, with participants selected from among those who responded to the email. From there, participants were asked if they were able to recommend other principals who might be potential candidates for participation in the study. This strategy represents a snowball (or network) sampling approach in which participants who meet specified criteria refer the researcher to other potential participants within their own networks they believe may also be good candidates for inclusion in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Such a sampling process was advantageous in that principals are often highly networked professionals. The participant pool recruited represented varied school size, school demographics, principal gender. These variances allowed for a fuller picture of how principals in a variety of contexts experience of work–life balance. Given our focus on depth rather than breadth, we concluded data collection at 10 interviews, as no new themes were emerging and existing codes were sufficiently developed, indicating that data saturation had been reached (Guest et al., 2006). Participants, represented by pseudonyms, and their career stage, years of experience as school principals, and school characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants in the study.

Principal	Career Stage	Years of Experience as School Principals	School Locale	Student Enrollment	Grades
Dr. Stacie	Mid	5	Suburban	390	Elementary
Dr. Henry	Late	15	Urban	2027	Secondary
Dr. Morris	Late	16	Urban	520	Middle
Andrews	Mid	9	Rural	269	Elementary
Houston	Mid	2	Rural	313	Elementary
Dr. Taylor	Late	20	Urban	345	Elementary
Dr. Dean	Late	18	Urban	1374	Secondary
Hawthorne	Late	18	Suburban	508	Elementary
Hamilton	Mid	6	Rural	126	K-12
Dr. Darby	Mid	6	Suburban	1454	Secondary

Missouri provides an important backdrop for this study, as its education system reflects many of the same challenges facing schools nationwide—such as leadership turnover, teacher shortages, and rural–urban disparities—while also exhibiting unique characteristics. The state is less demographically diverse than the national average, resembles many Mid-western states with its substantial rural population, and consistently ranks among the low-est in K–12 education funding (Cameron Anglum et al., 2024; Podgursky & Springer, 2006).

Within this context, participants represented a diversity of educational settings and career-stages. Including both male and female principals of varied experience levels, who serve in both urban, suburban, and rural contexts, and who represent a variety of grade spans allows us to see what is common to the profession across those lines. Of note, other than one participant, all participants are currently married. All participants have children of various ages, some very young and some adults in the workforce themselves. This is noteworthy in that it allows all participants to speak to the relationship between work–life balance and family, though it may impact the study’s ability to speak to the experience of unmarried principals or those without children of their own.

Of the 10 participant interviews, nine were conducted via private Zoom confer-ences; only one interview was conducted face-to-face. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai, with recordings and transcriptions stored on the researcher’s password-protected devices. Once interview data was obtained, transcripts were reviewed and edited for deidentification purposes. Each participant was assigned an identifying

pseudonym known only to the researcher. Interviews were coded and analyzed to surface recurring themes relevant to the research questions within data collected. Analytical memos were used by the researcher for several purposes. First, the memos aided the researcher in mitigating bias by separating interpretive analysis from the data itself. Second, the use of analytical memos ensured that analysis and interpretation arose from the data itself rather than the preconceptions and perspectives of the interviewer, thus serving to increase the credibility of the study itself (Rogers, 2018).

4.2. Analysis

Analysis of interview transcripts began with an initial open coding, a standard inductive process of identifying and classifying emergent themes in the raw data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This open coding was conducted using computer software (Dedoose version 9), which allowed for data to be stored on the researcher's protected devices as well as a secure, cloud-based platform. The first round of coding yielded 73 unique codes that touched on various elements of the principals' experiences of work–life balance. This open coding allowed the researcher to gather the essence of their experience apart from preconceived ideas or categories. Once initial coding was completed, a second review of transcripts was completed to establish connections between codes across the transcripts. This allowed the researcher to identify and bring separate codes under the umbrella of overarching categories (understanding, experience, challenges, impacts, coping/management), so that brought together systematically, codes could yield tentative answers to the study's guiding research questions. In the analysis process, the overarching themes that emerged allowed the researcher to ascertain both similarities and differences among the body of participants regarding their experience of work–life balance.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, we employed an independent review of coding, researcher triangulation, and member checking (Tisdell et al., 2025). Specifically, we independently coded and analyzed the data before collaborating to compare interpretations and refine themes. We also conducted member checking by asking participants to confirm that their perspectives were accurately captured and reflected in the analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

4.3. Positionality

Researcher 1 of this study is a working principal with nearly twenty years of experience in public education and holds an Ed.D. He has been the principal of a school with nearly 70 staff members serving just under 600 students. He understands the intricacies of principalship as well as the impact of work–life balance on professional and personal well-being. The second researcher is a faculty member at a research-intensive university, specializing in principalship and teaching in principal preparation/certification programs. Researcher 1's practical experience and understanding, combined with Researcher 2's scholarly expertise and methodological skills, shaped the methodological and theoretical lens of the study. Both researchers' insights into the profession enabled them to connect with the participants, provide a safe and engaging interview environment, and derive meaningful findings from this study. Their complementary perspectives ensured a comprehensive approach to understanding the challenges and experiences of work–life balance for school principals.

4.4. Findings

The central findings are arranged according to the guiding research questions, which focused on how working principals understand and experience work–life balance; spillover and its impacts on their health, wellbeing, and attitude toward their profession; and their capacity to cope with and manage the interaction between work and non-work.

4.5. Understanding of Work–Life Balance

In exploring the working principals' understanding of work–life balance, three common themes arose among participant responses: balance as a subjective experience, balance as responsive rather than fixed, and balance as boundary-necessary.

First, as the working definition in this study suggests, work–life balance is a subjectively understood reality, and what one perceives as balance might not feel like balance to another. As Principal Hawthorne said, work–life balance is “the prioritizing of my personal life and my professional life and how do I determine, almost on a daily basis, what takes precedence over other things.” Principal Andrews said that defining work–life balance is “subjective,” noting that while “some people are more geared towards working longer hours and they find that to be necessary,” others might have more clear lines and thus work less hours. Dr. Morris, a middle school principal, stated that proper balance requires one to be strategic about their decision-making, jesting that “everybody’s ‘strategy’ is a little bit different” and that factors, such as family makeup, can impact what strategic decision-making looks like. Such sentiments suggest that principals understand well the subjective nature of work–life balance.

Second, principals' responses imply they understand that work–life balance must be pursued in a manner responsive to both personal and professional demands that are fluid. Their responses affirm a fixed view of work–life balance is not realistic. For example, Dr. Taylor employed a common playground image to explain her understanding of work–life balance:

Typically, when I think of balance, I think of a teeter totter, right? And then balance would mean when it's completely perpendicular with the ground, right? But after being in education for a long time, I actually don't think of balance in that way anymore. Balance is really more of an ebb and flow of seasons of the job and seasons of my life, really.

Other participants echoed this statement. Dr. Henry described this idea of seasonal fluidity, saying “The beginning of the year is really crazy around the holidays. Springtime with prom, graduation, all the things you know, you kind of know the ebbs and flow of the season.” Because of this, he continued, “You have to know what's coming and be able to stay ahead of some of the things . . . the things that you can control, try to be proactive in those to help maintain that balance.” Similarly, Principal Hawthorne emphasized the fluid nature of her work's demands, suggesting that work–life balance entails “getting up and prioritizing . . . what part of me [personal or professional] is going to be stretched a little bit that day” and then asking, “how do I accommodate for that?”

Lastly, principals commonly understood attainment of work–life balance to require the establishment and maintenance of boundaries that protect both spheres of life, even if such boundaries must have some measure of flexibility and permeability. Principal Hamilton viewed work–life balance as having healthy enough boundaries not to isolate work from non-work but rather to “lessen the impact of your work life on your home life” or to have “strong enough boundaries that there's a differential between the two.” Dr. Darby sees work–life balance as more than just avoiding taking work home; rather, she encapsulated her understanding of work–life balance through the question, “How are you able to separate [work and non-work] and to, frankly, protect the two?” Principal Andrews stressed that work–life balance necessitates “clear understanding of when I'm at work and when I'm at home” and management of this interaction by recognizing “when that cutoff needs to happen.” Dr. Stacie expressed similar sentiments in terms of responsibility, saying:

I take professional responsibility for my students and my teachers. But I also take responsibility for my life at home and my kids in my marriage and all those

things. And so I think just for me, being able to manage them where I feel like I feel comfortable with the time that I'm giving to both.

In numerous responses, principals made clear that they understood the necessity of boundaries that promote healthy separation between work and non-work, yet as mentioned above, participant responses also indicate these boundaries are unique to individuals and must respond to ever-changing demands in both spheres.

4.6. Challenges to Work–Life Balance

While the principals we interviewed consistently affirmed that WLB must be understood subjectively and as responsive to ever-changing needs, they also expressed some level of struggle to attain healthy WLB as a principal. When asked to list what falls under their purview, three principals responded immediately with the word “Everything”. Dr. Darby summed up the role and responsibilities of a principal as, “Basically, we’re responsible for every single thing that happens from corner to corner and top to bottom of this campus.” Principal Houston, who had recently moved from one district to another, said of his prior principalship in an extremely rural district:

I was busy two to three nights a week doing supervision for sports or activities at the school. I was the SPED director, I was the Title One director, I was the ISS teacher, I was the Parents as Teachers coordinator, I was the curriculum instructor or curriculum coach instructor, I did all the observations for all 21 certified teachers.

While rural principals were more likely to serve multiple functions for their districts, even for principals in larger districts, the impressive scope of responsibilities was a common theme that seems to influence their experience of work–life balance. As Dr. Darby, principal of a sizable high school with assistants under her noted, her work still entails management of many areas, among them safety and security, human resources, staffing, programming, and most importantly, learning.

Perhaps connected to the wide scope of responsibilities they must manage, another challenge to principals’ experience of work–life balance was their common struggle to detach mentally from work when away from work. Though principals reported giving non-work time to work tasks, a more concerning challenge for them is avoiding thinking about work outside of work time. Dr. Darby shared, “I would say that I think about work and I am probably consumed by thoughts of work a lot outside of the day.” Dr. Dean admits her work is “constantly on my mind or on my shoulders.” Dr. Taylor reported thinking about work “more than I should, more than I want to.” When asked how much he thinks about work beyond the workday, Dr. Morris responded, “All the time? It’s just—it’s just too much. Just think about it all the time.” Such thoughts can be logistical in nature, such as for Dr. Stacie who shared, “I feel like even when I lay down at night it takes me a while to go to sleep because I have a list in my head of the things that I want to make sure I don’t forget or I usually check my calendar the night before for the next day.” Other principals reported ruminating on situations from their day, such as Principal Andrews, who stated, “I still do think a lot about things if there’s been some high stress situations or meetings. I tend to replay those more after school hours. Sometimes probably more than I should.” Such responses represent a commonality among principals in facing some difficulty mentally detaching from the workday beyond work hours.

A third observation was that principals’ expectations of themselves seem to play a large part in how they experience work–life balance. Though identified through different language (perfectionism, people-pleasing, work ethic, or a desire to support staff), multiple participants’ responses indicate that the expectations principals put on themselves have an impact on their experience of work and non-work balance. Principal Andrews stated,

“I have a very people-pleasing personality. I want to make sure everything is running smoothly.” Principal Hawthorne echoed Andrews, adding that “perfectionism is a challenge for me because I really don’t want to do things halfway or carelessly.” Dr. Darby noted that this manifests for her as “trying to be trying to be on 100% for my career and for my job and for the thing that I signed on the dotted line that said I will do and giving it 100%. Trying to be mom and giving it 100%. Trying to get to all the things.” Still, she also flatly acknowledged, “There’s just not enough time in the day.” Dr. Morris and Principal Houston expressed similar challenges, though in terms of work ethic. Per Morris, “I think when you have a strong work ethic, it’s . . . kind of, umm, you battle that because it’s always pulling you in a direction to try to get work accomplished when you may be needing to do something else.”

As principals often ascend to the role through work habits reflective of high self-expectations, it is not surprising that these same habits can present challenges to work–life balance when an individual assumes an elevated role with greater responsibility and a wider scope of work to be completed.

4.7. Impact of Spillover on Principals

In exploring spillover between work and non-work and its impacts, the study aimed to identify manifestations as well as impacts of both direct and indirect spillover. One common example of direct spillover was supervision of and attendance at activities outside of school as a significant cause of direct spillover. As Dr. Henry noted, there are seasons of his year that can necessitate two or three nights per week of evening supervision. Similarly, Dr. Dean commented, “In a high school setting . . . , I could be somewhere every single night supervising an event whether it’s, you know, an orchestra concert, football game.” Though supervision may look different at elementary levels, Dr. Taylor, a K-5 principal, expressed concern that principals are expected to be at numerous after-hours events, saying that she wishes the expectation for principals and evening activities was “We’d like for you to engage some, but it is not the expectation that you are at all and that you are in charge of all because those are big things that help you rest and not take energy away from all the other things you have to do.” As demonstrated, after-school supervision duties represent a significant demand on principals’ time beyond the standard workday.

In addition to direct spillover, principals also offered numerous examples of indirect spillover. One of the more notable examples offered by participants related to the transfer of work stressors to their non-work lives. For some participants, this transfer manifested in their mood outside of work. As Dr. Morris said:

On a normal day, I’m a happy, happy guy. . . . I’m a talker. But you know what? It may be a day where it’s just—or maybe just a rough week—and I just, it just kind of sucks the life out of you sometimes. And so when I come home and my wife can recognize that. . . . So I think sometimes it impacts my disposition.

Principal Andrews concurred, saying of disgruntled parents, staff conflicts, and other work stressors, “The more stress or the more negative influences that I have here at work, . . . that directly tends to affect my mood [at home].” Dr. Taylor also shared that the demands of being gracious and flexible all day at work with others can negatively impact her mood at home. In her words, “when I get home . . . I’m going to snap judgment and [I’ll] potentially ‘bark’ a little bit.” Participants routinely expressed concern over how this mood transfer as they fully understand that it has impacts not only on them, but also their families and loved ones they interact with beyond the work setting.

Still, mood alone was not the only manifestation of indirect spillover. Another example was isolation and withdrawal beyond work. As Dr. Stacie said, “When you’re at school, you’re on all the time.” As a result, she may find herself sitting away from others rather

than engaging socially at after-school events such as her daughter's volleyball games. Dr. Taylor spoke of the same reality, though at home rather than in public, stating, "I'm an extrovert, typically. And I extrovert all day long with all these people [at school], and then sometimes I get home, I'm like, I just want to hide, which is not fair." Others echoed this sentiment, such as Hawthorne, who shared that "if it's been a day where I've taken a, you know, figurative 'beating,' then I go home and my response to that is that I don't say anything. I'm kind of a shut-off person once those things happen."

While some principals' experience manifests as what could be called "people fatigue," some responses indicate that withdrawal may also stem from a desire (or even need) to avoid discussing work beyond the workday. As Dr. Henry noted, "I may have had the worst day ever, but it's like, I don't want to talk about it, because I don't want to relive it." Similarly, Principal Hawthorne mentioned that after getting home on a hard day, "I don't want to talk about school, like 'I school all day!'" In relation to problems that arise in the workday, Dr. Dean expresses the same idea:

I don't need to go over and over and over and over it, to rehash it with somebody else because I've rehashed it several times . . . so giving every detail again when I get home, it's just draining, so I just try not to have to relive it again, I guess.

Such comments from participants suggest that part of how principals detach from work may be avoiding discussion of work in non-work settings. Still, Dr. Henry was also quick to recognize that this has ramifications, admitting that his tendency to avoid "getting things out" has, in the past, led to negative interactions due to emotional buildup.

In addition to manifestations of spillover, the study also sought to understand the impacts participants perceive spillover to have on their own health and wellbeing. In analysis of responses, two notable patterns of response emerged. First, the physical impacts of the job are real for working principals. Several principals mentioned physical impacts, ranging from the common response of exhaustion or low energy levels at home, to more serious matters such as weight fluctuation, illness, loss of sleep, loss of appetite, blood pressure regulation, or even ulcers. One contributing factor across several responses was the incompatibility of principals' schedules with activity or proper diet. For example, Dr. Morris, Dr. Taylor, and Principal Hamilton all reported that their daily schedule does not allow them to find the workout time they need. As Taylor said, due to her long commute and school starting time, unless she wants to work out at 3:30 a.m., her schedule simply does not allow it. Like Hamilton and Morris, she finds it a struggle to convince herself after work, mentally and physical exhausted from the day, to make time for physical activity, which impacts energy levels, mood, focus, and overall fitness. Hamilton added that the busyness of the work also leads to both poor dietary choices and the tendency to skip meals, both of which are problematic. Commenting on how work impacts both diet and weight, Dr. Darby joked, "I don't know how I can go every day and only eat one meal a day and still gain weight. . . . I've gained like ten pounds in the last year and a half, which is super frustrating." As is evident in such responses, one of the physical impacts that seems most notable is the impact direct spillover has on activity level and diet.

While impacts on health and wellness do exist, participants expressed greater concerns about the impact of work-life balance on relationships, primarily with family members. While many principals affirmed the objective impact of time away from family due to direct spillover, most principals seemed less concerned about the quantity time away from family than about the quality of time with family. Concerned about his ability to be fully present with his wife at home, Principal Houston shared, "Sometimes . . . she gets 'the rest of me' and it's just something that I'm still working on how to make sure I achieve in both areas [work and home], and I'm not letting her down." Similarly, Principal Andrews noted the subtle danger of detaching from work stressors leading to a lack of presence with family,

noting, “if you’re not careful . . . it’s very easy to come home and just sit down and veg a little bit on TV or media. And the next thing you know you’re an hour or two into this and you’re not spending time with your wife or you’re not talking to your children.” Recalling a moment she sensed the importance of the time she has with her family outside of work, Dr. Darby stated, “if I can’t be present, even in the small amount of time that I’m with them, and if [work was] carrying over into me just being in this perpetual state of frustration and you know, having a lack of efficacy and all of those things, . . . it just wasn’t worth it.” These and other statements clarified that working principals prioritize familial relationships, but they tend to be more concerned about the impact of their work on the quality rather than the quantity of their time with family members.

4.8. Important Aspects in Managing WLB

The final aspect of work–life balances this study explored was the principal’s experience of managing the interface between work and non-work to maintain WLB. In exploring these aspects of WLB, the following findings emerged.

First, principals acknowledge they must establish boundaries that separate work and non-work but recognize those boundaries must maintain at least some level of flexibility and permeability. Principals routinely spoke of the need for them to be accessible, whether for logistical reasons or for more human needs such as situations pertaining to students or staff. As an example, while Principal Dean has ceased taking her laptop home after work as a communication boundary, she also noted, “if somebody calls me from school, like if I get a phone call from a teacher or I get a call from a parent that has my number, you know, then then I will stop what I’m doing and I will answer the phone and or I will take care of the situation.” Similarly, Dr. Henry attempts to set clear boundaries by communicating to colleagues, “‘Hey, you know, I’m available up until 7 p.m.,’ or ‘I’m available till 8 p.m.’ But . . . once we get to that, it’ll have to wait till the next day.” On the other hand, though, he also shared about a recent instance in which he had to take a call late on a Saturday night regarding an unarmed security system at his building. Though an isolated and easily handled situation, it does exemplify the types of needs that drive the tension principals feel in setting boundaries that protect the integrity of their work and non-work but allow for the level of integration of the two spheres their work requires.

A second finding related to principals’ management of work–life balance was the importance of relationships, social and familial, outside of school. As mentioned earlier, many principals indicated a desire or need to avoid work conversation beyond work settings. For those principals, having relationships where other topics are focal points of discussion seemed key. As Principal Hawthorne shared, “Sometimes you need . . . outsiders to be part of your circle because they don’t want to just talk about school. That’s not really interesting to them, and so you don’t feel like you have to.” Dr. Dean, noting the tendency to “talk shop” when with other educators, greatly enjoys the fact that she has part-time jobs beyond her role as a principal, sharing, “They are jobs not connected at all to being a principal. And I love it because I don’t have to talk about school.” Though he routinely meets socially with a group of other male principals, Dr. Morris benefits from the fact that their meeting is spiritual in nature, that the focus is on faith and scripture rather than solely professional. For Dr. Stacie, this theme emerged in her spousal relationship as her husband is also a working principal. For her, it has been important to set family boundaries and even take “mini-vacations” that allow them “to reconnect and not talk about work, which is really, really hard for [them] to do.” Examples such as these underscore the importance of having relationships in which a principal’s focus can shift away from work to other aspects of their life.

A last finding in relation to principals' management of work–life balance was that relationships and support from upper administration plays a huge role in the principals' experience of work–life balance. There were distinct differences in responses among principals who felt they had supportive, caring relationships with their upper administration and those who did not. For example, Principal Andrews noted he and his superintendent have a “close relationship,” expressing gratitude that “I can have an open conversation with them. I can have an honest conversation with them. I can admit where maybe I'm struggling, and they're willing to help and support.” Dr. Henry spoke of supervisors in the past who would demand things of him on tight timelines, noting that he is thankful for new supervisors who seem more respectful of the time outside of work such things would require. Dr. Dean and Principal Hawthorne also expressed gratitude for their superintendents, specifically mentioning how they support principals in taking time away when needed, checking in on them as people, and modeling and discussing the boundaries they know are good for their employees.

Other principals spoke of the challenges when such a relationship does not exist. For Principal Hamilton, a poor partnership with upper administration left her feeling like she had to carry more of the load than was her share, negatively impacting her ability to find healthy balance. Discussing how principals spend a good deal of time checking on their own staff and working to manage the climate and mood of the building, Dr. Stacie said:

I don't feel like the cabinet leaders don't care. I mean, I think they definitely care, and I think they get lost in their own worlds, too. And we're leaders, and so we're taking care of our people, but I think sometimes we forget to take care of our principals and to check on them.

Expressing the same concern, Dr. Taylor spoke of how much she invests in checking on teachers to ensure they are okay, but when asked whether anyone does that for the principals, replied, “mmm. . .no.” Taken together responses across the participant pool indicate that upper administration have capacity to strongly influence principals' experience of work–life balance through the relationships they build and the support they offer principals in establishing a healthy work–life balance.

5. Discussion

The study was guided by four research questions which focused on 10 principals in Missouri, United States—their understanding and experience of work–life balance, their perception of spillover and its impacts in their lives, and their ability to manage the interface of work and non-work. Below, we discussed key discussion points arising from the findings and its implications.

5.1. *Principals Get It—They Need Others to as Well*

One of the clearest takeaways from the interviews was that working principals understand what they signed up for in their work, but they need others to understand it, too. As the findings indicate, participating principals seemed to understand and accept their work is uniquely demanding and wide in its scope, encompassing a myriad of tasks they must complete, capacities they must possess, and roles they must assume (Pollock et al., 2015). As seen in this study and the wider research base, direct and indirect spillover effects of this reality pose physical, mental, and emotional impacts that are very real and can present challenges to both recruitment and retention of principals (Mahfouz, 2018; Ray et al., 2020; Reid & Creed, 2021). Such a prospect of principal turnover is highly problematic as it can impact academic achievement (Bartanen et al., 2019; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019), teacher retention (Guthery & Bales, 2022), district finances (School Leaders Network, 2014), and school equity (Béteille et al., 2012; Grissom et al., 2021).

Principals in this study acknowledged these challenges as well as the fact that in response, boundaries must exist to protect the integrity of both their work and non-work lives. Still, they are under no illusions that such boundaries can be universally firm and fixed as their work requires some level of fluid, responsive integration of both spheres. They must be able to “balance” by inhabiting space between extremes of work–life integration or segmentation (Ashforth et al., 2000), doing so in ways that proactively anticipate seasonal demands of work and non-work life. What seems of key importance for principals as they do this, though, is that they have social, professional, and familial relationships with others who understand the nature of their work and are responsive and supportive. Whether that be friends who are okay with talking about topics other than work, upper administration whose leadership recognizes and honors the tension principals feel in pursuit of work–life balance, or family members who are willing to engage in family time that integrates into after school duties, these are the types of relationships that seem pivotal in helping principals walk the leadership “tightrope” that can make balance such a challenge.

5.2. *It Is Not Just About the “Work”*

A second takeaway from the findings is that while the objective impacts of principals’ work–life balance are real and noteworthy, it is equally (if not more) important we recognize and address the more subjective impacts that principals face in their attempt to balance work and non-work. The principals interviewed seemed much more concerned about the subjective impacts of spillover such as thoughts about work beyond the workday, social withdrawal after hours, or the impact of their work–life on the quality (not quantity) of time with others, particularly family, in non-work settings. This has also been well documented in Doyle Fosco et al.’s (2025) study, which found that the impacts of work stress were multifaceted and often spilled over into the home environment. The fact that principals report thoughts about work beyond the workday as a concern is somewhat unsurprising as it accords with what we know about psychological detachment and its role as a recovery experience (Sonnetag, 2012; Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007). Also unsurprising, the reported experiences of withdrawal and impacts on quality of time (presence) with others seem to represent a tension in which engagement of one role (principal) can present spillover effects that hamper full engagement in other roles beyond the workday (social, familial). As it is these impacts that seem to be of greater concern to principals than the more objective impacts, it is worth discussion and further research as to what supports can help principals navigate these subjective challenges as well as the more objective ones.

5.3. *Principals Must Walk the Leadership Tightrope, but Systems Can Steady the Rope*

A primary purpose of this study was to surface and understand the experiences of working principals to establish what supports might aid principals in their pursuit of work–life balance. However, supports must be discussed on both individual and systemic levels.

For individuals in the profession, the results of this study suggest that principals should invest in establishing, maintaining, and tending to relationships (familial or social) that extend beyond their non-work networks. In this study, responses indicated such relationships allowed principals to detach from work more fully through interactions with family and others around shared interests that were not exclusively work-related. These relationships with others serve as essential outlets for principals, helping them manage stress and maintain balance (Mahfouz, 2018). This aligns with broader research on organizational leaders, which shows that those who thrive often remain “anchored” through meaningful connections to at least one, if not multiple, non-work groups (Cross & Garau, 2018). Similar findings underscoring the importance of connecting with others were reported in a study by Kutsyuruba et al. (2024). They noted that “outstanding principals

were mindful of the importance of asking for help when needed and were selective in terms of where to find the nonjudgmental supportive advice and assistance" (p. 15).

Additionally, principals can benefit from establishing reasonable boundaries sensitive to their needs and proactively communicating those to others. This study's participants recognized that boundaries must have a degree of flexibility and permeability, yet also acknowledged the fact that boundaries must clarify the line of separation between engagement in their work and non-work roles. Such boundaries may govern communication patterns beyond work hours, establish times at which one will leave work, block uninterrupted time for leisure or activity, or limit the time given to work tasks in non-work time. These boundaries, if established and communicated, can reduce the stress principals feel in their pursuit of work–life balance (DeMatthews et al., 2021a).

Individual principals should also draw on approaches to leadership that are distributive and involve responsibly sharing or delegating tasks and duties. As evidenced in this study's findings, the work of the principal is wide, and the general disposition of a principal is one of high self-expectation. In the words of one participant, principals want to be seen as "grinder[s]" who work hard and model high expectations for staff. As professionals with high standards and numerous responsibilities, principals may struggle with tendencies to avoid distributing or delegating leadership and tasks throughout the organization even though such approaches can both reduce stress (Pearce, 2007), relieve them from the pressure of being solely responsible for all organizational leadership (Lovell et al., 2007), and also support teacher leadership development within the organization itself (Galdames-Calderón, 2023). This was also echoed in a study conducted in Finland by Elomaa et al. (2023), which found that principals' stress was primarily driven by high workloads and that social support played a crucial role in helping them cope and maintain well-being.

Last, principals should establish and maintain rhythms that support healthy detachment and leverage it as a recovery experience (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007). Whether this involves using a commute as a transitional opportunity to disengage one role and engage another, taking family getaways, engaging in social roles outside of work such as volunteering, or simply turning off one's electronic devices and being truly unreachable, principals benefit from those activities and rhythms that tap into psychological detachment's power to positively impact wellbeing and even professional performance (Fritz et al., 2010; Sonnetag, 2012).

While principals can individually take steps to improve their own work–life balance, educational systems can also take meaningful steps to support principals in that endeavor. One of the first steps they can take is to prioritize principal mentoring. As results indicated, there appears to be a general trend for principals to become more adept at managing work–life balance as they progress throughout their career; this, though, depends on them remaining in the profession. Recent reports have revealed the power of early mentorship and ongoing support in helping principals do just that (Banerji, 2024; Liang & Slotnik, 2023). For this reason, and in accordance with other reports and studies (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018), it is valuable for principals early in their administrative tenure connect with more seasoned professionals whose experience can be offered as a support to ensure principals successfully navigate the early years of their administrative experience, allowing them to, over time, become more adept at the boundary management necessary for healthy work–life balance.

Second, systems can increase access to employer-based wellness supports and incentives. As principals have reported both subjective mental and emotional impacts as well as objective physical impacts of their experience of work–life balance, it could be beneficial for principals and their employers if school systems were not only to provide but also promote supports and incentives, whether that be access to counseling services,

reduced rate gym memberships, or even bonuses for participating in wellness checks or challenges (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Moss, 2023; Steiner et al., 2022; Woo & Steiner, 2022). As participants noted, and as the wider research bases suggests, it is such self-care that often gets neglected in principals' attempts to negotiate the demands of work and non-work, so employers promoting such care in this fashion can alleviate some of that strain principals feel in pursuing a healthy work–life balance. For example, interventions, such as Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) or Stress Management and Resiliency Training Program (SMART), provide mindfulness-based training that improves educators' well-being and reduce stress (Jennings et al., 2013; Chesak et al., 2019). While attention to principals' well-being is beginning to grow, much of the existing policy and practice in this area continues to focus primarily on teachers. Consequently, additional research and program development are needed to address the unique stressors and work–life balance challenges faced by school leaders.

Third, and perhaps most important, systems must take seriously the role of upper administration in supporting principals' experience of work–life balance. This study and others affirm that if principals have upper administrative supervisors who are supportive, caring, and pro-WLB, principals' experiences of work–life balance benefit. Such relationships should be characterized by concern for principal wellness, discussions and modeling of healthy work–life boundaries, and encouragement to engage in self-care practices that allow for optimal work–life balance. Upper administration who supervises principals would be wise to proactively support principals' experience of work–life balance as such (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Oplatka, 2017; Yang, 2020).

Future studies are necessary to continue building our understanding of the principalship and how working principals can pursue a balance that allows them to attain satisfactory, complementary, and rewarding experiences in both their work and non-work lives. Additionally, research focusing on race and the intersectionality of gender and other identities can provide valuable insights into the diverse experiences of principals in achieving work–life balance. Future research should also examine the efficacy of specific supports, such as non-work relationships, mentoring, administrative support, and health/wellness initiatives, that may promote greater work–life balance. Understanding what truly works for principals will help develop targeted interventions and support systems that enable them to maintain their well-being while effectively performing their professional roles.

6. Conclusions

While each principal's experience of work–life balance is shaped by contextual, professional, and personal factors, this study contributes to the growing evidence that school leaders consistently face significant challenges in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. Principals enter the role with an awareness of these challenges, yet sustaining their wellbeing requires more than individual resilience; it demands systemic attention to the conditions under which they work. District and school leadership must actively prioritize principal wellbeing, not only to support leaders' longevity in the profession but also to enhance their capacity to serve students, families, and staff effectively. Findings from this study underscore the need for continued research and policy development that center principal wellbeing as integral to educational leadership. By deepening our understanding of the ways principals navigate work–life balance, future scholarship can help inform structures and supports that foster healthier, more sustainable leadership practices.

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