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## Leading on Empty: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Secondary Trauma in School Leaders

### Abstract

Those in helping professions who work with individuals in trauma are at risk for developing symptoms of secondary trauma. Many helping professions, like social workers and mental health counselors, have training and support to help them recognize and mitigate the symptoms of secondary trauma. Like social workers, school leaders also work closely with children in trauma. However, they lack the necessary training, support, and knowledge about secondary to help them manage their symptoms. The intent of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how school leaders experience secondary trauma and how they believe secondary trauma effects their leadership. The research was conducted using one-on-one semi –structured interviews. The data was coded and interpreted to help better understand how school leaders experience the phenomenon of secondary trauma. Findings revealed that, in the absence of formal training, school leaders either repress or suppress the effects of secondary trauma so they can fulfill the responsibilities of their leadership role. The recommendations of this study include: revised school policy to include wellness and mental health, the inclusion of secondary trauma training in educational leadership certification programs, and continued study of this under-researched phenomenon in school leaders.

Leading on Empty: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Secondary Trauma  
in School Leaders

By

Sharon Archer

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Theresa Pulos, Ed.D.

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St. John Fisher College

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## **Dedication**

When I consider all those who held me up and inspired me during this process, I am humbled by the love and support I feel. This study is dedicated to those who supported me, guided me, influenced me and inspired me.

To my husband, mother-in-law, and sister, thank you for the countless hours of watching the kids and keeping the balls in the air while I was in class. I could not have even started this process without your dedication and flexibility. Knowing my children were in good hands while I was not home was invaluable in this process.

To my team, Team GRIT, thank you for going through this process with me. The camaraderie, laughter, and support the four of you have given me has been such a comfort throughout this challenging program. Thank you Amanda, Lucy, Stephen and Derrick for your trust, your truth, and your friendship.

To my chair, Dr. Pulos, my committee member Dr. Moore, and my advisor, Dr. Evans, thank you for giving so much of yourselves to me. You all were so generous with your time, dedication, and feedback during my dissertation process. Dr. Moore, thank you for your intellectual insight and pragmatic strategies. I left many meetings feeling ready to tackle the next step based on your suggestions. Dr. Pulos, thank you for making me a scholar and researcher. Thank you for continuously pushing me, developing me, believing in me. I am a better leader, researcher, and scholar because of your mentorship.

Dr. Evans, thank you for your loving, yet firm guidance throughout this process. I will continue to hear your voice when life is out of balance.

This study, however, is ultimately dedicated to four people: my parents who influenced me and my children who inspire me. I was blessed with the perfect combination of parents. My mother truly told me every day, “Sharon, you can do anything you set your mind to.” As my mother developed my sense of efficacy, my father taught me a tireless work ethic. This combination of confidence and drive has served me well, but it was particularly valuable in my dissertation process. Even when I was on my thirteenth revision, it never occurred to me to give up. I was only compelled to work harder.

To my son CJ and daughter Fenton, I hope you look back on this time and realize it was all for you. I did this to be the best version of myself; to be the best mama I could be to you. I hope this opens doors for our family and allows me to give you more of what you want and deserve. I hope this serves as a model for you of the hard work Papa instilled in me and the confidence Mammy gave me. Because you, CJ, and you, Fenton can also do anything you can set your mind to. Mommy loves you.

## **Biographical Sketch**

Sharon Archer is currently a Vice Principal in the Syracuse City School District. Mrs. Archer attended the State University of New York at Oswego and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Education in 2001. She attended the University of New England from 2003 to 2006 and graduated with a Master of Sciences degree in Education in 2006. Mrs. Archer completed her National Board Teaching Certification in Adolescent Mathematics in 2011. She attended the State University of New York at Oswego and graduated with a Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Leadership in 2018. She came to St. John Fisher College in the spring of 2018 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mrs. Archer pursued her research in the analysis of secondary trauma in school leaders under the direction of Dr. Theresa Pulos and Dr. Melissa Moore and received the Ed.D. degree in 2020.

## **Abstract**

Those in helping professions who work with individuals in trauma are at risk for developing symptoms of secondary trauma. Many helping professions, like social workers and mental health counselors, have training and support to help them recognize and mitigate the symptoms of secondary trauma. Like social workers, school leaders also work closely with children in trauma. However, they lack the necessary training, support, and knowledge about secondary to help them manage their symptoms. The intent of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how school leaders experience secondary trauma and how they believe secondary trauma effects their leadership. The research was conducted using one-on-one semi –structured interviews. The data was coded and interpreted to help better understand how school leaders experience the phenomenon of secondary trauma. Findings revealed that, in the absence of formal training, school leaders either repress or suppress the effects of secondary trauma so they can fulfill the responsibilities of their leadership role. The recommendations of this study include: revised school policy to include wellness and mental health, the inclusion of secondary trauma training in educational leadership certification programs, and continued study of this under-researched phenomenon in school leaders.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Secondary trauma refers to the behaviors and emotions exhibited by a person who is exposed indirectly to another person's traumatic event (Figley, 1995, 1999). Secondary trauma is also a negative occupational outcome experienced by professionals who work closely with clients in trauma (Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2016). These symptoms are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, even though the individual does not directly experience the trauma (Figley, 1999). Secondary trauma is defined as indirect exposure to trauma through a firsthand account of narrative of a traumatic event. The vivid recounting of trauma by the survivor and the clinician's subsequent cognitive or emotional representation of that event may result in a set of symptoms and reactions that parallel post-traumatic stress disorder (Figley, 1995). Figley (1995) considered the terms secondary trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma to be synonyms.

Secondary trauma is more common in the helping professions (Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2016). Social workers, counselors, police officers, child welfare workers, parole officers, and nurses are among the professionals who can develop symptoms of secondary trauma (Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2016). This phenomenon is increasing in school workers as trauma is increasing in students (Elliot et al., 2018).

Education is a highly stressful profession with levels of stress similar to paramedics, police officers, and social service workers (Koenig et al., 2018). Likewise, secondary trauma can create additional feelings of stress in educators (Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2016). In 2018, 47% of children in the United States aged 17 years or less reported

having experienced at least one traumatic event in their childhood, and 22% of children in the United States experienced more than one traumatic event before age 17 (Elliot et al., 2018). This is relevant for school personnel because they can vicariously acquire the negative emotional status of traumatized children (Motta, 2012).

In 2018, 64% of educators in the United States reported experiencing symptoms of secondary trauma (Elliot et al., 2018). Secondary traumatization may initially express itself as depersonalization and feelings of reduced personal accomplishment (Szempruch, 2018). As secondary traumatization continues, one may exhibit energy loss, headache, joylessness, weariness, insomnia, hypersensitivity, proneness to sudden reactions, impulsiveness, internal tension, and generalized anxiety. At this stage of secondary trauma, Szempruch (2018) found that school leaders can be perceived as negative, heartless, or overly indifferent to students, their parents, and colleagues. The school leaders appear to lack empathy, be dehumanizing, have a negative attitude, and be cynical (Szempruch, 2018).

While it is one phenomenon, secondary trauma has several side effects. It may also affect school leaders personally. The emotional labor, which is the process of managing feelings and expressions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a job, that school leaders might use to mitigate the effects of secondary trauma can create feelings of hopelessness in those leaders (Smit, 2017). In addition, the emotional work, which can be defined as the management of one's own feelings or work done in an effort to maintain a relationship, of leading a school can cause school leaders to feel ill, at their emotional threshold, and devastated (Smit, 2017).

In the Drago-Severson et al. (2018) qualitative study on the emotional demands of school leadership, principals described the nature of their social-emotional awareness as it related to their occupational success. The study developed themes like “all on me,” “absolutely draining,” and “balance and self-care” (Drago-Severson et al., 2018, p. 332). Drago-Severson et al. (2018) asserted that school leaders feel the emotional demands of their leadership role.

Federici and Skaalvik (2012) asserted school principals’ feelings of emotional exhaustion are significantly correlated with depersonalization and the motivation to quit their positions. As principals experience elements of secondary trauma, such as emotional exhaustion, their sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction decreases. Mascall and Leithwood (2010) argued that principal turnover is associated with school culture, curriculum and instruction, and student achievement. What Mascall and Leithwood (2010) found is that principal turnover is moderately and negatively correlated with school culture and curriculum and instruction, and they found a weak negative relationship with student achievement. Mascall and Leithwood (2010) posited that leaders can personally experience decreased mood and decreased job satisfaction, and when they do, school leaders may experience difficulty leading change.

Research has examined the relationship between occupational stress and emotional labor (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Oplatka, 2017). People engage in emotional labor when they try to manage or change their emotions to ensure that their emotions are consistent with a role or an expected behavior. Fein and Isaacson (2009) uncovered themes, such as “paying a personal toll,” “stress changes the job,” and “leadership as an internal compass”(p. 1335-1339) that seem to guide leaders as to which emotions to

suppress and express when dealing with trauma. Oplatka (2017) found school principals feel the need to suppress negative emotions and regulate caring emotions.

Similarly, Kiral (2016) discovered statements by principals, such as “I put on a mask to display the right emotions at school” (p. 77), indicate the emotional labor expended by school leaders. Haver et al. (2013) revealed leaders and followers attempt to hide their inner feelings, and the researchers considered this to be emotionally harmful. Further, leaders were found to suppress their emotions more often than their followers. When leaders choose to suppress negative emotions, such as anger and uncertainty, more positive emotions develop in their followers. In addition, Haver et al. (2013) found leaders suppressed their emotions more often than their followers.

The degree to which individuals engage in surface acting, or disguising their emotions, on a daily basis was associated with increased emotional exhaustion, negative mood, and decreased job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2009). Leaders, especially those in high-needs schools, are charged with enacting change. Reitzug and Kappler-Hewitt (2017) identified the characteristics of effective turnaround principals or principals charged with making change within their school. Among the interpersonal qualities necessary for a leader to bring about change are effective communication, building relationships, gaining credibility, and trust.

### **Problem Statement**

Public schools are both in need of ongoing reform and work to serve traumatized students. Further, the leaders of these schools are at risk for developing secondary trauma as a result of the frequency of exposure to traumatized students. Secondary trauma and the emotional labor associated with secondary trauma can result in depersonalization,

feelings of reduced personal accomplishment, joylessness, hypersensitivity, internal tension, detachment from others, irritability, and generalized anxiety (Szempruch, 2018). Consequently, leaders who feel these emotions can experience difficulty in developing the levels of effective communication, relationships, credibility, and trust necessary to lead change.

Despite the awareness of how secondary trauma can affect professionals in a school setting, research on secondary trauma in school leaders is limited. There is a gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of school principals who work with traumatized children and how their experiences can affect their leadership. Further, there is little known regarding how school leaders can effectively lead while experiencing symptoms of secondary trauma. While there is an abundance of research regarding secondary trauma and the mental health professions, there has been little focus on how this phenomenon may affect those working in a school setting.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The phenomenon of secondary trauma can be viewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory, which describes the impact environment has on individual human development. With this theory, one can examine how an individual who works with traumatized students can be impacted on multiple levels. This theory brings meaning to how individuals might develop symptoms of secondary trauma when working in an environment of traumatized students as well as how this trauma is perceived and processed over time.

The theory includes nested circles that represent layers of how the environment is effecting the individual. The inner-most layer, and closest to the individual, is the

microsystem, followed by the mesosystem, the ecosystem, the microsystem and finally the chronosystem.

In the mesosystem and exosystem, this theory explains how one can be impacted by indirect contact with others. Further, Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem provides a structure to analyze how the way individuals are impacted by their environment can change over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This theory brings meaning to how individuals might develop symptoms of secondary trauma when working in an environment of traumatized students as well as how this trauma is perceived and processed over time.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore how school leaders experience secondary trauma. Specifically, this study explored how school leaders experienced what they felt after gaining the knowledge of a student's trauma. Gaining knowledge of student trauma can include when a student discloses the traumatic experience, bearing witness to those students who may act out in reaction to their trauma, and simply being aware that a student has experienced something traumatic, even though the student has remained silent about the traumatic event. In addition, this study explored how school leaders' experiences with secondary trauma affected their leadership.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do school leaders experience secondary trauma?
2. How do school leaders believe their experiences with student trauma affect their leadership?

## **Potential Significance of the Study**

This study builds on the existing literature regarding the emotional effects of secondary trauma in the helping professions. While there is an abundance of research regarding secondary trauma with those in the mental health professions, there has been little focus on how this phenomenon may affect school leaders. Research states that symptoms of secondary trauma can impede emotions that are necessary to establish positive relationships; however, there is little known about how this dynamic can interfere with effective school leadership.

Secondary trauma can create symptoms of depersonalization, detachment and irritability in school leaders (Szempruch, 2018). These symptoms can serve as a barrier to effective leadership as a Relator (Rath, 2008). The ability for a leader to effectively build relationships creates a culture in which staff takes ownership of their work (Rath, 2008). The trust that is developed between leader and follower is critical to a leader's ability to be unconventional, innovative, and the followers' openness to change (Rath, 2008).

Further, the symptoms of secondary trauma can prevent leaders from the interpersonal connections that are necessary to motivate and inspire followers to develop trust and loyalty (Sinek, 2009). In order for a leader to achieve long term results and success with staff, leaders must be vulnerable and communicate from the heart (Sinek, 2009). Symptoms of secondary trauma like joylessness, weariness, hypersensitivity, proneness to sudden reactions, impulsiveness, internal tension, and generalized anxiety and cynicism (Szempruch, 2018) could impede a leader's ability to make the authentic connections necessary to be an inspirational leader.

Kiral (2016) found there is an expectation for school leaders to successfully manage the emotional aspects of their jobs and provide the service of education. To successfully lead in this environment, principals may try to simultaneously manage their own emotions as well as the emotions of those around them. There is little research on how school principals behave as a result of working in an environment of secondary traumatic stress. Kiral (2016) revealed little is known about how secondary trauma in school leaders may create conflict with employees, occupational stress, and motivation to quit.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Bio ecological Systems Theory* - describes how individuals develop within the context of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

- *Microsystem*- subsystem is closest to the individual and encompasses interpersonal relationships and direct interactions with immediate surroundings. For example, a school leader having first-hand knowledge of student trauma.
- *Mesosystem*- describes the interactions between the individuals in the microsystem and how these interactions influence the conditions in the microsystem. For example, a school leader having second-hand knowledge of student trauma.
- *Exosystem*- describes how the interactions between others close to the individual can influence the conditions in the microsystem. For example, two members of a school leader's household having conflict on the same day a school leader experiences a student in trauma.

- *Macrosystem*- describes how the culture of the environment influences the individual's experience. For example, a school leader experiences a student in trauma in a school culture in which stakeholders expect consequences for the student.
- *Chronosystem*- describes how the experiences in each subsystem changes over time. For example, as a school leader gains more leadership experience, they may be influenced differently by secondary trauma.

*Emotional Labor* – how individuals manage their emotions during wage work.

Typically, these emotions are reflected in observable facial expressions and body posture. Emotional labor is a type of emotional regulation that includes two strategies: deep acting and surface acting.

- *Deep Acting* – adjusting one's subjective experience. More specifically, changing the cognitive methods used to manage inner conflicts, anxiety and other negative emotions to improve mood.
- *Surface Acting* – adjusting external expressions of emotion. This adjustment process does not change the mood experienced because individuals often express emotions that are inconsistent with their true feelings.

*Secondary Trauma* – natural consequent behaviors resulting from knowledge about an outrageous event experienced by a significant other (Figley, 1995). Figley (1995) considers the terms secondary trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma to be synonyms.

*Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)* – the emotional strain of wanting to help traumatized individuals after gaining knowledge of a traumatic event can create secondary traumatic stress (Newell & McNeil, 2010).

## **Chapter Summary**

Secondary trauma is a phenomenon that can create a disturbance in feelings and emotions (Motta, 2012), and it can occur when an individual is exposed to a traumatized individual (Elliot et al., 2018). While secondary trauma has been extensively researched in social workers and counseling professions, there is a lack of research on how this phenomenon may affect educators (Demirdag, 2016). This research was aimed at exploring how school leaders experience secondary trauma and what they believe about how this phenomenon that may affect their leadership.

Chapter 2 explores the review of the empirical literature. Following the review of the literature, the research design and methodology are discussed in Chapter 3. The results of the research are disseminated in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings and recommendations based on the analysis of the data collected.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

The emotional nature of working with children who are experiencing trauma can create challenges for school leaders. Research indicates that secondary trauma and similar situations can affect school leaders. This review of the relevant literature first discusses the phenomena of trauma, secondary trauma, and related aspects, such as emotional labor. The review then covers the effects of secondary trauma on school leaders. This section includes the psychological and relational effects of secondary trauma. Finally, the literature regarding secondary trauma and other factors that can make school leaders more vulnerable to developing secondary trauma is reviewed. This section of the review includes how secondary traumatic symptoms differ based on gender, school setting, outside personal factors, and exposure over time.

### **Trauma**

To better understand the phenomenon of secondary trauma, it is helpful to first review what is known about trauma. Traumatic events can include war, natural disasters, accidents, rape, abuse of any kind, and the death of a loved one (Hesse, 2002). When a person experiences trauma, it can change their behavior. After experiencing trauma, individuals may lack feelings of safety and security. Even when victims of trauma seek help, the trauma can be difficult to process, and the effect of trauma may continue long after the traumatic event occurred (Langdon et al., 2018).

However, this study is through the lens of childhood trauma. The National Institute of Mental Health (USA) defines childhood trauma as the experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects (2020). Childhood trauma contains three sub-components: abuse, trauma in the environment, and neglect.

## **Secondary Trauma**

Secondary trauma is the consequential behaviors of knowing about traumatic experiences that have happened to a significant other. School psychologists, social workers, teachers, and guidance counselors frequently encounter traumatized children in their daily work. Motta (2012) suggested that exposure to others being traumatized can have a negative effect on another person's emotions and well-being. As many school employees have a developed sense of empathy, it increases their understanding of a child's experience of being traumatized. Motta (2012) argued that this deeper understanding may lead to the development of secondary trauma, but it may occur on an unconscious level.

Research indicates that both community workers and school guidance counselors feel that they are not always aware that they may be experiencing secondary trauma (O'Neil, 2010). However, when interviewed, community workers spoke about specific coping mechanisms and professional qualities necessary to work with individuals who have experienced trauma (O'Neil, 2010). In contrast, school counselors have stated the general support systems they use when they feel overwhelmed rather than using specific coping mechanisms. In addition, five of the six school counselors interviewed by Parker and Henfield (2012) expressed a need for more trauma training. This implies that counselors, probation officers, youth workers, and community health workers have a knowledge of secondary trauma that school guidance counselors may not. Parker and Henfield (2012) posited that an awareness of secondary trauma can allow school counselors to implement strategies to diminish its effects.

The symptoms of secondary trauma can develop in professionals without their conscious awareness (Parker & Henfield, 2012). Research indicates that due to the apparent lack of awareness, secondary trauma can also develop in educators without their realization. Furthermore, the effects of secondary trauma on the professional is all-encompassing (O'Neil, 2010).

O'Neil (2010) conducted a narrative inquiry to learn more about the experiences of caring professionals who worked with traumatized individuals. Eight participants (five women and three men) volunteered to participate in a qualitative study of helping professionals. The participants were counselors, probation officers, youth workers, and community health workers. When speaking about the personal effects of providing trauma support, the participants expressed their post-trauma challenges and the work components that were specifically related to their training. When participants were asked about the personal and professional qualities needed to work with traumatized individuals, they shared the importance of dealing with their own trauma, using coping strategies, and the guiding beliefs of hope and resilience. The participants agreed there is an ambiguous nature to secondary trauma, and one does not always know they are developing symptoms (O'Neil, 2010). Along with feeling profoundly affected, helping professionals reported feeling that helping those who have experienced trauma takes over their lives.

While the effects of others trauma may be all-encompassing, research indicates that school personnel may not be familiar with the phenomenon of secondary trauma. Those in the education profession, including principals, can be ill-equipped to manage and support the effects of secondary trauma. Parker and Henfield's (2012) qualitative

study recruited school counselor volunteers to explore the nature of secondary trauma in school guidance counselors. Participants were either licensed or certified school counselors and/or individuals who were described as school counselors and were working in a school at the time of the study. Six school counselors, ranging in age from 27 to 54, were recruited from schools located in a Midwestern state (three females and three males). The participants worked at least part time and had 3 to 14 years of counseling experience. The data indicate that secondary trauma was often ambiguously defined by the school personnel (Parker & Henfield, 2012). Participants referred to taking on the issues that students or clients had and “carrying those things home,” rather than to use the term secondary trauma.

### **Emotional Labor**

Research indicates a connective nature between working with students in trauma and developing secondary trauma (Koenig et al., 2018; Wagman et al., 2015). Working with students in trauma can create unfavorable emotions within the helping individual such as depersonalization, feelings of reduced personal accomplishment, joylessness, hypersensitivity, internal tension, detachment from others, irritability, and generalized anxiety (Szempruch, 2018). Oplatka (2017) revealed that leaders, due to their role, feel there are limited in the emotions they can express. Leaders feel pressure to repress unfavorable emotions that secondary trauma can create (Oplatka, 2017). Kiral (2016) suggested that the intentional suppression of negative emotions leaders feel while experiencing secondary traumatic stress may indicate that emotional labor could be an additional element to consider when exploring secondary trauma and school leaders.

However, emotional labor is not limited to school leadership. An integrative review of 25 articles on emotional regulation and its implication for leaders was performed to determine the field's existing knowledge of emotional labor (Haver et al., 2013). The synthesis revealed two themes: (a) emotional labor and the leader's health and (b) emotional labor and the leader's job outcomes. Haver et al. (2013) started by identifying and synthesizing previous studies with various methodologies. In addition, the support of a research librarian was enlisted to develop a systematic research strategy. Leaders were found to suppress their emotions more often than their followers. Among the most frequent emotions leaders chose to express were gladness, enthusiasm, and interest. When leaders chose to suppress negative emotions, such as anger and uncertainty, more positive emotions developed in their followers (Haver et al., 2013).

People engage in emotional labor when they try to manage or change their emotions to ensure their emotions are consistent with a role or expected behavior. Fein and Isaacson (2009) interviewed 36 school leaders over a 3-year period regarding the emotional labor expended during a stressful situation. Interviews were conducted with leaders in seven North American schools where school shootings occurred. Participants served in both formal and informal leadership roles during or after the shootings. The purpose of this study was to examine leaders' understanding about what feelings were appropriate or inappropriate in crisis situations. In this narrative case analysis, Fein and Isaacson (2009) found participants reported to use deep acting (purposefully changing emotions to match expectations) and surface acting (acting as if one feels in an expected manner; faking) as a way to regulate their emotions and project expected, role-appropriate responses. Fein and Isaacson (2009) discovered themes, such as "paying a

personal toll,” “stress changes the job,” and “leadership as an internal compass,” seemed to guide leaders as to which emotions to suppress and express when dealing with trauma.

Further, Oplatka (2017) found empathy and compassion were among the emotions principals felt were permitted to express, while caring and anger the participants thought should be hidden. Oplatka (2017) recruited 10 Israeli principals to participate in semi-structured interviews about their ability to balance the demands of a stressful environment with their internal emotions. Of the 10 principals, six were from elementary schools, and four were from high schools (Oplatka, 2017). Purposive criterion sampling was used for the principals who had been in the position for at least 4 years and who demonstrated emotional intelligence, self-control, and emotional openness. Using comparative analysis coding, two themes emerged: (a) emotions principals are allowed to display, and (b) emotions principals must hide. Participants spoke about the need to suppress negative emotions and regulate caring emotions.

A similar study measured the efforts of school leaders to regulate their emotions by using the psychological properties of the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS). Kiral (2016) distributed a descriptive survey that was voluntarily completed by 212 school principals. When responding to prompts about surface acting on the ELS, the principals most frequently reported “I put on an act to appropriately deal with people and situations at school” ( $r = .836, p < .001$ ) (Kiral, 2016, p. 77), and “I behave in a way that differs from how I really feel at school” ( $r = .834, p < .001$ ) (p. 77). Further, when asked about deep acting, principals most often reported that they “attempt to create certain emotions within themselves that matches the image of their job” ( $r = .717, p < .001$ ) (Kiral, 2016, p 77). Statements by the principals, such as “I put on a mask to display the right emotions at

school,” (Kiral, 2016, p. 77) explained 30% of the variance in the emotional labor score scale for principals.

Leaders were found to suppress their emotions more often than their followers. The most-frequent emotions leaders chose to express were gladness, enthusiasm, and interest. Fein and Isaacson, (2009) discovered themes, such as “paying a personal toll,” “stress changes the job,” and “leadership as an internal compass,” (p. 1335-1339) seemed to guide leaders as to which emotions to suppress and express when dealing with trauma. Using comparative analysis coding, two themes emerged: (a) emotions principals are allowed to display, and (b) emotions principals must hide. The participants spoke about the need to suppress negative emotions and regulate caring emotions. “I put on an act to appropriately deal with people and situations at school” ( $r = .836, p < .001$ ) (Kiral, 2006, p. 77), and “I behave in a way that differs from how I really feel at school” ( $r = .834, p < .001$ ) (p.77). Further, when asked about deep acting, principals most often reported that they “attempt to create certain emotions within themselves that matches the image of their job” (Kiral, 2016, p. 77).

Research asserts that those in leadership positions feel there are limited emotions they should express and other emotions they should suppress (Haver et al., 2013). Specifically, data indicate that leaders suppress negative emotions and attempt to act in a way that is counter to how they really feel (Kiral, 2016). This intentional suppression of emotions occurs simultaneously while principals also try to manage the emotions of those around them, including students who are effected by trauma. This additional aspect of emotional labor may exacerbate how school leaders manage their symptoms of secondary trauma (Kiral, 2016).

Through the lens of the bio ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the culture of the school and tacit demands that the school leaders suppress negative emotion is influencing the school leader. In this example, the school culture, or macrosystem, may be effecting the way school leaders experience student trauma and the emotional labor used to maintain a leadership demeanor.

## **Effects of Secondary Trauma on Leaders**

**Psychological Effects.** The emotional challenges of working with students in need can change school leaders' intent to stay (Smit, 2017). A narrative study by Smit (2017) used interviews and field observations to collect data on school leaders' motivation to quit in challenging situations. Convenience sampling was used to interview two school principals about the challenges of leading schools with students in poverty. In addition to the interviews, observations during field visits to the two schools were used to collect data. Participants described the stress of being a principal of a school with high levels of poverty as making them feel ill, at their emotional threshold, and devastated. Smit (2017) revealed how principals experience lowered personal achievement. One participant revealed, "There was a time when I thought I would never leave, because I thought work had to be done in this school. But now I think differently, as, emotionally, I have reached my threshold" (Smit, 2017, p. 12).

Similarly, Mascall and Leithwood (2010) also examined the association between occupational stress and attrition in principals. The purpose of the study was to explore the nature and consequence of principal turnover. In the mixed-methods study, 2,570 principals were surveyed on how principal turnover is associated with school culture, curriculum and instruction, and student achievement. Principal turnover was moderately and negatively correlated with school culture ( $r = -.37, p < .05$ ) and with classroom curriculum and instruction ( $r = -.33, p < .05$ ). In the qualitative portion of Mascall and Leithwood's (2020) study, four focus groups were created using criterion sampling of the

principals and teacher-leaders in schools that had experienced high rates of principal turnover. The interviews revealed themes of emotional turmoil and cultural chaos.

While data assert the emotional challenges associated with school leadership leads to principal attrition (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Smit, 2017), these studies do not indicate how long each participant had been in their positions at the time of the study. Given that principal turnover is negatively associated with school culture (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), it may be that the lower self-efficacy, decreased job satisfaction, and job-related stress reported in these studies are connected to the history of principal turnover in the participants' schools, rather than secondary trauma (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

**Emotional Effects.** The emotional challenges of school leadership may compound the risk of a principal acquiring secondary traumatic stress. Drago-Severson et al. (2018) interviewed 30 principals regarding their experiences managing as leaders in stressful environments. Principals volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews and focus groups during the study. Participants revealed themes such as all on me, absolutely draining, and self-care and balance. One participant remarked, "You're kind of the glue that . . . holds it all together, and you just have to be strong. Within all of it" (Drago-Severson et al., 2018, p. 327). Still, she worried, that it sometimes felt like "there's really no glue that holds you together" (p. 332).

During qualitative interviews, Smit (2017) found school leaders to be at their emotional threshold. Principals described the additional stress of emotional labor as making them feel ill and devastated. While these studies reveal the emotional nature of being a school leader, they do not take other emotional stressors into account. The

participants may have had occupational stress that was not related to interacting with students in trauma. They may have had accountability stressors, difficulty with resources, or personal factors that were not considered in these studies.

**Relational Effects.** The scope of how secondary trauma affects the school leader is uncertain, but it may go beyond the work environment.

Interpersonal relationships can be affected by secondary trauma. Nelson and Wampler (2000) conducted a study of couples in which one partner had a history of abuse. The participants included 96 clinic couples who reported a history of childhood trauma in one or both partners, and 65 clinic couples who reported no childhood history of trauma. The couples in which one or both partners reported childhood trauma reported significantly lower marital satisfaction, higher individual stress symptoms, and lower family cohesion than the couples with no abuse history. There were statistically significant positive correlations between partners' scores on the subscales for physical complaints,  $r = .22, p < .05$ ; depression,  $r = .26, p < .01$ ; hostility,  $r = .27, p < .01$ , paranoia;  $r = .28, p < .01$ ; and psychotic thoughts/behaviors,  $r = .21, p < .05$  (Nelson & Wampler, 2000). These results suggest that in relationships with one partner who has a history of trauma, there is a tendency for their partners to mirror the behavior (Nelson & Wampler, 2000).

This phenomenon is supported by the bio ecological systems theory. One can be highly influenced by what happens with those closest to you, in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This mirrored behavior is a result of being exposed to a traumatized individual within the microsystem and how this exposure changed the individual over time in the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

## **Vulnerability to Secondary Trauma in School Leaders**

Research indicates that exposure to those who have experienced trauma appears to be the main factor in developing secondary trauma. While there is a measurable connection between principal efficacy and secondary trauma (Cieslak et al., 2014; Finkelstein et al., 2015), the timeline as to how these phenomena develop is unclear. The research is unclear if the condition of secondary trauma is the baseline status from which lowered efficacy develops, or if secondary trauma is the result of lowered efficacy.

Figley (1995) recruited 99 mental health professionals and social worker volunteers to complete a survey about the effects of treating traumatized individuals. Self-reporting questionnaires, with a 5-point Likert scale, were used to measure the perceived professional support, professional self-efficacy, and exposure to traumatized individuals. Secondary trauma was measured by the Compassion Fatigue Questionnaire (CFQ). Once data were collected, a regression model was run to determine the relationship between professional support, efficacy, and exposure to—and the development of—secondary trauma. Of all the variables, exposure to trauma ( $\beta = .373$ ,  $p = .001$ ) was the most positively associated with the development of secondary trauma (Finkelstein et al., 2015). Finkelstein et al. (2015) found that there is a negative association between the perceived professional competence, or efficacy, of professionals ( $\beta = -0.260$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the development of secondary trauma.

**Gender.** There is a body of research that seems to suggest female leaders are at higher risk for developing secondary trauma than their male counterparts. “Just seeing that there is a woman in the chair is enough to trigger negative attitudes due to the conception of a male as leader” (Zikhali & Perumal, 2015, p. 355). In addition, Zikhali

and Perumal's (2015) research asserts that female leaders may worry if the community thinks they are strong enough to lead a school

**Empathy.** Research seems to indicate that the presence of empathy may cause an individual to be more vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress (STS). A study was conducted by Wagman et al. (2015, to examine the relationship between social workers' empathy and their level of STS and compassion satisfaction. Participants ( $N = 173$ ) were emailed to voluntarily participate in a quantitative study on empathy. In addition to answering demographic questions (Appendix A), the participants completed the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI), which uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure empathy. The sample was predominantly female (87.8%,  $n = 151$ ) and White/Caucasian (73.8%,  $n = 127$ ). Participants ranged in age from 20 years to over 70 years, with a majority (58%,  $n = 101$ ) being between the ages of 40 and 60. Time working in the profession ranged from 2 to over 40 years. Most participants were child welfare workers (12.1%,  $n = 20$ ), behavioral health professionals (18.8%,  $n = 31$ ), health or medical services personnel (18.8%,  $n = 31$ ), and school-based services employees (8.5%,  $n = 14$ ). A multiple regression model was run to measure the relationship between these variables. Wagman et al. (2015) found that as participants experienced an increase of secondary traumatic stress, they reported a decrease in emotional regulation ( $r = -.36, p < .05$ ), and self/other awareness (empathy) ( $r = -.26, p = .05$ ) (Wagman et al., 2015).

Secondary trauma is negatively associated with levels of emotional regulation and empathy (Wagman et al., 2015). The average self/other awareness measure for the participants was  $M = 4.88$ . This serves as a baseline measure of the empathy of the participants on a 5-point Likert scale, with a maximum of 5. This measure is likely

reflective of the criterion of the sample. Social workers, in general, have a developed sense of empathy. While the participants' empathy decreased as their secondary trauma increased, their baseline measure was likely higher at the beginning of the research than other professionals' baseline measure (Wagman et al., 2015).

**Job-Related Influences.** Research indicates there are many job-related influencers of secondary trauma.

**School Setting.** Setting seems to be a consideration when exploring secondary trauma in school leaders. Data indicate teachers in private schools experience less secondary trauma than teachers in public schools (Yorulmaz & Altinkurt, 2018). However, the nature of school leadership is different than that of a teacher. Acton (2018) and Dematthews (2018) posited that principals in urban schools may experience more secondary trauma than in suburban or rural settings. However, this conclusion has limitations. The total number of participants for these two studies was small ( $n = 4$ ). Furthermore, there is no data available from rural or suburban principals to compare their experiences with secondary trauma to that of an urban principal.

Finkelstein et al. (2015) stated there is a positive association between exposure to individuals who are experiencing trauma and the development of secondary traumatic stress, and they are both statistically significant ( $r = .80, p < .001$ ), and they have a large effect size ( $r^2 = .52$ ). A school leader may be more vulnerable to secondary trauma based on the school setting they work in (Finkelstein et al., 2015).

Working in an urban setting may increase the likelihood a school leader will experience secondary trauma. A narrative inquiry of two principals in Toronto, Canada was conducted to explore their perceptions of their role as principal (Acton, 2018).

Unstructured interviews with the two principals revealed themes of both barriers and rewards. The rewards were connected to the advocacy the principals carried out with high needs students. The participants described feeling that they gave “a lot of themselves” (Acton, 2018, p. 312), but the reward was in knowing they made a difference. One barrier both principals reported is knowing their students came to kindergarten already far behind their peers who live in wealthier neighborhoods. One principal remarked “The entire school is doing everything right. I am working with some of the best teachers I have ever worked with and a few students do move up to the provincial standard, but not many” (Acton, 2018, p. 310). The principals shared that many parents often do not have the time to help with homework or to read to their child at night because they may be working two or three jobs. Participants also remarked on a constant focus of student well-being. One principal stated:

I don't think my fellow principal colleagues have any idea what I do on a daily basis. The biggest difference, I think, is the mindset you have to have. I am looking out for kids constantly—it never shuts off. Every time I walk down the hall, I find myself continuously scanning my students. Whose pants are too big? Whose shoes are too small? Whose clothes need to be cleaned? Who is acting out because they are hungry? (Acton, 2018, p. 312)

In a separate narrative inquiry study by Dematthews (2018), principals described difficulty in managing the resources and the high level of student needs. The study used convenience sampling to conduct unstructured interviews with two urban elementary principals examine their experiences and their efforts to create more inclusive schools. Both principals reported overall success in creating more inclusive schools for most of

their students with disabilities within challenging school settings. However, the two principals also confronted significant institutional, organizational, and social and emotional challenges. One participant expressed difficulty in knowing how to balance knowing a student's extremely difficult social history and delivering appropriate consequences for the same student's emotional outbursts (Dematthews, 2018). The other participant stated he was often faced with teachers who were crying because of emotional exhaustion and frustration, due to the challenging circumstances of working in an urban setting (Dematthews, 2018).

### **Chapter Summary**

There is a body of research that indicates how secondary trauma and secondary traumatic stress can affect school leaders. Lynch (2017) found secondary trauma and related phenomena can create physical and psychological side effects (Lynch, 2017). Boscarino et al. (2010) asserted secondary trauma can affect a school leader's efficacy and motivation to quit. Smit (2017) stated there are physical and emotional effects of secondary trauma that can cause school leaders to feel devastated. There are also relational effects from secondary trauma. Berkavitch and Eysel (2015) and Nelson and Wampler (2010) found that school leaders can have difficulty with interpersonal relationships and with the isolation created by school leadership. Furthermore, research indicates there are specific factors that can make a school leader more vulnerable to developing secondary trauma. Finkelstein et al. (2015) posited that for all school leaders, exposure to traumatized individuals is the key factor to developing secondary trauma. In addition, working in an urban environment, being female, and feeling pressure to

suppress emotions at work can also make school leaders more vulnerable to secondary trauma (Basol, 2013; Cieslak, et al., 2014; Fein & Isaacson, 2009).

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Secondary trauma is a negative occupational outcome experienced by professionals who work closely with clients in trauma (Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2016). It refers to the behaviors and emotions exhibited by a person who is exposed indirectly to another person's traumatic event. These symptoms are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, even though the individual did not directly experience the trauma.

Marshall and Rossman (2010) believed the nature of this inquiry warranted a qualitative research study where the participants were asked to describe their experiences and feelings. Qualitative research methodology reveals how people think and perceive the world, and it helps us understand complex ideas and phenomena. Further, qualitative research methodology helps to develop a deep understanding of complicated human experiences by researching a small number of participants who have experience with the problem (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This research is exploratory in nature, and it helps uncover information about understudied phenomena such as secondary trauma (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Secondary trauma is under researched in the field of education, and in particular, with school leaders. The use of this qualitative method offered a structure to understand how secondary trauma is developed in school leaders.

This research was conducted using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and the goal of a phenomenological study is to understand how individuals perceive the world and make sense of their experiences (Murray & Holmes, 2014). The

research questions helped to understand the little-known phenomenon of secondary trauma in school leaders. Edmund Husserl proposed phenomenology as an experimental method that reveals what is consciously understood by participants (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Phenomenology is a broad discipline that is based on the idea that reality consists of events as they are perceived or understood in the human consciousness. IPA takes the exploration of human perception further by including elements of psychology, ideography, and interpretation. IPA is a qualitative approach that aims at providing detailed examinations of personal lived experience. IPA produces an account of a lived experience on its own terms rather than one prescribed by preexisting theoretical concepts, and it recognizes that the goal is an interpretative endeavor because humans are sense-making organisms. IPA is explicitly idiographic in its commitment to examining the detailed experience of each case in turn, prior to the move to more general claims. IPA is a particularly useful methodology for examining topics that are complex, ambiguous, and emotionally laden. This methodology includes the subjective interpretation of the researcher as a valuable part of the analysis process. The intent of IPA is to explore how participants make sense of what they experience (Jeong & Othman, 2016).

There are three theoretical principles of IPA. First, this methodology values participants' perspectives. Second, IPA examines the experiences of each person. The unique perspective and experience of each individual is used to explore phenomena that is not yet understood. Third, IPA embraces the researcher as part of the process. Therefore, the interpretation of the information is subjective (Jeong & Othman, 2016).

IPA draws upon phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. While IPA traditionally uses a small sample size, it demands a detailed analysis of personal accounts, which followed by presenting and discussing the generic experiential themes. This process is typically paired with the researcher's own interpretation. IPA researchers try to understand what an experience is like from the participant's perspective, and this process is typically paired with the researcher's own interpretation. (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Furthermore, IPA includes the formulation of critical questions during the analysis and interpretation. Some of these questions may include: What is the participant trying to achieve? Is there something going on here that the person himself or herself is perhaps less aware of? (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

### **Research Context**

The research for this study was conducted in public school districts in Central New York. Given the potential for a conflict of interest with the researcher, Syracuse City and Jamesville-Dewitt School Districts were not included in the study. The districts that represent a range of New York State Education Department (NYSED) accountability status and socioeconomic settings were included when recruiting participants.

The urban school districts used for this study include the Utica City, Auburn City, and Rochester City School Districts. At the time of this study, Utica City School District had just over 10,000 students, where 28% of 3-8 graders were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), and 32% of 3-8 graders were proficient in mathematics (NYSED, 2019). Utica City School District had 46% of its children living in poverty and, on average, 78.6% of the students graduate from high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b).

In comparison, at the time of this study, Auburn City School District had just over 4,000 students with 28% of 3-8 graders proficient on ELA state assessments and 38% of the 3-8 graders proficient in mathematics (NYSED, 2019). Auburn City School District had an 84.6% graduation rate, with 17% of children living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a). Rochester City School District, the largest district that is included in this study, had approximately 26, 000 students at the time of this study of which 13% of the students were proficient on both ELA and math state assessments (NYSED, 2019). Similar to other urban districts participating in this study, Monroe County, which includes Rochester City School District, had an 83% graduation rate and 19% of children were living in poverty (County Health Rankings, 2020b).

The suburban school districts participating in this study included Liverpool, Cicero-North Syracuse, and Baldwinsville Central School Districts. Both Liverpool Central School District (7,000 students) and Cicero-North Syracuse Central School District (8,400 students), at the time of this study, had 39% of 3-8 graders proficient in ELA and 46% and 40% of 3-8 graders were proficient in math, respectively (NYSED, 2019). All three of the suburban districts are in Onondaga County. Similar to the counties for urban districts, 20% of children live in poverty and, on average, 84% of student graduate from high school (County Health Rankings, 2020c). Baldwinsville had over 5,000 students, at the time of this study, with 43% of 3-8 graders proficient on ELA state assessments and 47% of 3-8 graders proficient in math (NYSED, 2019).

Rural school districts that participated in this study are Morrisville-Eaton and Pulaski School Districts. Morrisville-Eaton School District, at the time of this study, had just over 600 students, and 48% of 3-8 graders were proficient in ELA and 38% of 3-8

graders were proficient in math (NYSED, 2019). Morrisville-Eaton School District is in Madison County and 14% of the children lived in poverty and, on average, 86% of students graduate from high school at the time of this study (County Health Rankings, 2020a). In comparison, Pulaski Central School District has just over 900 students with 36% of 3-8 graders proficient on both ELA and mathematics in Grades 3-8 (NYSED, 2019). Oswego County, which includes Pulaski Central School District, had an 84% graduation rate with 23% of children living in poverty at the time of this study (County Health Rankings, 2020d).

### **Research Participants**

The research sample or the participants in phenomenological research are generally chosen according to what is known as purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is characterized by the incorporation of specific criteria met by the participants at the moment of selection (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The main goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest and that will best be able to answer the research questions. In addition, IPA uses a sample size between 8 and 12 participants. Therefore, the 13 participants in this study were school leaders (principals and assistant principals) with a minimum of 12 months of leadership experience so they could draw on their experiences when answering the interview questions.

Sampling in IPA studies is also dependent upon individual research situations and the pragmatic restrictions one is working under (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). For this reason, professional connections and snowball sampling were used to continuously recruit participants.

The majority of the participants were recruited by the researcher leveraging her professional relationships with school leaders in school districts in Central New York. Associates were emailed directly to recruit the participants. Specifically, existing connections the researcher had in the Baldwinsville Central, Morrisville-Eaton, Pulaski, Liverpool Central, North Syracuse Central, Auburn City, and Utica City School Districts were used to recruit participants by email invitation to participate. In addition, the social media platforms of LinkedIn and Facebook were used to recruit participants. All the participants completed the consent forms prior to engaging in an interview. Participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcript of their respective interviews to validate the content, and the participants will be compensated for their participation with a \$10.00 gift card to various local vendors.

### **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

In IPA, the researcher is the primary instrument and interviews are the primary source for important themes. The interviews were held at a location determined by the participants. The interview questions were asked, verbatim, in the same order in each interview. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission by two different audio recording devices. Throughout the process, reflexive memos and field notes were kept to record the participant's behaviors analog with the overall first impressions after the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All information that was gathered during this process was kept in a confidential fashion.

### **Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

The most appropriate data collection strategy for a phenomenological research is the interview (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). In this study, the interviews were face to face with the

participants. When face-to-face interviewing was not possible, technology was used to conduct a phone or video interview. The interview questions (Appendix B) were short, specific, and read exactly as written and in identical order for each interviewee. Tape recordings of the sessions and transcription of the recordings by Rev.com were used to capture the interviews (Smith, 2008).

Smith et al. (2009) suggested a six-step process for data analysis. The first step in coding involved the researcher being immersed in the transcripts and repeatedly reading and re-reading of the original data. In the second step, time was spent noting and examining the content until the data produced comprehensive notes. During the third step, the researcher distilled the notes by merging ideas into themes. These themes reflected both the participants' original words and the researcher's interpretation. Once the emergent ideas had been identified, the fourth step involved reducing the number of categories into broad themes. In the fifth step, the broad themes were analyzed to find connections across emergent themes and categories. These connections were done by charting the ideas. This process was followed to analyze the data until there were emergent themes from each interview. And, last, the sixth step, general patterns were identified that connected all of the interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

Rigor and trustworthiness of this study were strengthened by triangulation. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, notes and drafts were submitted to the dissertation committee. As a result, multiple researchers were involved in the analytical process. Audio recordings of the interviews were listened to multiple times and they were preserved in the event that a second analysis was necessary (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Along with triangulation, credibility and dependability of the study can be strengthened by reflexive memos and journaling. Field notes on the behaviors and activities of the individuals during the interviews also strengthened the credibility of this qualitative data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore what school leaders understand about their potential to develop secondary trauma. Qualitative research methodology was used because the research questions asked the participants to describe experiences and feelings. In addition, this research was conducted using IPA).

The context of this research is urban, suburban, and rural public school districts in Central New York. Through purposive criterion sampling, 13 school leaders, with at least 12 months of experience in their positions, were recruited as participants because they would be the best candidates to be able to answer the research questions, because the professional contacts of the researcher were used to recruit them, and snowball sampling will subsequently be used with these participants. Participants monetarily compensated for their time.

During the data collection process, rigor and trustworthiness of the study were strengthened by triangulation with the dissertation committee. Credibility and dependability of the study was strengthened by the reflexive memos and journaling of the researcher

Once the data was collected it was analyzed and coded for common themes. These themes were connected to produce an in-depth explanation of how school leaders experience secondary trauma.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

This chapter first describes the demographics of the participants in this study. Next, it provides a detailed interpretative analysis of each individual interview, highlighting emergent themes. Last, this chapter reveals the superordinate themes that were developed from the synthesis of each interviews' emergent themes.

**Demographic Background.** The 13 participants, at the time this study was conducted, were all current or former school leaders in New York State public schools. Two of the 13 participants were former building leaders. One was a retired principal and the other was a former assistant principal who had been recently promoted to a district-level position. Of the 13 participants, 11 were employed as principals, and two participants were employed as assistant principals. Two were male; eleven were female, and all of the principals/assistant principals had least 12 months of building leadership experience. To provide anonymity, each participant received a pseudonym of "P," indicating "principal," and "AP," signifying assistant principal). Additionally, each P or AP was assigned a number of 1 through 13.

**Qualitative Methods.** The data was analyzed by using IPA. This method focuses on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample (Smith et al., 2009). In-depth interviews produced textual data that was analyzed to answer each of the study's research questions.

## Research Questions

The data reported in this section is aimed at answering the study's research questions that were examined during this study. They are:

1. How do school leaders experience secondary trauma?
2. How do school leaders believe their experiences with student trauma affect their leadership?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the lived experiences of the school leaders who worked with students in trauma, and how these experiences may have affected them personally and professionally. The following data emerged as both individual emergent and superordinate themes.

## Data Analysis and Findings

The findings from this study were organized into emergent themes and superordinate themes. First, the individual interviews were analyzed to find overriding, or emergent, themes. Then the emergent themes were strung together to find larger, superordinate themes.

**Emergent Themes.** The following section describes the individual analysis of each interview. The emergent themes from each interview is described along with any nuances of the participant that occurred during the interviews, which may provide clarity or create meaning.

***PI.*** The most pervasive emergent themes from P1's interview were managing emotions and emotional regulation. P1 spoke throughout his interview about compartmentalizing and preferring to stay in an emotionless mode. When describing his emotions, he used verbs like "set aside," "push through," and "handle." These are words

are typically used to describe physical objects that are formative in size or weight. It was as if these emotions were so large and created such a barrier to his work that he felt he had to physically move his emotions, which are generated when working with students in trauma, so he could, as he described, “stay more focused as a leader.”

Just as one would be physically exhausted by handling, pushing, and setting a heavy object aside, P1 spoke of the emotional exhaustion he experienced as a result of all of his emotional regulation. He described his emotional exhaustion as “carrying him away” at times. It was as if P1 was in a physical tug-of-war with the emotions he experienced when relating to students in trauma, and it left him exhausted.

Along with describing emotional exhaustion, he described the toll that working with children in trauma had taken on his mental health. He described having to “watch himself” because he knew he “can go to dark places.” In addition, he described how, if he was not careful, his day could “spill over,” and he would feel out of control. He shared that he drinks alcohol more now as a principal, and his wife has told him that he is often not back to himself, after a week of work, until Sunday afternoon.

Other emergent themes from P1’s interview were both giving and seeking support. P1 stated that working with traumatized students can cause staff to overreact and make emotional decisions. He recognized that staff members need his support when experiencing student trauma, and that is part of his role as a leader. He stated that the adrenaline his staff feels when confronting student trauma “rocks them” to the point that their decision-making is clouded. He also expressed his desire to support families as a result of his work with traumatized students. P1 felt more patient and empathetic toward

students and families in crisis. He expressed a change in his viewpoint and felt he could empathize with students and families rather than to judge them.

P1 also recognized the importance for him to seek and have his own support system. He described the importance of having someone else to talk to about student trauma. He said he often “unloads” his heavy emotions and experiences onto a colleague who “gets it,” and then he can carry on. In addition, he supported himself by practicing wellness and getting enough sleep and exercise.

*P2.* The most pervasive theme that emerged from P2’s interview was unpreparedness. P2 was acutely aware that she struggles when working with students in trauma and she described a weakness in her ability to “handle it,” even after 6 years as an urban principal. Further, she appeared to be resentful that she has to deal with student trauma:

So, I struggle with that sometimes, knowing what to say, I guess, in my head, honestly. I hope you’re not offended by language, but I wanna scream out, “What the fuck; are you kidding me?” Like, what is it? I did not think I’d be doing this. This is not, you know, my job. I walk around and say, “They did not talk about this in college.” (P2, 77)

Along with the frustration of having to deal with students in trauma, P2 expressed fear that she would handle a student in crisis incorrectly and create even more trauma. In addition, she felt equally unprepared to help the support staff:

But what I, what I don’t like is that I feel that the teachers are going home with it [secondary trauma] a lot, and I don’t, I don’t know how to help. So that bothers me a lot, right? So that’s an extra layer. (P2, 126).

Even though P2 expressed that she did not know how to handle students in trauma, and she did not know how to help her teachers deal with the effects of secondary trauma. Her motivation to support her staff seemed to come from exasperation rather than empathy.

I've had teachers with anxiety when a kid melts down, and they come in here and they, you know, have their moment and we talked through it and whether it's "No, you need to go home and take care of whatever it is," you know, I knew that that's what she needed from me. It was like, "Oh my goodness, just get through the day." That's what I want to say. But I knew that, I guess, that's what she needed to do. (P2, 131)

While P2 described a memory of a student in trauma who was particularly upsetting, she said she physically wanted to run away at that time. P2 generally described the compartmentalization of her secondary trauma. When she described how she might feel after learning about student trauma, she stated: "I'm pretty good at putting that all away and put it in a box and, I don't know, being done with it, I guess." However, during the conversation, she hinted that she may not be compartmentalizing as successfully as she thought. While she overtly stated that she was not experiencing secondary trauma, and said she felt "like if I was really, really having a hard time, or was aware that it was something that was affecting me, I would go do something about it," some of her other responses revealed some cracks in her ability to compartmentalize. Throughout the interview, P2 described being "off" or "super stressed" sometimes but not knowing why. When asked what she experienced after finding out a student had experienced trauma, she stated:

I guess I, you know, haven't had it come bubbling out. I've been doing it for a while, so you would think something would happen. But, again, maybe it has, and I just haven't said what it was, you know, giving it that credit. Maybe I blamed it on something else. (P2, 160)

It was as is if she was considering for the first time that perhaps she was not as good at "putting it in a box" as she thought.

**P3.** This principal described experiencing significantly delayed effects of secondary trauma. While he stated multiple times that he feels no emotion in the moment, he spoke at length about how his emotions seem to come to him well after the event. P3 stated that once the issue had been dealt with, the delay for him to experience the emotions was proportionate to the significance or severity of the trauma.

So, you know, I kind of, kind of have an earlier response for something less significant, that I move past. If it's something more significant, that might be, you know, as I said, it comes back and comes back around a couple days later."

Unlike some of the other participants, P3 seemed aware of some of the signs of secondary trauma. He felt that because he was aware of how working with student trauma might affect him, he was better able to cope. "It took me early on, realizing that that's what it (secondary trauma) was. I think I process things better because I've realized that's what the cause was." Even though he had only been a rural middle school principal for 2 years, he stated that the longer he was a principal, the easier it was for him to identify signs of secondary trauma and develop resilience.

Furthermore, P3 shared that he knew that when he was difficulty regulating his emotions, it was a sign of secondary trauma. While he described himself as someone who

regulates his emotions well, he stated he was aware it is a lot more challenging to regulate his emotions in the face of student trauma. “So, usually I find myself being short. Why? So, usually, when I start thinking back through the week, something (traumatic) happened with a student.” He described this reflection as processing time, and he made sure to set time aside daily for this type of reflection.

*P4.* The most dominant emergent theme from P4’s interview was compartmentalization. She described her concerted effort to avoid her feelings. Initially, she presented as someone who just lacks emotion. She went so far as to say she wished she were “more on the emotional side of things.” She described her ability to “move past things” and “not dwell on things.” However, the more she spoke, the more it seemed she was not emotionless as much as she was in denial of her emotions:

There is so much tragedy in my day that I don’t want it to bring me down. So, I’m, I’m kind of like “oh, that’s really shitty. That stinks. What can we do to fix it?” And that’s just it. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about my feelings. (P4, trans line #)

P4 described her concerted effort to stay detached. She had, perhaps, a fear of what tapping into these latent emotions would be like. “I mean, I could continually think about these things, and I continually feel for them. But I, again, I don’t, I don’t, I don’t—want to ruin my night.” Her hesitation revealed a deep denial to describe what tapping into those emotions might feel like, as she repeated, “I don’t” three times before she took a long pause and settled on “ruin my night.” During the conversation, she told a story of two vastly different people that seemed to be inside her. While she spoke of, or even bragged about, her ability to compartmentalize and remain emotionless, she also

uncovered some subconscious fear she may have had about how secondary trauma has manifested itself at her core. This duplicity is shown in P4's desire to be emotionless:

I want to stay cold because, if not, I'm just. I'm able to focus on what needs to be done. You have to set up some kind of a barrier or it's really gonna kill you. This is a very tough job, and you have to figure out a way to shut it down. If I didn't have the ability to shut it down, I could spend all day crying, you know, I really could. Just so much trauma, poverty, when so much is coming at you. You have to set up some kind of a barrier or it's really gonna kill you. It's just going to overwhelm. And that's not going to be beneficial to anybody.

**P6.** The predominant emergent theme from P6's interview was "feeling inept." This word, inept, was used by P6 over and over when describing her experience with students in trauma. Inept is more than unsure, more than lacking confidence, more than fear. For P6 to describe herself, a skilled, veteran principal of 25 years, as inept conveys that she believed she had no skills to confront, work with, and process what it means to work with traumatized students. In addition, she used the word "exasperated" to describe her feelings when she learns of student trauma. It was as if it was hard for her to comprehend the abuse some of her students have endured:

There are really children who have to walk through this kind of pain? And with that would come a heartache because it's sort of like a disbelief that anyone could treat a child in such a way. Because it's just so hard for me to wrap my, so hard for me to wrap my head around. How anyone could look at an innocent child and treat them in a way that is less than, is less than like complete love? (P6, 71)

This combination of feeling incompetent as a leader, when confronted with student trauma and disbelief in the face of child abuse, even after many years in school leadership, may indicate that P6 has never experienced abuse or trauma firsthand. It is possible that if she had traumatic childhood experiences to draw from, she would not feel such self-doubt and disbelief when confronted with the traumatic reality of so many of her students. Furthermore, this combination may increase the likelihood that she may be unaware of the secondary trauma she was experiencing.

While P6 expressed compassion and empathy for her students in trauma. She described experiencing many physical effects from working with traumatized students. She said she often feels sick to her stomach and loses sleep in the days following her discovery of a student in trauma. This loss of sleep was coupled with her inability to stop thinking about how to fix the situation for the child.

I would say that I would have some propensity to kind of be on a wheel in my mind, where it would be difficult to stop thinking about what I could do to make things more right for that child. (P6, 71)

**P9.** Principal 9 spoke mostly about staying focused on the students. When she was asked about her feelings regarding student trauma, she listed plans, actions, and she described the desire to “figure it out.” Even after several probes for more emotion, P9 spoke only about feeling the need to take action.

I’m like, “if I were in their shoes, what would I need the most?” Because I think everyone is so great about being like: “Oh, I’m so sorry you’ve experienced this, and it’s terrible that you have to go through this.” So, people are able to say the

right things but the root of it, which is what the student actually needs when they're going through that and trying to figure out what that is. (P9, 51)

Her response reveals that P9 was not only task-focused when dealing with student trauma, but also, she might be critical of those who may express sympathy. She appeared to consider sympathy to be futile in these situations. This could indicate that she had internal barriers to experiencing students in trauma on an emotional level.

Another emerging theme from P9's interview was to stay positive. She reiterated multiple times that she believed it was important to maintain a positive attitude.

So, I think, like, it's important. I always try to carry this attitude. You know, it's a great day to have a great day, and today's going to be awesome, and just try to be positive every single day, even though you know students are going through these traumatic experiences, and it kept me up all night. (P9, 120)

The attitude she described, that seemed to function as her internal dialogue, was contradictory in nature. "It's a great day" does not emotionally align with "student trauma has kept me up all night." It seems that P9 was actively, and perhaps unconsciously, denying her emotions and replacing them with a to-do list and relentless positivity in the face of student trauma.

*P11.* P11 described feeling anger, sadness and frustration, when faced with the knowledge of student trauma. In conjunction with feeling these emotions, she expressed difficulty in managing and compartmentalizing at times. Rather than using compartments, she described trying to keep her emotions and responsibilities in "buckets." After a day when she dealt with students in trauma, she noted that her husband would describe her as edgy or grumpy. She then described that her work bucket "splashed into her home

bucket, and it's hard not to let that happen." When asked if she sees herself affected by her work, she stated,

The selfish side of me would say no. I got this. I'm doing it all, but if you really were to kind of step back and look at things, I've gained 20 pounds. I'm too tired to hang out with friends. I don't have time to exercise. (P11, 61)

P11 described a desire to stay task-oriented and focus on doing rather than "stopping to think about this stuff." She described herself as robotic when dealing with student trauma.

Sometimes I will shut down a little and just focus on the paperwork aspect of things and just dive in the paperwork. Okay. This needs to become very robot-like. Okay, this situation was revealed, this paperwork needs to be done." (P11, 78)

P11 explored her own childhood trauma during this interview. She described often feeling triggered, and how that contributes to poor emotional regulation. She described her feelings after working with a student in crisis:

I started thinking, as an adult ,how scary it is not to have control over something, and my feelings were very difficult for me to manage during that time because it triggered, triggered for me my own trauma from my childhood. That came into play, and it was unbelievably overwhelming and very difficult to maintain that leadership role in that moment. (P11, 26)

***AP12.*** One of the emergent themes from AP12's interview was feeling overwhelmed. She described that the demands of the job, coupled with the needs of students in trauma was extremely hard to manage.

It just affects you in so many ways, and I hated my walkie-talkie because it just was like, this constant reminder of my kids, like, being in pain. And me not always being able to fix it. Or maybe fix it for 10 minutes and know that it was just a quick fix. (P12, 338)

Part of feeling overwhelmed for AP12 was feeling frustrated that she was required bring a lot of work home because she was so focused on students in crisis at school. “You’re not able to ever work for more than 10 minutes on anything. You know, then you start worrying about everything you’re going to have to take home that night when it’s been a particularly hard day.”

Another emergent theme from AP12’s interview was the balance between staff and student needs. AP12 described feeling torn between making disciplinary decisions that would support staff while at the same time meeting the social emotional needs of a traumatized student.

As a leader, people want you to give consequences and put down the, you know, the hard fist on that. It’s hard because people were very not used to that way of looking at things. I’m not going to give up a 2-day suspension when a kid is throwing things in the room, when we know what they’re going through, you know? (P12, 220)

In addition, she expressed frustration with staff calling for help with traumatized students in their classrooms and, at the same time, a strong sense of responsibility to educate and develop her staff to be more effective with students in trauma.

How can we make the adults feel safe? Because a lot of times, kids in trauma are acting out. So, then, other people in the room don’t feel safe. And then that leads

to those kids who have already experienced difficulties not having the relationships that we want them to have with teachers. (P12, 350)

AP12 shared that the demands of working with students in trauma have caused her to doubt her effectiveness as a leader. Further, she considered leaving the profession. “I want to do this. I don’t know if this is right for me, you know, because I want to make a difference. I don’t want to just be putting out fires, you know, like I don’t think that’s my calling, and I don’t think it’s effective for kids, you know?”

*AP13.* Much of AP 13’s conversation focused on her desire for training and her lack of preparedness to cope with the effects of working with students in trauma. She described her experience as “flying by the seat of my pants” even though she had over 6 years of experience as a building leader. She went on to acknowledge that she had been trained in student trauma and trauma-informed instruction, and that was not what she needs more training in.

There’s articles and books and all that stuff, but I don’t have a lot of formal training in this. Not student trauma, but the whole mental health side of stuff, no. Just at a whole new level. The stuff you’re talking about. Not training in the students. We know that stuff. It’s help with how the adults can deal with it. (P13, 209)

P13 also described an inability to disconnect. She often felt restless and unsettled. She shared that she cannot disconnect from work.

I’m having trouble, like, disconnecting. Or I can’t disconnect at all, and I think, you know, and then when I’m home, you know, I don’t want to talk to people. I

don't want to talk on the phone. I'm really, I really struggle with leaving it at school and I wish I knew how people do that because I don't know how to do that at all.

AP13 shared her struggle with emotional regulation as well. She often waited until she got home to cry. She stated that many times during this school year, as she felt the number of students who experiencing trauma was increasing, she had to step away to her office, close the door, and cry. At times, she felt the privacy of her office was not enough for her to be able to let her feelings go:

I have actually gone in the back of the school on the playground and sat there and cried, but it probably, I would say, this year, it's probably come out a little bit more at school than it has in the past.

**P5.** Like many participants, P5 expressed a strong desire to fix the situations that are causing students to be traumatized. As a leader, part of P5's personal and professional identity was to solve problems. Much of the sadness and frustration P5 expressed when considering students in trauma stemmed from her inability to actually solve the problem for the student. She fantasized about having a little hole in her office wall that led to a farm, and traumatized students could crawl through it to escape their situations.

Another emerging theme from P5's interview was the importance of regulating emotions. In contrast to P4, P5 was both highly aware of the emotions she was experiencing and understood the importance of masking her emotions given her role: "She actually physically attacked me. And it was like 'wow, this is, this is hard,' because it's not usually the principal, right? And staying strong in front of the staff." After this situation, she described closing her office door and crying in private.

In addition, P5 expressed a need for support in the form of resources for students in trauma. She expressed frustration that she could not properly address the mental health needs of her traumatized students. When she asked for more support from the district level, she was redirected to review her behavior plans or how she was using her staff. This disconnect between the district's perception that there was a planning problem and her reality of working with students in crisis continued to fuel her frustration. "You guys have no clue. You have no clue what's going on. So. I'm on my own with my team."

P5 mentioned that while she can feel frustrated or sad at times, and she had to expend emotional labor regularly to manage her emotions at work, she stayed balanced through self-care. Meditation and exercise were important for her ability to process some of her secondary trauma and maintain her calm demeanor as a leader.

You know, I'm just making sure that I am taking care of myself because I'm a firm believer, if you don't take care of yourself, if you don't love yourself, you're not gonna be able to love others, and so I make sure that I'm loving myself. (P5, 295)

**P7.** P7 was very conscious of her emotional regulation and control when working with students in trauma.

I have always believed that a lot of the reasons why students disclose to me is because my demeanor is pretty constant. So, yeah, whether they're telling me they ate pizza for dinner or they're telling me they were raped, I kind of stay pretty, I'm predictable because I try to be predictable for them. (P7, 54)

She spoke of having a hyper-awareness of her face, her body language, and her volume and tone of voice when working with a student in trauma. Whether dealing with a

student in full-blown crisis or a student quietly disclosing a traumatic event, she operated with her body as a prop:

So physically, I'm very aware of what I appear to be feeling to the student. Right?

So, I try to always appear relaxed, but I probably am feeling tense, you know, my body's prop. My mind is saying tense up, but I'm purposely not so that they don't see that. (P7, 105)

However, P7 described staying acutely aware of her emotions during this time. Despite the fact that she appeared to be physically in control, she may barely be able to manage her emotions internally. She described a physical strategy of pinching the skin between her index finger and thumb when the emotional labor becomes too much.

P7 also shared her experience with delayed emotions after interacting with students in trauma. She explained that after the encounter with a child, she often felt frustration, sadness, and anger, especially when there was a documented awareness of abuse, but nothing had been done. She described that the emotions tended to come when she was speaking to a trusted friend or colleague who was "emotionally able to hear" her emotion. She described that in those moments, she allowed herself to not be a leader and just feel the emotion.

P7 also spoke about how her own history of trauma seemed to help her manage when students were in trauma. "I grew up in the projects where trauma was life. Like everybody had trauma. If you were somebody who didn't have something that had happened, or you know, then you were, you're not the norm." She explained that she often wondered why she could maintain her demeanor when dealing with students in trauma, and said she was worried she was becoming desensitized. However, as she

reflected on this throughout the interview, she concluded that her own experience with childhood trauma was a strength rather than a burden when experiencing student trauma as a school leader.

When you're asking me about my own feelings, I made a weird, like, I had a weird thought that like, my own actual first, like, primary experiences with trauma don't make me more triggered. It helps me not be triggered by it, which I never thought about before.

*P8.* The main emergent themes from P8's interview were pain, worry, and self-care. When asked to describe what she felt when she learned of student trauma, she repeatedly described worry. Worry, though, can be considered more of a result of an underlying feeling of panic or anxiety about what may happen in the future.

I worry. I worry about the child and their safety and their future. You know, it's everything that you carry around with you, and sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night and it's the first thought in your head of "Oh my God, it's freezing out. I hope they have heat." (P8, 43)

P8 also described both dread and the physical pain associated with the anticipation of encountering a student in trauma. She described dreading going to school in the morning because "the shit could hit the fan" any minute with no warning. In addition, she mentioned she felt pain in her jaw and joints the nights before work, but the pain is absent while on vacation or on weekends.

When I'm on vacation, nothing hurts. My jaw doesn't hurt. I'm not clenching my teeth. It doesn't hurt. But when I'm ready to return to work, it'll hurt all over

again, even though everything I do for myself, it still hurts. Physical toll this is huge. (P8, 117)

She also stressed the importance of self-care.

I had to put myself first. There's a reason why, you know, they say to put that oxygen mask on you before the passenger next to you because, because you have to be well and be able to breathe. I do something for myself every day. (P8, 103)

She prioritized exercise and socializing, and she gives herself permission to be selfish to maintain her own mental health.

**P10.** Sadness was the most predominant emergent theme for P10. She described feeling sad about individual situations and students but also for society as a whole. "It's sadness for the innocence of the child that's gone. Now 6 years old, right, that's an innocence that's gone."

P10 described multiple physical reactions when working with students in trauma. She spoke about feeling adrenaline and an increase in her heart rate in the moment. As time has gone on, as she was in her fifth year as a rural principal, she still felt the adrenaline, but she learned to "downplay" it. She stated she would step into her office to "take deep breaths." She also described feeling at times like she was having an "out of body experience" when responding to student trauma. After the event, P10 described feeling exhaustion. When reflecting on her experience with student trauma, P10 remembered:

I went into mode of being principal and, you know, whatever else, but I do, I do actually have a memory of coming home and being so physically exhausted that I fell asleep on the couch, you know, which is not likely. (P10, 56)

In addition, as P10 described her experiences with student trauma, she discovered the depth to which she had been affected. As she reflected, she described that her experience was very much like post-traumatic stress disorder, even though the trauma was secondhand.

And, so, I remember that day too. It's kind of funny because I almost feel like it's PTSD for me because I'm reacting with her, right? Because I'm like, "Okay, now I understand what you're thinking. I'm remembering the day you told me." Right? I remember that day, too, and the best I can describe it as its PTSD. (P10, 74)

P10 stressed her coping strategies are critical to helping her process the trauma that her students have experienced. She described how important processing difficult days was to her, whether she journaled or talked it through with her husband. She also believed her experiences with student trauma have strengthened her faith.

I've become extremely religious, which is really interesting. I've always been very faith-based, but I've become more religious, because I go to my faith in God, and I pray at my desk and in my mind all the time, and it really truly helps. I believe that it's made a difference for me to get through some of the more difficult things that I've had to deal with, with staff. (P10, 216)

**Superordinate Theme Identification.** During the coding process, the researcher identified trends and cross-examined information using a deductive process. Smith et al. (2009) indicated the development and expansion of codes and subsequent themes reflect not only the participant's original thoughts but also the analyst's interpretation. Table 4.1 outlines the major themes identified in this study. The identified themes are

(a) suppression of secondary trauma and (b) repression of secondary trauma. The distinction between repression and suppression should be noted in the context of this study. Emotional suppression is a deliberate emotional regulation strategy to make uncomfortable thoughts and feelings manageable. When framing suppression through the lens of emotional labor, suppression is synonymous with surface acting (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Conversely, repression is an unconscious denial of emotion. Repression is similar to Fein and Isaacson's (2009) deep-acting state of emotional labor because it is a change to the core in the way an individual experiences emotion.

**Table 4.1**

*Major Themes and Descriptions From Participants*

Themes	Descriptions From Participants
School Leaders Suppress Secondary Trauma	<p>I don't think I ever cried so much over a job than I did in those 2 years just; pure frustration like not, not feeling like I could change things that I wanted to change.</p> <p>And just SOB of sadness and frustration and, and then anger, I mean after.</p> <p>I guess, like crying in my car, because I was so exhausted.</p> <p>And there was so much emotion built up that [it] almost just like came out the second I got into a safe place.</p> <p>When I feel like I'm gonna cry, do this – (poke index finger between thumb and opposite index) to keep you from crying. So that would be my go-to move if I think that I'm not going to be able to be stoic.</p> <p>But you also need to be able to know when you can't control your emotions and be willing to tag out or let somebody else take the lead or admit that this is something that hits a little; takes a little too close for like it's a little too close to home for you.</p> <p>Really self-aware of how things affect you and also controlled in your emotions enough to, to I think you need to be able to control your emotions.</p> <p>So, I try to always appear relaxed, but I probably am feeling tense,</p> <p>But then I cry; then I'm going back to my office that goes with it.</p>
School Leaders Repress Secondary Trauma	<p>I'm not aware of it, but it's my husband who will say, "I can tell you're a little off today" or "you seem a little grumpy today" and he's like, "so do you want to talk about what happened" and that's when I know I'm gonna let go.</p> <p>I would just be depressed or angry or short-fused, and sometimes [with] the family or whoever else, and [I am] really not able to identify why.</p> <p>I would say that I would have some propensity to, kind of, be on a wheel in my mind, where it would be difficult to stop thinking about what I could do to make things more right for that child.</p> <p>I control my emotions very well. I just find it's a lot harder to do.</p> <p>I find myself a lot shorter fused so, you know, just my ability to regulate; I notice as much, much shorter, you know?</p> <p>I don't know. I guess I don't really bring that back.</p> <p>You know, I may not be on the emotional side, but it's hard to turn the brain off at times.</p> <p>But, right now, I think I'm okay with, you know, any of the trauma that has happened, because I have truly been really removed from it. You know, it's just what the students tell me or seen bruises or something like that on them. It's not like I actually see it.</p> <p>And, yeah, I mean, literally, I could cry all the time if I, if I, if I, was that kind of person and emotional because the situations are so horrible.</p> <p>So busy and being a full-time worker, and in school and working with my son, John, and that I don't really think about that. Honestly, say that that's not something that is on my plate. I'm like, "what? [I] don't need that on there; cut that out."</p> <p>My wife says, on weekends, I'm not really myself until Sunday afternoon, and then it starts all over again.</p>

## **Summary of Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore what school leaders understand about how they experience secondary trauma. This study explored what school leaders feel when they learn of student trauma. In addition, this research explored how this phenomenon may be affecting school leaders' leadership. There were several emergent themes that developed from the data analysis, including emotional labor and regulation, feeling overwhelmed, physical effects, difficulty compartmentalizing, staying emotionless, and feeling unprepared. These emergent themes led to the development of two superordinate themes: the repression and suppression of secondary trauma. These themes describe how school leaders experience secondary trauma and how it may be affecting their leadership.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an increase of students living in trauma. As these numbers rise, educators continue to experience students in trauma, and they are vulnerable to the secondary effects of student trauma. However, unlike other professionals, such as therapists and social workers, educators do not have the training or the background to recognize that they may be developing symptoms of secondary trauma. There is an additional burden on school leaders who work with students in trauma because they must manage the emotional demands of secondary trauma while maintaining a stoic leadership demeanor.

The purpose of this study was to explore how school leaders experience secondary trauma. The study examined what school leaders experience when they learn students are in trauma. Furthermore, this study explored how these experiences may be affecting school leaders' leadership.

The interviews provided a variety of data that spoke to how school leaders experience secondary trauma. When dealing with secondary trauma, school leaders tend to either suppress or repress their emotions to execute their leadership responsibilities. The data in this section show the results of this study's two research questions. Quotes from the participants were used to deepen an understanding of how school leaders experience secondary trauma.

## **Implications of Findings**

The implications and findings of this study are based on the following research questions:

1. How do school leaders experience secondary trauma?
2. How do school leaders believe their experience with student trauma affects their leadership?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine the lived experiences of school leaders who worked with students in trauma, and how these experiences may have affected them personally and professionally. The themes that emerged as threads throughout each interview with respect to Research Question 1 included (a) choosing how to feel, (b) emotions bubble up, (c) can't do this, and (d) my own trauma. And the themes that emerged as threads throughout each interview with respect to Research Question 2 included (a) flying by the seat of my pants, (b) they carry this with them constantly, (c) whatever the kids need, and (d) parents just need help.

**Research Question 1.** Findings for Research Question 1 were elicited through interview questions 2-6, and 10. Interview question 1 helped to frame the conversation by asking the participant to recall a specific time a student experienced something traumatic. Interview questions 2-6, and 10 were used to elicit the 78 data points for Research Question 1. Based on the responses to the six interview questions, the theme of emotional regulation was the most pervasive, and it manifested itself in a variety of ways.

All the participants reported that they experienced a high volume of exposure to students in trauma. The school leaders' responses reveal that they tended to experience secondary trauma in one of two ways. Of the 13 interviewed participants, six tended to

suppress the emotional and physical effects of secondary trauma so they could focus on the job at hand. It was only after their doors closed or the day ended that they allowed themselves to feel the effects of secondary trauma. Conversely, the other seven participants' responses revealed they were more likely to repress their emotions and the effects of secondary trauma. They described feeling unaffected by working with students in trauma while, at times, simultaneously feeling short tempered, disconnected, restless, and exhausted without knowing why. All the participants described the effects of secondary trauma as physical, emotional, relational, and psychological. In addition, the school leaders described the emotional labor they expended while feeling these emotions and simultaneously maintaining a calm demeanor.

The participants who tended to suppress the effects of secondary trauma (Suppressors) spoke at length about the emotional labor required to set one's own emotions aside and project a sense of calm and confidence—even when there was internal angst and self-doubt. In addition, these participants stated that they experienced a delayed emotional response to the students' trauma, with many participants citing that at the end of the day, they closed their office doors, or they get into their cars and cried.

The demands of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), or norms and culture around school leaders help to create this delayed response. Societal norms create a standard for leadership behavior that does not include sadness, and crying.

When answering interview questions 2-6, and 10, those who tended to repress the effects of secondary trauma (Repressors) noted that they were skilled at emotional regulation and stated they deliberately created emotional barriers. They described “setting the emotion aside” and just “taking action.” In addition, many of these participants

described feeling “off,” or they noted a spouse pointing out that they were sometimes “not themselves,” and the participant did not know why.

The phenomenon of secondary trauma in school leaders is uniquely a consequence of experiencing students in trauma in the absence of formal supports and training. While the job is demanding and stressful, the participants of this study are not simply experiencing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lowered personal achievement because they are burned out. Each participant expressed their commitment to the students and their desire to continue to get up and go to work each day. Even those who expressed doubt when working with students in trauma, described deep commitment to the work. P6 reflected: “This was not about a child being bad. This was not about a child needing consequences. This is about a child who needs something. I’ve got to figure out.”

Whether a school leader is a Suppressor or a Repressor, the secondary trauma they are experiencing can create a perfect storm of emotions. Their experience with secondary trauma may intensify the stress and daily demands on the personal and professional lives of school leaders. Stressful emotions are intensified in challenging circumstances and add emotional burdens on school leaders (Smit, 2017). This research indicates that secondary trauma can compound the emotional demands on a school leader.

As school leaders suppress or repress the effects of secondary trauma, they are attempting to balance their accountability to their job and their personal life factors with the concurrent side effects of secondary trauma. Looking through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s theory, (2005), school leaders experience secondary trauma directly in their microsystem or may hear about it second-hand in their mesosystem, while balancing

the demands of personal life in the exosystem. In this model, Suppressors tend to take daily inventory of their occupational and personal stress within these systems, including symptoms of secondary trauma. Repressors, on the other hand, tend to balance these demands through compartmentalization and detachment from their stress.

The variance in how school leaders experience secondary trauma can be explained using the bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Personality traits and temperament can influence how a school leader experiences a student in trauma in the microsystem, or first hand. Although all the school leaders in this study experienced student trauma first-hand, the unique differences in the individual's microsystem may explain why some tend to be Suppressors while others are Repressors.

*Choosing How to Feel.* One of the main ways school leaders said they experienced secondary trauma was by actively managing and compartmentalizing their emotions. This type of depersonalization can be common when one expends the emotional labor necessary to maintain demeanor as a leader (Szempruch, 2018). However, the length of time and the degree to which the emotions created by secondary trauma are regulated are different between Suppressors and Repressors. When asked how he felt when he learned of student traumas, a Repressor, P1, explained that he made a deliberate decision to “set all the emotion aside and just stay in that mode.” Adding, “emotions cloud your decision-making, so, as a leader, I tend not to react. I tend not to react.” Conversely, when asked the same question, Suppressors describe the pressure to maintain their leadership demeanor, or what P11 called “the face of leadership.” Oplatka (2017) determined that principals feel this pressure to mask emotions, like tension and hypersensitivity, and even, as P7 specifically described, their physical appearance to maintain a calm demeanor when working with traumatized students.

Suppressors specifically described difficulty in controlling their emotions. P7 described a physical strategy when she was losing control of her emotions:

When I feel like I’m gonna cry, [I] do this [poking her index finger between her thumb and opposite index finger] to keep you from crying. So that would be my go-to move if I think that I’m not going to be able to be stoic. So, I mean there are those moments where, yeah, it’s just like too much. So, you feel like you’re going to cry, so that’s what I do during those moments.

All the participants described feeling stress, anger, and frustration in connection with working with traumatized students. Suppressors tended to describe these emotions in terms of identifying with the student or families. AP 12 described that she felt:

Really sad at the kids who are in pain, you feel really overwhelmed by the anger and frustration that this happens to helpless kids. It's so stressful. I mean, there's just no like. No words for people who have never done it to understand how incredibly stressful it is.

Given that empathy is positively associated with secondary traumatic stress (Wagman et al., 2015), this increased level of empathy that Suppressors tend to feel could make them more vulnerable to the effects of secondary trauma than their repressing counterparts.

The Repressors also described stress when working with traumatized students, but the source of their stress appeared to be different. Rather than the stress stemming from empathy, Repressors' stress came from frustration. P8 described,

Yeah, I mean, I think you feel a range of emotions when that's going off all day long. I think you feel incredibly frustrated with your staff for calling so much, frustrated that you're not able to ever work for more than 10 minutes on anything.

***Emotions Bubble Up.*** Perhaps due to their desire to manage their emotions, all the participants described having delayed emotional responses to the secondary trauma. Suppressors, however, had a shorter delay and a more acute onset of the emotions they associated with secondary trauma. Suppressors tended to engage in surface acting, creating a sense of emotional dissonance within the school leader (Kiral, 2016). Therefore, Suppressors described a release of emotion as soon as they were behind closed doors, as if they can only manage their emotions as long as absolutely necessary.

Suppressors spoke specifically about regularly crying in their cars on the way home or closing their office doors to cry. P5 described that “sometimes you have to, you know, right after you have to close the door in your office, and, and be emotional.” Several participants described waiting for what AP12 called a “safe space” to release emotions. This safe space could be a car, office, at home, or in the company of someone else who understood. In addition, P7 described how rapid succession of exposure to students in trauma can make it difficult to delay emotion.

At the end of that, the combination of the two things happening within a week of each other. I just, I never cry at work, but that was the moment where I had to say, “be right back” and go to the psychologist and just kind of let it go.

The need to release emotions as soon as possible is a core practice of Suppressors who are experiencing secondary trauma. They are just acting on the surface to be in control, often because they feel pressure to appear calm as a leader. P2 described having to “remain calm and stable and steady throughout, no matter what it’s doing to you inside.” While most principals felt permitted to express empathy and compassion, they did not feel they could openly express the type of genuine care and concern for students that may lead to tears (Oplatka, 2017).

Repressors, however, experienced this delay in a more obtuse, abstract manner. Those that repressed the effects of working with traumatized students knew they didn’t feel right, but they cannot always pinpoint why. This is reflective of the ambiguous nature of secondary trauma. Without training, those who experience it are often completely unaware of the symptoms of secondary trauma (O’Neil, 2010). Repressors worked to stay emotionless and denied much of the emotional toll student trauma can

take on an individual. P2 shared that she often did not know what was bothering her in the days after dealing with a student in trauma.

I don't know that that's what's causing, maybe, stress, o, you know, maybe distraction, like I don't, I guess I don't give it that, that credit. So maybe I am off later on, but I don't know if that's it, like I don't connect it.

However, Repressors cannot hold it in forever. Perhaps the most profound response regarding secondary trauma came from P3, a Repressor who prided himself on his ability to control his emotions: “

I was at a choir concert in December. There's a, I think, about 50 kids in the group and the majority of the top row of girls, you know, I knew from personal situations [who] had been through sexual abuse. So, that's a significant number. Yeah. So, right away, at that moment, I wanted to vomit. My ears rang, but I just kept smiling. I had parents all around me. We're juggling right? That's what we do. And then I just cried in the car on the way home.

***I Can't Do This.*** The participants who tended to suppress the emotional effects of secondary trauma felt a sense of self-doubt when working with students in trauma. P6 described that when dealing with a student in crisis she felt “inept, like I have, there's a whole new learning.” P10 spoke about her lack of preparedness, “You know, that's, that's my big fear is, ‘oh my God. Am I prepared emotionally to hear that she was raped,’ was this, you know, all these things right?” It is, perhaps, the willingness to be connected to their emotions and process the gravity of the situations that created the self-doubt. In addition, this expression of self-doubt and lowered personal accomplishment is consistent with symptoms of secondary trauma (Szempruch, 2018). AP13 went on to share:

I'm flying by the seat of my pants a lot of days. Because I don't have formal training and, you know, there's articles and books and all that stuff, but I don't have a lot of formal training in this.

The lack of efficacy in Suppressors is an acknowledgment that working with students in trauma is difficult and hard to emotionally handle.

It would follow then, that Repressors, who are not tuned in to the emotions they experience when working with traumatized students, feel confident in their ability to navigate these situations. Further, they may even feel that other staff lack the skills necessary to work with students in trauma. P4 described teachers: "And then when they try to deal with [it] themselves, they get frustrated, so they call the office more, and you feel like you're responsible to empower them with more skills to deal with kids."

***My Own Trauma.*** While only four participants spoke about their own personal trauma and how it may have informed their work with students in trauma, the findings are notable. Those school leaders who repressed their experiences of secondary trauma stated that their own childhood trauma seemed to get in the way of working with traumatized students. P1 spoke about how "my feelings were very difficult for me to manage during that time because it triggered my childhood trauma." P11, also a Repressor, described a situation that: "Triggered for me my own trauma from my childhood that came into play, and it was hard to maintain." Since Repressors deny the way they experience secondary trauma, they are unaware of how students in trauma may be mirroring some of their own childhood experiences. It is not until the experience becomes acute that it is hard to ignore and repressors feel triggered.

However, Suppressors said their own childhood trauma made their leadership more effective with students in trauma. P7 said,

My own actual first, like, primary experiences with trauma don't make me more triggered, but it helps me not be triggered by it, which I never thought about before. Hmm. So that's kind of interesting. You know, you're, like, 'cause I'm thinking "why am I not more affected in these moments" and it's like well, that's just kind of how it is."

P5, also a Suppressor, reflected that her personal experience with childhood trauma helped her find hope and determination to find resilience in her students.

Like I was able to do it. I was able to, kind of, get through trauma. And so that there's a way for us to support other people and so on. It's like, if you can find the foundation in somebody around like, resilience, like it's in there."

P5 also described how her own trauma can cause her to over identify with students of families:

I have to be careful that I don't project, you know, like all of a sudden you're kind of in a moment with a child or a parent and they start talking, like you kind of want to leave a leadership role and start talking first.

Research indicates that this type of empathy and over-identification with traumatized children can increase the likelihood of an individual experiencing secondary traumatic stress (Wagman et al., 2015). However, these findings seem to contradict this research. Suppressors who have experienced their own childhood trauma find their empathy to be empowering rather than debilitating. They express that they feel better prepared to help students in trauma because they have had a similar experience. Perhaps

this is unique to suppressing school leaders because they have persevered to overcome their own childhood traumas, became well educated, and rose to leadership roles. Further, unlike Repressors, Suppressors have processed their own trauma in a way that empowers them rather than triggers them when faced with a student in trauma.

**Research Question 2.** The findings for Research Question 2 were elicited through interview questions 7-9, 11, and 12. These questions were used to elicit the 65 data points for Research Question 2. Based on the responses to the five interview questions, the themes of needing training, supporting staff, supporting families, and balancing students and staff needs were the most pervasive themes. The participants spoke at length about the lack of training and preparedness they experienced when working with students in trauma. Of the 13 participants, 10 described having difficulty balancing the needs of their students with the needs of their staff.

Overall, the participants expressed that they were more supportive leaders as a result of their experience with secondary trauma. The school leaders felt a concern for the students, families, and staff members who were also experiencing secondary trauma. However, those leaders who tended to suppress the effects of secondary trauma and who were more conscious of how they were affected by working with students in trauma, had become more supportive because they were able to sympathize and empathize with others going through it. Those leaders who tended to be more repressive in the way they experienced secondary trauma saw the need to support staff and families, but it is because they have identified that others lacked the skill of “dealing with it.”

*Flying By the Seat of My Pants.* All participants reported the need for more training. Training may allow school leaders to implement coping strategies and manage their symptoms of secondary trauma (Parker & Henfield, 2012). However, those school leaders who suppressed the way they experienced secondary trauma expressed a desire for the staff to be trained because they were concerned for the mental health and welfare of their staff. AP13 shared:

I think we get a lot about what it [trauma] is. When I think, that's a lot in education. We get a lot of like—here's what it is—but we're not dealing with the person that's dealing with it every day.

P5, also a Suppressor, expressed concern over the burden the staff carried as a result of working with traumatized students:

So, I think they probably carry it with them constantly, and they're trying to figure out, you know, is it best to talk about it? Is the best just to move on? Is that, you know, should we go for a walk? Should we do this? Should we not bring attention to it? So, I have a feeling they probably carry it with them all the time.

The Repressors also stated a desire for staff to have more training. However, this desire was rooted in their belief that the teachers were not skilled at working with students in trauma, and this deficit, ultimately, created more work for the school leaders. P4 stated, “That, that bothers me a lot right? Because that's that extra layer. Right? Right. So I'm supposed to take care of them and take care of the kids.” However, this lack of compassion may actually indicate that this Repressor has been experiencing secondary trauma for some time. Negativity, heartlessness, cynicism, and lack of empathy are all symptoms of advanced secondary trauma (Szempruch, 2018).

*They Carry This With Them Constantly.* The desire to support staff was a main theme throughout the interviews. P5 spoke about the challenge of making staff feel supported while still doing what is best for students in trauma:

And then I'm looking at the staff because staff is, you know, "what are you going to do with this kid? Should this kid be here?" My staff was so, "like what is wrong with her? Why isn't she suspending him? Expelling him."

However, there was a notable difference in the reasons why Suppressors felt the desire to support teachers compared to the reasons Repressors expressed that same desire.

Suppressors, like P11, expressed real concern for the teachers' well-being:

So, I think I have a lot of really open conversations with my staff about where things might, like the emotional places, that certain behaviors, or, you know, actions are coming from and, you know, how not to take it personally when you're not the person that they're sharing that with right away.

Knowing that Suppressors are open and accepting of the feelings they experience with secondary trauma, it would follow that, as leaders, they would be more in tune with the feelings the teachers must be experiencing. P7 described her desire to "Assure them that I believed in them, assure them that they, assure them that they were doing the hardest work. What did they need? How could I help? Being there, like showing up for them when they called." AP13 also expressed a need to support fellow colleagues:

I see some of my colleagues who are not as experienced, and I worry for them and I find myself giving them a lot of support because they don't, this is new to them. And this is not the job that they necessarily bargained for or thought that it was.

In contrast, the Repressors expressed the need to support staff because they were unable to support themselves. P8 described this frustration:

Oh, so like, when a staff member will send, or a teacher, sends a child to me because they were being silly in class. Like are you effing kidding me?! Were they throwing chairs? I keep them, you know, deal with it because . . . why should I have to deal with it, so I'm annoyed by people's inability to deal.

P8's expression of criticism and anger, along with a lack of empathy for her staff may actually indicate, however, that she is experiencing secondary trauma (Szempruch, 2018).

*Whatever the Kids Need.* The participants described a deeper desire to support the students. The participants that suppressed their experience with secondary trauma spoke about being sensitive to student needs. P5 reported a constant fear of re-traumatizing students. "Our phrase is, 'don't be the bear.' It's like, don't re-traumatize these kids." AP13 reported that the knowledge of student trauma often makes it hard for her to be out of the building:

I was supposed to be in a meeting but ended up going back to school, and part of the reason I went back to school, I needed to check on kids. I needed it, so I was, like, there are certain kids in that building right now. I guess I need to go check on them. I was not going to sleep that night if I didn't [them] check out.

The knowledge of students in trauma can add to the feeling of "it's all on me," along with the emotional demands of being a school leader (Drago-Severson et al., 2018).

The Repressors also reported the desire to support students, however, it was expressed as a function of productivity. P4 explained feeling resentful:

I was taking so much work home because the walkie-talkie was going off all the time. Like, I spend every Sunday doing teacher observations, writing up teacher observations, like, all day, the whole day every Sunday. Because like, I could get nothing done at work there was like, there was like crisis after crisis.

***Parents Just Need Help.*** The participants described a desire to support and empathize with the families of the traumatized students. After their experiences with students in trauma, school leaders recognized that part of helping the child is extending support to the family, without judgment.

The Suppressors, however, tended to truly empathize with the families of the traumatized students. They expressed concern and a desire to help both the child and the family. They described a desire to partner with the family as well . P5 stated “How could we, like, adopt all these children and even these families because sometimes, just the parents just need help.” Suppressors seemed to recognize that trauma can happen to any family. P7 described a conversation she had with a parent of a student experiencing trauma: “Don’t apologize, miss. You’re doing your thing. You love your kids. Great. I love your kid, too. I’m never going to be offended by you loving your kid and wanting what’s best for your kid.”

While repressors also expressed concern for families, their concern was limited to sympathy rather than empathy. They expressed that they felt bad for [the] families’ circumstances and feel that the trauma their students were experiencing is often a result of generational trauma and abuse within the family. Repressors described an active decision to sympathize with families, rather than a natural response. P8 stated: “I put on my sympathy hat and reach out to the family or parent and say, ‘you know, it must be

hard for you.’ Because I think they’re trying to do the best that they can.” P6, in fact, identified that these situations

Required some empathy. Like this father that I’m thinking of. Like, wow, what his life experience was. Mentally ill and never got the right support. Did he, was he in a war and, you know, is traumatized from that? Like what trauma has he experienced that has resulted in him having these crazy notions about his own children.

At first, repressors may sound like they might be identifying themselves as saviors, as they express their responsibility to save and assist these families. However, the emotional distance they keep from these families by sympathizing rather than feeling deep empathy is likely another result of their desire to deny and repress emotion.

Table 5.1 outlines each research question and the most common responses.

The implications of this research affirm that school leaders are vulnerable to secondary trauma. Their exposure to student trauma affects them both personally and professionally in their leadership roles. School leaders tend to either suppress or repress their emotions relating to student trauma, and they are not always aware of how secondary trauma might be affecting them.

This study suggests that school leaders would benefit from some professional development on secondary trauma to raise their awareness and help them identify their own symptoms. In turn, school leaders would then be able to better support staff with symptoms of secondary trauma. This heightened awareness could, in turn, help suppressors better regulate their emotions and establish a support network. Repressors would also benefit from learning about secondary trauma because they would learn that

processing feelings that are related to secondary trauma is a normal and helpful part of working with traumatized students.

Table 5.1

*Research Questions and Common Responses*

Research Question	School Leaders Who Suppress the Effects of Secondary Trauma	School Leaders Who Repress the Effects of Secondary Trauma
How do school leaders experience secondary trauma?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cry behind closed doors</li> <li>● Feel stress, anger, and frustration about students in traumatic situations</li> <li>● Feel overwhelmed by emotion</li> <li>● Feel fear and self-doubt when dealing with a student in crisis</li> <li>● Struggle to regulate emotions</li> <li>● Feel delayed effects during or at the end of the school day</li> <li>● Say their own experience with trauma helps them work with traumatized children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Deliberately put up emotional boundaries</li> <li>● Focus on taking action</li> <li>● Feel stress, anger, and frustration that student trauma creates barriers to student learning</li> <li>● Feel overwhelmed by workload</li> <li>● Feel they have to often step in for others who are dealing with students in crisis</li> <li>● Maintain their emotions</li> <li>● Sometimes feel “off” but are unsure why</li> <li>● Say they sometimes feel triggered by students in trauma</li> </ul>
How do school leaders believe their experience with student trauma affects their leadership?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support staff, student, families, and each other because they empathize</li> <li>● Want more training because they are concerned for the well-being of staff</li> <li>● Make regular time for self-care</li> <li>● Seek support from others in the same position</li> <li>● Seek balance through mindfulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support staff, students, and families because they need skills to work with students in trauma</li> <li>● Want more training for staff because much of the workload that falls on the leader</li> <li>● Have trouble disconnecting from work</li> <li>● Seek balance through rigorous physical exercise</li> <li>● Use maladaptive coping strategies</li> </ul>

Table 5.1 appears to indicate that, in the absence of formal training and support, secondary trauma creates a dichotomy of Suppressors and Repressors within school leaders. However, these categories are not rigid. The data collected in this study indicates that school leaders tend to be on a continuum between suppression and repression. It is possible to be a repressor but exhibit some suppressive tendencies. For example, P4 described hallmark descriptors of being a repressor like the desire to focus

on action, disconnect from feelings and a strong sense of self efficacy. However, she also revealed great concern for how secondary trauma might be effecting staff, which tends to be a more suppressive characteristic.

Further, P11 tends to have repressive characteristics. She described a desire to compartmentalize her emotions, maintain focus on tasks, and a need to be robotic when working with students in trauma. However, she also noted feeling triggered by a student who's situation reminded her of her own childhood trauma. Although she stated that she preferred to repress her secondary trauma and focus on logistics and paperwork when working with students in trauma, her own childhood trauma created a tipping point. Like Suppressors in this study, she described this experience as "unbelievably overwhelming" and she could not maintain her leadership role in that moment.

While this study was focused on school leaders, the results have implications for district leaders as well. District leaders are somewhat removed from the front lines of working with traumatized students. They may not understand the firsthand experience of secondary trauma, but they will be supporting and supervising school leaders who are experiencing it. They should not only have knowledge of secondary trauma, but it would be helpful for them to understand which school leaders are Repressors and which are Suppressors. By knowing how their employees process secondary trauma, district leaders can frame their coaching and set meaningful goals for school leaders. For example, district leaders may want to help Suppressors develop in-the-moment coping strategies and set up supports to help their emotional regulation. For Repressors, district leaders may want to coach them on being more empathetic to staff and their needs when dealing with student trauma. Effectively coaching and evaluating school leaders who are

experiencing secondary trauma requires that district leaders understand the effects of this phenomenon.

### **Limitations**

While all of the participants met the necessary criteria, the researcher leveraged professional relationships to recruit 10 of the 13 participants. This preexisting relationship helped increase trust during the interviews and may have led to the participants being more willing to be vulnerable.

In addition, three of the 13 interviews were done virtually, using Google Meet. In these interviews, there were limitations to what could be observed from body language and from an authentic person-to-person connection.

### **Recommendations**

As an under-studied phenomenon in leadership, the findings of this study reveal some new information. The results of this study lead to several recommendations for school district policy, improved practice, and further research.

***Recommendations for Policy.*** The results of this study lead to recommendations to make changes in school district policy and practice. It is recommended that school districts add or revise a wellness policy to reflect some of the emotional and mental health support that staff might need as a result of secondary trauma. As a best practice, school buildings should consider having a wellness room, or a “safe space” for staff to go to when they are having difficulty regulating their emotions. In addition, school districts should include secondary trauma training in their new staff orientation as a best practice.

In addition, school districts may want to consider creating and passing a mental health policy for staff. This policy should include guidelines for staff to take mental

health days, and should create structure for providing mental health services to school leaders following exposure to student trauma. This policy should specifically identify and require district level leaders including directors, assistant superintendents, and the superintendent to attend training in secondary trauma. Since these leaders tend to be physically removed from regular exposure to students in trauma, the policy should dictate annual training for those at the district level. In addition, this policy should create protections from stigma for those school leaders who come forward in need of support from the effects of secondary trauma. The suggested mental health policy adopted by a school district should include structures for anonymity that also normalize the experience of secondary trauma to prevent stigma.

***Recommendations for Improved Practice.*** The findings of this study indicate the need for several recommendations for improved practice. The results reflect a need for more training for school leaders and staff on secondary trauma. Professional development on secondary trauma will raise awareness of this phenomenon and help staff recognize their own symptoms and needs. This level of awareness would allow school leaders to seek help and adopt coping strategies when symptoms of secondary trauma arise. District level leaders would also benefit from this training, as they are responsible for supervising school leaders. Including district leaders in secondary trauma training would help them develop a more effective lens when supporting their school leaders' needs.

In addition, college and university educational leadership programs should consider adding training and instruction on secondary trauma in school leaders. By adding this component to preservice school leader programming, those new to the profession would enter the field equipped with knowledge and strategies that would help

mitigate some of the effects of secondary trauma, especially early in their careers. Further, school leaders who have received training during their educational leadership program may be better able to train and support their staff with secondary trauma.

***Recommendations for Future Research.*** There are also implications for future research of secondary trauma and school leaders. This study examined the lived experiences of school leaders without respect to gender, setting, grade level, or years of experience. In future research, it may be beneficial to focus on school leaders in a singular setting, at a certain grade level, or with consider for years of experience. Given that females were overrepresented in this study (11 females, 2 males), future research may want to focus strictly on the male experience.

There is also an opportunity for research to further examine the nature of Suppressors and Repressors and how they process secondary trauma. Additional research with a specific focus on exploring the traits of Suppressors and Repressors would clarify how each group processes secondary trauma. The use of focus groups in such a study would create the potential for a richer data set. For example, a group of Suppressors would have similar experiences with secondary trauma and, therefore, build off of each other's answers.

In addition, further research is needed to explore the findings that revealed that empathy is not always a contributing factor to developing secondary trauma, as previous studies have suggested. This study could be replicated with a sample of school leaders who have experienced their own childhood trauma to further explore how Suppressors transfer empathy for the child in trauma to a strength in their leadership.

## **Conclusion**

In the absence of training, secondary trauma in school leaders has naturally evolved into two styles: Suppressors and Repressors. At the core of these two differences is what motivates leaders to want training for teachers and to support staff, students, and families dealing with student trauma. Suppressors are motivated to support and train their staff because they feel empathy and concern for all those involved with students in trauma. Repressors are also motivated to support the teachers, students, and families connected to student trauma, but their motivations are different. Repressors want to support teachers and families because they feel the need to build the skills of those around them. They feel they are the only ones who are able to adequately handle students in trauma and they feel they have the resilience to do so. These findings reveal differences in leadership philosophies as a result of secondary trauma.

The findings from this study suggest that school leaders face a range of emotions and physical reactions when they learn of a student in trauma. In some cases, the overwhelming emotion threatens to derail the principal's leadership ability. In others, the school leaders go to great lengths to deny feeling any emotion, and they become very task-oriented. Whether school leaders suppress their emotions just long enough to get to their office, close their door, and cry, or they repress their emotions relating to secondary trauma and become robot-like, the emotional labor associated with these reactions can create internal conflict. Specifically, the data indicate that leaders suppress, or even repress, negative emotions and attempt to act in a way that is counter to how they really feel (Kiral, 2016). This intentional suppression of emotions occurs simultaneously while

principals also manage the emotions of those around them, including students who are affected by the trauma. This additional aspect of emotional labor may exacerbate how school leaders manage their symptoms of secondary trauma.

The findings indicate that school leaders experience the physical, emotional, psychological, and relational effects of secondary trauma. There are aggravating factors that seem to make secondary trauma more intense, like empathy, lack of support, and lack of training. There also seems to be mitigating factors, such as self-care, support from others, and experience. School leaders do not feel prepared to deal with students in trauma, and they need more training to support themselves and others with the secondary effects of student trauma. Experiencing secondary trauma has, however, driven school leaders to be more supportive of staff, students, and the students' families. As an understudied phenomenon in school leadership, secondary trauma should be explored further to determine how to coach, support, and supervise a school leader who is experiencing secondary trauma.

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## Appendix A

### General Demographic Data for All Participants

Participant	Position	School Level	School Type	Gender	Years in Position
P1	Principal	Middle	Rural	Male	5
P2	Principal	Elementary	Urban	Female	6
P3	Principal	Middle	Urban	Male	2
P4	Principal	Elementary	Urban	Female	1
P5	Principal	Elementary	Suburban	Female	5
P6	Principal	Elementary	Suburban	Female	25
P7	Principal	K-12	Suburban	Female	3
P8	Principal	Elementary	Suburban	Female	7
P9	Principal	Middle	Suburban	Female	3
P10	Principal	Elementary	Rural	Female	5
P11	Principal	Elementary	Rural	Female	3
AP12	Assistant Principal	Elementary	Suburban	Female	2
AP13	Assistant Principal	Elementary	Suburban	Female	3

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

This interview is being conducted to gain an understanding of the experience school leaders have with secondary trauma. Rather than focusing on the immediate actions a leader must take when learning of student trauma (putting supports in place, contacting support staff, investigating), the interview questions aim to uncover the emotional or delayed response school leaders have to discovering student trauma. The following questions that will be asked during the interview.

#### Student Trauma:

Tell me about a time you discovered that a student experienced something traumatic.

Describe how you feel when this happens.

Tell me more. What else did you feel?

When do you experience these feelings?

*Prompt: physically, emotionally, mentally*

What do you think about?

What words or images come to mind?

*Prompt: professionally, personally*

#### Leadership:

How would you describe yourself as a leader?

How would you say student trauma has made a difference in how you see yourself as a leader?

*Prompt: compared to the first time you experienced a student in trauma*

How would you describe how other people see you?

*Prompt: teachers, students, parents*

Experiencing Secondary Trauma:

How much do you think about your wellness?

*Prompt: mentally, emotionally, physically, socially*

Do you see yourself as being affected by your work?

How do you deal with the knowledge of student trauma in your school?

*Prompt: emotionally, supporting others, day-to-day, over time*