Journal of Education and Learning Technology (JELT)
ISSN 2720-7730 Volume 7 Issue 9 2026, 1144- 1158
Available online at: https://noyam.org/journals/jelt/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.2026799

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Prevalence and mitigation of burnout among female secondary school teachers in Heidedal, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Lyndall Leipers[1] & Alfred Henry Makura[1]

[1] Department of Post Graduate Studies Education, Faculty of Humanities of the Central University of Technology, Free State, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The educational quality suffers from teacher burnout, which creates major challenges for teacher retention, especially in under-resourced educational settings. The combination of structural inequalities and gendered role expectations creates additional stress factors for female educators who work in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. The purpose of this study was to examine burnout levels and coping methods among female teachers at Heidedal secondary schools in South Africa's underdeveloped townships. The research used a convergent mixed-methods approach. The Maslach Burnout Inventory—Educators Survey (MBI-ES) measured emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP) and personal accomplishment (PA) for 30 participants. The research team obtained qualitative information through semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers, which underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed three major themes, which included insufficient institutional support and unmanageable workloads; insufficient leadership support and gendered work-life conflicts; and specific strategies to reduce burnout, such as workload reduction, gender-sensitive policies, mental health days, peer mentoring and systemic reforms. The burnout among female teachers in Heidedal is attributed to institutional factors, socioeconomic conditions, and gender-related challenges. The study recommends multi-level interventions aimed at institutional accountability and gender-responsive support, alongside comprehensive policy changes. The research also emphasizes the importance of prioritizing teacher well-being in educational equity initiatives, particularly in resource-limited environments. This study contributes to scholarship by providing empirical evidence on the gendered experiences of teacher burnout in an under-resourced South African township and offers context-specific recommendations to inform educational policy, leadership, and teacher retention strategies.

Keywords: Burnout, Emotional exhaustion, Institutional support, Work-life conflict, Female teachers

INTRODUCTION

Educators across the world face burnout as a major concern because it involves emotional exhaustion combined with depersonalization and decreased personal accomplishment.[1] Current understanding

[1] Christina Maslach, Wilmar B Schaufeli, and Michael P Leiter, "Job Burnout," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, no. 2001 (2001): 397–422.

CORRESPONDENCE – Lyndall Leipers **Email**: lynnleipers@gmail.com
PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 22nd April, 2026 | Accepted: 31st August, 2026 | Published: 11th November, 2026.
TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Leipers, Lyndall, and Alfred Henry Makura. "Prevalence and mitigation of burnout among female secondary school teachers in Heidedal, Bloemfontein, South Africa." *Journal of Education and Learning Technology* 7, no.9 (2026): 1144 - 1158. https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.2026799
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recognizes burnout as both an occupational risk factor and a public health matter that affects teachers individually and produces wide-reaching impacts on students and institutions.[2] The teaching profession at secondary schools experiences growing demands due to expanding curricula and increasing student requirements, along with administrative challenges and rising social expectations. Teachers commonly face the challenge of performing educational responsibilities while providing counselling, social work and care functions without sufficient resources or professional development.[3]

The education system of South Africa continues to battle with apartheid-related issues through unequal resource distribution, physical separation and insufficient development of township and rural areas.[4] Staff members in these areas deal with specific stress factors, which include inadequate physical facilities such as large classrooms, along with insufficient educational resources and insufficient psychological support systems. According to a national survey conducted by Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius.[5] South African teachers showed burnout symptoms at more than 55%, which exceeded worldwide averages. The educational setting in Heidedal near Bloemfontein presents an extreme risk for educator burnout since this disadvantaged community experiences high rates of unemployment alongside gang violence and social instability that combine with school-based stressors.[6] These educational contexts create dual challenges for female teachers because they must navigate both the systemic barriers of the education system and gender-related stress factors.

Studies reveal that teaching women experience higher burnout rates because professional demands combine with cultural expectations about emotional work and caregiving responsibilities.[7] Women experience increased fatigue due to the "second shift" obligation to perform unpaid domestic tasks after their regular workday, while their recovery time is restricted.[8] The gendered school systems of patriarchy make these issues worse because female educators report they receive little value from the system and face both leadership underrepresentation and discriminatory behavior.[9] The negative impact of burnout extends from affecting teachers' health to deteriorating both teaching quality and student participation levels. Emotionally exhausted teachers show decreased classroom management abilities and deliver unclear instructions while showing punitive behaviors toward their students.[10]The situation produces a chain reaction that weakens student education as well as the school environment, which eventually leads to poor educational results. Teacher burnout leads to extensive teacher departures, which worsen the already severe deficit of qualified educators across South Africa.[11]

The education sector requires immediate attention to teacher burnout, as it directly affects the sustainability of equitable education systems, particularly in under-resourced communities that serve women teachers. Research on burnout has expanded, but localized studies focused on township schools

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[2] Malik Muhammad Sohail et al., "Factors Influencing Teacher Wellbeing and Burnout in Schools: A Scoping Review1," *Work* 76, no. 4 (December 15, 2023): 1317–31, https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-220234.

[3] Amy N. Farley and Leah M. Chamberlain, "The Teachers Are Not Alright: A Call for Research and Policy on Teacher Stress and Well-Being," *The New Educator* 17, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 305–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2021.1939918.

[4] Godfrey Chitsauko Muyambi and Philip Kwashi Atiso Ahiaku, "Inequalities and Education in South Africa: A Scoping Review," *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 8 (2025): 100408.

[5] Anita Padmanabhanunni and Tyrone B. Pretorius, "Teacher Burnout in the Time of COVID-19: Antecedents and Psychological Consequences," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 5 (February 27, 2023): 4204, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054204.

[6] Clifford O. Odimegwu and John Kekovole, eds., *Social Demography of South Africa* (Routledge, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315818818.

[7] Nur Fadhilah Umar et al., "Examining Gender Microaggressions In Academic Settings: An Analysis Of Types And Factors Contributing To Gender Inequality Among Teachers In Schools," *Counsenesia Indonesian Journal Of Guidance and Counseling* 4, no. 1 (June 3, 2023): 22–31, https://doi.org/10.36728/cijgc.vi.2498.

[8] B. Bennett, "Women Working Overtime: The Influence of the Second Shift Discrepancy on Relationship and Life Satisfaction" (2024).Yun Wei, Geetha Subramaniam, and Xueshen Wang, "The Glass Ceiling Perception and Female Teacher Burnout: The Mediating Role of Work–Family Conflict," *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (April 14, 2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.155190.

[9] Asena Yücedašlar, N Bilge Uzun, and Cenk Akay, "Career Barriers of Female Education Administrators: Systematic Review and a Qualitative Meta-Synthesis," *I-Manager's Journal on Educational Psychology* 17, no. 4 (2024): 26.Damilola Adinyenka Akinola and Parvathy Naidoo, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: An Examination of Gendered Barriers in School Leadership Progression in South Africa," *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (December 31, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2395342.

[10] A Aloe, J. Amo, and M. Shanahan, "The Impact of Self-Efficacy on Teacher Burnout," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2014.Siyu Duan, Kerry Bissaker, and Zhan Xu, "Correlates of Teachers' Classroom Management Self-Efficacy: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Educational Psychology Review* 36, no. 2 (2024): 43.

[11] Martin Gustafsson and Kholosa Nonkenge, "Basic Education Policy in South Africa: From 1994 to Now: Policy Paper 33," *ERSA Working Paper Series* , 2025, 28.

remain scarce in understanding its manifestations and prevention strategies. The research investigates two essential aspects, which are (1) the level of burnout experienced by female teachers at secondary schools in Heidedal, Bloemfontein and (2) the individual and organizational strategies for managing or preventing burnout occurrence. The study uses the first-hand accounts of female educators from a disadvantaged setting to develop evidence-based intervention approaches that maintain teacher health and build professional endurance.

Although teacher burnout is widely studied both in the US and abroad, little work has been done on the gender-specific nature of burnout among female secondary school teachers in underprivileged township schools.[12] In addition, there are few studies that incorporate qualitative descriptions of teachers' experiences with quantitative measures of burnout to find coping strategies that are contextually relevant.[13] This is why interventions that are specifically tailored for schools with limited resources are not being developed. Heidedal is a good case study since it provides a good example of the educational and social problems faced by underprivileged South African township communities. Poverty, community violence, high unemployment, and lack of resources have a huge impact on teachers and schools. A focus on burnout in this area provides important insights into how gendered responsibilities, school conditions, and structural inequality combine to impact female educators' well-being. Thus, Heidedal's findings may inform interventions for other underfunded township schools which are dealing with similar issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Burnout among teachers has become a serious problem facing global education systems and is especially common in secondary schools as work demands tend to be more intense. Burnout, a concept developed by Christina Maslach, concerns states of being characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lowered sense of personal accomplishment.[14] Research suggests that burnout is rampant but also often hits female teachers the worst as professional and societal norms intersect.

Prevalence of Burnout

Teacher burnout is prevalent in most education environments, but the rate of teacher burnout varies widely. International studies have estimated that between 30% and 60% of teachers are burned out, and the causes of burnout have been attributed to different educational systems, social conditions and organisational support.[15] That has been backed up by research available in Frontiers in Psychology that found that a significant number of educators do fit into the high burnout categories, further establishing the size of the challenge.[16]

The literature consistently describes gender-related differences. Although most studies concluded that female teachers tend to experience more emotional exhaustion compared to male teachers, researchers are divided on the reason for this. The most popular explanation is that work–family conflicts and caregiving responsibilities are the primary reasons for this difference, but organisational factors such as the lack of leadership support, emotional labour, and workplace culture are also part of it. This indicates that gender doesn't explain burnout alone, but rather that burnout is the confluence of professional demands and social expectations.[17] Workload and the pressure to maintain a high level of emotional engagement also play a greater role in burnout levels in women than

[12] Filip Van Droogenbroeck et al., "Does the School Context *Really* Matter for Teacher Burnout? Review of Existing Multilevel Teacher Burnout Research and Results From the Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018 in the Flemish- and French-Speaking Communities of Belgium," *Educational Researcher* 50, no. 5 (June 10, 2021): 290–305, https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X21992361.

[13] Pauliina Avola et al., "Interventions to Teacher Well-Being and Burnout A Scoping Review," *Educational Psychology Review* 37, no. 1 (March 28, 2025): 11, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-025-09986-2.

[14] Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, "Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry," *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (June 5, 2016): 103–11, https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311.

[15] K Tran, H. Luong, and T. Nguyen, "Prevalence of Teacher Burnout: A Meta-Analysis," *International Journal of Educational Research*, 2024.

[16] Mohammed H. Alghamdi and Georgios Sideridis, "Identifying Subgroups of Teacher Burnout in Elementary and Secondary Schools: The Effects of Teacher Experience, Age and Gender," *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (January 13, 2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1406562.

[17] Oluwanife Segun Falebita et al., "Gender Differences in the Impact of Workload Demands and Motivation on Teachers' Burnout and Stress: A Multigroup Analysis," *Education Sciences* 16, no. 2 (February 6, 2026): 259, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020259.

men, research suggests. The environment of secondary school exposes students to unique stressors like learner discipline problems and increased classroom pressure, which are associated with burnout.

Most high-income countries in the world often study the problem of workload and administrative stress, but research in developing countries such as South Africa highlights additional sources of burnout, including resource shortages, overcrowded classrooms, as well as poverty and social problems at the community level. Despite being different in context, emotional exhaustion is the most common problem faced by teachers.[18]

Causes of Burnout

Theoretical research has highlighted several principal contributors to burnout among female secondary school teachers. Overwork was the most consistent predictor of teacher burnout across the literature. But increasingly, researchers are arguing that workload alone is not enough to explain burnout.[19] This phenomenon can be better understood using the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, which states that burnout occurs when job demands outweigh the resources to overcome them, making it necessary to work toward burnout.[20] At the same time, weak leadership, poor recognition, and limited professional support all contribute to increased stress. More women teachers are specifically impacted by family-work conflict, which

Mitigation strategies

Organizational interventions have an important role in decreasing workload, building leadership support, and promoting supportive schools. Schools that prioritize teacher growth through resource provision and mentorship tend to experience less burnout. Stress management, resilience training and peer support provide an approach at an individual level that has been shown to help.[21] The JD-R model emphasizes that work resources (e.g. autonomy, recognition, collaboration) can complement the high job demands. Crucially, scholars call for gender-responsive strategies which take into account the specific challenges of being female teachers, especially regarding their responsibilities at work and in their personal lives.[22]

There is a general agreement that burnout cannot be cured by a single person's coping mechanism. Early research focused more on resilience training and stress-management intervention whereas recent studies have looked at organisational strategies to lower workloads, enhance leadership support, and increase resource levels in the workplace.[23] More and more scholars say the best interventions are those that combine organisational change with individual support programmes, specifically in resource-constrained schools where structural factors are a big cause of burnout. Recent studies also call for gender-responsive interventions that recognize the dual professional and domestic roles of many female teachers.[24]

Overall, the literature confirms that burnout among female secondary school teachers is both widespread and complex. It is driven by factors such as excessive workload, limited institutional

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[18] Christine Cohidon, Pascal Wild, and Nicolas Senn, "Job Stress among GPs: Associations with Practice Organisation in 11 High-Income Countries," *British Journal of General Practice* 70, no. 698 (September 2020): e657–67, https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp20X710909; Schlebusch Luzaan, Schlebusch Gawie, and Lineo Matjeane, "Fostering Resilience in South African Township Primary School Teachers," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 22, no. 5 (May 30, 2023): 58–73, https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.22.5.3.

[19] Natalia Rajendran, Helen M. G. Watt, and Paul W. Richardson, "Teacher Burnout and Turnover Intent," *The Australian Educational Researcher* 47, no. 3 (July 30, 2020): 477–500, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00371-x.

[20] Azanaw Asega Belay et al., "Work-Related Burnout among Public Secondary School Teachers Is Significantly Influenced by the Psychosocial Work Factors: A Cross-Sectional Study from Ethiopia," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (July 3, 2023), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1215421.

[21] Peng Liu et al., "Understanding the Relationship between Teacher Leadership and Teacher Well-Being: The Mediating Roles of Trust in Leaders and Teacher Efficacy," *Journal of Educational Administration* 61, no. 6 (2023): 646–61.

[22] Z Wang, N. C. Hall, and J. L. Taxer, "Teacher Stress and Burnout: A Review of the JD-R Model's Application in Teaching," *Educational Psychology Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 1–-33.

[23] Catherine Cohen et al., "Workplace Interventions to Improve Well-Being and Reduce Burnout for Nurses, Physicians and Allied Healthcare Professionals: A Systematic Review," *BMJ Open* 13, no. 6 (June 29, 2023): e071203, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-071203.

[24] Belinda Agyapong et al., "Interventions to Reduce Stress and Burnout among Teachers: A Scoping Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 9 (April 24, 2023): 5625, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20095625.

support, and work–family pressures. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that targeted interventions at both organizational and individual levels can significantly alleviate burnout. Addressing this issue is essential for promoting teacher well-being and ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of education systems.

Though there is significant evidence for the prevalence, causes, and effects of teacher burnout, there are still substantial gaps in the literature. Studies from Europe, North America, and other well-resourced education systems are of general interest but not applicable in South Africa. Meanwhile, South African researchers have mostly looked at teachers as a single occupational group and are less concerned with female secondary school teachers' gendered experiences. There are also few studies that offer quantitative measures of burnout along with qualitative accounts of teachers' lived experiences in township schools. There is thus little knowledge about how institutional conditions, socioeconomic disadvantages, and gendered expectations relate to burnout in the context of Heidedal. The study is guided by the Social Feminist Theory and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. Together, they offer an in-depth understanding of burnout experienced by female secondary school educators in underfunded schools in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Setting

This study used an embedded mixed-methods design from the pragmatic research approach, which values diversity of methodologies in exploring complex social problems. The design serves to strengthen this fusion of the quantitative and qualitative, so that a comprehensive view of burnout is formed by combining prevalence and narrative accounts. In a convergent strategy, two strands are gathered in parallel, and their analyses are performed separately, while in the process of interpretation, the two strands are linked together to establish validity and triangulation.[25] The study was conducted in three secondary schools in Heidedal, an ex-disadvantaged township located in Bloemfontein, Free State Province, South Africa. Heidedal is mainly populated by Coloured groups and suffers from chronic unemployment, crumbling social infrastructure, urban decline, social conflict, and high levels of community violence. [26] Accordingly, it serves as a notable microcosm for examining the occupational and psychological vulnerabilities found among teachers, especially with regard to gender.

Participants and Sampling

The target population of the study were female teachers currently serving at the eligible secondary schools. Using a purposive sampling strategy, participants were selected based on gender, employment, and availability. A sample of 30 female secondary teachers took part in the quantitative phase, and they all participated in filling out the Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educators Survey (MBI-ES) on a voluntary basis. Twelve participants were then acquired for qualitative sampling in the qualitative stage using criterion-based or convenience sampling in order to ensure that an overall demographic representation of the range of ages, teaching experience and subject specialisation was present. All participants were asked to participate on their own, and consent was obtained from the participants as per the ethical research protocol and informed consent documents. The method of sampling was considered appropriate for this study’s exploratory nature, because the aim was to understand the nature of the problem of burnout within a contextually bounded case (Heidedal) and not to have a statistical generalisability goal with regard to the process of assessing the phenomenon.

[25] Michael D Fetters, Leslie A Curry, and John W Creswell, “Achieving Integration in Mixed Methods Designs—Principles and Practices,” *Health Services Research* 48, no. 6pt2 (2013): 2134–56.
[26] Odimegwu and Kekovole, *Social Demography of South Africa*.

Instruments

Quantitative tool

Quantitative data were gathered using the Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educators Survey (MBI-ES), a 22-item psychometric measure specially designed to evaluate burnout occurring in academic settings.[27] The MBI-ES assesses three principal aspects of burnout:

• Emotional Exhaustion (EE): feelings of being emotionally drained while working;
• Depersonalisation (DP): impersonal and unfeeling response to recipients of service or instruction;
• Personal Accomplishment (PA): the sense that one has accomplished what one is trying to accomplish in one's job. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 0 ("Never") to 6 ("Every day"). Increased levels of EE and DP scores and lower PA scores signify higher burnout levels. The MBI-ES has also shown decent psychometric properties, both internationally and among participants in South Africa, and the internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) of the three sub-scales were typically statistically larger than 0.80.[28]

Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative arm was composed of semi-structured interviews conducted under the supervision of an interview protocol involving rich descriptions of participant experiences, perceptions and approaches to work burnout. The interview questions addressed perceived causes of burnout, support systems, personal coping strategies and recommendations to combat burnout. Interviews were conducted in English, transcribed verbatim for analysis, audio-recorded with written consent from each participant, assigned pseudonyms and ensured anonymity.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and frequencies) were used to analyse the quantitative data to summarize the burnout scores on the three sub-scales of the MBI-ES. Given the small sample size, non-probabilistic distribution of participants and the lack of statistical inferences as to which statistical procedures are correct for the study group that conducted the study, the researchers did not use any inferential methods. This method was driven by the intent to investigate the trends in prevalence and comparison of score distributions by a number of threshold recommendations for a given population.[29] Analysis and manipulation of the dataset were carried out through the SPSS program (Version 28.0). 2.4.2. Qualitative Analysis. Qualitative analyses were conducted according to Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis.[30] Through this six-phase process, going from pre-existing data immersion to theme development, patterns and interpretations were created. There were inductive and theory-driven codes, especially those pertaining to burnout and gender-related pressures. NVivo 12 software facilitated the coding and organizational step. 2.4.3. Integration and Triangulation. The data were integrated in the interpretive phase in the sense that patterns from the MBI-ES scores were identified, compared and contrasted with themes generated and analyzed through qualitative analyses. This enabled the researchers to understand how prevalence data translated into individual stories in relation to the local contexts. For credibility and validity of findings, data triangulation was applied in the form of methodological triangulation; reflexivity and peer debriefing were used to guard against researcher bias.[31]

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[27] Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter, "Job Burnout."
[28] Lannita J Randle, *The Relationship between Work Engagement, Burnout, and Employee Turnover Intention* (Walden University, 2022).
[29] C Maslach and M. Leiter, *The Burnout Syndrome: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Intervention* (Routledge, 1997).
[30] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.
[31] John W Creswell and Vicki L Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (sage, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical principles of the Central University of Technology Research Ethics Committee (reference REC/2024/02/LEIPERS) and was conducted in accordance with the research ethics guide. Written consent was requested from all participants before starting data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time throughout the research process without sanctions. Exposure to data was securely maintained and strictly for academic benefit.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Prevalence of Burnout

Quantitative data derived from the Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educators Survey (MBI - ES) show that signs of burnout are high in the sample of female secondary school teachers in Heidedal. The mean aggregate score in the three subscales of the MBI - ES, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalisation and Personal Accomplishment, was indicated in Table 1.

Table. 1: Burnout scores among female teachers in Heidedal (N = 30)

Burnout Dimension	Mean Score	Interpretation
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	28.4	Moderate to High
Depersonalisation (DP)	14.1	Moderate
Personal Accomplishment (PA)*	30.7	Low to Moderate

Note: Lower scores on PA reflect higher levels of burnout.

The results showed that Emotional Exhaustion, which is regarded as the most significant marker of burnout, was experienced at a moderate to high level by 68% of the study's participants. This variable reflects the degree to which respondents believe they are overextended and emotionally drained by their work, indicating a high burden on psychological and physical energy reserves.

The mean score for Depersonalisation was 14.1, indicating that it was experienced at a moderate level by 54% of the study's participants. This suggests that teachers have a tendency to develop a detached or impersonal attitude towards learners and their professional work, probably as a coping mechanism for chronic stress and emotional fatigue.

Personal Accomplishment had a mean score of 30.7 in the low to moderate range. About 47% of the participants had a diminished sense of professional efficacy and accomplishment. These responses imply that nearly half of educators perceive that they have lessened their ability to contribute meaningfully to their work, probably due to a decline in motivation or a lack of institutional recognition and support.

Overall, the data show a picture of burnout described by high emotional fatigue, moderate feelings of psychological detachment, and low feelings of professional accomplishment. At a combined level, these components suggest a high level of occupational burnout among the female educators in this setting and the need to address the welfare of the teachers within the institution with a focused intervention.

Strategies for Mitigating Burnout

Qualitative analysis of the interview data yielded three interrelated themes reflecting the participants' perceptions of potential strategies for mitigating burnout. These themes—(a) institutional support deficits, (b) work-life conflict, and (c) proposals for systemic and practical change—capture both the underlying causes of occupational stress and the participants' visions for meaningful intervention.

Institutional Support Deficits

A recurring theme across participant narratives was the perception of inadequate institutional support. Teachers reported feeling undervalued by management, overwhelmed by excessive workloads, and unsupported in the face of increasing demands associated with learner well-being, discipline, and

academic performance. The perceived absence of empathetic and responsive leadership structures was described as a central contributor to emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation.
One participant stated:
"We are expected to carry the burden of both teaching and social work… with no support from above." (Participant 3)

This sentiment was echoed by others who emphasized the lack of practical assistance, recognition, and emotional validation from school leadership. The data suggest that burnout is exacerbated when teachers are left to navigate complex psychosocial challenges in isolation, without adequate institutional backing or collaborative problem-solving mechanisms.

Work-Life Conflict

Participants also highlighted significant difficulties in managing the intersection between their professional obligations and domestic responsibilities. Many described feeling chronically overwhelmed by the dual demands of teaching and caregiving, particularly as women were expected to fulfil extensive roles in the home after work hours. These tensions contributed to cumulative stress, time scarcity, and diminished personal well-being.
As one teacher explained:
"After school, I still have to cook, clean, and take care of my children. There's no time to rest." (Participant 7)

This theme reveals how role conflict and the lack of personal recovery time compound feelings of exhaustion and hinder sustained engagement in the teaching profession. Participants indicated that the blurring of boundaries between work and home life was intensified by the emotionally demanding nature of their educational roles.

Proposals for Change

In addition to identifying challenges, participants offered a range of suggestions aimed at alleviating burnout. These proposals reflect a desire for structural reform, psychosocial support, and the promotion of a more sustainable professional environment. The following strategies were most frequently recommended:

- Reduced administrative workload: Participants emphasized the need to streamline paperwork and bureaucratic reporting tasks, which were described as time-consuming and mentally draining.
- Mandatory wellness programs: Teachers called for regular, structured opportunities for psychological support, stress management, and physical health promotion.
- Peer mentoring and professional solidarity: Several participants advocated for mentoring systems that would promote collegial support and shared coping strategies.
- Designated mental health days: Some suggested the introduction of formally sanctioned leave days for mental health recovery, acknowledging the psychological toll of the profession.
- Gender-sensitive workplace policies: Participants expressed a need for greater institutional recognition of the unique pressures faced by female educators, including flexible scheduling and support for parenting responsibilities.

Collectively, these proposals underscore the necessity for multi-level interventions that attend not only to the professional demands of teaching but also to the broader socio-cultural context in which female educators operate. The data reveal that participants are not merely passive recipients of stress but active agents capable of articulating informed solutions rooted in lived experience.

DISCUSSION

Burnout in Under-Resourced South African Schools

This study confirms that burnout is a prevalent and multifaceted challenge among female secondary school teachers in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas such as Heidedal. Emotional exhaustion was found to be the most dominant symptom, accompanied by moderate levels of depersonalisation and

diminished personal accomplishment. These findings are consistent with recent South African studies highlighting the disproportionate burden borne by educators working in under-resourced schools, where high learner–teacher ratios, limited support, and infrastructural inadequacies prevail.[32]

Burnout in such settings cannot be adequately explained by individual weakness or personal maladjustment. Rather, it is structurally embedded within the broader socio-political and economic constraints that characterize historically marginalized communities. Teachers in these environments often navigate multiple systemic stressors, including poor leadership, unsafe working conditions, and excessive administrative demands—factors that are known to erode morale and undermine occupational well-being.[33]

Institutional Role Strain and Illegitimate Tasks

The qualitative data reflect persistent frustration with excessive bureaucratic responsibilities and insufficient leadership support. Teachers reported being tasked with duties beyond their core teaching functions, echoing the concept of "illegitimate tasks."[34] These tasks—perceived as unnecessary or outside one's professional role—are closely associated with psychological strain and reduced job satisfaction. In the context of Heidedal, where staffing and support are limited, such illegitimate role expectations may further exacerbate teacher burnout by diminishing perceptions of professional dignity and autonomy.

Gendered Role Conflict: A Social Feminist Perspective

The interplay between professional and domestic roles emerged as a significant stressor. Many participants articulated difficulties balancing their teaching responsibilities with caregiving roles at home, reinforcing well-established feminist critiques of the "double shift" endured by working women.[35] Social feminist theory posits that gender-based divisions of labor, both formal and informal, subject women to unique forms of structural burden—particularly in cultures where domestic responsibilities are disproportionately assigned to women.[36] The Heidedal teachers' accounts reflect these gendered dynamics: expectations to simultaneously perform as caregivers, disciplinarians, and educators within chronically under-supported settings.

Enhancing Self-Efficacy: Insights from Social Cognitive Theory

Several of the proposed solutions align with Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, particularly the notion that self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to execute specific actions, plays a central role in managing occupational stress and motivation.[37] Participants called for mentoring structures, peer support, and wellness interventions that could reinforce personal agency and coping skills. As previous research shows, educators with high self-efficacy are more resilient to burnout and are better positioned to maintain consistent classroom performance even in adverse conditions.[38]

Organisational Change and Systemic Support

The mitigation strategies suggested by participants—including the introduction of wellness days, reduction of administrative workload, and implementation of gender-sensitive HR policies—point to a need for systemic transformation within the educational sector. These suggestions are consistent with

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[32] Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius, "Teacher Burnout in the Time of COVID-19: Antecedents and Psychological Consequences."

[33] Tony Bush and Derek Glover, "Research on School Leadership in South Africa: A Systematic Review," *Handbook of Research in Basic Education in South Africa*, 2021, 115–30; L Segalo, "Teacher Resilience and Learners' Classroom Disciplinary Problems in a South African Setting," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 15, no. 10 (2021): 628–39.

[34] Lijing Zhao et al., "Doing It Purposely? Mediation of Moral Disengagement in the Relationship Between Illegitimate Tasks and Counterproductive Work Behavior," *Journal of Business Ethics* 179, no. 3 (September 2, 2022): 733–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04848-7.

[35] Bennett, "Women Working Overtime: The Influence of the Second Shift Discrepancy on Relationship and Life Satisfaction."

[36] Raewyn Connell, *Gender: In World Perspective* (John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

[37] Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (Macmillan, 1997).

[38] Steven Randall Chesnut and Hansel Burley, "Self-Efficacy as a Predictor of Commitment to the Teaching Profession: A Meta-Analysis," *Educational Research Review* 15 (June 2015): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.02.001; Shanshan Li, "The Effect of Teacher Self-Efficacy, Teacher Resilience, and Emotion Regulation on Teacher Burnout: A Mediation Model," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1185079.

recent calls for structural reforms in South African public education that place teacher well-being at the centre of institutional development.[39] Notably, structured peer mentoring programs, collective reflective practices, and community wellness initiatives have demonstrated success in reducing burnout symptoms when applied in similarly high-stress school environments.[40] The desire for collegial solidarity and practical relief from administrative overload indicates that effective interventions must be both psychosocial and operational. It is not enough to offer individual stress management techniques if broader environmental and managerial conditions remain unchanged.

Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

By merging quantitative findings with qualitative narratives, this study presents a cohesive picture of burnout as a contextually embedded phenomenon. The moderate-to-high levels of emotional exhaustion identified through the MBI-ES correspond to the institutional and personal pressures described in interviews. Depersonalisation appears to function as a psychological buffer, allowing teachers to emotionally distance themselves in unsupportive or overwhelming situations. Low personal accomplishment reflects the reality of working in constrained environments with limited recognition or growth opportunities. While the results are consistent with research published in South Africa and globally, where emotional exhaustion is the main driver of teacher burnout, this study offers other new perspectives.

First, the findings indicate that the burnout experienced by female secondary school teachers in Heidedal stems not only from excessive workloads but also from systemic disadvantages, organizational practices, and societal gender norms. This perspective is significantly broader than those explored in earlier studies, which have primarily concentrated on either organizational or individual factors, such as overall job performance.

Second, the research highlights the significance of illegitimate work in under-resourced schools. While earlier studies have acknowledged that administrative tasks related to work can be overwhelming, this study reveals that participants articulate how such tasks fail to enhance their professional identity and autonomy. This observation is noteworthy, as it suggests that the intensity of work, rather than merely the quantity, is a crucial factor in the development of burnout and the emergence of occupational stress in challenging educational environments.

Third, by integrating Social Feminist Theory with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the research illustrates that the burnout experiences of female teachers are shaped by both external structural inequities and internal beliefs about self-efficacy. The inclusion of these theoretical frameworks is typically absent in South African research on teacher burnout, marking a conceptual advancement in the field.

Finally, the mixed-methods approach provides more accurate data about burnout by linking quantitative burnout measures to real-life experiences of teachers. Rather than treating emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment as separate things, the qualitative data show how these symptoms arise from ongoing exposure to organizational pressures, gender-based role conflict and lack of institutional support. The integration of such information can help to better target interventions in under-resourced schools across South Africa.

Overall, these findings add to the existing literature on burnout by emphasizing that effective burnout interventions need to go beyond individual stress management approaches and include organizational practices, gender-sensitive policies and systemic inequalities that shape the daily work environments of teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings underscore the importance of addressing burnout through both individual and systemic interventions. Schools should adopt wellness policies that are context-specific and sensitive to gender

[39] Naureen Durrani and Zhadyra Makhmetova, "A Multi-Layered Socio-Ecological Framework for Investigating Teacher Well-Being: Key Predictors and Protective Factors," *Sustainability* 17, no. 3 (January 23, 2025): 900, https://doi.org/10.3390/su17030900.

[40] Sasabona Maseko and Shingairai Chigeza, "Understanding the Relational Well-Being of Primary School Teachers in Rural South Africa," *African Journal of Career Development* 6, no. 1 (August 30, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/AJCD.v6i1.115.

dynamics. Leadership development that fosters emotional intelligence and accountability can enhance organisational culture and reduce role conflict. Additionally, embedding peer mentorship and mental health resources within school routines can provide sustained support to educators. The research's implications include the urgency of a gender-sensitive and more holistic intervention that is designed to address the realities articulated by female teachers.

Institutional Recommendations

These may include adjustments in school leadership practices which will emphasize emotional support and workload redistribution; gender-responsive human resource policies to acknowledge caregiving responsibilities; and a combination of wellness programs (e.g., peer mentoring, psychological support, professional growth, etc.)Not only would these be measures that help to reduce burnout, but they would also increase retention, improve the effectiveness of instruction, and contribute to a healthier school culture.

This study thus opens up the theoretical dialogue on occupational stress from a structural critique to consideration of personal agency, establishing a social feminist and social cognitive framework for examining the experience of burnout. It indicates that while having the capacity to promote teachers' self-efficacy and resilience is important, these efforts should be interwoven with supportive, well-resourced, and empathetically governed school settings.

While the findings are in line with previous research in South Africa and globally, which suggests that emotional exhaustion is the leading cause of teacher burnout, this study provides several new perspectives.

Finally, the mixed-methods approach has improved burnout research by linking quantitative burnout metrics to teachers' real-life experiences. Rather than focusing on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment as separate conditions, the qualitative data show how these symptoms arise from ongoing exposure to organizational pressures, gender-related role conflicts and inadequate institutional support. This integration can provide context-specific evidence to inform interventions in under-resourced schools across South Africa.

Policy recommendations

The Department of Basic Education must develop and implement comprehensive teacher wellness policies that recognise burnout as a significant occupational challenge, particularly in under-resourced schools. Those policies must include clear guidelines for teacher well-being, manageable administrative workloads, and access to psychological support services.

Education authorities should develop gender-responsive human resource policies that acknowledge the caregiving responsibilities frequently carried by female teachers. Such policies should encourage equitable workload distribution and provide workplace practices that enhance work-life balance.

Greater investment also needs to be made to increase staffing levels, infrastructure, and educational resources in historically disadvantaged schools. Addressing structural inequities would alleviate many of the systemic problems that cause teacher burnout and would have more positive effects on teacher retention, teaching effectiveness, and educational quality.

These findings add to the existing literature by stressing that burnout interventions need to be in addition to individual stress management strategies, but also in addition to organizational practices, gender-sensitive policies and systemic inequalities in the work environment of teachers.

CONCLUSION

As indicated by the outcome of this study, burnout is prevalent and multifactorial for female secondary school teachers in Heidedal. Quantitative data recorded moderate to high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation along with reduced personal accomplishment. Qualitative narratives articulated their daily worlds contained in these scores: lack of support from the institution, chronic administrative burden, persistent occupational pressure with limited time for family to accommodate higher-level operational obligations. Collectively, these results provide a complex picture of the magnitude and

nature of burnout in resource-poor learning settings. Burnout in this way is unmistakably not to do with personal resilience shortfalls or individual failure to cope. Instead, it is grounded in broader structural inequities and gendered social expectations that pervade teachers' experiences both inside and outside the confines of the school space. Such evidence suggests an urgent need for a shift in perception regarding the theoretical model of and treatment of burnout. It is not enough to engage in individual-level responses (e.g., teaching stress management or mindfulness), but rather there is a need for institution-level and systems-level transformations where teacher wellbeing is recognized as an essential condition for durable quality teaching. In particular, the implications of these findings provide a nuanced, contextually sensitive understanding of burnout and the underserved South African education context. It presents an argument for and reflection upon the urgent but potentially possible need for empirically informed, theoretically grounded policy and practice reforms grounded in teacher voice, theoretical learning, and research. And the voices of the female educators in Heidedal are less voices of distress than testimony to the institution itself: calls for change, a demand for responses that should resonate as a collective with policymakers, education leaders and scholars.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the limited sample and geographical scope of the study, future research could adopt a comparative approach, examining burnout dynamics across different provinces or education districts. Quantitative modelling of the relationship between self-efficacy, gendered role expectations, and burnout would also be valuable in refining predictive frameworks for teacher attrition and performance.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Lyndall Leipers is an education practitioner and researcher. She earned her Master of Education degree from the Central University of Technology, Free State, in September 2026, and she has applied to continue with a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the same institution. She currently works in early childhood development as a school principal. Her research interests are education, gender, and burnout among female teachers. In her current study, she looks at how common burnout is among female secondary school teachers in Heidedal, Bloemfontein, South Africa, and examines ways to reduce burnout and support teachers' well-being. The study focuses on the pressures female teachers face and on practical support for their professional and personal health.

Alfred Henry Makura is a Full Professor in the Department of Postgraduate Studies (Education) and a Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) fellow at the Central University of Technology in South Africa. His current areas of speciality and interest are in education, particularly female education leadership and management, curriculum development, gender studies, teacher education and professional development in higher education. Over the years, he has graduated several postgraduate graduands at all levels. He is an external examiner and reviewer of academic articles and book chapters for several international academic journals and sits on some editorial boards. Prof Makura previously worked as a senior academic development practitioner and acting manager at the Teaching and Learning Centre [TLC], University of Fort Hare [Alice campus], and extensively as a principal lecturer at Morgenster Teacher Education College, an Associate College of the University of Zimbabwe, and at the Zimbabwe Open University. He has published four books, three book chapters, over seventy peer-reviewed journal articles and presented more than sixty papers at local and international conferences and seminars.