

## Beyond Structural Change: A Cultural Interpretation of School Principals' "Burnout National" Survey by ANP–LUMSA

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[Doi:10.19044/esj.2026.v22n4p63](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n4p63)

Submitted: 29 December 2025

Accepted: 13 February 2026

Published: 28 February 2026

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*Cite As:*

Angeloni, G. (2026). *Beyond Structural Change: A Cultural Interpretation of School Principals' "Burnout National" Survey by ANP–LUMSA*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 22 (4), 63. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n4p63>

### Abstract

The 2025 ANP–LUMSA national survey provides robust empirical evidence of widespread occupational stress among Italian school principals, characterized by high cognitive and emotional demands, excessive workloads, and significant risks of burnout. While these findings are empirically sound and methodologically rigorous, their interpretation cannot be confined to a purely structural or organizational framework. This article argues that the explanatory power of the survey is substantially enhanced when read through a culturalist lens, distinguishing between episodic organizational changes or structural reengineering and deeper processes of cultural transformation in the anthropological sense. From this perspective, principals' burnout emerges not only as a consequence of excessive demands and insufficient resources but as the outcome of a progressive delegitimization of the leadership role, weakened institutional trust, and governance cultures oriented toward control rather than support. The paper proposes that meaningful improvement cannot be achieved solely through middle management expansion or administrative reinforcement, as suggested by the survey respondents, but requires a reconfiguration of the ethical, symbolic, and relational foundations of school leadership. Such a shift redefines principals' wellbeing as a collective institutional responsibility and calls for policy responses centered on role recognition, professional dignity, and trust-based educational governance. By integrating empirical evidence with cultural analysis, this study tries to

contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership burnout and offers a theoretically grounded foundation for policy approaches capable of producing not merely change, but genuine transformation in educational systems.

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**Keywords:** School leadership; burnout; organizational culture; educational governance; institutional legitimacy

## Introduction

School principals occupy a pivotal position within contemporary educational systems. International research consistently demonstrates that leadership quality significantly influences school improvement, teacher motivation, and student outcomes (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Yet this strategic role has progressively expanded in scope and intensity, absorbing administrative, legal, managerial, and relational responsibilities that extend far beyond traditional pedagogical leadership (Day & Gu, 2014).

Within occupational health psychology, the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model provides a well-established framework for understanding how excessive job demands combined with insufficient resources generate chronic stress and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The ANP–LUMSA survey constitutes the most comprehensive national application of this framework to Italian school principals, offering compelling quantitative evidence of systemic risks.

However, this article contends that empirical confirmation of stress does not exhaust the explanatory task. Quantitative indicators describe *what* is happening, but not fully *why* it is happening in the specific form and intensity observed. To address this gap, the present study proposes a qualitative, cultural reinterpretation of the survey findings, grounded in organizational anthropology and critical leadership studies.

## Methods and results

Though the methodological strength of the ANP–LUMSA survey lies in its breadth, standardization, and national representativeness. Its instruments effectively capture workload, cognitive and emotional demands, burnout indicators, and principals' perceptions of organizational solutions.

As a matter of fact, the study sample consisted of 1,798 Italian school principals, with a predominance of female participants (73%) and a mean age of 56 years (SD = 6.2). Participants were geographically distributed across northern, central, and southern regions of Italy, with higher representation from Lombardy and Sicily. In terms of school type, 61% of principals led early childhood or primary schools, whereas 32% were responsible for secondary

schools. Notably, only 42.4% of respondents worked within their municipality of residence, indicating potential additional stress associated with commuting. Data were collected through a structured online survey designed to assess multiple dimensions of occupational stress and well-being among school principals. The survey included the following key components:

- **Workload and Work Rhythm:** Self-report items evaluating task accumulation, time scarcity, and perceived pace of daily work.
- **Cognitive Demands:** Items measuring the frequency of multitasking and the complexity of decision-making responsibilities.
- **Emotional Demands:** Measures addressing emotion regulation, conflict mediation, and affective labor inherent to the leadership role.
- **Well-Being Indicators:** Standardized scales assessing burnout (via the Maslach Burnout Inventory), sleep quality, depressive symptoms, and somatic complaints.
- **Organizational Perceptions:** Items exploring the availability of administrative support, presence of delegation structures, and clarity of internal and external communication.
- **Intervention Evaluations:** Likert-scale items (1–5) assessing principals' perceptions of the potential effectiveness of various organizational or support interventions.

Principals overwhelmingly report **high workloads**: 84.7% note irregular work accumulation; 80.3% indicate insufficient time for task completion; 88.9% describe elevated daily rhythms. These percentages exceed standard cutoffs for occupational risk in managerial populations (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Nearly all respondents (99%) indicate constant multitasking and complex decision-making. **Emotional demands** are also prominent: 90% report situations triggering emotional strain; 60% admit to emotional masking; 87% maintain courtesy independent of interpersonal treatment.

Female principals report significantly higher risk levels across all job demand dimensions ( $p < .01$ ). While geographic disparities emerge in administrative support and the presence of an Administrative Director, high stress levels remain pervasive nationwide.

Workload and burnout show a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.62, p < .001$ ). Cognitive demands correlate positively with self-efficacy ( $r = 0.34, p < .01$ ), indicating a complex interplay where challenging work may reinforce professional identity. Elevated work rhythm associates with sleep disturbances ( $r = 0.46, p < .001$ ).

Yet large-scale surveys inevitably privilege measurable variables over symbolic and cultural dimensions. This article does not question the validity of the data, but rather reframes their interpretation by integrating insights from

organizational culture theory (Schein, 2010), educational change theory (Fullan, 2007), and governance studies.

As argued hereafter, the analysis shows that principals' burnout is best understood if a cultural perspective is used to grasp the whole phenomenon that includes the role delegitimization, trust erosion, and control-oriented governance.

The guiding assumption is that burnout is not merely a psychophysiological outcome, but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by institutional narratives, power relations, and moral economies of work.

## **Discussion**

### **Re-reading the Results Through a Cultural Lens**

The survey findings depict a condition of extreme workload intensity and persistent multitasking among school principals. From a culturalist perspective, such overload cannot be interpreted merely in quantitative terms. It is fundamentally symbolic, reflecting an accumulation of responsibilities that is not accompanied by a proportional expansion of authority, institutional trust, or organizational support. This structural asymmetry produces what may be conceptualized as *responsibility without sovereignty*, whereby principals are held accountable for outcomes over which they exercise limited control. Within this framework, burnout emerges not merely as an individual response to stress, but as a socially and institutionally constructed phenomenon, shaped by the interaction of role expectations, symbolic recognition, and organizational logics (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

High cognitive, emotional, and relational demands are frequently normalized as intrinsic to leadership. However, the present data suggest a more problematic configuration that can be described as *moral overexposure*. Principals must absorb conflicts generated by systemic dysfunctions, mediate between contradictory policy imperatives, and preserve institutional decorum even when organizational conditions undermine their effectiveness. This aligns with research on emotional labor in leadership, which highlights the chronic strain produced when leaders must continuously regulate emotions in contexts of limited agency and ambiguous legitimacy (Herman et al., 2018). From a culturalist perspective, emotional labor constitutes a form of *symbolic capital*: its exercise generates moral legitimacy and recognition when successful but produces vulnerability and delegitimization when organizational conditions constrain enactment (Bourdieu, 1990).

Gendered dimensions further underscore the cultural embeddedness of burnout. Higher stress levels among female principals cannot be reduced to individual susceptibility; they reflect enduring organizational and normative expectations around availability, care, and emotional regulation (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women's labor is culturally framed as simultaneously technical

and affective, exposing them to double binds where success is measured both in performance metrics and in relational adequacy. Consequently, burnout is unevenly distributed along gendered lines, reinforcing the argument that it is a product of *institutional logics* and culturally embedded role norms rather than individual resilience deficits.

The 2025 ANP–LUMSA survey highlights that principals prioritize structural interventions over individual-focused psychological support. Specifically, *middle management with clearly defined delegations* was rated highest (4.56/5), followed by *enhanced administrative staffing* (4.25/5) and *greater autonomy in ATA/DSGA selection* (4.12/5). Coaching and listening services received the lowest rating (2.81/5), indicating that principals perceive structural, procedural, and role-based adjustments as more efficacious than interventions targeting personal coping. This hierarchy of preferences reflects the culturalist assertion that organizational context, authority structures, and legitimacy frameworks are central determinants of well-being; interventions focusing solely on individual resilience are insufficient when systemic and symbolic dimensions remain unaddressed.

These findings corroborate the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, which posits that high job demands coupled with limited resources predict burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Maslach et al., 2001). Yet the solutions emphasized by principals largely reside within a *change-oriented paradigm*, concerned with functional redistribution, procedural adjustment, or episodic reengineering. A culturalist approach necessitates distinguishing between *change* and *transformation*: while change addresses technical or structural modifications, transformation entails shifts in *shared meanings*, institutional values, legitimacy frameworks, and normative understandings of leadership. Without such transformation, organizational adjustments risk functioning as adaptive maintenance, perpetuating the conditions of stress while redistributing rather than mitigating overload.

A particularly salient but under-theorized aspect of burnout concerns *role delegitimization*, especially in interactions with Regional School Offices (USR). International literature highlights the connection between leadership wellbeing, procedural justice, and trust, emphasizing that developmental accountability rather than punitive oversight sustains effective leadership (Van den Broeck et al., 2017; OECD, 2020). When oversight is perceived as primarily sanctioning, principals' roles are culturally reframed from educational leader to potential offenders. This symbolic shift erodes *institutional capital*, generating fear-based compliance, emotional exhaustion, and diminished agency, illustrating how organizational culture mediates the moral and symbolic dimensions of leadership.

Finally, distributed leadership—commonly endorsed as a strategy for organizational resilience (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2014)—demonstrates the

culturalist insight that authority and responsibility are inseparable from legitimacy and recognition. Formal delegation in the absence of symbolic and relational support redistributes stress downward without enhancing well-being. Only when delegation is culturally sanctioned and aligned with institutional logics does it constitute a genuine protective resource. Burnout, therefore, is not merely the consequence of quantitative workload but the outcome of interactions among symbolic capital, institutional norms, and moral expectations, highlighting the indispensable value of a culturalist lens for understanding the phenomenon.

## **Conclusions**

### **From Measured Stress to Cultural Transformation in Educational Leadership**

The ANP–LUMSA national survey offers compelling and methodologically robust evidence that Italian school principals are exposed to persistently high levels of occupational stress, cognitive overload, and emotional strain. Within the framework of the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), these findings unequivocally confirm that excessive demands combined with insufficient organizational resources are strong predictors of burnout, sleep disturbances, and depressive symptoms. At an empirical level, the survey successfully captures the magnitude and pervasiveness of this phenomenon across gender, geographical areas, and school types.

However, the contribution of this article lies in advancing the argument that empirical confirmation alone is insufficient for explanatory adequacy or policy relevance. Large-scale surveys, by their very nature, are designed to measure observable conditions and perceived needs; they are less equipped to question the cultural, symbolic, and institutional logics that produce and stabilize those conditions over time. By reinterpreting the ANP–LUMSA findings through a culturalist lens, this study demonstrates that school principals' burnout cannot be fully understood as a technical imbalance between demands and resources, but must be conceptualized as a systemic and culturally embedded outcome of contemporary educational governance.

A central conclusion emerging from this analysis is that organizational change must not be conflated with cultural transformation. Structural interventions—such as expanding middle management, increasing administrative staffing, or refining procedural autonomy—represent necessary forms of organizational change. Yet, as extensive research on organizational culture indicates (Schein, 2010; Fullan, 2007), such measures remain inherently limited if they are not accompanied by shifts in shared meanings, institutional norms, and meaningful relations. In the absence of cultural

transformation, structural reforms risk becoming episodic adjustments that stabilize, rather than resolve, the conditions generating occupational distress.

From an anthropological and sociological perspective, leadership burnout emerges as a phenomenon deeply intertwined with processes of role delegitimization and moral erosion. The survey data, when read qualitatively, point to a paradoxical configuration in which principals are increasingly held accountable for system performance while simultaneously experiencing reduced trust, constrained agency, and heightened surveillance. This configuration aligns with international analyses of “responsibilization without authority” in public sector leadership, which identify moral injury, identity fragmentation, and chronic exhaustion as predictable outcomes (Maslach et al., 2001; Van den Broeck et al., 2017).

Particularly salient is the role of intermediate governance structures, such as Regional School Offices. International evidence consistently shows that leadership wellbeing is strongly associated with perceptions of procedural justice, institutional legitimacy, and developmental accountability (OECD, 2020; Pont et al., 2008). When inspection regimes and oversight practices are predominantly perceived as punitive or compliance-driven, they contribute to a culture of fear and defensive leadership, undermining both professional identity and organizational learning. Conversely, systems that emphasize accompaniment, mentoring, and formative evaluation foster psychological safety, trust, and sustainable leadership practices.

The findings related to gender differences further reinforce the need for a cultural, rather than purely technical, interpretation. Female principals’ higher reported stress levels reflect enduring gendered expectations concerning emotional labor, availability, and relational responsibility (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These expectations are not reducible to individual coping deficits, but are structurally and culturally embedded within organizational norms. Addressing such disparities, therefore, requires institutional awareness and culturally sensitive policy design, rather than generic stress-management interventions.

A further implication concerns the conceptualization of distributed leadership. While widely promoted as a solution to leadership overload (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2014), distributed leadership is effective only when embedded within cultures of trust, shared accountability, and mutual recognition. Formal delegation without cultural legitimation risks merely redistributing stress across organizational layers, leaving the underlying dynamics of burnout intact.

Taken together, these conclusions call for a reframing of principals’ wellbeing as a collective institutional good and a moral responsibility of the educational system. Sustainable leadership cannot be achieved by enhancing individual resilience or by incrementally adjusting organizational structures

alone. It requires a deliberate transformation of governance cultures—from control-oriented, sanction-based models to trust-based, dialogical, and ethically grounded frameworks.

In practical terms, this implies that educational policy must move beyond instrumental conceptions of efficiency and accountability to embrace a broader understanding of leadership as a culturally mediated practice. Policies aimed at reducing burnout should therefore prioritize:

- the explicit non-delegitimization of the principal's role;
- the ethical and symbolic recognition of principalship's work;
- governance practices grounded in procedural justice and professional trust;
- and institutional narratives that reaffirm the educational, social, and civic value of school leadership.

Ultimately, the well-being of school principals serves as a critical indicator of the cultural and systemic health of educational institutions. When leadership is chronically overburdened, emotionally and morally exposed, or symbolically delegitimized, the very legitimacy and sustainability of educational reforms are undermined. From a culturalist perspective, principals' wellbeing reflects not only individual resilience but the alignment—or misalignment—between organizational structures, normative expectations, and symbolic recognition. In contexts where institutional logics privilege compliance over developmental support, and where distributed leadership lacks cultural sanction, systemic dysfunction is reproduced: reforms may be formally implemented but fail to generate meaningful transformation. Therefore, safeguarding leadership wellbeing is not a peripheral concern but a central prerequisite for the legitimacy, effectiveness, and transformative potential of educational systems.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author reported no conflict of interest.

**Data Availability:** All data are included in the content of the paper.

**Funding Statement:** The author did not obtain any funding for this research.

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