THE THEORETICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SHARED LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract. Shared leadership and professional burnout have been topics of discussion and debate among scientists and practitioners. The article analyses the theoretical assumptions of the relationship between shared leadership and professional burnout in an educational context. The article consists of the following parts: first, the concepts of shared leadership and burnout are revealed, and then the relationship between these two concepts is discussed. An analysis of scientific literature suggests that decentralised leadership, empowerment, a culture based on trust, effective communication, and feedback, as features of shared leadership, help to create a psychologically safe working environment and climate of an educational institution. Such an organisational climate reduces the risk of teachers' burnout, strengthens their motivation, emotional resilience, and engagement. This suggests that shared leadership in the educational institution and teachers' professional burnout are interrelated.

Keywords: leadership, shared leadership, professional burnout, dimensions of professional burnout

INTRODUCTION

Burnout is one of the most pressing challenges in organisational psychology and management today. Rapidly increasing workloads, information overload, and the expansion of remote work are contributing to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional effectiveness among both managers and employees. Burnout, defined as emotional, cognitive, and social exhaustion, is increasingly referred to as an "epidemic" that has serious consequences for employee well-being and work efficiency (Bocheliuk et al., 2020). Teacher burnout not only reduces job satisfaction and professional engagement, but can also contribute to greater emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, symptoms of depression, and even the decision to leave the profession (den Brok et al., 2017). As organisations seek sustainable solutions, increasing attention is being paid not only to individual coping strategies, but also to structural, cultural, and leadership models that can reduce the risk of burnout. Constant change is characteristic of many everyday organizational processes, and educational institutions are no exception (Gadelshina, 2020). The traditional hierarchical management model often fails to meet the requirements of the modern education sector, creating a need for new management strategies that promote inclusion, collaboration, and shared responsibility. With rapidly changing educational needs, growing organizational challenges, and increasing managerial responsibilities, shared leadership is becoming increasingly important (Storey, 2019).

Thus, in this regard, the concept of shared leadership is becoming particularly relevant. It is based on the idea that leadership is not the prerogative of a single formal leader, but a dynamic process in which responsibility, decision-making, and influence are distributed among team members. The issues arising in modern pre-school educational institutions are becoming increasingly complex, so leadership in such institutions should be understood as a shared or collective process that requires the collective competence and involvement of the entire community (Yada and Jäppinen, 2022). Shared leadership theory suggests that such structures can increase psychological safety, mutual trust, autonomy, and fairness in the distribution of responsibilities – factors that are associated with a lower likelihood of burnout in the literature.

Many studies on shared leadership can be found in scientific literature. Drescher et al. (2014) explored the dynamics of shared leadership, trust building, and performance improvement, while Meuser et al. (2016) analyzed the theoretical approaches to this type of leadership and their integration. Mi et al. (2024) devoted considerable attention to the empowerment of shared leadership in organizations. The characteristics of this leadership were discussed by Pearce and Conger (2003), Hoch and Dulebohn (2017), Dambrauskienė and Liukinevičienė (2018), D'Innocenzo et al. (2021).

However, there are still significant gaps in the scientific literature. First, studies tend to examine shared leadership as a factor in team effectiveness, but rarely as a determinant of employee emotional well-being and burnout, especially in the educational context. Second, little is known about the conditions under which shared leadership can have the opposite effect – for example, causing role ambiguity, conflict, or additional pressure to be a "leader", which can even increase the risk of burnout. Third, there is a lack of long-term research across different sectors, especially in the education sector, that would allow us to understand the dynamics of this interaction over time. Therefore, a systematic study of the relationship between teachers' burnout and shared leadership could complement theoretical discussions of leadership and lay the groundwork for the development of more effective preventive measures in organisations.

In this context, the following problem question is formulated, which this article seeks to answer: *What is the relationship between shared leadership and professional burnout in the educational context*?

This article aims to reveal the theoretical relationship between shared leadership and professional burnout in the educational context.

The aim implied the following structure of the article: in the first two parts, the concepts of shared leadership and professional burnout are revealed, then the theoretical insights into the relationship between the mentioned concepts in the educational context are analysed.

The article was prepared using a scientific literature analysis method.

THE CONCEPT OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

In scientific literature, terms such as shared management, joint leadership, collective leadership, and distributed leadership are used to describe the concept of shared leadership.

An analysis of scientific literature reveals that the concept of shared leadership is dynamic and multifaceted, emphasizing interactivity, collectivity, and the importance of interaction within a group or organization. Pearce and Conger (2003) point out that the essence of shared leadership lies in the interactive process of influence among group members in pursuit of common goals. This idea is complemented by D'Innocenzo (2016), who emphasizes that this type of leadership is an emerging team phenomenon characterized by the distribution of leadership roles among team members, while Meuser (2016) emphasizes that shared leadership is not about one leader, but about the sharing of leadership among all participants. The dimension of interaction in shared leadership is also reflected in the definitions proposed by Çetin and Keser (2015) and Chiu (2016), which highlight the importance of interdependence and mutual influence in achieving team goals. Atkočiūnienė et al. (2019) refer to shared leadership as innovative leadership and emphasize that it is one of the key components of a modern organization. In this concept, the source of innovation is the entire team, and the innovative leader acts as a visionary, team builder, creative thinking promoter, and rational manager. According to the authors, this form of leadership is particularly important in educational institutions when seeking to improve the quality of education, introduce innovative teaching methods, and involve the school community in decision-making. An innovative educational leader not only shapes the vision, but also encourages teachers, students, and other community members to collaborate, share responsibility for improving educational outcomes, and seek creative solutions to emerging challenges. The authors note that this approach strengthens the culture of educational institutions as learning organizations, increases community involvement, and contributes to the ability of educational institutions to adapt to the ever-changing needs of society.

According to Alanezi (2016), scientific research focuses mainly on the analysis of shared leadership traits such as decentralization of leadership, empowerment, mutual trust, communication, and feedback. Drescher et al. (2014) argue that shared leadership creates an environment of mutual trust that encourages open communication and cooperation, strengthening the relationships necessary to ensure group effort and coordination in achieving goals.

Based on an analysis of scientific literature (Pearce and Conger, 2003; Hoch and Dulebohn, 2017; Drescher et al., 2014; Dambrauskienė and Liukinevičienė, 2018; D'Innocenzo et al., 2021), the following characteristics of shared leadership can be identified, reflecting the essence of shared leadership, emphasizing the importance of leadership decentralization, and contributing to organizational flexibility and member engagement:

Decentralization of leadership. It means that decision-making responsibility is distributed among all group members, allowing them to actively contribute to the management of the organization. Group members share responsibilities and influence each other in pursuit of common goals (Pearce and Conger, 2003). This structure reduces pressure on any one individual, distributes responsibility according to ability, and creates collective responsibility for results, thereby fostering a shared vision and understanding of goals that ensures a unified direction, strengthens motivation, and helps to unite the educational institution community (Dambrauskienė and Liukinevičienė, 2018). When teachers feel that their voice is heard and valued, it reduces emotional stress, encourages mutual support, and increases engagement—all of which are important factors in preventing burnout (Holmström et al., 2023). In addition, a clear organizational vision helps educators understand the meaning of their work. This sense of meaning and intrinsic motivation act as protective factors against emotional exhaustion and strengthen professional resilience (Liu et al., 2023).

Empowerment. Leadership roles are distributed according to the competencies of group members, allowing each member to perform specific tasks (Hoch and Dulebohn, 2017). This distribution of responsibilities reduces work overload and allows educators to focus on the activities that suit them best, thus avoiding fatigue from tasks that are incompatible with their abilities or motivation (Gudžinskienė and Pozdniakovas 2021).

Mutual trust. Mutual trust is essential for the success of shared leadership – it helps to create a culture of openness, shared responsibility, and emotional security. Trust among colleagues allows for the sharing of responsibility, the open expression of opinions, requests for help, and the constructive resolution of conflicts (Drescher et al., 2014). Research shows that trust within an organization correlates with a lower likelihood of emotional exhaustion and greater psychological resilience, especially in the education sector, where work requires intense emotional engagement (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Communication and feedback. Effective communication and constructive feedback are important features of shared leadership because, as shown by an analysis of scientific literature (Hargie, 2016; Maslach and Leiter, 2016), they help ensure smooth teamwork and strengthen the emotional well-being of employees; feedback, especially when provided regularly and constructively, helps employees understand their strengths, opportunities for improvement, and real contribution to the organization's activities. Clear communication reduces misunderstandings, feelings of isolation and uncertainty, and, at the same time, professional burnout. This boosts self-confidence, professional growth and helps to

avoid emotional exhaustion. In addition, employee evaluation and recognition help them feel seen and valued, which also reduces the risk of burnout.

In summary, shared leadership can be described as joint leadership or the sharing of leadership. It is an independent and informal structure that is not dependent on or reminiscent of vertical leadership. It differs from traditional or vertical leadership in such features as decentralisation, empowerment, mutual trust, open communication and effective feedback.

THE CONCEPT OF BURNOUT

Burnout is broadly understood as a state of psychological exhaustion resulting from the continuous exposure to work-related stressors, when there is a lack of resources to effectively cope with these stressors. Vaicekauskienė (2014) emphasizes that burnout syndrome is not a temporary or quickly disappearing condition—it is a long-term and complex negative reaction of the body to constantly experienced stress factors. These factors gradually deplete the employee's emotional, energetic, and personal resources, which leads to a decrease in professional activity and a drop in work efficiency. Many researchers (Hall, 2007; Certer, 2006; Weigard, 2004; Maslach, 2003; Butler and Constantina, 2005; Wolmer, 1998; Leiter, 1988, etc.) define burnout syndrome as a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by the long-term impact of unfavorable work environment factors, known as stressors. Authors researching this phenomenon describe it as chronic physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, manifested by constant fatigue, feelings of helplessness, and a negative attitude toward work, others, and life in general. Scientists (Mäkikang et al., 2021, Nadon et al., 2022) emphasise that when individuals experience burnout, work that was previously challenging and meaningful to them becomes a source of stress over time and seems less and less valuable.

Studies show that burnout can affect employees in any field, but teachers are among those at greatest risk of experiencing burnout. According to Vaicekauskienė (2014), burnout is identified as one of the most pressing problems in professional development among people in this profession.

Bakker and De Vries (2021) define burnout as a state in which an employee loses motivation, emotional connection to work, and feels fatigue and hopelessness, and when an internal mismatch occurs, where a person feels that their work no longer meets their personal expectations or values. In other words, burnout is usually described as a work-related syndrome that includes at least three distinct but interrelated components: exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and reduced professional engagement. Leiter and Maslach (2015) emphasise that emotional exhaustion manifests itself as a lack of energy and fatigue, depersonalization as detachment, indifference, or even irritability toward work, and reduced professional effectiveness as declining productivity, lack of motivation, and reduced belief in one's abilities. In other words, burnout can be described as a combination of fatigue, detachment, and disappointment.

Thus, burnout, according to researchers, encompasses three main dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and reduced professional effectiveness. Kavaliauskienė and Balčiūnaitė (2014) emphasize that **emotional exhaustion** usually marks the beginning of burnout, and emotional exhaustion is followed by the emergence of two negative attitudes: one towards others (referred to in scientific literature as depersonalization), and the other towards oneself (referred to in scientific literature as a declining assessment of personal achievements or reduced professional effectiveness). As noted by Yang et al. (2023), **depersonalization** is a symptom that manifests itself as a feeling of detachment from oneself, one's thoughts, or actions, as if one were observing oneself from the outside or acting on "autopilot". The employee begins to feel detached from their work, colleagues, or even their professional identity. The authors emphasize that this phenomenon can also occur in mentally healthy individuals, especially when experiencing high levels of stress or physical and emotional exhaustion, which are common signs of professional burnout. **Reduced professional effectiveness,** as one of the dimensions of burnout, manifests itself as constant dissatisfaction with one's work and a feeling of failure to achieve set goals. López-Núñez et al. (2020) state that employees begin to doubt their abilities and feel inadequate, even though they may have previously been motivated and productive. They get the impression that their contribution is insignificant and their efforts are fruitless. This state, according to the authors, often arises after a long period of working under stressful conditions, especially if there is no support or recognition. A reduced sense of achievement can affect self-esteem, reduce the desire to try, and, in the long run, even lead to leaving a job or profession.

In summary, burnout may be understood as a long-term, work-related psychological state arising from constant emotional and interpersonal stress in the work environment. It has three main components: emotional exhaustion, a cynical or detached attitude toward work, and reduced professional effectiveness. In scientific literature, burnout is considered not only an individual but also a social phenomenon that develops gradually and is closely related to working conditions and the organisational environment.

THEORETICAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SHARED LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT

An analysis of scientific literature (Carson et al., 2007; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016; Hoch and Dulebohn, 2017; Maslach and Leiter, 2016; Spreitzer et al., 2017) has revealed several relationships between shared leadership traits and burnout in an educational context.

Relationship with decentralisation of leadership. This means that decision-making responsibility is distributed evenly among teachers, administrators, and even the parent community. This not only improves organisational functioning but also enhances the psychological well-being of employees, which is essential for reducing burnout. It should be noted that researchers consider one of the psychological effects of decentralised leadership to be an increased sense of control among employees over their work. When decision-making becomes collective, teachers are not only involved in the processes but also feel like important participants in the organisation, rather than just task performers. Such involvement strengthens the sense of autonomy, which reduces feelings of helplessness, dependence, and pressure, common factors in emotional exhaustion. Decentralisation of leadership allows tasks to be shared according to employee competencies and interests. This reduces individual stress, improves teamwork, and reduces the emotional strain that most often causes professional burnout.

Relationship with empowerment. Empowerment manifests itself in the strengthening of individual responsibility and trust in employees. The practice of empowerment in educational institutions increases teachers' motivation, encourages their active involvement in decision-making processes, and strengthens their confidence in their professional abilities. Such an environment creates the conditions for the psychological well-being and stress resistance of employees, as teachers feel that they are not just executors, but meaningful participants in the process. One expression of empowerment is the autonomy given to employees, such as the opportunity to independently develop teaching methodologies or create individualised teaching plans. Maslach and Leiter (2016) note that such professional freedom allows teachers not only to contribute to the goals of the organisation, but also to feel valued, visible, and recognised in their overall activities, which strengthens their sense of meaning in their work, which is associated with lower professional burnout. Research by scientists shows that employees who are empowered to act independently experience less emotional exhaustion, are less likely to feel meaningless or cynical, and are more engaged in their work.

Relationship with a culture of trust. Trust among team members allows for effective conflict resolution, shared responsibility, and the generation of new ideas. Such an open and collaborative atmosphere reduces tension, feelings of isolation, and job dissatisfaction—all important factors related to the risk of burnout. When there is a strong sense of mutual trust, employees feel more supported, find it easier to ask for help, share their emotional difficulties, and experience greater psychological security, which, as research shows, can significantly contribute to the prevention of burnout.

Relationship with communication and feedback. In the context of shared leadership, smooth communication and feedback are particularly important for the emotional well-being of employees and for reducing burnout. Communication allows problems to be identified on time, prevents misunderstandings, and supports common goals. Meanwhile, constructive feedback encourages self-reflection, professional growth, and helps employees feel seen and valued. These factors reduce emotional distance and encourage engagement, which is directly linked to a lower risk of burnout.

Based on an analysis of scientific literature, it can be argued that the characteristics of shared leadership, such as decentralization of management, employee empowerment, a culture of trust, and smooth communication and feedback, create a favorable organizational environment that reduces the risk of professional burnout, as these elements strengthen employees' sense of control, independence, and engagement, and help create psychological safety and a sense of community. This reduces emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional effectiveness, i.e., the main dimensions of burnout.

CONCLUSIONS

1. An analysis of scientific literature revealed that shared leadership can be defined as a dynamic, collective, and interactive process based on cooperation, shared responsibility, mutual trust, and mutual influence among members of an organization. The analysis of scientific literature revealed five characteristics of shared leadership: decentralization of leadership, employee empowerment, a trust-based organizational culture, effective communication, and constructive feedback.

2. An analysis of scientific literature defines burnout as a psychological syndrome arising from constant stress in the context of work relationships. Burnout manifests itself in three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and reduced professional effectiveness. Emotional exhaustion manifests itself in constant fatigue, lack of energy, and difficulty coping with daily professional challenges. Depersonalization (cynicism) means emotional detachment from work, loss of motivation, and an indifferent or negative attitude towards colleagues and the content of work. Reduced professional effectiveness manifests itself in decreasing satisfaction with one's work, doubts about one's competence, and a declining self-assessment as a specialist.

3. An analysis of scientific literature suggests that decentralised leadership, empowerment, a culture based on trust, effective communication, and feedback, as features of shared leadership, help to create a psychologically safe working environment and climate of an educational institution. Such an organisational climate reduces the risk of teachers' burnout, strengthens their motivation, emotional resilience, and engagement. This suggests that shared leadership in the educational institution and teachers' professional burnout are interrelated.

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