





Identifying the Components Contributing to Organizational Trauma in Schools: A Phenomenological Approach

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to identify the components contributing to organizational trauma in schools. The research approach was applied in terms of objective and qualitative in nature, based on phenomenological methodology using Parseh's approach. The statistical population consisted of secondary school teachers in the city of Mashhad. Through unstructured interviews conducted with 19 expert teachers, the components contributing to organizational trauma were identified. The sampling method was snowball sampling. To assess the credibility of the findings, Lincoln and Guba's four criteria were employed. The results obtained from the interviews led to the identification of 161 initial codes and 24 core themes categorized into nine dimensions: job demotivation, intention to leave the profession, communication breakdown, decline in mental health, lack of job attachment, perceived justice, deterioration in educational quality, organizational distrust, and personalization of the organization.

Keywords: *Organizational trauma, secondary schools, teachers*

1. Introduction

Today, human resources are considered one of the most critical drivers of the development and advancement of human societies. A country can make significant strides on this path if it provides the necessary conditions for individuals' talents to flourish. Employees, as vital assets of

an organization, play a significant role in its productivity, stagnation, success, or failure of programs. Therefore, addressing the fundamental needs of employees within organizations must be prioritized (Mohajeran & Dioband, 2017). If organizational harms are not adequately addressed, their effects may persist and negatively influence organizational performance (Kan et al., 2013; Kleinberg,

2016). One such organizational harm is the phenomenon of organizational trauma. Service-providing organizations—including schools—due to the particular nature of their activities, are among the entities most vulnerable to organizational trauma (Koulivand & Sarlak, 2016). When the meaning and concept of organizational trauma are not understood, it can harm individuals. Viewing trauma from an organizational perspective expands individual experiences by identifying its structural forms and enhances self-care by fostering a healthy environment, ultimately supporting organizational survival during crises (Herman & Whitaker, 2020).

Organizational trauma is a phenomenon that affects the capabilities of individuals and the organization, leading to the depletion of talent and organizational energy (Zarei & Tavakoli Benizi, 2017). Trauma influences organizational functioning at multiple levels and can damage the organization's defensive structures. If these issues are not appropriately managed, they leave behind undesirable and negative consequences (Mahdi et al., 2021). If organizational trauma is ignored, it fades into silence but leaves lasting effects on performance (Steinkamp, 2014). Vivian and Horman (2015) identified the consequences of organizational trauma as the closing of organizational boundaries to the environment, the spread of stress and anxiety, weakening and erosion of organizational identity, prevalence of depression among individuals, fear- and aggression-based relationships, diminished morale and optimism, and the lack of motivation and energy for task execution (Vivian & Horman, 2015).

Organizations suffering from trauma enter a state of stagnation, face potential collapse, and exhibit declining performance (Faiz et al., 2019; Zarei & Tavakoli Benizi, 2017). Organizational trauma can impair employees' workplace skills. If prolonged, trauma can undermine organizational productivity (Sarlak & Koulivand, 2015). In traumatized organizations, individuals experience collective despair and hopelessness. They cannot envision a clear future for themselves, which leads to depression and loss of energy and motivation for work (Shirazi & Ahmadi, 2015). Additionally, organizational trauma reduces organizational commitment (Venugopal, 2016). The study by Doulati and Diehim Pour (2017) revealed a significant relationship between organizational trauma and employee turnover (Doulati & Diehim Pour, 2017). Other research has shown significant correlations between organizational trauma and organizational cynicism (Moezinejad et al., 2023), social undermining (Shahbakhsh & Nasti Zai, 2023), deviant

workplace behavior (Morshedi Tankabani, 2021), mental health (Mahdi et al., 2021), organizational silence (Ebrahimi et al., 2019), and reduced productivity and service quality (Simon et al., 2010), as well as diminished work ethic (Hwang & Chang, 2023). A toxic environment, declining loyalty, depletion of intellectual capital, and ultimately organizational demise are among the side effects of trauma in organizations (Switzer, 2001).

The reviewed literature highlights a multifaceted understanding of organizational trauma, its antecedents, and intervention strategies across various institutional contexts. Khoshhal (2024) identified structural and managerial inefficiencies such as weak organizational culture, unclear roles, and lack of justice as key trauma-inducing factors in government agencies (Khoshhal, 2024). Similarly, Rahmani and Ghanbari (2024) found that toxic leadership significantly contributes to organizational trauma and cynicism among teachers, indicating the critical role of leadership behavior (Rahmani & Ghanbari, 2024). Morshedi Tankabani (2021) emphasized the influence of deviant employee behaviors, particularly incivility, in escalating trauma severity (Morshedi Tankabani, 2021). Zarei and Tavakoli Benizi (2017) provided a conceptual framework viewing organizational trauma as a collective psychological response to sudden changes, disrupting organizational defenses and requiring systemic coping strategies (Zarei & Tavakoli Benizi, 2017). Koulivand and Sarlak (2015) focused on trauma in private hospitals, finding that environmental factors and organizational objectives were more impactful than internal structure or technology (Koulivand & Sarlak, 2016). Herman and Whitaker (2020) demonstrated the benefits of trauma-informed professional development, showing that relational safety and awareness-building can improve morale and engagement (Herman & Whitaker, 2020). Lastly, Venugopal (2016) shifted the focus to prevention, emphasizing the need for proactive organizational strategies to mitigate trauma before it takes root (Venugopal, 2016). Together, these studies underscore the complexity of organizational trauma and advocate for integrative approaches involving leadership reform, systemic clarity, participatory culture, and psychological support.

This phenomenon is an organizational reality that is not confined to a single institution but affects all workplaces and organizational environments. Hence, educational organizations and schools are not exempt. In the secondary education system, due to its mission and role in preparing adolescents for higher education, social integration, and

future life, this level of schooling holds a particularly significant position. Philosophically, biologically, psychologically, and socially, secondary education is a critical phase. It connects general education to higher education and prepares a large cohort for integration into society and the labor market. Consequently, any deficiency or disruption in this phase directly affects the performance and quality of both general and higher education. Therefore, it is imperative to take a serious and targeted approach to addressing the occupational issues prevalent in secondary schools. A review of the research background reveals that organizational trauma has not been explicitly studied in secondary schools. There is a clear research gap in this area, evidenced by the lack of domestic studies and the scarcity of international research and theoretical frameworks that explore the components contributing to trauma in schools. In light of the above, the central question of this study is: What are the components that contribute to organizational trauma among secondary school teachers?

2. Methods and Materials

The qualitative section of this research is applied in purpose and interpretive phenomenological (lived experience) in methodology. Phenomenology involves describing the meanings of a concept or phenomenon from the perspective of individuals based on their lived experiences. In this study, Parse's (1990) method of phenomenological analysis was used. Parse's analytical framework offers a unique approach to phenomenological analysis. Her procedure is based on a form of dialogical engagement in which the researcher and the respondent participate in an unstructured conversation about the lived experience. In Parse's method, experience is described as a "me-you" intersubjective encounter that emerges during the conversation.

The participants were competent and expert teachers selected based on the following criteria: over five years of professional teaching experience, more than three years of executive or managerial experience, and interest in participating in interviews related to the research topic. The researcher selected the first participant after a thorough review and initiated the interview process. Subsequent participants were introduced by prior interviewees, using snowball sampling, and the process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—specifically, after the nineteenth interview. In total, 19 participants were selected for in-depth interviews to obtain detailed information

regarding the study's subject. All participants were selected using snowball sampling, where each expert teacher introduced the next eligible participant after their interview.

The research instrument was in-depth, unstructured interviews, recorded and transcribed. Questions focused on organizational trauma and participants' personal experiences. The interview questions were posed cumulatively, developing based on the responses to previous questions.

The validity of the research instrument was assessed using Lincoln and Guba's (1989) four criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research. These four criteria are:

Credibility

This refers to ensuring that the findings of the research accurately reflect the participants' intended meanings. To achieve this, Lincoln and Guba suggest strategies such as prolonged engagement with the research environment, examining data from multiple angles, peer debriefing, sufficiency of references, maintaining and developing relationships with respondents, and member-checking. In the present study, to enhance credibility, interview transcripts were returned to participants for review, and their feedback was solicited regarding the results. Additionally, participants with diverse professional backgrounds and experiences related to the research topic were selected.

Transferability

According to Mohammadpour (2013), transferability refers to the applicability of research findings to other contexts. To ensure transferability, the researcher must provide detailed descriptions of the research context so that readers can determine whether the findings are applicable to their own situations. In this study, the researcher provided a comprehensive description of the research process, from sampling to data interpretation, and included sample excerpts from interviews in the findings section.

Dependability

This denotes the consistency and adequacy of the data analysis process and decision-making procedures. To achieve dependability, the researcher relied on guidance and oversight from subject-matter experts throughout the data collection process to confirm that interpretations emerged naturally from the data. In the present study, expert consultation was used throughout data collection to ensure dependable interpretations.

Confirmability

This refers to the accuracy and objectivity of the data and the extent to which findings can be confirmed. Achieving

confirmability requires reviewing raw data, interpretations, suggestions, and findings to ensure they are not influenced by the researcher's personal biases. The researcher must demonstrate that the findings are truly grounded in the data. In this study, confirmability was enhanced through meticulous, repeated review of the data, interpretations, and findings to ensure their objectivity and accuracy.

- A minimum of 10 years of managerial experience in the Mashhad Electricity Distribution Company
- At least a graduate-level degree (Master's or Doctorate)
- Being key figures in the field, well-known, theoretically knowledgeable, diverse in background, and motivated to participate.

3. Findings and Results

According to the findings, 10 participants were women (53% of the sample) and 9 were men (47%). Demographic data indicate that 21% of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, 58% held a master's degree, and 21% held a doctoral degree.

To identify the components contributing to organizational trauma among teachers, interviews were conducted. Selected excerpts from these interviews include:

• **Interviewee 1:** Despite the importance and sensitivity of teaching, teachers are increasingly unwilling to continue teaching in schools for various social, economic, and other reasons. It appears that the teaching profession no longer holds a sustained professional meaning for them—some are considering shutting down their schools, others are seeking transfers, and many are contemplating leaving the teaching profession altogether. Another factor that, in my opinion, contributes to organizational trauma is the recent trend of teachers moving to other schools due to concerns about school management practices. Even encouragement from colleagues has had no impact on their decisions. Given the economic despair that many teachers face, it is not surprising that they lack the desire to remain in the teaching profession.

• **Interviewee 2:** In my view, organizational trauma stems from multiple issues, including indifference toward teaching and a lack of interest in the profession. This indifference is often rooted in hopelessness about improving learning activities. As a result, teachers lose motivation to apply their personal skills in teaching, which itself becomes a contributing factor to organizational trauma. This indifference and disinterest lead to several other problems: lack of job enthusiasm, reduced teaching effectiveness,

decreased productivity, diminished interest in student interaction, negative feelings toward the school environment, a lack of sense of professional importance, efforts to find opportunities outside the educational setting, inability to justify teaching as a fulfilling profession, and an overall unpleasant feeling toward the school of employment.

• **Interviewee 3:** In my opinion, organizational trauma is caused by weak or absent professional communication within the organization. When there is no communication with colleagues, parents, or students, trauma results. I believe trauma arises from declining levels of interaction with administrators, colleagues, parents, and other stakeholders. Sometimes the lack of interest in professional communication is so severe that some teachers do not even participate in school councils, or participate very infrequently. All of this leads to a greater organizational trauma: a lack of motivation to engage with students.

• **Interviewee 4:** Organizational trauma in schools arises from the concerns teachers experience—economic concerns, job insecurity, organizational uncertainty, and more. These include fear regarding one's position within the educational system, a sense of job hopelessness, lack of job enthusiasm, feelings of being ignored by the organization, loss of professional morale, internal conflict about tasks, interpersonal conflict in performing duties, feelings of disrespect within the organization, and a sense of defeat. These concerns are intensified when a teacher feels that their abilities, professional background, and experience are not valued by the organization or senior administrators.

• **Interviewee 5:** Organizational trauma in schools and in the teaching profession is closely linked to financial issues. Low income, limited job benefits, and lower earnings compared to other countries—or even compared to other public sector employees—are financial factors that lead to teachers' organizational trauma. Despite high societal expectations, teaching remains a profession with minimal financial rewards.

• **Interviewee 6:** When a teacher lacks attachment to the classroom, to teaching, to the school, to students, or to colleagues—when they lose hope in striving to improve or have no interest in extracurricular cultural activities—this is where trauma begins to form.

• **Interviewee 7:** Teaching is about effort—effort to improve, to grow. In my opinion, the absence of effort leads to organizational trauma: no effort to enhance student learning, no effort to reduce academic failure, no effort to improve student understanding of content, no effort to promote the school's brand, no effort to improve teaching

effectiveness or educational productivity, no effort to improve student satisfaction, school satisfaction, principal satisfaction, parent satisfaction, or colleague satisfaction.

The identified themes were summarized and categorized in Tables 1 through 9. The findings in Table 1 indicate that

organizational trauma in the dimension of job demotivation consists of five core categories: (1) lack of justification for tasks, (2) disinterest in improving learning activities, (3) lack of effort to meet expectations, (4) decline in work ethic, and (5) indifference toward educational quality.

Table 1

Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Job Demotivation

Core Category	Open Concepts
Lack of Professional Attractiveness	Disinterest in teaching (Code 2), unpleasant feelings about the school (Code 2), unjustifiability of teaching (Code 2), lack of perceived job importance (Code 2), dissatisfaction with school environment (Code 2), unwillingness to engage with students (Code 2), decline in teaching efficiency (Code 2), reduced teaching productivity (Code 2), lack of job enthusiasm (Codes 2 & 4), underutilization of individual capabilities (Code 2)
Disinterest in Improving Professional Activities	Lack of interest in improving the teaching-learning process, teaching innovation, lesson planning, collaboration with administration, transformational programs, student engagement, diverse instructional tools, in-service training, active school presence, school affairs participation, and decision-making (Code 9)
Lack of Effort to Achieve Educational Goals	Lack of effort in improving student learning, reducing academic failure, enhancing content understanding, branding the school, teaching efficiency, teaching effectiveness, educational productivity, student satisfaction, colleague satisfaction, principal satisfaction, parent satisfaction, and improving school environment (Code 7)
Decline in Work Ethic	Reduced responsibility in effective teaching (Code 16), fatigue in teaching (Code 16), lack of responsibility in collaborating with the principal and colleagues (Code 16), indifference in assisting students' learning (Code 16)
Indifference Toward Educational Quality	Indifference to improving learning activities (Code 2), quality of teaching (Code 10), student learning enhancement (Code 10), student learning challenges (Code 10), school branding (Code 10), school advancement (Code 10), school administrative expectations (Code 10), parental expectations (Code 10), organizational expectations (Code 10), modern learning tools (Code 10), innovative teaching techniques (Code 10), and clarifying lesson content (Code 10)

The findings in Table 2 indicate that organizational trauma in the dimension of diminished organizational

retention includes two core categories: (1) unwillingness to continue working and (2) perceived job insecurity.

Table 2

Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Intention to Leave the Profession

Core Category	Open Concepts
Unwillingness to Continue Working	Teachers' reluctance to continue teaching (Code 1), restlessness to leave school (Code 1), efforts to transfer (Code 1), joy at school closures (Code 1), hopelessness about economic sustainability (Code 1), lack of long-term career planning (Code 1), attempts to find opportunities outside education (Code 2)
Perceived Job Insecurity	Inability to foresee the future in teaching (Code 1), lack of long-term teaching continuity (Code 1), instability in commitment to teaching (Code 1), inability to prevent job transfers (Code 1), anxiety about teaching (Code 1), attraction to other schools (Code 1), efforts to leave the profession (Code 1)

Table 3 shows that organizational trauma in the dimension of communication decline includes two

categories: (1) diminished relationships and (2) growing distance between management and teachers.

Table 3

Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Communication Decline

Overarching Theme	Core Category	Open Concepts
Lack of Professional Communication	Decline in Relationships	Declining peer communication (Code 3), with management, stakeholders, parents, or school councils (Code 3), social interaction needed for school development (Code 3), fatigue in student interaction (Code 3)
	Distance from School Stakeholders	Distancing between management and teachers, between peers, between teachers and admin hierarchy or higher-ups, and between teachers and parents (Code 17)

Table 4 shows that organizational trauma in the dimension of reduced psychological well-being includes four core categories: (1) loss of morale, (2) negative

emotions, (3) lack of respect, and (4) sense of routine monotony.

Table 4
Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Reduced Psychological Well-being

Core Category	Open Concepts
Loss of Morale	Decline in innovation, motivational activities, progressiveness, and proactive actions (Code 14)
Negative Emotions	Concerns about personal standing (Code 4), job hopelessness, emptiness, perceived worthlessness of capabilities and experience, favoritism, loss of professional morale, perceived defeat (Code 4)
Lack of Respect	Feeling unappreciated for personal experience, organizational neglect, disrespect by organization, lack of respect among colleagues and from management (Codes 4 & 18)
Sense of Routine	Routine behavior in teaching, councils, communication, and student interaction (Code 15)

Table 5 indicates that organizational trauma in the dimension of lack of job attachment comprises two categories: (1) detachment from educational activities and (2) unwillingness to attend educational meetings.

Table 5
Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Lack of Job Attachment

Core Category	Open Concepts
Detachment from Educational Activities	Loss of attachment to classroom, students, teaching, school, colleagues, extracurricular activities, and personal improvement (Code 6)
Unwillingness to Attend Meetings	Avoidance of teacher councils, formal meetings, ad hoc meetings, and student counseling duties (Code 13)

Table 6 reveals that organizational trauma in the dimension of perceived justice includes two categories: (1) professional justice and (2) financial justice.

Table 6
Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Perceived Justice

Core Category	Open Concepts
Professional Justice	Social prestige disparity between teachers and other professionals (banking, healthcare, etc.), promotion challenges, high expectations with low rewards (Code 5)
Financial Justice	Low income, limited job benefits, low wages compared to other countries and public employees, inability to meet basic needs (Code 5)

Table 7 indicates that organizational trauma in the dimension of decreased educational quality comprises two categories: (1) regression in educational activities and (2) regression in extracurricular activities.

Table 7
Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Decline in Educational Quality

Core Category	Open Concepts
Regression in Educational Activities	Decline in learning activities, student achievement, teacher instruction, school performance, and educational programming (Code 10)
Regression in Extracurricular Activities	Decline in cultural, participatory, transformative, and joyful activities (Code 10)

Table 8 shows that organizational trauma in the dimension of organizational distrust includes two categories: (1) distrust in the organization and (2) distrust in individuals.

Table 8
Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Organizational Distrust

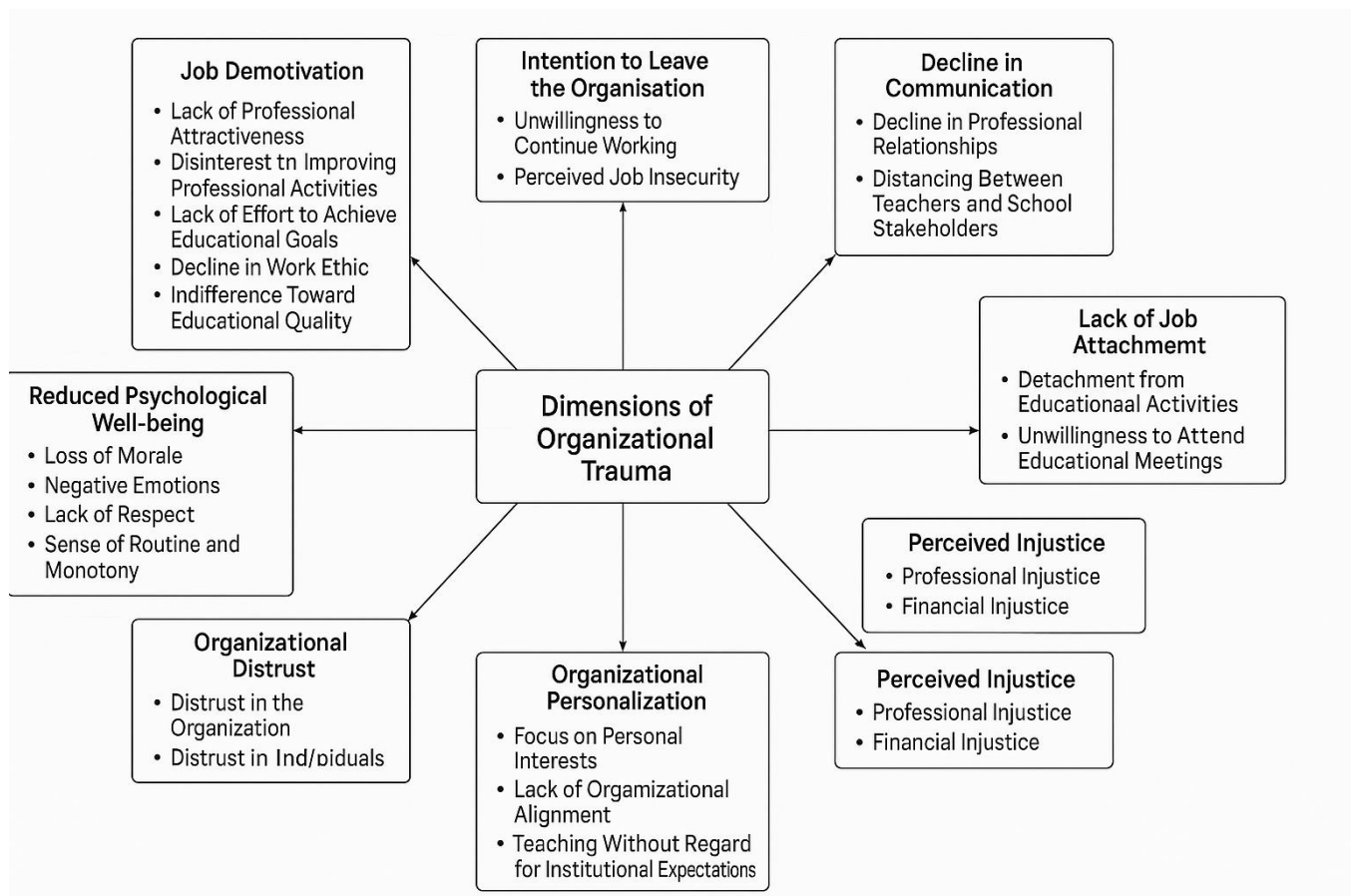
Core Category	Open Concepts
Distrust in Organization	Distrust in the organization, its future, its reputation, sustainability, and digital systems (Code 8)
Distrust in Individuals	Distrust in colleagues, leadership, and students (Code 8)

Table 9 reveals that organizational trauma in the dimension of organizational personalization includes three categories: (1) lack of alignment with the organization, (2)

self-interest, and (3) teaching without regard for expectations.

Table 9
Organizational Trauma in the Dimension of Organizational Personalization

Core Category	Open Concepts
Self-Interest	Conflict of interest with the organization, prioritization of personal matters, disregard for responsibilities and organizational goals (Code 12)
Lack of Alignment with Organization	Disorderliness, disregard for rules, mismatch between personal and organizational behavior, lack of organizational behavior, individualism, neglect of protocols (Code 12)
Teaching Without Regard for Expectations	Disregard for school regulations, school mission, educational equity, administrative directives, situational needs, and instructional expectations (Code 19)

Figure 1
Final Model of The Study


4. Discussion and Conclusion

In today's era, recognized as the age of organizations, human capital is regarded as the most critical organizational asset and operational force. Competent human capital is considered the most valuable resource, as it is the only organizational input that—through commitment, skill, and expertise, combined with mental and physical capacities—enables the effective utilization of all other organizational resources (Amirian et al., 2023). Organizations that experience psychological trauma typically fall into stagnation. Without proper management and the ability to implement appropriate technologies, such organizations risk failure and elimination from competitive arenas (Liisa et al., 2019). Today, organizations face emotional and psychological injuries; while many do not survive, some can grow post-trauma. This motivates a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, about which relatively limited data is currently available (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2016).

Accordingly, trauma-informed leadership brings several advantages, prompting some organizations to adopt a trauma-informed model. One key benefit is enhanced collaboration and trust between management and employees. Creating an environment where individuals feel physically and psychologically safe reduces staff turnover, as employees experience less burnout and can engage more deeply with their work, leaving personal trauma behind as they enter the workplace. Moreover, trauma-informed institutions prioritize employee experience, ensuring that safe spaces are provided. As a result, employees feel supported and valued, which leads to increased productivity, engagement, teamwork, and reduced absenteeism and turnover (Uglean, 2024).

In other words, the theory of organizational trauma serves as a guiding framework for understanding organizational stressors, offering effective solutions for managing them, and minimizing the impact of traumatic shocks. Psychological pressures can alter organizational identity, diverting it from its core mission and leading to weakened collaboration and communication. These pressures affect individuals, organizational groups, and employees' families, disrupt defensive mechanisms, and result in widespread organizational despair. Additional indicators of organizational trauma include a lack of focus on primary duties, an overreliance on private relationships, the absence of problem-solving capacity, enforced silence, and a lack of regulations. Therefore, neglecting organizational trauma

disrupts performance and reduces an institution's capacity to cope with challenges (Sepahvand et al., 2020).

By identifying the core themes and nine key dimensions, a deeper understanding of the emotions, attitudes, and behaviors that both cause and result from organizational trauma can be developed. These findings can serve as a foundation for designing intervention programs aimed at reducing the negative impact of organizational trauma in educational settings, ultimately improving teachers' mental health and enhancing educational quality. Thus, a comprehensive and balanced approach to human resource management and the cultivation of a healthy organizational culture—particularly in educational institutions—is essential for improving workplace atmosphere and mitigating the effects of organizational trauma.

Furthermore, the findings of this research will assist education administrators, school leaders, staff, teachers, and researchers in understanding the contributing factors to organizational trauma and how considering these factors can support the achievement of institutional goals. Based on the interview results, participants believed that successful educational programs are those grounded in teachers' input. Therefore, to reduce the effects of organizational trauma, it is essential to implement supportive and educational programs for teachers. These should include counseling sessions, communication skill enhancement, team-building activities, and opportunities for discussion and knowledge exchange to foster stronger relationships and solidarity among teachers.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes that addressing organizational trauma and its consequences should be prioritized in educational policymaking, as improving teachers' psychological and occupational well-being can significantly enhance educational quality and support the advancement of the education system.

Research-based recommendations include the following:

To prevent the emergence of the nine dimensions of organizational trauma, it is recommended to conduct educational and motivational workshops for teachers focused on the identified components. Strengthening internal organizational communication and holding regular meetings between teachers and administrators are also suggested to enhance collaboration and exchange of ideas. Programs supporting teachers' mental health—such as psychological counseling and recreational or sports activities—are recommended to reduce negative emotions and improve morale. Transparency in decision-making and fair policies regarding teacher compensation and benefits are

advised. Finally, it is recommended to promote an organizational culture based on collaboration and synergy, shared values, and teamwork among teachers and staff to reduce self-interest and enhance alignment with organizational goals.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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