USE OF COPING STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH THE EFFECTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY
PRESSURES ON PRINCIPALS

A Dissertation

by

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of successful campus principals regarding their strategies to navigate and mitigate the challenges of their roles in the context of high stakes accountability pressures. More so, this study proposed to explore the means by which school administrators cope with the challenges of accountability and the challenges of being a high school principal. Perceptions of those successful principals who rise above the fray of negative conversations around accountability and provide real behind-the-scenes insight into enacting leadership of successful campuses will inform the extant literature seeking real world examples. The lead researcher, who recently served as a current high school principal in an urban Coastal Bend high school and was promoted to central office, knows that successful leadership is possible when campus principals do have the necessary support from upper administration and superintendents to focus on building their own capacity and coping skills.

The study included principals who experienced success with leading schools during this accountability era, as well as principals who left the profession of leadership due to accountability constraints. The study addressed several overarching research questions which focus particularly on the various challenges that cause work related stress for administrators as well as their coping strategies utilized to reduce the stress.

Emerging themes identified may contribute to the understanding of the various forms of stress and support identification of the need for coping strategies. Findings from this study may assist educational institutions on better preparing aspiring principals by better understanding the challenges principals face in the public school system. More robust principal preparatory programs could potentially be informed of enhanced professional development and mentoring

programs to support emerging leaders. The study's findings may serve as a vessel to meet the needs of principals and better equip them with the tools and skills necessary to manage the ever-changing accountability culture that exists in schools.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the leaders and educators who work tirelessly every year to ensure students are given the opportunity to excel in whatever career path they choose. In a time where accountability is used as a measure to label a school's effectiveness and success, I am in awe of your resiliency to always put kids first and do what is best for students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Personal Rationale

As a principal in the K-12 public school system, I knew first-hand the impact the accountability system had on my role as a principal. My first principal job was as a middle school principal in the only Academically Unacceptable campus in my district. Not only was my campus not meeting the state and federal standards for accountability, but it was also a low socioeconomic campus with many challenges. My success and survival as principal would be simply defined, produce high scores, and move my campus towards meeting state standards. My goal of course was to grow faculty who strongly supported increasingly successful students.

My first challenge was to change the culture of the school. This school was in a challenging area of the city. Discipline was out of control and teachers blamed the students for the predicament of the school. It was important to me to support teachers by first addressing the disciplinary issues that existed. What I realized quickly was that it wasn't students' behaviors causing the issues. but rather, adult behaviors that contributed to the issue. We needed to first reflect as a campus on the things we could control within our four walls and take responsibility for our actions. I began by modeling the behaviors I wanted to see in others. I began by having conversation with teams about who we were as a campus and who we wanted to be. We talked about contributing factors and eliminated those we could not control. We began the work of creating routines and procedures to eliminate behaviors from students by keeping them engaged and on task.

Secondly, we created a campus improvement plan that honed in on practices and strategies to address our academic needs. I advocated the mantra "less is more." We became experts in 3-5 initiatives rather than trying to do too many things and not be able to do them

consistently or effectively. As a campus we created small goals and we met them weekly. Our language was common, and our expectations were consistent. I spoke to students daily on announcements and reiterated what we expected to see from them as scholars.

Our campus became a data driven campus. We created a data room and tracked our data and our practices. We reflected on our data and decided as a team what worked and what didn't work. We continued the practices that worked, and we reflected on what didn't. Collectively, we saw gains. Collectively we collaborated and worked hand in hand to change our mindsets and our practices. I would not ask anything of them that I did not require of myself. I worked side-by-side with them in every meeting and every classroom visit. This was a total team effort assault on an accountability system that did not take into account the individual needs of our kids. Teachers and students were unfairly measured by a "one shoe fits all" method. It was unfair and it was draining, but we fought through and continued the work.

Despite all our efforts and our growth in scores, we failed to meet accountability again and the sanctions of the No Child Left Behind Act of (2002) caused our campus to be reconstituted. This was the ugly side of accountability and it had shown its face to us clearly. We began the process of rehiring staff and were now faced with an outsider Professional Service Provider (PSP) coming in to assist with the process. The Professional Service Provider was now responsible for my growth as an instructional leader and the success of my campus. She was known as the eyes of the state and our district. Regardless, she was on our team now and we pushed forward. Reconstitution was a means of identifying what staff was committed to the work and what staff had merely been compliant in the process.

I was fortunate enough to work with a PSP who was invested in my growth as a leader of my campus. I was also fortunate enough to work for a district that provided an outside consultant

during my early years as principal. This outside consultant worked as a liaison between the district and me. She was a sounding board and provided a safe place for me to air my frustrations. She was a breath of fresh air and provided counseling during my most troubling times. I felt supported and valued. My district superintendent and assistant superintendents gave me the autonomy to do what I needed to do to help my school. I never felt pressured by them, although I know the pressures to meet standards were ever present. I was never alone in my battles because I knew I could call on them when and if I needed. However, I knew their job was far more demanding than mine, so it was rare that I called upon them. I allowed the PSP and our outside consultant to mentor me and accepted the good with the bad and learned a great deal from them. As a new principal, I had support, I had mentoring, I had autonomy, and I had a means to express my challenges without consequence.

By spring of the following year my school, with the assistance of my PSP, was making great progress. Disciplinary issues were a thing of the past, teachers were strategy driven and speaking a common language that was empowering and inspirational at the same time. We had forged through our darkest of days and my teachers were thriving. By the end of the year, we had met accountability measures but more importantly, we had reinvented ourselves as a staff, as a campus, and as a community. We were no longer only surviving, we were thriving!

Mine is a success story amplified perhaps due by my experiences with schools that were low performing. However, this is not the case for many leaders. I've known of many leaders that step into the role of principal only to be demoted two years later for not meeting or exceeding expectations on accountability. It weighs on me daily to see this happen to other principals. I reflect and wonder why did I succeed, and they did not? Why are principals failing? How are we, as educational institutions, failing them? What are the processes and or systems in place to help

principals lead successfully through this age of high stakes testing? I think it is something everyone should be asking themselves. I was fortunate enough to have a sounding board, to have guidance, to have autonomy, and to have support. I realize more and more that is not the case for others. This is my why and this is the purpose of this study. To better understand the effects of accountability on school principals and research coping strategies as a means to deal with the pressures so that others might find the same success.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the causes of stress for school administrators and the need to utilize coping strategies to meet the demands of the work. Specifically, how has the accountability system impacted the role of campus principals and what coping strategies do principals utilize to deal with the stress of an accountability system? The following research literature provides the historical context as well as the academic rationale and context relative to the emergence of accountability at both the state and federal level. This accountability continues to shape and contextualize the challenges of work as a campus principal heightened by the current pandemic context which is anticipated to have impacted student achievement for years to come.

Academic Rationale

President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 which marked the historic expansion of the federal government's role in the United State education policy (Jacob, 2017). This policy had broad and deep impact on educational policy and practices throughout the country (Jacob, 2017). One of the most visible effects of the NCLB Act was the requirements of schools to administer exams in reading and math in grades 3 to 8 which was once determined at the district level (Jacob, 2017). Some stakeholders believed that these new state and federal regulations transferred power away from schools, parents, and local

communities while other stakeholders applauded efforts at ensuring rigor in preparation across states by imposition of these policies (Hursh, 2005). These regulations required that states report student performance annually, which indicated there was a fraction of students meeting proficiency standards overall and separately for a variety of subgroups (Jacob, 2017). Accountability and concern about the quality of education students were receiving as well as the impact of that quality on the national economy and educated workforce had surfaced before when prior to NCLB, the landmark publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 initiated the shift of decision- making from the local level to the state level (Hursh, 2005).

The publication of *A Nation at Risk*, resulted in corporate and government officials blaming education for economic problems of the 1980's which prompted a call for more uniformed education policies (Hursh, 2005). *A Nation at Risk* was the beginning of educational reforms that sought to create a system of uniformed standards and testing of all students (Pazey & DeMatthews, 2016). Pazey and DeMatthews (2016) described this environment as "faulty" as they tried to seat the blame for educational challenges as grounded in the lack of research-based instructional practices. Pazey and DeMatthews (2016) further explain policy makers believed educational reforms tied to sanctions would instill a sense of fear for school closures which would in turn force all stakeholders to ensure student success or face sanctions.

Accountability Debate

Accountability was hotly contested in the academic literature in the early 2000's as several academics interrogated and challenged the emergence of an accountability system in Texas debated across the literature hotly contesting the mandates of accountability and its impact and marginalizing impact on students of color (Valencia et al., 2001). However, several other prominent equity-minded scholars situated accountability as grounded in creating more equitable

educational systems for children of color (Scheurich & Skrla, 2000; Skrla et al., 2010). In fact, an edited book summarizing this intensive conversation on equity and accountability weighed the merits and pitfalls of the system (Skrla & Scheurich, 2004).

Scholars on the anti-accountability side of the aisle continued to argue their perceptions of the negative impact of accountability. Mintrop and Sunderman (2009) stated that "even though the law formulates the sanction stages in the language of improvement, support, and radical renewal, the punitive core for districts and school is apparent. When improvement efforts fail, loss of control and threat to organizational survival is at stake" (p. 354). These sanctions are negative and can threaten "freedom or survival" (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009, p. 354). Mintrop and Sunderman (2009) argued that measures such as sanctions can fail because these policies produce fear, lack capacity building, and do not take into account the various stakeholders that are affected by those who create policy. Buchanan (2006) added that school districts have turnover of teachers and administrators due to these pressures, and no accountability measures, or solutions, address those growing concerns. Mintrop and Sunderman (2009) posits sanctions tend to punish those who work in low socio-economic areas most as those students tend to lag behind and have far more challenges than most. Mintrop and Sunderman (2009) proffered that failure to recognize the negative effects of accountability will cause administrators and teachers to leave and a revolving door will have been created.

The scholarly debate merely weighing the pros and cons of accountability, while providing a call to arms, did not and does not resolve the needs of failing schools. Recent literature on the positive impact of the principal and instructional capacity building have emerged as solutions to address the needs of failing schools.

Challenges of Building Instructional Leadership Capacity

For more than two decades, the federal government has allocated funding to support successful school turnaround efforts. The federal government overhauled the Title I School Improvement Grant Program in 2009 and increased its value to $3.5 billion with money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). ARRA spelled out four turnaround options from which perennially failing schools would have to choose, if they wanted to receive funding (Education Week, 2018). Part of the focus of these federal initiatives targeted building leadership capacity. Turnaround school projects stemming from this funding even resulted in policy shifts affording partnerships with higher education institutions. For example, HB 1842 effective August 31st, 2015, formalized university partnerships as a turnaround option for failing schools and building leadership capacity (Maxwell et al., 2019).

Building principal leadership capacity has long been a focus of various scholars (Perilla, 2014). Scholars agree that a substantial percentage of a student's achievement level is due to the principal. Perilla (2014) firmly noted that federal policy is not helping principals prepare for this type of responsibility. Thus, more than two decades ago, best practices asserted that principals must be the focus of attention on a systematic approach to building the capacity of campus principals to help them navigate through the abundance of challenges faced daily from being the campus principal to meeting federal mandates. Perilla (2014) urged all preparatory programs to implement teaching that reinvents what a principal used to be to give them the tools to meet the challenges of future generations.

Shirrell (2016) also described the challenges novice principals face as they enter their new roles with accountability pressures looming. Shirrell (2016) found that most principals want to come in and begin the process of building relationships and spending time getting to know

their schools and communities. However, time may work against them if they are entering a school that is low performing (Shirrell, 2016). The author reminds us that new principals are merely trying to find a balance between traditional duties and meeting the challenges of accountability. Shirrell (2016) also found that new principals struggled with balancing control and power wanting to avoid alienating staff or giving them the wrong perceptions. Novice principals also have little time to waste since some of the schools they lead are low performing and things need to change quickly. Sherill (2016) further affirmed that "trust, cohesion, and professional community are crucial;" however, "accountability pressures are often urgent and demand immediate attention" (p. 572). Sherrill (2016) posited that accountability measures needed to be changed to address this need for new principals or new principals will fail as they have to prioritize accountability over relationships which ultimately affects student achievement.

According to Cooley and Shen (2003), the era of school accountability accelerated by the No Child Left Behind Act of (2002) dramatically increased the complexity of the role of the school principal. Prior to NCLB, most of these decisions related to standards, while learning, and assessments were left up to individual states (Watkins et al., 2020). Not only were campus principals responsible for managing their schools, improving instruction, and meeting the demands from the state, but principals were also faced with federal accountability pressures such as closing achievement gaps for underserved students (Watkins et al., 2020). Jaafar and Anderson (2007) describe how the pressure placed on principals was increasing to exceed expectations or to be held responsible as school leaders, as schools, and as a district. Vinovskis (2009) added that the passage of the NCLB act, encouraged states to utilize high stakes testing to determine how effective school principals and teachers are. Principals were and are measured by how well their students score on a standardized test (West et al., 2014). This positioned

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principals as the key to improved academic outcomes. West et al. (2014) explained that "scholarly concern has also increased regarding how the high-stakes environment of the NCLB has affected US principal attitudes and well-being" (p. 374).

High Stakes Testing

Taubman (2009) has proffered that, "teaching, teacher education, and education, have increasingly been abstracted and recorded as numbers such as test scores, numerical data and dollar amounts. Slattery (2013) argues with accountability advocates that "we do not have to choose between rigorous lessons in the disciplines and engagement with social, cultural, environmental, and political issues of our time. West et al. (2014) affirmed that this added accountability pressure led to increased pressures on principals and also led to an increase in principal turnover. DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003), as well as Gajda and Militello (2008) posited that further studies indicated the increase of accountability pressure on principals led to a decrease of potential leaders considering this profession. Not only has accountability caused principal turnover, but it is also now cause for concern for those who might consider becoming a principal.

The NCLB Act of 2001 placed considerable focus on a school's ability to close achievement gaps or face federal sanctions (Sanzo et al., 2011). Many sanctions included losing federal funding or having a school reconstituted by the state (Sanzo et al., 2011). It is the responsibility of the campus principal to ensure all mandates are met as it is the "school leader who sets the tone" for the campus (Sanzo et al., 2011, p. 49). According to Leithwood et al. (2006), "there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership" (p. 14-15). Elmore (2005)

confirmed that in this age of accountability, the role of the campus principal changed drastically. The impact of the NCLB Act continues to have lasting effects on the role of the principal.

Many studies find that principals can have a positive effect on their schools, however having to manage and meet the demands of an accountability system is challenging (Oliveras-Ortiz, 2015). Oliveras-Ortiz (2015) asserted that little is known on how principals grapple with the challenge of being an instructional leader and producing high scores. Principals must learn how to manage their workload to meet the demands of the accountability system in a high stakes environment, while also having to manage the day-to-day operations of their job (Oliveras-Ortiz, 2015). It is the purpose of this study to better understand how principals cope with the stress of their work in an accountability era.

Statement of the Problem

"Accountability pressures and related stress can cause school leaders to experience dissonance between their desired and required role, begin to doubt their ability to lead, isolate themselves from members of the school community, become less effective leaders, and be more willing to resign their position" (Diehl & Gordon, 2016, p. 496). "School leaders are not only faced with the responsibility of trying to ensure that all of the children placed in their supervision are in a safe learning environment, but they are equally required to meet the plethora of federal, state, and local mandates" (Maulding et al., 2012 p. 22). Also, in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, new research is emerging that emphasizes principals be care-givers (Anderson et al., 2020). This feminist approach is aligned to an ethic of care and reflection (Noddings, 1992; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) frames successful leadership quite differently from traditional approaches.

These added responsibilities of care-giving increased stress on school administrators. Knowing how to cope with these multiple challenges is imperative for the longevity of a school administrator, as well as for their personal health. Reardon et al. (2019) proffer that reflection and resiliency practices are needed in order to meet the demands of such a job asserting that these approaches are necessary as "mental exercises" to help leaders grow beyond their experiences (p. 23).

Conceptual Framework

During the decades of the 1990s and early 2000, scholars explored the impact of stress as well as the coping strategies of principals. Poirel et al. (2014) stated the main issue principals face are the constraints of their administrative work. Many of the stressors come from the daily stresses principals encounter during their workday. Studies have shown that it is important to understand the relationship of stress and coping if principals are to be able to perform their jobs effectively (Poirel et al., 2014).

Poirel et al. (2014) categorized three coping strategies principals used most to address stress as:

(a) Life habits such as sleeping well, eating, well and exercising to build strength as principal copes with stress.

(b) Life habits such as mind techniques including relaxation, meditation, etc.

(c) Problem solving/emotional focus coping which focuses on the immediate stressor, cognitive reaction and emotional reaction.

The strategies utilized by principals include "spending time with family, watching television, prayer, silence, meditation, reading, exercise, time with friends, travel, and leisure activities" (p. 305). Furthermore, Poirel et al. (2014) asserted it is important to better understand the

transactional theory of stress created by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. to know how coping

strategies are used by principals. Psychologists coined the term, *appraisal*, as the moment where

the individual makes a judgment as they process a perceived stressor or situation to determine if

the threat is harmful or it is a benign situation (Biggs et al., 2017). Poirel (2014) elaborated that it

is during the appraisal process that the individual can discern whether the stressful event is

harmful or being perceived as a threat (Poirel et al., 2014). It is in that moment that coping

strategies are initiated by the individual to overcome the stress. The "appraisal process" is the

most important part of dealing with stress (Biggs et al., 2017). This process initiates the

implementation of the coping process and coping strategies (Biggs et al., 2017). Sogunro (2012)

explained that stress is an evolving process so multiple appraisals or reappraisals may occur. "An

individual's judgment that a stressful situation exists often initiates a complex process, and the

effects or feelings of disturbance can effectively be reduced by seeking to change either the

situation, the person's reaction to it, or both" (p. 668).

      Biggs et al. (2017) proffered that the "transactional theory of stress and coping,

developed by Lazarus and Folkman has been instrumental in shaping stress and coping research

over the past five decades. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and

coping contributed to this study as this theory ties together how the stressors are processed to

initiate the appropriate coping strategies.

Figure 1

Conceptual Theory
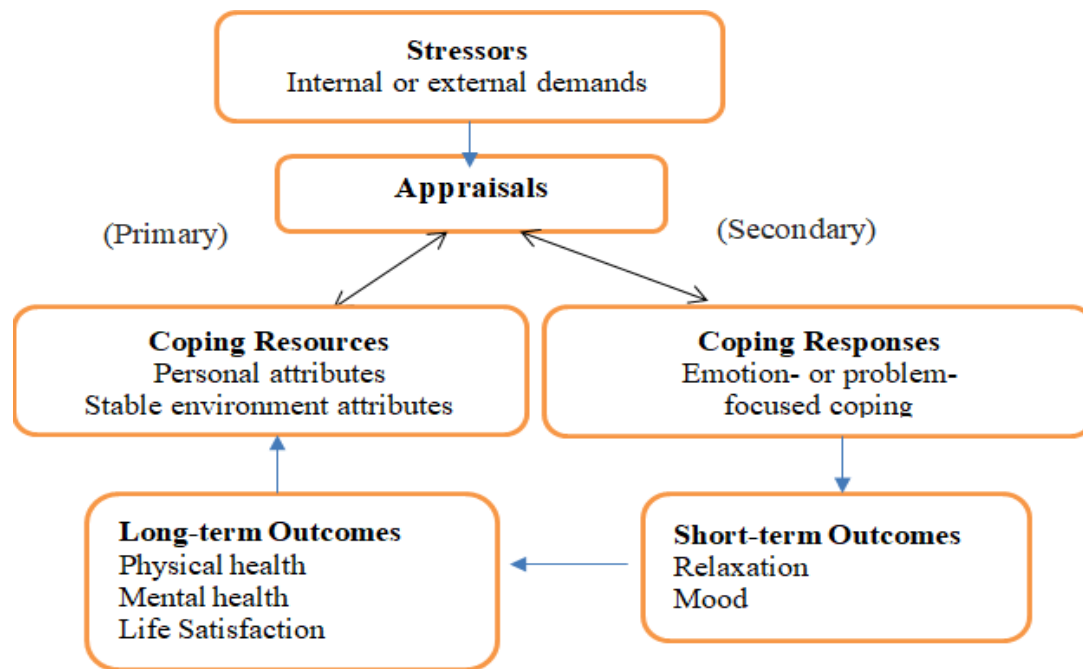
Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Biggs et al. (2017) explained "this transactional theory of stress and coping, developed by Lazurus and Folkman has been instrumental in shaping stress and coping research over the past five decades. Susan Folkman most recent additions to the research focused on the positive and negative aspects that surface during the stress process (Biggs et al., 2017).

According to Biggs et al. (2017) the "appraisal process generates emotions, and when stimuli are appraised as threatening, challenging, and harmful, the resulting distress initiates coping strategies to manage emotions or attempt to directly address the stress itself" (p. 352). During the coping process, one can elicit positive and or negative responses. Part of the coping process is to distress and continue to find ways to manage the stress until resolved (Biggs et al., 2017).

Biggs et al. (2017) adds the intensity for which an individual response to stress is influenced greatly by the individual. Individual's responses are influenced by two sets of forces "(a) an individual's agenda, including their values, goals, and beliefs, and (b) environment factors, such as demands and resources" (p. 352). Biggs et al. (2017) explains that the transactional process between stress and coping is connected to perception of the stress and not necessarily to the event causing the stress. Therefore, every transaction may be deemed positive or negative according to the individual and how they respond to the stress (Biggs et al., 2017). Coping resources, situational variables, and coping styles play a significant role in how individuals to respond to stress and overcome the challenges presented by the stress (Biggs et al., 2017).

For principals, knowing how to manage stress is important. Therefore, finding the coping mechanisms that best limits the amount of stress felt for certain occurrences is imperative. Should the individual be unable to alleviate the stress by use of primary appraisal, a secondary appraisal is initiated to better understand how to solve the challenges at hand (Biggs et al., 2017). This involves a cognitive process, a more reflective process, that evaluates how to better identify and evaluate coping resources thus building self-efficacy for future use (Biggs et al., 2017).

According to Poirel et al. (2014) few studies have been done to capture the real-time coping strategies used during or following a stressful event. Secondly, Poirel et al. (2014) mentioned gender, administrative position and what type of school a principal lead can contribute to the amount of a stress an individual may experience. Several studies have shown that women tend to be more stressed than men and that the most stressful situations principals encounter are at the high school level for a variety of reasons including potential legal challenges with regard to class rank, scholarship awards, honors and awards, as well as academic and

extracurricular potential issues (Poirel et al., 2014). However, since very few studies have been done to find a direct relationship between gender and stress, further research would have to be done to see if in fact gender plays a significant role with stress and coping. Given the fluidity of gender in 21st century conversations, using a male/female binary to assess stress levels in and of itself could be antiquated.

Boyland (2011) stated that principals are under more pressure now due to the many changes that have occurred in recent years. There are increased demands on principals and the scope of the position has changed especially with strict accountability measures (Boyland, 2011). School leaders are also challenged with the changing demographics in their schools which require more attention and better resources. Coupled with budget constraints, accountability constraints, and external forces, principals stress levels continue to increase causing some to burnout and consider leaving the professions (Boyland, 2011). Therefore, Boyland (2011) affirmed that more research needs to be done to investigate the levels of job-related stress and contributing factors to alleviate stress and promote the health of leaders. Boyland (2011) further added "it is important to examine to examine principal's personal coping strategies and compare those with research-based stress management strategies in order to determine the effectiveness of the techniques principals are currently employing" (p. 3).

Further, Sogunro (2012) described stress as an assault on leaders who lack the stress coping techniques to protect themselves. Principals must build a level of coping capacity if they are to be effective and successful (Sogunro, 2012). Sogunro (2012) suggested institutions create stress management training for leaders on a regular basis to ensure leaders have the ability to manage stress. Sogunro (2012) also indicated a need for institutions to monitor the number of staff and students a principal oversees. The larger the amount of personnel and students that a

leader must manage, the more abundant the stressors, therefore reducing the amount of individuals that a principal oversees can reduce the amount of stress a principal has (Sogunro, 2012).

Consideration of these various scholars' perspectives on principals and stress, and in particular Biggs et al. (2017) updated perspective on the Lazarus & Folkman model, serve to contextalize and offer a critical lens for analysis of participant data in the study.

Purpose of the Study

According to Oplatka (2017) "part of a principal's workload is caused by the principal's own drive to be a self-starter, one who initiates projects and creates new tasks proactively" (p. 560). Not to mention answering to the daily issues and concerns that flood through daily from various stakeholders who want to be kept aware of what is happening at school (Oplatka, 2017). Feng et al. (2010) note that, "Struggling schools that come under increased accountability pressure face many challenges in terms of changing instructional policies and practices to facilitate student improvement" (p. 13). These challenges increase the workload daily and utilizing coping strategies is important to meet the demands of the work.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore ways that school administrators cope with the various challenges of being a campus principal. More so, this study sought to share the perceptions of those principals in an effort to rise above the fray of negative conversations around accountability and glean real behind the scenes insight regarding how school administrators lead campuses. As the lead researcher and former 5A high school principal in an urban Coastal Bend high school, I know it is possible when campus principals do have the necessary support from upper administration and superintendents to focus on building their own capacity and coping skills, that school improvement can be a reality.

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The study included principals who have experienced success while leading schools during the current accountability era, as well as principals who have left the profession of leadership due to accountability constraints. Participants also noted that the pandemic context, while not the focus of the study, has further compounded accountability concerns. The study will seek to address several overarching research questions which focus particularly on the various challenges that cause work related stress for administrators in their work as well as their coping strategies utilized to reduce the stress.

Research Questions

The questions framing this study addressed the various views and perceptions of principals during a high-stakes testing accountability era, specifically through the lens of participants who are or have been affected by accountability. This study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding how they mitigate the challenges of accountability?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding successful approaching to navigating the increased workload often attributed to accountability demands?

RQ3: What strategies do school administrators utilize to cope with stress in their roles as campus principals?

Methodology

This naturalistic inquiry case study (Patton, 2015) was framed around the perceptions of school principals, specifically, how principals cope with the various stresses of the position to lead successful campuses.

Role of the Researcher

Patton (2015) states that the researcher is the "instrument to inquiry" (p. 3). Therefore, what we as researchers choose to study should be that which is important to us. As our knowledge and experiences help to shape our interests and encourage our need to know more about a given topic (Patton, 2015), we are compelled to explore those passions. Our role as the researcher and instrument are intertwined as "only the instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39). As researcher, we are driven to share our real-life experiences and explore the world through this context navigating the worlds of those with similar experiences from their "own words" to "capture patterns and themes" (Patton, 2015, p. 12).

Research Design

This qualitative study sought to explore and glean the stressors principals face daily, and the perceptions of successful principals regarding how they navigate these stressors through strategies such as personal reflection and via other means. Participants were interviewed separately in minimum one-hour interview sessions seeking to get the participant talking and as researcher "to get out of the way" (Bernard, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that it is 'important to determine a focus of the inquiry" (p. 226) which can only be done through an open mind of the researcher who must attune herself to the emergence of themes from the participant data. This willingness to "hear" emergent data helps the researcher to focus and seek to "resolve" what is unknown and provides a better understanding of what the problem is through knowledge. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants for this study. This sampling approach was utilized in expectation of the "information rich" details that could emerge (Patton, 2015). By utilizing purposeful sampling, the researcher is able to keep the focus on the purpose of the study. The researcher selected 6 principals with over 2-3 year's administrative experience as successful leaders of campuses with B ratings or better as currently defined by the Texas Education Agency accountability system (Texas Education Agency, 2021). The researcher purposefully selected participants with a large range of experience at varied school levels to allow for ample information and details for the study. Erlandson et al. (1993) agrees that sampling is important to gain insight as to what is important to the study as determined by the focus of study.

Site Selection

All participants were interviewed at their respective campuses. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that by doing so it allows the participants to be in their "natural setting" in order to better connect to what they are saying and to allow the researcher to have a better understanding or connectedness to the information they are gaining from the participants. By performing these interviews out in the field, in a setting where the participant is most comfortable, he or she may be more likely to feel at ease with the questions and be able to provide more detailed information and thick description in their responses (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Data Collection Process

The data collected will utilize a "semi-structured interview" process (Bernard, 2006). At the beginning of every interview, permission was sought to record the interview. Permission was sought twice, including once before recording and once recording begins. Secondly, participants

were advised of their "anonymity and confidentiality" (Bernard, 2006). Building a rapport of trust is important from the onset to gain "credibility" (Erlandson et al., 1993). The principals was asked a set of 10-12 questions. The questions narrowed the focus to ensure emerging themes amongst the participants. Questions ranged from experience, followed by causes of stress, and ending with the role reflection and resiliency play as a coping strategy. "Probing" was utilized to solicit more information from participants (Bernard, 2006). The researcher utilized a "silent probe" as most effective to give participants time to think questions through and allowed them time to reflect before responding (Bernard, 2006).

Data Analysis

The data was then transcribed and organized by identifying emerging themes by coding the responses by using a spreadsheet. Responses were transcribed from an audio tape and highlighted into subcategories as themes emerge. As stated by Saldana (2016), a code is a "research generated construct" that allows the researcher to organize the information to categorize emerging themes (p. 4). This analysis allowed the researcher to connect the participant's responses to one another. It is important to note however, that coding is subjective because it allows us to link one participant to another as we complete the analysis (Saldana, 2016). Thus, the coding is generated based on our perceptions and experiences and will require utilization of trustworthiness and credibility strategies to mitigate researcher bias as described in the next section.

Trustworthiness/Credibility

Trustworthiness and credibility strategies included various approaches to ensure that while the research is instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), researcher bias is navigated judiciously through various means including efforts such as member checking, and triangulation of themes

across the participant data as well as through varied means of sampling. Member checking was used by restating some of participant's responses to ensure the researcher understood the information being shared. At times, the researcher asked follow up questions to allow participant to elaborate on certain topics being addressed to gain a better understanding of the participant's perspective and perceptions. Erlandson et al. (1993) reminded us that credibility must be established with the individuals sharing data. Erlandson et al. (1993) further stated triangulation is important to allow truths in the data to come forward which leads to validity in the data. It also allows you to connect the data to the varied perspectives of the participants.

The researcher began each interview by introducing myself and sharing some background information about this study but also about myself so that participants could understand why I chose this research study and why it was important for me to better understand more about the study. I wanted participants to feel I was trustworthy and credible since I too had been a principal in public education, and I too had been affected by accountability. This allowed the participants to feel they could speak freely and more importantly, the participants understood that I could relate to what they have or are going through during such challenging times. Sampling in this study included both purposeful as well as snowball sampling to ensure that participant data shared in the study was credible. Moreover, efforts previously noted to ensure substantial conversations including thick description from the interview participants will support the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Informed consent was sought from the participants to document their agreement to support the study and be advised of their confidentiality (Bernard, 2006). The researcher was also able to empathize with the participants as their background is in school leadership. This empathy "develops from interpersonal interaction" with those being interviewed (Patton, 2015).

The researcher was able to understand the stressors a leader faces daily and able to understand that one must learn to utilize coping strategies to protect one's longevity in the work they face daily. Furthermore, being "mindful" during the interview is critical (Patton, 2015). The researcher took measures to ensure that the participants knew she was "present" during the interview. The researcher's sole purpose was to gain a better understanding of who the participants are and what they do in pursuit of contributing knowledge in their voice and through their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connally, 2000; Patton, 2015). The interviewer's ability to be clear of any distractions during the interview allowed the participants, as well as self as the researcher, to be fully engaged with the task at hand. Throughout the interview, as participants answered questions, the researcher was able to empathize with the participant so connections were made between researcher and participants.

Significance of the Study

Utilizing the information given, the research identified emerging themes that might contribute to the understanding of the various forms of stress and identify the need for coping strategies. Findings from this study may assist educational institutions in better preparing aspiring principals by better understanding the challenges principals face in the public school system. This would allow for a more robust principal preparatory program including professional development and mentoring programs. The study's findings are anticipated to serve to inform the field to better meet the needs of principals and equip them with the tools and skills necessary to manage the ever-changing accountability culture that exists in schools.

Chapter Summary

This study explored the perceptions of campus principals regarding their strategies to navigate and mitigate the challenges of their roles in the context of high stakes accountability

pressures. Chapter 1 provided the background of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and its mandates and sanctions for schools who fail to meet accountability. Specifically, the study proposed to address not only the pressures placed on principals but illuminate how principals lead their campuses. Chapter II is a comprehensive review of literature on accountability and coping strategies. Chapter III discussed the research methodology and research design with specific details on how the study was conducted. Chapter IV provides findings of the study conducted, and Chapter V discusses the results of the study as well as interpretation of the findings and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Chapter I set the stage for the accountability challenges that face campus principals in light of increasingly challenging standards. Yet, considering what are now decades of acknowledgement of these challenges, some schools still fail, while others rise to the challenge. This study seeks to illuminate what sets these campuses apart by exploring the perceptions of campus principals regarding their personal journeys and strategies that have not only helped support the success of their campuses, but also, insight into how they cope as leaders.

The extant literature in Chapter II built on the historical accountability conversation that emerged in the early 2000's with both proponents of accountability on the one side and those who adamantly take the opposite point of view in that the punitive approach to the process has been harmful. Some solution must exist. Some principals are successful in light of the challenges. This literature review examined the context of post-modern thought building on the premises of Paulo Freire, as well as the social justice literature and building understanding around culturally competent teaching and leading as enhanced contexts some successful leaders embrace as they adopt ethics of care, and postures of compassion embedded in their own very intentional and very personal reflective efforts to do better, care more and make a difference despite the challenges.

Figure 2

Accountability gave rise to the stress levels faced by principals daily. Principals faced many internal and external challenges in trying to meet the demands of the state accountability system. To ensure leadership effectiveness and improve academic outcomes, principal must incorporate an array of coping strategies including instructional improvements.

Context of the Challenge in Light of Accountability

Levin et al. (2019) recently found "the turnover rate for principals was 18 percent, with higher percentages among principals in high poverty schools' 21 percent" (p. 3). The authors found that working conditions contributing to the turnover rate including a heavy workload and an unsupportive district (Levin et al., 2019). In addition, they found that 31 percent of principals leave the profession early due to pressures of state accountability issues (Levin et al., 2019). Forty-seven percent of principals reported that they leave the profession because their school districts do not have any type of intervention plans or effective strategies to help principals cope with the demands of the job (Levin et al., 2019).

As previously noted, the NCLB of 2002 marked the expansion of the federal government's role in U. S. Educational policy (Jacob, 2017). One of the visible effects of NCLB was the requirement that schools administer standardized exams (Jacob, 2017). These new state and federal regulations transferred power to the states and required that student performance be reported annually to the federal and state government (Hursh, 2005). The NCLB Act of 2002 placed focus on a school's ability to close achievement gaps or face federal sanctions (Sanzo et al., 2011). Many of these sanctions include losing federal funding or having a school reconstituted by the state (Sanzo et al., 2011). It is the responsibility of the campus principal to ensure all mandates are met as it is the "school leader who sets the tone" for the campus (Sanzo et al., 2011, p. 49). According to Leithwood et al. (2006), there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership. Elmore (2005) confirms that in this age of accountability, the role of the campus principal has changed drastically. The impact of the NCLB Act continues to have lasting effects on the role of the principal. "Educational reforms and concerns about outcomes and accountability have been changing what goes on in schools for the past twenty years" (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006, p. 2). The campus principal's role has now shifted from being accountable for schedules, budget and resources to being accountable for student outcomes and achievement (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006, p. 2).

Diehl and Gordon (2016) assert that the most documented type of pressure on a school administrator are those related to accountability and high stakes testing. Many principals worry about what will happen to them if their schools cannot meet the demands of high stakes testing (Diehl & Gordon, 2016). Reback (2007) emphasized that accountability is a system in which the only indicators used to determine the ratings of a school are the passing rates. Diehl and Gordon

(2016) add stress is the most common side effect and that stress can lead to several medical underlying conditions both physically and mentally. Tikkanen et al. (2017) defined work stress as negative emotions that can cause both physical and psychological problems. Therefore, it is important that principals find ways to cope with the stress to manage the day-to-day expectations of running a school and meeting the pressures that accountability places on them. Mahfouz (2020) asserted "the principal is expected to be the instructional leader with heavy accountability for student achievement and to be a change agent who leads reform efforts, both of which carry emotional components" (p. 441). Kaufman (2019) adds that leadership is a stressor and that the amount of stress on principals can determine the overall wellness of a school.

Recently, DeMatthews et al. (2021) emphasizes the importance of the role principals have on school improvement. The authors remind us that order for schools to continue to improve, principal placement must be stable (DeMatthews et al., 2021). The retention of principals is continuing to be the most challenging issues pressing school districts. Without stability and support, principal's burnout due to multiple and compounding stressors (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Yet school districts and administrators are not addressing the issues leading to the stress or addressing the need to lessen the stress that are placed on principals with all the responsibilities that principals must cope with (DeMatthews et al., 2021). This leads to principal turnover which directly affects school improvement. Principal turnover ultimately directly affects school improvement; thus, it is critical as Maslach and Leiter (2016) noted that burnout as a "psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors of the job" be addressed (p. 103). By developing ways to address the stress and pressures that principals are facing in order, districts afford principals the tools necessary to be successful. One approach suggested by DeMatthews et al. (2021) recommended that school

districts implement strategies to address principal burnout and provide training for principals to embed self-care techniques to help alleviate on the job stress.

According to Le Fevre et al. (2003), occupational stress is increasing and is causing problems for both employees and institutions. Occupational stress should be of great concern to all stakeholders involved in any institution (Le Fevre et al., 2003). This type of stress is exacerbating the loss of personnel which in turn causes loss of productivity for their organizations (Cartwright & Boyes, 2000). Historically, research on stress has informed advantages and disadvantages. For example, Selye (1956) defined "stressors" as external forces that affect the physical and mental of individuals. Selye (1964) defined "eustress" as good stress and defined "distress" as the "bad" stress as it places stress on the body which the body is unable to respond to. To clarify "eustress" can be helpful in increasing performance, while "distress" limits performance as the body is unable to respond to the levels of stress psychologically or physically (Selye, 1964). Therefore, addressing the levels of stress placed on individuals is important to ensure productivity is optimal as well as ensuring the well-being of employees.

Day et al. (2008) agreed schools' leaders cannot be effective if the school leader is not performing well due to stress. The stress causing physical and phycological issues that will hinder the principal's ability to do their job effectively which can have negative effects on the school environment (Day et al., 2008). Beausaert et al. (2016) adds institutional variables contribute to the level of stress and burnouts that may exist in an institution. The authors mention factors such as working conditions, staffing, lack of training, student outcomes, discipline, and lack of resources also causing increased pressures on principals leading to elevated stress levels (Beausaert et al., 2016). Beausaert et al. (2016) emphasizes these job-related factors are increasing stress levels for principals that can and should be addressed to ensure support systems

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are created to alleviate the stress; thus, this is expected to support principals with coping skills to combat stress and remain healthy both physically and mentally. As stated previously, Beausaert et al. (2016) agreed that eustress can be beneficial and allows individuals to perform at optimal levels, while distress has increased levels of stress to point where the body is unable to respond and therefore, has negative impacts on employees.

Mitani (2018) found that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 resulted in increased pressure and stress on principals. The NCLB Act urged principals to think outside box and change practices to increase student achievement (Mitani, 2018). Mitani (2018) asserts the expectations behind this legislation was supposed to require principals to revamp their curriculum, change their teaching practices, increase the time spent in classrooms, and seek or be given funding to ensure effective training and resources for teachers to improve academic achievement. What this legislation did not provide for was the negative impact it would have on principals as demands increased along with the stress levels (Mitani, 2018). Mitani (2018) found that these increased levels of stress lead to principal turnover which in turn led to ineffective schools and the need for more school improvement issues. Mitani (2018) describes the chain of events that occurred due to this legislation, as principals' health issues were increasing resulting in decreased productivity related to the emotional, social, and physical issues that had elevated.

Hunter and Thatcher (2007) recognized in their study that worker's commitment to their jobs may also influence the amount of stress an individual feels. They suggested that a worker who is very committed will take their tasks seriously and personally and will ensure all tasks are completed to meet the needs of the organization regardless of the strain it may place on the individual (Hunter & Thatcher, 2007). Furthermore, Hunter and Thatcher (2007) posit other employees who are less committed to their work and to meeting the demands of the work, may

do less or not perform their duties to completion within the time frame expected, therefore they do not experience stress levels increasing. Hunter and Thatcher (2007) further explain that stress can be contributed to the various levels of positions held by individuals. According to their study, a lower-level position might not present the increased challenges or pressures for a clerical position but would present high levels of stress on an administrative position linking stress to the level of position held by an employee (Hunter & Thatcher, 2007). Stress levels can also be attributed to job satisfaction; thus, the more an organization can do to take care of their employees and find ways to utilize their skills sets in familiar or attainable settings, the more likely they are to be successful at completing their task, thus lessening the amount of stress levels (Hunter & Thatcher, 2007).

Darmody and Smyth (2016) state in order to ensure principals can be effective in their work to improve student achievement, institutions must first understand what is contributing to the amount of stress and what strategies can be employed to support principals by reducing the stress. Institutions must first understand what are the contributing factors that affect stress levels. There must be a clear understanding that systematic factors are increasing the demand placed on principals including the impacts from: legislation, district policies, district expectations, as well as curricular issues for campuses (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Brewer and McMahan (2004) describe occupational stress as a level where the demands of the job exceeds an individual's physical or mental ability to do the work. The authors assert this is key for employers to understand the relationship between the work and the individual (Brewer & McMahan, 2004). Put quite simply, if the amount of work or the difficulty of the work is too much to handle by the employee then you have increased the stress level for the employee, thus placing strain on their physical and mental wellbeing. Darmody and Smith (2016) emphasize employers must realize

the connection between stress and job performance if they want to ensure the longevity of their workers and job satisfaction as well. The more employees feel supported and valued by ensuring safeguards for the personal health, the more likely employees will perform at optimal levels.

This qualitative study sought to describe how principals (former and current) deal with the stress of a stringent accountability mechanism in their job responsibilities as instructional leaders.

A Paradigm Shift

Reflection and dialogue amongst the oppressed and the oppressors can lead to change. If we all become subjects participating in dialogue to recreate our knowledge, liberation can become a reality (Freire, 2000)

Paulo Freire (2000) described how the educational system has contributed to the oppression of students. Freire (2000) believed by making oppression the topic of his writing, those who are the "oppressors" and the "oppressed" can begin to reflect on their roles and begin to make the necessary changes to "liberate" themselves. Freire (2000) intended to reveal that if we continue to do nothing to address the growing concerns of oppression, we then contribute to the "dehumanization" of those around us. Freire (2000) believed to dehumanize is to contribute to the "uncomplete being" of oneself (p. 43). Freire (2000) asserted dehumanization affects not only those who are being losing their humanity but also those who are taking away the humanity of others. Fear, loss of personal and professional power as well as the unwillingness to challenge is what has always been accepted leads to further oppression.

The effects of high stakes testing lead to a banking system of education. Freire (2000) describes the banking concept of education as teachers merely making deposits of information to students. Freire (2000) implied that students are empty vessels that teachers deposit knowledge

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into. Freire (2000) also described how the banking concept reduces learning by being void of creativity, inquiry, and knowledge that is relevant to students thus engaging in the oppression of students. Freire (2000) argued that students need to be engaged in their learning so they can become "beings for themselves" and therefore, can began to transform their reality and thus feel free (p. 74). Bybee (2020) asserted that high stakes testing contributes to this banking concept. Bybee (2020) added that a high stakes testing environment limits a teacher's ability to meet the sociocultural needs of students.

Freire (2000) stated, "The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (p.73). Freire (2000) added critical consciousness is concept of students accepting "the passive role imposed on them" (p. 73). Rather than challenge the norm or those things that oppress their ability to think on their own and be creative, the less likely they are to challenge what has always been accepted by society and therefore, they conform.

Baldwin (2008) reminded us "the purpose of education is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black, or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not (p. 18). Baldwin (2008) asserted students need not obey the rules but challenge them and problematize practices that don't work for equity. He believes teachers need to open students' mind sets and recognize what students have endured in the past and challenge the conspiracies that have oppressed the rights of these individuals. Furthermore, Baldwin (2008) suggested teachers recognize the "tremendous potential and tremendous energy" that lies within their students before it is destroyed (p. 20). As teachers of all students, it is our responsibility to ensure we allow students to become self-actualized participants in their learning, so they understand the significance of their learning.

John Dewey, a leader of progressive education believed that students learned better by doing which contradicts our enforcement of scripted lessons (Spring, 2011). Educators should teach students to think rather than relying on remote memorization (Kennedy, 2019). Yet, public schools are required to teach students concepts that have no bearing on their experiences. Instead, schools are forced to teach content from a curriculum that does allow students to connect to their learning and that does not equip them with the tools to tackle real world problems in the future (Spring, 2011). Teachers continue to use traditional methods of delivering new information to students who find no value in what they are learning. Progressive education is a means of allowing students to connect real life experiences with newly learned information. It provides an opportunity for students to be active with their environment and to develop socially. Progressive education is a way to challenge students and allow them to experiment with real life situations and to become reflective problem solvers. The progressive classroom should be flexible, cooperative, and project-oriented affording students the freedom to choose instead of having to abide by teachers' decisions without input (Kelleher & Leonall, 2011).

Students with disabilities also suffer emotionally from the stress of having to take a standardized test (Conderman & Pedersen, 2010). Chamberlain and Witmer (2017) add that special education students suffer anxiety and stress due to the test format that does not align to their needs. The way the test is created does not address the needs of special education students and impedes their ability to have success which conflicts with federal laws of IDEA (Chamberlain & Witmer, 2017). Fowler (2013) adds the NCLB Act was supposed to address social values such as "freedom and liberty" for all students but assigned labels such as "low performing" and "failing" to schools ultimately resulting in poor public perceptions of those campuses (p. 321). Conderman and Pedersen (2010) assert that teacher's attitudes toward

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testing also greatly impact students. Students feel pressure to do well and want to do well for their teachers (Conderman & Pedersen, 2010). They seek the approval of those around them, so it is important for educators to create an environment that is inclusive and supportive for students (Conderman & Pedersen, 2010).

New Ways of Navigating Leadership

Recent research confirms that having strategies to cope with the daily stressors of the workload is important. Isaacs (2012) noted that resilience can be a construct to dealing with adversity by having the skills, behaviors, and qualities to overcome the stressful situations. Isaacs (2012) proffered those five characteristics are critical to ensuring that school administrators overcome adversity – those being the need to be: proactive, positive, focused, flexible, and organized. Isaacs (2012) stated that the "ability to recover; to bounce back; coping and adaption; willingness and ability to implement change; overcome adversity; withstand hardship; and strength to confront" is necessary (p. 133).

Principals must utilize coping strategies to be able to withstand the many facets of the work and its effect on one's personal self. Kaufman (2019) stated that some principal's deal with stress through physical activity while others engaged in relationships with those close to them to help mitigate stress. Other coping strategies used by principals included "mind body techniques" and "emotion focused" coping strategies (Kaufman, 2019, p. 5). Zimmerman (2011) suggest creating supportive groups to help alleviate some of the stress placed on principals to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Oplatka (2017) mentioned two techniques used by some principals to alleviate the overload of work included delegating and prioritizing. Oplatka (2017) emphasized that by building capacity in others and delegating some of the tasks, a principal's workload could be minimized and therefore, the stress can be alleviated. Poirel and Yvon (2014) stated "planning

for the future, discussing with colleagues, exercising, and delegating tasks are also part of the best strategies evoked by principals" (p. 3). Poirel and Yvon (2014) also found that creating networks of social support by discussing problems with other principals was the most widely used coping strategies amongst principals. Poirel and Yvon (2014) affirmed that regulating emotions and utilizing self-control is important as it can help principals protect themselves from tensions and stress.

Mahfouz (2020) stated there is a little research that examines closely how relationship the of stressors to coping strategies work together so gaining a deeper understanding is important to address this increasing challenge. Mahfouz (2020) added if principals succumb to the stressors and begin to lose enthusiasm for their work it will affect the school community as a whole. If principals don't find ways to manage the stress it can lead to a loss of self-efficacy and doubts in their ability to do their work and meet their responsibilities (Mahfouz, 2020). DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) found that what adds to the stress that principals face is having insufficient authority to make decisions and not having the resources as instructional leaders to meet accountability requirements. This is leading to shortage in prospective candidates for administrator's roles (Mahfouz, 2020). Mahfouz (2020) asserted "school principals should be thought of not only as leaders of change and managers of a school who are expected to maintain high quality instructional leadership and sustain a supportive enriching environment, but also as individuals with social and emotional needs" (p. 452). Understanding the stressors and what coping strategies are employed will be important to provide principals with support to build their confidence and emotional wellbeing. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004) posited, "Emotional competence seems to be a necessary skill that principals must possess in order to cope with the stress that comes with the professions" (p. 18).

Reflection

Aside from having to be resilient, administrators should also be reflective in their work to help cope. Bond (2011) explains in his research that reflection can be impactful if principals reflect on how they handle the unexpected, how they respond to the unexpected, and how they approach their decision making based on that reflection. He found that most administrators would better benefit from this type of reflection if properly trained in doing so. Bond (2011) mentions maintaining poise and clear thinking during unanticipated events should be a priority for principals. Bond (2011) describes one coping strategy of self- talk where principals carry a conversation with themselves while trying to figure out what to do next as a form of reflection. Bond (2011) adds that reflection in action includes "managing their emotions, understanding the scope of problem, considering possible actions, and the personal and or professional values that drive their choices" (p. 11). Wright (2009) explains "reflective practices become an invitation for principals to reclaim moral, professional, and political autonomy. Reflective practice is about being open, accountable, and vulnerable as we enter into different and important conversations about how schools might be improved" (p. 270). Reardon et al. (2019) add that reflective leaders understand how their goals, attributes, actions will impact the outcomes of their organization.

Being able to think critically is a very important skill for leaders (Reardon et al., 2019). It allows the leader to look closely at themselves to identify problems and improve their understanding (Reardon et al., 2019). Schön (1983) agrees by using critical reflection, practitioners can reflect beyond their training to better inform their practices which can lead to professional growth. Reardon et al. (2019) emphasize these mental exercises can help develop a leader's ability to be proactive and responsive. "The practical application of critical reflection

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empowers emerging leaders" to be able to meet the challenges of their work as leaders, thus allowing them to grow as leaders (Reardon et al., 2019, p. 30).

Utilizing reflection as a coping strategy can help deter some of the frustration and emotions principals are faced with during emotional events. Zimmerman (2011) suggests that leaders need to "become reflective practitioners who know themselves and engage in professional development" to improve their own readiness (p. 108). Zimmerman (2011) adds "given the demands and constraints under which they work, it is critical for principals to determine their own readiness for change before undertaking the complex process of changing schools" (p. 107). Turk and Wolfe (2019) affirm in order to be effective; principals will need to know how to maintain their resiliency to overcome adversity.

Emotional Intelligence

Another aspect to consider while dealing with accountability pressures, it the ability to develop one's emotional intelligence. Chen and Guo (2020) assert that having to deal with all the demands of a principal's job can take an emotional toll on principals. Principals have many challenges to overcome including meeting the demands of the job and meeting the needs of all the stakeholders who have various objectives (Chen & Guo, 2020). All of these demands place more pressure on principals to be effective instructional leaders and require principals to be effective in handling the emotional demands of their teachers and staff (Chen & Guo, 2020). Maamari and Majdalani (2017) added that a leader's ability to lead their teachers is dependent on their emotional state. If they are able to lead with a more positive outlook, then their teachers will be more positive and effective. Leading in a more negative manner will create a more dysfunctional environment (Maamari & Majdalani, 2017).

Burcea and Sabie (2020) stated emotional intelligence requires "self-understanding" (p. 68). It's the ability to manage one's emotion and in turn, use those feelings to motivate others. Mayer and Salovey (1993) assert, "Emotional intelligence" allows for the regulation of our own emotions; "they derive from people's expectations, which are in contradiction with what reality offers" (p. 435). Siscanu (2019) added that emotional intelligence increases knowledge and self-control and by doing so individuals are better able to manage their emotions when dealing with others which can lead to more meaningful relationships. By being able to manage one's emotions, the individual can be more productive as a leader thus contributing to positive outcomes for themselves and their staff (Burcea & Sabie, 2020). This creates an atmosphere of positivity and positive influence to help all stakeholders meet the demands of the job collectively while reducing the levels of negativity due to the demands of the work.

Rajesh et al. (2019) determined transformational leaders and followers must foster a strong emotional connection if leaders are to foster a culture of trust and improved performance. Sivanathan and Fekken's (2002) found emotional intelligence to directly affect the impact and influence of transformational leadership. Gardner and Stough (2002) added that "transformational leaders, through their ability to identify, express, and understand emotions of others, are in a better position to comprehend followers' needs" (p. 68). The ability to manage one's emotion and the emotions of their followers will lead to higher performance outcomes for all. Gross (2007) describes research is emerging that suggest leader's ability to regulate and control their emotions can also help to regulate one's personal stress level.

Turk and Wolfe (2017) stated leaders have the ability to increase the emotional intelligence and resiliency of all its members if they are able to manage their emotions first. By embedding these practices into their work, they can move their followers forward in a positive

direction (Turk & Wolfe, 2017). Principals should first engage in the practice of "identifying and cultivating their own emotional intelligence and resiliency" (Turk & Wolfe, 2017, p. 150). Teleos Institute (2017) affirms resonant leaders have the power to transform their followers through a renewed energy that increases the productivity in a positive manner. Turk and Wolfe (2017) mention that with all the pressures placed on a principal from managing their schools to meeting accountability standards, it is important for principals to concentrate on building their resiliency.

Gorgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021) noted a strong connection between emotional intelligence and successful leadership. Leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence can directly influence the attitudes of those around them (Gorgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021). Subordinates feel less threatened by their leader when he or she has created a culture of unity despite the challenges they face daily (Kerr et al., 2006). If followers feel supported and cared for, they are more likely to look pass any negative emotions a leader might display during challenging times. More recent leadership approaches such as distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and professional learning community approaches (Hord, 2009) that focus on building networks and communities rather than viewing teachers as subordinates or followers, have supported recognition and enhanced emotional states and leadership recognition for teachers (Hord, 2009). Thus, the importance of developing strong emotional experiences for all parties. Maamari and Majdalani (2017) explained that organizations must use a variety of methods to train employees by mentoring and coaching to increase a leader's effectiveness and efficacy which in return can have a positive effect on the entire organization.

Change Agency

Lunenburg (2010) described a change agent as "anyone who has the skill and the power to stimulate, facilitate, and coordinate the change effort" (p. 43). However, change is not something that can be done insolation as it requires the efforts of the leaders and those that they serve (Acton, 2021). One of the biggest mistakes made is to think that any one person themselves can meet the challenges of all educational reforms (Acton, 2021). Constant changes to educational reforms also have contributed to more issues for leaders as they struggle to keep abreast and meet the demands of all the changes (Acton, 2021). Scholars on equity refer to equity-oriented change agents (Skrla & Scheurich, 2004). Those equity-oriented change agents were described as having multiple common characteristics including an equity attitude, void of demonization, courageous conversations, persistence, patience, asset attitude, and coherent focus (Skrla et al., 2009).

Skrla et al. (2009) reminded leaders that they must model what they want to see in their schools. If teachers are expected to treat students with kindness, respect, and appreciation than the leader should model those behaviors for adults. Skrla et al. (2009) stated that despite the negativity that often occurs among adults in the school setting, as a leader you must still respect and care for that person and no demonize them. Instead Skrla et al. (2009) emphasized the use of courageous conversations to address those who may be negative. Skrla et al. (2009) reiterated the importance of having a fair open dialogue with colleagues by being patient, understanding, truthful, and engaging during the conversation to ensure an open equitable dialogue to better understand what is contributing to the negative emotions or behavior toward the organization. Skrla et al. (2009) also added to be an equity-oriented change agent, leaders must be persistent and patient. Leaders must recognize the inequities in schools have existed for some time and it

will take time to change the environment into a more inclusive environment while changing the inequitable practices of the past (Skrla et al., 2009). Leaders must persist while being patient as change occurs slowly and the process should be one that the leader allows for rich discussion and dialogue to address the inequities of the past (Skrla et al., 2009). Finally, Skrla et al. (2009) insisted that leaders utilize their assets to strengthen their programs. Assets need to be valued and recognized and should be closely related to what needs to be accomplished. Keep in mind what the focus is and keep the focus of creating an equity-oriented environment for your school (Skrla et al., 2009). Remain focused on what it is that needs to be accomplished and remain persistent in the pursuit of an equity-oriented change agency (Skrla et al., 2009).

The "turnaround" principal, as the change agent, is the person responsible for turning around an underperforming school (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). Principals are the ones that possess the skills, traits, and knowledge to provide needed change to an organization (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). These principals are the most important component to leading schools to school improvement. Principals are ultimately the ones that face consequences if their campuses are unsuccessful in making the needed changes toward school improvement (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). Wise and Jacobo (2010) add the role of the principal is not what it used to be. Schools are constantly having to change to meet the demands of the work. What once worked is no longer acceptable and school progress is measured as a whole and not in isolation (Wise & Jacobo, 2010). According to Fullan (2001) being an effective leader requires that you are working collaboratively with all stakeholders to create innovative ideas. Wise and Jacobo (2010) remind us that true change will occur when there is a supportive environment where all ideas are welcomed and supported. Effective leaders will bring about the needed changes when they utilize their teams, forge strong relationships, encourage dialogue, and build a culture of trust and

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support (Wise & Jacobo, 2010). Brinia and Papantoniou (2016) add that it is very important to the success of a school to have a leader that will not only follow orders but take risks and make the changes that will inspire and motivate those they lead.

Furthermore, Zimmerman (2011) asserted that a principal's own self-efficacy can also contribute to more effective teaching and learning environments. Maulding et al. (2012) believed that a "possible link between successful administrators and student academic success is implied because teacher efficacy, morale, and school culture are enhanced" through leadership (p. 23). They further note that being resilient can enrich administrator's lives and allow everyone to benefit from contributing to a life that is fulfilled (Maulding et al., 2012). Mahfouz (2018) emphasized that school leaders must know how to manage their stress to ensure the stress of those around them is not negatively impacted. Therefore, it is extremely important for leaders to find ways to cope with the stress of their daily responsibilities to ensure they can continue to function as effective leaders.

Culturally Responsive Principals

"Educational reforms have long claimed school leadership is a crucial component to any reform of education" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). Leithwood et al. (2004) added effective leaders understand the need to hire culturally responsive teachers to better serve the marginalized students in order to sustain an effective school. Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) stated leaders must be knowledgeable and competent to lead their educational institutions and support school initiatives. School leaders must be responsive and present in daily instructional practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). Leaders should also address the needs of the minoritized groups by leading teachers in the development of curriculum and practice of instructional strategies to better serve student's needs (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasized that leaders have a responsibility to ensure an educational environment that is inclusive and supportive. Leaders should recognize the role oppression has played in contributing inequities amongst the underserved populations and work to create a culturally responsive environment that pushes back on oppression to create a climate that improves teacher's instruction with students needs in mind to improve student success (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) proffered that "culturally responsive leaders like anti-oppressive, transformative, social justice leaders will challenge teaching and environments that marginalize students of color, and they will also identify, protect, institutionalize, and celebrate all cultural practices from these students" (p. 1278).

Leithwood et al. (2006) found in their research that there are four major components to a Culturally Responsive School leader (CRSL). The components include ensuring critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricular and teacher preparation, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and engaging students and parent in community contexts must be present. Gay and Kirkland (2003) posit leaders must be aware of the inequities within their school environment and must work to create an environment that is supportive of all students. Leaders must have an understanding of the potential every student has and create a culture that cultivates and propels students and teacher forward by addressing the inequitable factors that hinder their ability to be successful.

Leithwood et al. (2006) posited that a culturally responsive curriculum and teacher development program must be implemented. Leaders need to train and develop teachers by having those courageous conversations around race and culture (Leithwood et al., 2006). Leaders should integrate resources, training, instruction, and mentoring to ensure teachers are well equipped to be culturally responsive in the classroom (Leithwood et al., 2006). Leaders should

also be willing to able to address any resistance from teachers should they be unwilling or non-participatory in integration of a culturally diverse instructional plan (Leithwood et al., 2006).

Leaders should also ensure an inclusive environment of all students (Dantley & Tillman, 2006). Students must all be treated equally. An inclusive environment is one where all students are treated the same in regard to discipline and or special education placements (Leithwood et al., 2006). Skiba et al. (2002) adds patterns should be investigated to ensure students of color are not disproportionately punished or overly identified for special education placements. Ensuring fair and equitable practices will ensure a culturally responsive school environment (Leithwood et al., 2016).

The last component for culturally responsive leadership is engaging students and parents in the community contexts (Leithwood et al., 2006). This requires the leader to embed themselves in the various cultures in their school setting and making connections to the school community as well (Leithwood et al., 2006). School leaders should participate in the community and attend events or participate in conversations with members of the community to better understand their student's various cultures (Leithwood et al., 2006). Student's culture appreciations and recognition should be embedded in the school environment to allow everyone to feel supported and recognized thus creating a culture of inclusion for all (Leithwood et al., 2006).

Chapter Summary

The extant literature shared here is focused on the paradigmatic shift from traditional approaches in leadership to those aligned with a more feminist, post-modern ethic of care seeking to advance equity, and support culturally relevant environments in our schools as evidenced by reflective leadership. This extant literature provided a backdrop and context for the

data being sought from participants in this study who successfully led campuses in light of

multiple challenges they face.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study that explored and described the stressors a principal is faced with during this age of accountability and to better understand the various coping strategies principals utilize to manage their stress. Six school principals were interviewed having varied levels of experiences and perceptions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that it is 'important to determine a focus of the inquiry" (p. 226). The focus helped to "resolve" what is unknown and provides a better understanding of what the problem is through knowledge. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As a developing researcher, gaining a better understanding of Michael Patton's (2015) twelve-point framework of strategic themes in qualitative research was key to understanding the purpose of research and glean the most from the participant data in a qualitative study. The premise of qualitative research is that the researcher is the instrument of inquiry. Qualitative research "takes place in a natural world; draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants; focuses on context; is emergent and evolving, and is fundamentally interpretive" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 3). The researcher is the instrument of inquiry in qualitative methodology. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that the researcher studies "social phenomena holistically; systemically reflects on who she is; is sensitive; uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted and interactive; and conducts systematic inquiry" (p. 3).

This methodology chapter outlined the research design that was utilized to conduct the study. Specifically, planned instrumentation, participant selection, site selection, data collection and analysis procedures, and trustworthiness and credibility were covered in this chapter.

Research Questions

The questions framing this study addressed the various views and perceptions of principals regarding the stressors they face and how they navigate those stressors via coping mechanisms during this high stakes testing accountability era, specifically through the lens of participants who are or have been affected by accountability. This study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding how they mitigate the challenges of accountability?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding approaches to navigating the increased workload often attributed to accountability demands?

RQ3: What strategies do school administrators utilize to cope with stress in their roles as campus principals?

Research Design

Patton (2015) began his qualitative research framework with the concept of naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry focuses on studying real world situations in their natural setting and being open to whatever might emerge during the investigation. Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasized that the setting can influence human interactions; therefore, it is important that the researcher be able to study participants in their natural setting to better understand the impact the setting might have on their behaviors. Being able to physically be a part of the setting allows the research to better understand the effects of face-to-face interactions for participants in their natural setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Observations are also a very important part of the research. Through observations the researcher can also make note of not only what they can visually see, but what they can also sense (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Observations must

include recordings, interactions, conversations, and details from what is observed about the interaction action of participants and or what is observed about the setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) add that field notes play an important role in gathering details about the participant and study in a nonjudgmental manner.

Emergent design flexibility is being open to adapting inquiry as new paths of discovery emerge. Marshall and Rossman (2016) assert that the researcher may be both the observer and the observer as a participant. The researcher must be willing to be flexible to gain a better understanding of those he is studying while learning from his own experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Being both an observer and a participant might allow the researcher to become more reflective in the process to make familiar that which is not familiar (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Saldana (2015) affirms that reflection helps one to better understand what is confusing while also helping the researcher to think qualitatively about the purpose of their research.

In this study, the researcher expected to not only interview the participants, but also include field observation data, journal notes, and potential artifacts as part of the context of the study process.

Research Methodology

Instrumentation

Patton (2015) stated that the researcher is the "instrument to inquiry" (p. 3). Therefore, we chose to study what is important to us. Our experiences and knowledge help to shape our interests and encourages our need to know more about a given topic (Patton, 2015). Our role as the instrument is important because "only the instrument is capable is grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39). Thus, the need to

learn what real life is like for those with similar experiences from their "own words" to "capture patterns and themes" (Patton, 2015, p. 12).

Personal experience and engagement are essential to the naturalistic inquiry process as the direct contact the inquirer has with people, situations, and what is being studied serve as the products for inquiry. Phenomenological interviewing as an outgrowth of the naturalistic inquiry process involves in-depth interviews of the lived experiences of participants. What we learn about those experiences help develop greater meaning and understanding of the lives and experiences of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The advantages of open-ended semi-structured interviewing used in this study, is that it allows a connection between the researcher's personal experience and that of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) add "in qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument. Her presence in the lives of the participants invited to be part of the study is fundamental to the methodology" (p. 118). Patton (2015) affirms a "more traditional qualitative researcher learns from participants' lives but maintains a stance of empathic neutrality" (as cited in Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p. 119). Marshall and Rossman (2016) believe that qualitative studies "depends primarily on the interpersonal skills of the researcher" (p. 124) "Building trust, maintaining good relations, respecting norms of reciprocity, and sensitivity considering ethical issues" is important (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 124). The relationship cultivated with participants is imperative (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Being patient and thoughtful to have a better understanding for what others believe will help researchers to refrain from embedding their own opinions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The researcher intended to implement the best practices outlined by Patton (2015) and others in the conduct of this study and via the interview process.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling was utilized to select participants for this study. This sampling was utilized due to the "information rich" details that could emerge (Patton, 2015). By utilizing purposeful sampling, the researcher was able to keep the focus on the purpose of the study. Participants were chosen based on their various school levels. The researcher identified the participants by seeking principals from various areas. It was important to the researcher to seek out participants from the lower South Texas area to Houston and Dallas to have a wide range of participants for several areas of Texas to ensure a more robust pool of applicants. The researcher then sent out 12 emails to various principals in the Texas area. Several potential participants did not respond. Three participants however did respond and of those three participants, two principals were identified. The researcher asked those participants whether they knew of other participants who were willing to participate thus snowballing sampling occurred. Of all the participants names received, the researcher searched the Texas Education Agency website to validate if potential participants were of a "B" rated campus. The researcher then contacted all potential participants via email and four more responded willing to participate. Again, the researcher had to structure the potential participant pool so that all school levels were represented. There were two other participants that responded that would be willing to participate but after multiple attempts to schedule interview, those two participants did not respond for requests to schedule interview.

The researcher selected six principals with two to three year's administrative experience. The researcher was purposeful in selecting participants with a large range of experience at varied school levels to allow for ample information and details for the study. Erlandson et al. (1993)

agreed that sampling is important to gain insight to what is important to the study as determined by the focus of study. Six principals were interviewed.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) asserted that "well developed sampling decisions are crucial for any study's soundness. Making logical judgements and presenting a rational for these decisions go far in building the over case of a proposed study" (p. 110). The purpose of the sampling strategy is to start a search for information rich cases to better understand the phenomenon being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), Marshall and Rossman (2016) also stated that the study's "final credibility and transferability will be greatly enhanced if the future readers can find, in the research report, an account of the sites and sampling process" (p. 111).

Site Selection

All participants were interviewed at their respective campuses via Zoom. Due to Covid related safety protocols, participants felt it was best to not meet in person for interviews. Researcher asked participants what method would be best to hold the interviews before deciding on site selection. All participants agreed they preferred to have their interviews via Zoom. Again, they felt most comfortable doing so as Covid was still a safety concern for them. Researcher agreed and sent them emails to choose a time and date for Zoom interview. All participants responded with a time and day for the interview.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that by doing so it allows the participants to be in their "natural setting" allowing both the participants and the researcher to better connect to what they are saying and to allow the researcher to have a better understanding or connectedness to the information they are gaining from the participants. By performing these interviews out in the field, in a setting where the participant is most comfortable, he or she was more likely to feel at ease with the questions and be able to provide more detailed information in their responses.

Context sensitivity refers to how the researcher's inquiry places findings in social, historical, and temporal context; being careful about meaningfulness of generalizations and thoughtful exploration of transferability and adaptions to the setting. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that in qualitative studies one "could argue that human actions are significantly influenced by the setting in which they occur and the one should therefore study that behavior in those real-life natural situations" (p. 101). Both authors asserted "the social and physical setting-schedules, space, pay, rewards, and internal notions of norms, traditions, roles and values are crucial aspects of an environment" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016 p. 101). This is where context is important and researchers need to understand the setting is where all the complexity exists and where multiple versions of the reality will be (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Data Collection Process

The qualitative data collection approach often includes not only interviews, but also field observations that yield thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Marshall and Rossman (2016) describe four methods participants used for data collection including setting, observing, interviewing, and analyzing. Observation is often key in the data collection process. Saldana (2015) adds that the data collected is usually found in the textual and visual material we collect. He further explains that qualitative data analysis consists primarily of techniques and strategies to condense data into varied codes, categories, themes, etc. (Saldana, 2015). Most of this data is recorded through field notes. Field notes must be detailed and recorded without judgement (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It is important to remember that the first part of inquiry is on discovery (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Being open to enter a participant's setting without predetermined or strict guidelines will lend the inquiry to discovering more about the setting, actions and behaviors (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Saldana (2015) affirmed that qualitative

inquiry is an emergent process that allows the researcher to be flexible during the varied stages of the study.

The data collected in this study utilized a semi-structured interview process (Bernard, 2006). At the beginning of every interview, permission was sought to record the interview. Secondly, participants were advised of their anonymity and confidentiality (Bernard, 2006). Building a rapport of trust was important from the onset to gain "credibility" (Erlandson et al., 1993). The principals were asked a set of twelve questions. The questions narrowed the focus to ensure emerging themes amongst the participants. Questions ranged from perception, followed by causes of stress, and ending with strategies to cope with work related stress. Probing was utilized to solicit more information from participants (Bernard, 2006). The researcher believed the silent probe would be most effective to give participants time to think questions through and just allow them time to reflect before responding (Bernard, 2006). At times, the researcher merely allowed for some silent time to the participant could reflect on what was being asked. I would state "I'll give you a minute to reflect on that question." I wanted to participant to know I was fully engaged and really valued what they had to say. At times, the participant respondent with very little details to questions, so I would restate questions and remind participant that there work had such value to others, so I was asking again to see if they had further insight to offer to the questions. Other times, I merely restated what they the participant's answer and would ask if they had anything further to add to elongate their responses. This proved to be effective on allowing them to think through their responses.

The interview conducted provided questions that were open-ended where participants were able to speak about several facets of their work and how accountability affected their work. Once the researcher learned what was contributing to their workload, questions were asked about

the types of supports were available to support their work or lessen the load. Several participants mentioned various items that made the work challenging, so the researcher "probed" and attempted to redirect participants to the question at hand. The researcher utilized "probing" techniques and pauses in time to allow the participant to share more information for their responses as some participants find it difficult to think of what to say. Doing so allowed participants to think through their responses for a richer conversation.

Throughout the interview, participants make connections with the lead researcher as again the lead researcher was a high school principal at the time of interview. Almost all participants conveyed a sense of comradery for having been in similar situations and for having had success in the midst of state mandates. Therefore, at times I would mention actions I took to lessen the load of the work and participants would respond, "Oh yes, of course." By sharing my experiences throughout the conversation, it allowed them to remember the actions they had taken to address various issues. We spoke candidly and openly, and some became emotional, the researcher emphasized and assured them of their value to education. This process provided participants a safe open dialogue for rich conversation.

At times the participants took a more negative approach and concentrated their thoughts on individuals that caused stressed for them. The lead researcher was mindful to redirect the conversation to focus on what actions were taken to remedy the challenges in order to be successful rather than focus on an individual. The researcher reminded participants at times the purpose of the study was to know how they overcame challenges and not on who made the work challenging. Redirection was important to gain better insights to how they managed the work and ultimately were successful.

Data Analysis

Unique case studies assumes that each case is unique, and the first stage of analysis is respecting and capturing the details of the individual case. Marshall and Rossman (2016) state "case studies are widely used among qualitative researchers because of their explicit focus on the context and dynamic interactions" (p. 19). The authors explain that the strength of a case study is the use of multiple methods and flexibility while studying the case (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). "Case studies favor intensity and depth, as well as exploring the interaction between case and context" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 19). Particular attention was placed on individuals, groups, and settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasize "strengths of the genre for research that is exploratory, descriptive, that accepts the value of context and setting, and that searches for a deeper understanding of the participants lived experiences of the phenomenon under study" is important to convey deeper understanding of the participants lived experiences (p. 102).

First the researcher transcribed all responses with questions and emailed responses back to participants to validate and approve responses. During this time participants were allowed the opportunity to change, add or delete anything from their interview. All participants were asked to email back and changes, and or approve transcripts. All participates emailed back stating all responses were accurate and approved.

Next, the researcher sought to exam closely the responses of each participant. Doing so allowed the researcher to better understand the perceptions each participant had. Responses were transcribed from an audio tape and highlighted into subcategories to allow themes to emerge. Once data was transcribed and placed on a word document, it was studied by the researcher to ensure the researcher had a full understanding of responses.

The data was transferred to an excel spreadsheet and organized by emerging themes. The researcher looked for key words or phrases that connected to one another in the first round of coding. A descriptive word or phrase was then given to each subcategory. As stated by Saldana (2016), a code is a "research generated construct" that allows the researcher to organize the information to categorize emerging themes (p. 4). This analysis allowed the researcher to connect the participant's responses to one another. It is important to note however, that coding is subjective because it allows us to link one participant to another as we complete the analysis (Saldana, 2016). Thus, the coding is generated based on our perceptions and experiences. A second round of coding was then used to organize themes accordingly. A descriptive word was used again that linked several participants responses to a behavior or an action that the participants may have mentioned. It was important to tie every response to each other to ensure theming was effective.

Saldana (2015) describes analytical induction as a process that allows answers to research questions to emerge as you collected more information and more data. The author mentions "plans change, and new strategies are set in motion" from what was originally planned and as new information emerges (Saldana, 2015, p. 26). Once we are in the field of inquiry and reflect on what is occurring, our experiences will change, and we will learn more and understand better what we are studying. Patton (2002) describes being able to be open, flexible, and creative to themes and patterns that might emerge.

Creative synthesis can help bring all this data and information together. Thinking summarily allows the researcher to bring large amounts of data into a small, more manageable body of work. Saldana (2015) describes it as a way of getting the researcher to "condense large amounts of data into manageable units, it encourages you to reflect, motivates you to produce

focused and clearer writing, and provides a streamline account your field work and analysis" (p. 139). Saldana (2015) further describes the process as an "interpretative read or take that synthesizes a larger portion of data" (p. 139). Doing so allows the reader to be focused and clearer about their writing (Saldana, 2015).

Holistic perspective is when the whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than a sum of its parts. Thinking assertionally is the process of gathering all the data and interpreting the "read and takes" of all the material (?). Saldana (2015) defines assertions as "summative statements the researcher puts forth that can be supported by evidence" (p. 139). Saldana (2015) calls this a "holistic yet systematic way of reviewing data corpus and composing claims about what the researcher interprets to be true" (p. 139). The goal is to "outline the interrelationships between key assertions, assertions, and sub-assertions" (Saldana, 2015, p. 140). Saldana (2015) states doing so allows for a holistic, interpretive act which allows others to read and interpret something differently from each other. The researcher sought to implement these best practices and constructs of research methodology throughout the conduct of this study.

Trustworthiness & Credibility

Trustworthiness was required to start as permission will need to be granted to record sessions and participants will be advised of their "confidentiality" (Bernard, 2006). The researcher empathized with the participants as their common background is in school leadership. At the beginning of the interview, as lead researcher I introduced myself and provided some details about my experience as a middle school and high school principal. I shared my experiences as a principal and how respectful I believed the professional was. I wanted the participants to know that I had just recently left the campus and knew full well the challenges

administrators faced daily. Building trust and credibility was important so they could speak freely and openly to me. Empathy can be developed by ensuring personal interactions are evident (Patton, 2015). The researcher was able to understand the stressors a leader faces daily and able to understand that one must learn to utilize coping strategies to protect one's longevity in the work they face daily. Furthermore, the researcher remembered to be "mindful" during the interview which is crucial (Patton, 2015). Ensuring that the participant knows that the researcher is mentally "present" during the interview will enhance the sole purpose of gaining a better understand of who the participants are and how they name their stressors and cope with those challenges (Patton, 2015). The researcher's ability to be clear of any distractions during the interview will allow the participant to be fully engaged with the task at hand.

Saldana (2015) reminded us that our role as researchers is to better understand the role of the participant in their daily lives and the world, they live in. As researchers we can learn more from our participants if we are willing to step into their shoes from their perspective. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated, "human interactions cannot be understood unless the meaning humans assign to those actions are understood. Because thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspectives" (p. 101). Empathy is connecting on an emotional level to what someone else is feeling (Saldana, 2015). As researchers engaging with our participants on this level can lend itself to better insights into the minds of our participants (Saldana, 2015). Marshall and Rossman (2016) believed the success of a qualitative study is highly dependent on having an empathetic understanding and respect for our participants and their lives is important. Trust is built over time as the relationship is strengthened during the study. Researchers should have the skills to be sensitive in dealing with may come from their fieldwork (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Utilizing the information given, the researcher sought to identify emerging themes that might contribute to the understanding of the various forms of stress and identify the need for coping strategies. Findings from this study may assist educational institutions on better preparing aspiring principals by better understanding the challenges principals face in the public school system. This would allow for a more robust principal preparatory program including professional development and mentoring programs. The study's findings can only serve as a vessel to meet the needs of principals and better equip them with the tools and skills necessary to manage the ever-changing accountability culture that exists in schools.

Summary of Methodology

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the research methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study that explored and described the stressors a principal is faced with during this age of accountability and to better understand the various coping strategies principals utilize to manage their stress. The research design, instrumentation, participant selection, site selection, data collection process, data analysis process, and trust worthiness and credibility of the study were discussed in detail. All six participants interviews were recorded, data was analyzed and coded to allow for emerging themes. Participants were candid in their responses about the various challenges they face as principals and how managing stress allows them to be successful.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter explored the perceptions of campus principals regarding their strategies to navigate and mitigate the challenges of their roles in the context of high stakes accountability pressures. Specifically, this chapter shared participant data revealing how the challenges of accountability pressures affects their work and what strategies these principals implement to manage the stress that comes with leading schools during this accountability age. The participants included six principals from the South Texas area with experiences at the elementary levels and the secondary level. Two of the participants are no longer principals as they have chosen to leave the profession while the other four are sitting principals in public schools.

This qualitative study examined their experiences and their perceptions leading in public schools. The researcher was interested in gaining insights into how principals navigate accountability demands, how federal and state accountability affects their daily work, and how these principals manage the stress and workload, as well as what insights these principals offered future leaders.

Overview of Participants

As explained in Chapter III, six principals were identified using purposeful and snowball sampling. In order to participate in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. Work/have worked in public school system

2. Have at least two to three years of administrative experience

3. Serve a campus with at least a "B" rating as measured by the Texas Education Agency.

All six principals selected to participated led struggling schools at some point in their careers. Of the six participants, two are no longer in their positions as the stress ultimately

overwhelmed them. Three principals worked in large 5A districts while three worked in smaller leadership settings. Two served as high school principals, while two served at other campuses within their respective districts. Every effort has been made to protect the identity of the participants through the use of pseudonyms and presenting details in summary about their experiences when possible.

Among all participants, five hold bachelors and master's degrees while one has a doctorate degree and three are finishing their doctoral degree through a local university. Their years of experience as principals range from 5-10 years. Four out of the six participants took the traditional route for their principal certifications while two took the alternate route for certification through their local Education Service Centers. All participants have worked for campuses that are or were "B" rated campuses prior to the pandemic. Only one participant has worked for the same school district while all the other participants have had varied experiences at multiple districts ranging from large to small school districts.

The demographics of information regarding every school the principals have served will play a role in the challenges that these participants faced in their work as principals. The demographics of each school district will ultimately shape the participant's perspective regarding the amount of stress or workload each principal faced daily.

Table 1 provides the following participant information: pseudonym, degrees held, years in public education, administrative and teaching experience, number of school district serves, classification of school district, and student population size.

Table 1

Participant Experience and Background Summary

Pseudonym	Degrees	Years in Public Education	Years as Principals	Years as Assistant Principals	Years as Teachers	Number School Districts	Type of School District	Student Population Size
Barron	BS, MA, EDD	20	7	7	6	4	3A, 5A	1086
Brown	BS, MA EDD	22	7	6	9	2	3A, 5A	1550
Espinosa	BS, MA	19	5	5	9	2	5A	550
Hewitt	BS, MA	14	3	3	8	1	3A	515
Lopez	BA, MA	17	10	2	5	3	3A/5A	440
Rainey	BA, MA	27	2	5	7/Counselor 8	3	3A/5A	330

Participants

John Lopez, Mills High School, Mills ISD

Principal Lopez spent the last 10 years of his career in education as a high school principal. Before that he was a high school assistant principal for two years in a large 5A district before moving to a smaller school district. Principal Lopez spent five years as a teacher and a coach at all levels of education from elementary to middle school as well to high school. Principal Lopez also has experience working with an alternative school that was run by the Department of Corrections. Principal Lopez holds a bachelors and a master's degree and has worked in academically struggling schools for the past 12 years. Principal Lopez is now self-

employed after leaving the profession several years ago due to the stress and challenges that the accountability pressures placed on his work as a principal.

Principal Lopez believed he was prepared somewhat for his role as a principal. He reflects on the two districts he worked for and believed his first district prepared him better for the work that was ahead of him. Principal Lopez stated that as an assistant principal in his first job he felt "they did a good job in exposing me to a lot of areas of administration, a lot of trainings, different training opportunities." He added that while he felt prepared there was no way he could "win a game that the rules are being changed" constantly.

Dr. Lisa Barron, Harris Elementary, Harris ISD

Dr. Barron has been in education for 21 years. She was a teacher for six years, an assistant principal for seven years and has currently been an elementary principal for seven years. All her administrative experience has been at the elementary level. She has worked in three districts, one being a smaller district in a small town in South Texas that struggled academically, however she is now is the principal of a large elementary school in Houston that is high performing. She has a bachelor's degree and master's degree from a traditional university and received her doctoral degree from a local university in South Texas. She also earned her principal certification through the university.

Dr. Barron believed she was prepared to be a principal because she had the opportunity to work for a high performing district before taking over a struggling school. She believed the training she received as well as learning from the teachers she worked for previously allowed her to have confidence in her new role. She stated working for a high performing campus "gave me a lot of confidence to lead the teachers" as a first-time principal.

Dr. Barron has had varied experiences moving from a low performing campus and district to a higher performing campus and district. She found that expectations were much different between the two campuses and that the level of support to varied. While one district placed more support and trust in the campus principal, she has found that higher performing campuses teachers are valued more than its leader. This has caused greater stress and has caused Dr. Barron to lose the confidence she came in with. She asserted "I've seriously considered other positions or, you know, professions because you know, I get anxiety every Sunday night because I'm going to have another week of this." Dr. Barron is struggling to continue in this position and expects to retire soon.

Melissa Espinosa, Sutter Middle School, Sutter ISD

Principal Espinosa has twenty years of experience in education. She was a teacher for five years and has fifteen years of administrative experience. She is a principal overseeing a campus with 550 students in a large school district in South Texas, which itself has about 32,000 students. She has worked for two districts and currently has been a middle school principal for five years. She has always served at the middle school level and has been fortunate to work for high performing campuses. Principal Espinosa has a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from a local university is presently a doctoral program as well. She received her principal certification through a traditional pathway. Principal Espinosa believed her first district and her first job as an assistant principal prepared her for the role of principal. She stated, "I drew a lot on my experiences and the training I had received from the previous district," and this has allowed her to be successful within the current district she works for.

Principal Espinosa added that taking the time to assess her new campus and taking the time to build relationships is what allowed her to grow her team's capacity to create a plan for

school improvement. She mentioned, "I spent the first two weeks in my job in my office talking to people and it was one-to-one conversation." Building that culture of trust was important to her to ensure as a team, they could work together to ensure improve their processes and systems.

Dr. Mary Brown, Dallas High School, Dallas ISD

Dr. Brown has been in education for 22 years. She has been an administrator for 13 years. Dr. Brown has been a principal for seven years at all three levels including elementary, middle, and high school levels. Her most recent position was that of a high school principal for two years. Dr. Brown has a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a doctoral degree from a local university. She did earn her principal certification through a local Education Service Center.

Dr. Brown has led a high performing middle school campus and was recently leading a large 5A district high school that presented its challenges. Dr. Brown recently left the profession due to the challenges the accountability system placed on her work as a principal. She described how the accountability system was an ever-moving target too hard to meet,

> During my principalship, the accountability system changed twice, and each time it changed, not only did it change, but I also had to learn new accountability systems and how we were rated for each level so from elementary to middle and then by the time I got back around to high school, the game had changed again.

Dr. Brown found that a lack of support, too many district directives, and lack of autonomy were too much to deal with. She felt it was best for her personally and professionally to move on as too many colleagues were losing their jobs. She stated, "we saw examples of that throughout our district, people losing their jobs, or being demoted because of their accountability and performance."

Diane Hewitt, Heights High School, Heights ISD

Principal Hewitt has been in education for 15 years. She was a teacher for five years, a counselor for three years and has been an administrator for seven years. Her current position is that of a high school principal. She has also served as a middle school principal. All her years in education have been spent working for the same small school district in deep South Texas. Principal Hewitt has a bachelor's degree and a master's degree and is currently a student in the doctoral program at a local university. Her certifications have been earned through an alternative pathway at a local Education Service Center.

Principal Hewitt felt that she was somewhat prepared for the role of a principal as she received some training through her local school district but did feel she was at a disadvantage having gone through the alternative pathway for certifications acknowledging now that she probably did not receive the proper training others might have received going through the university.

Principal Hewitt described the accountability system as "stressful." Having been through various superintendents during her time as a principal, Principal Hewitt added a shift in mindset has made her work more doable. Her latest superintendent has shifted the focus from the assessments results to focusing in on curriculum and instruction which has allowed her and her team to focus on growing their teachers and meeting the needs of their students. Principal Hewitt asserted

> We try to make people see that our kids are more than a test. They have so much more to offer so because that's our philosophy and that's something that we've been shifting through most of our discussions which are not assessment led.

With this shift in philosophy, Principal Hewitt has found dealing with accountability has led to better results and less stress.

Jennifer Rainey, Sandy Intermediate, Sandy ISD

Principal Rainey has been in education for 27 years. She has been a teacher, a counselor, a dean of instruction, an assistant principal, and currently serves as a principal in a small school district. This is her first year as a middle school principal after having served as an elementary principal as well. She is currently serving as a middle school principal to two small schools, one being the intermediate and the other being the middle school campus. She mentioned this is what normally happens within a small school district as resources are limited. Principal Rainey has had experience in all levels serving in elementary schools, middle schools, and the high schools at five different districts moving from a large district to a smaller district. Principal Rainey has a bachelor's degree and a master's degree and is currently a doctoral student at a local university. All her certifications have been through the traditional route at a local university.

Principal Rainey believes she was prepared for her role as a principal because she was fortunate to work for some great role models. She called her former principals "her mentors" who continue to support her in her work. She believed the training she received at her various districts as well as her degree in counseling, have been instrumental in allowing her to be prepared for this role. While she admitted that accountability is "very stressful," she worked hard to ensure her teachers and her students have the resources they need to be successful. She believed if you take care of the teachers and provide interventions for students, at the end of the day it's all you can do. It's important for Principal Hewitt to stay positive through it all in order to deal with the stress. She adds "every day is a new day so take one step at a time."

Leadership Effectiveness

Figure 3

Leadership effectiveness is often at the intersection of stress and coping and how judiciously principals are able to manage. Principals face many internal and external challenges when dealing with meeting state standards. Participant data in these next sections detail principal experiences and insights regarding the casual factors of the stress, as well as how their leadership effectiveness plays a role in their success, and also shares the coping strategies used to manage stress.

Leadership

Mitani (2018) asserts the expectations behind accountability was to require principals to revamp their curriculum, change their teaching practices, increase time spend in the classroom, and provide effective training and resources for teachers to improve academic achievement.

Stress

Stress Diehl & Gordon, (20160 Accountability pressures and related stress can cause school leaders to experience disonnance between desired role and required role, begin to doubt their ability to lead, isolate themselves from the community, becoming less effective leaders.

Coping

Mahfouz (2018) emphasizes schools leaders must know how to manage stress to ensure the stress does not have a megative impact on those around them, therefore they must find ways to cope with the stress to ensure they can lead effectively.

<center>**Emergent Themes**</center>

Data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded through several

rounds. Utilizing the participant data provided, the researcher identified emerging themes that are

anticipated to contribute to the understanding of the various forms of stress experienced by

principals as well as identify the need for coping strategies. The following themes emerged from

all participants once coding reached saturation as perceived by the researcher.

Theme 1: Accountability has greatly impacted the work and added to the workload.

Figure 4

Principals share perceptions on what role accountability has on their work. The principals share

insights as to what district expectations were and how the systems inhibited their ability to do

their work effectively and therefore, increasing stress.
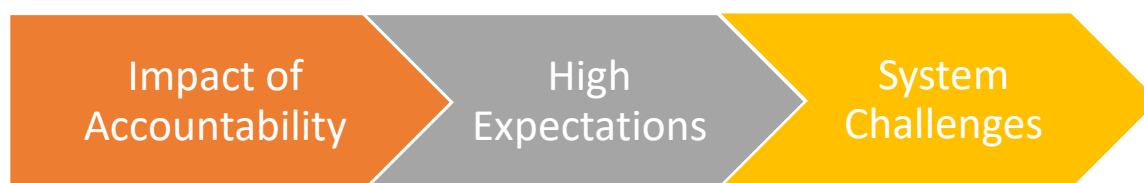
Impact of Accountability

When asked how accountability has affected their work as principals, all participants felt

that accountability played a significant role. According to the interview participants,

accountability was the driving force for most decisions being made regarding their work. Some

found it more challenging than others depending on the level of support they had. Principal

Lopez emphasized that in his perception, most principals are measured by the scores their

schools receive. He added that scores can determine if "you're becoming ineffective as a campus

principal." He conveyed his perspective that he felt the accountability system was unfair and is a

<center>69</center>

constant moving target. He stated "accountability being what it is when TEA and the politics with the state legislators and the funding that's all tied to accountability, and how we operate, public education, it's always moving. It's not serving the best interests of kids." He believed there's no way to win with a system that is constantly changing. Principal Espinosa described how "accountability is always in the back of your mind" and feels it takes away from enjoying her work as a principal. Dr. Brown reiterated that it drove everything on her campus from the beginning of the year as with each year being different to keep up as accountability, "it was the moving target from year to year."

Principal Hewett shared how planning was the only way to stay ahead of accountability measures, noting that "we had plans and ensured teachers had the necessary training to better serve the kids. While Principal Rainey emphasized, "my mind is always, how can I get these scores up?" She also described the commitment to excellence she tries to cultivate. She mentioned "there is no exception." She tries to hire the best staff and expects them to be "excellent."

While most found that accountability drove their daily operations, there was one that did not feel pressured to do well on the state exams because she was worked at a high performing campus. Dr. Barron mentioned her role was simply to "keep teachers happy." When she first came in she thought she would have to do the work she did at her previous campus that was struggling academically, but she learned quickly that change was not needed at this campus and her superintendent asked her not to make changes that would upset the teachers because "if morale was low that would affect their accountability" so she shifted her focus on doing things to keep her staff happy.

High Expectations

All principals also shared that with accountability came high expectations. All were expected to perform at high levels to ensure high scores. Principal Lopez was from a small school district, so he mentioned that what often happens in his school affects the community. He mentioned there's a lot of stress that comes from working in a small community. He described that it is like "working under a microscope." He added "all eyes are on you" so you are expected to do well, or you will be called in. Principal Lopez stated "what goes on at the high school is what's going on in the entire community. It's not pieces of what's going on, its everything. Depending on how the high school is doing, from a lens, it's how the high school does and in a smaller community it's how the district, does in a small community and everybody follows suit. So, whether they're positive things going on, whether it's success, that is going, that is being seen or felt at the school and outside in the community. It's all going to be driven by the high school." Therefore, Principal Lopez knew he had to do well, and his school had to perform well because any negativity would be felt by the community.

Similarly, Dr. Brown asserted that the principal is "everything" and "you are the community face." Dr. Brown described that it didn't matter how tough the work was or the challenges were, she had to "paint it on" and get back up and perform. She stated in "all honesty, you just paint it on and move forward. I mean, and why I think only the strong survive in that role because you have to be able to take that beating and still put on a smile and stuff out the door because you're at the center of attention everybody's looking at you." Dr. Brown understood that higher scores were expected of her and that she needed to ensure her campus improved as was expected by not only her supervisors but by the community she served.

Principal Hewitt emphasized that "a lot of stress comes from high expectations." She added that her superintendent was a "workhorse" and "we are expected to produce." Principal Hewitt stated "we have to stay disciplined. We are worried about our results and it's every day worrying and making sure that our teachers are doing what they need to do in the classroom to make sure that overall success for our students. So, that was something we would deal with on a consistent level with stress level." Principal Hewitt committed herself to working hard despite having responsibility to a family of six. She mentioned, "you're spread so thin" but she just brings her children with her so she can get the work done.

Principal Espinosa described her experiences as stressful. She stated, "There's other 'powers that be' that bring this stress to us that don't realize everything involved, you know, because they're not in the trenches." She added that the pandemic has added to the stress since scores are lower than before. Principal Espinosa mentioned

> You're constantly reminded that accountability is everything you know, and as an administrator, I personally feel that I've had to balance between the work and what we're doing daily and how we're making sure that we're maintaining that rigor, but that that stress has been now doubled. I feel because we're having to figure out what more did this this pandemic do for children coming back? We're seeing it every day and we're having to learn even the adults the adults are having a lot of stress afterwards.

Finally, while Dr. Barron experienced a different kind of stress as her campus has always been high performing, it was very clear that expectations were high. She explained "it's tough, like the expectation is high, so imagine the pressure it puts on a principal but also the expectations of teachers." She stated her superintendent expects excellence. Dr. Barron emphasized in her district "Excellence is like a commitment to excellence, like we can't, we will, like it's there.

There is no exception. You will be excellent because we only hire the best." Dr. Barron understood when she took this position that expectations would be high, and she would be expected to perform at high levels.

Stress

All principals agreed that the accountability system has added great stress to their work. Due to the high expectations and the expectations to excel when it comes to state accountability, the stress is at times insurmountable. Dr. Barron emphasized "I have never cried so much with this job." She found it difficult to find balance with the work and meeting expectations of her supervisor. She added

> It's just a lot of anxiety because when you sit back and look at it, like you're responsible for all these kids and all these people, and if you don't perform well, if anything happens on that campus, it's my fault. So, I just it gives me a lot of anxiety to think that hey, they hired me to lead this campus and it's a big job.

Principal Espinosa also found it difficult to manage the workload and ensure her kids and teachers feel supported while still trying to ensure better results. Principal Espinosa added "you're constantly reminded that accountability is everything you know, and as an administrator, I personally feel that I've had to balance between the work that we're doing daily and how we're making sure that we're maintaining that rigor, but that stress has been now doubled." She added

> I think the stress has been just about how do we maintain because we do this big, big job, but how do we do it now as we're coming back, you know, from this time and, and then another stress for me is, is what we're doing in that? I don't know that or do we have to completely revamp everything.

As a new principal to her campus figuring out how to build relationships and at the same time implement needed changes had its challenges.

Principal Hewitt mentioned the stress level is high daily. Principal Hewitt stated, "I mean, I worried about our results and it's every day worrying and making sure that our teachers are doing what they need to do in the classroom to make sure that overall success for our students." Principal Hewitt stated the challenges are greater because her school has a large population of economically disadvantaged students so that presents its challenges too. She mentioned "we do come from a low socio-economic community. So, that is why we try to make people see that our kids are more than a test they have so much more to offer." Therefore, they focus on removing the stigma that comes from standardized testing and focus more on instructional practices. Principal Rainey mentioned "the stress is just too much." She worries her teachers also feel this pressure and "that's a lot to put on teachers as well." She described how her school had also been through a hurricane previously and were still trying to recover from that. Principal Rainey explained "You know, we went through a hurricane, you know, it's very stressful times. I mean, there's still positions that are open in our district that we can't fill." Coupled by the pandemic recently and having to run to small campuses by herself continues to add stress to her position. She understands academics and improved scores is important in her job, but she tries to focus on the positives on her campuses to keep her teachers and students motivated. Principal Rainey reflected and stated

> You know, academics is extremely important. Always, but we also have to focus on the
> fine arts and athletics and so I find personal joy in those areas as well. So, I try to
> incorporate everything for kids" to help lessen the stressed faced by all.

System Challenges

Several principals felt that they were at a loss dealing with accountability measures. They believe that the accountability system is an unfair system that causes more harm than help because the targets are always moving; thus, they find it difficult to be successful with those constantly moving targets. Principal Lopez questioned the validity of this system. He asserted "how can you prepare students; how can the staff and administrators prepare and really know what's going on and how to prepare?" He added because the targets move every year, you find yourself having to readjust and hope you can meet the mark. Principal Lopez explained "the accountability system is a game that can be used to represent data, the way you want it. You want it to be seen whether that's in a positive light, or a negative light. The accountability system does not rate you based upon your staff turnover, your ability to have staff, you know, or a complete staff." He further stated, "whether you have students that are mobile, in and out of the district, in and out of homes in and out of whether it's foster care or even the criminal justice system." Principal Lopez said there are so many reasons as to why students don't perform well on a standardized test that can never be revealed in a test score. He mentioned "it's much harder for a smaller school or a smaller school district, as everything is more magnified at that level."

Dr. Brown reflected on the impact of accountability by describing the constant workload that increases yearly. Dr. Brown stated, "you lead them academically plus you're in charge of the staff and all their personal problems and things going on." She felt the accountability system is unforgiving and does not consider the many contributing factors campuses deal with daily and yearly. Not to mention the challenges that came with not fully understanding how the accountability system worked. She stated,

We were kind of left out there floundering alone, navigating those waters trying to not

only navigate a new accountability system, but to find ways to support it internally

because externally, not only did they not know how to support it, but they also didn't

understand it.

Dr. Brown argued that because her supervisors were unable to fully understand how the

accountability system worked, that made the challenges greater as she had to seek ways on her

own to meet the expectations of performing well.

Principal Espinosa agreed, "it's not easy, and we have our issues and I have personnel

issues up the wazoo," yet she realizes it is ultimately her responsibility to ensure her school

excels. She found her work particularly challenging because her school was low performing.

Again, she was new to this campus and had to take the time to get to know her staff and their

skills set so she could create a plan to help her teachers and students grow academically. She

mentioned the "former leadership that had been there was very dictator like, when I walked in

there, I had no idea that the staff members that were there, they were going to be like, like I was

walking into a battered shelter." She knew she was going to have to take the time to rebuild her

staff before she could make the necessary changes. So, she spent the next several weeks getting

to know her staff. Principal Espinosa stated "I brought them in one by one" to learn more about

them and the role they played as a whole. She began with her administrative team "to lay done

the expectations" followed by her teachers and moved forward to custodians and cafeteria

workers. It was that important to her that they understood she would not be a dictator but

someone who listened, was inclusive, and ensured all decisions were made as a team.

Although the school was low performing, getting her staff to trust her would be key in

revamping their instructional programs to better serve kids. Principal Espinosa understood that if

she were to have success meeting accountability measures, she would first need to ensure her staff trusted her, had a voice in the changes being made so that collaboratively they could create a plan for school improvement.

Theme 2: Resources can make a difference.

Figure 5

Principals discuss what challenges their particular district created in dealing with meeting accountability measures. Most agreed resources and training play an important role in assisting them with the best tools necessary to be effective.

District Challenges → Resources → Training
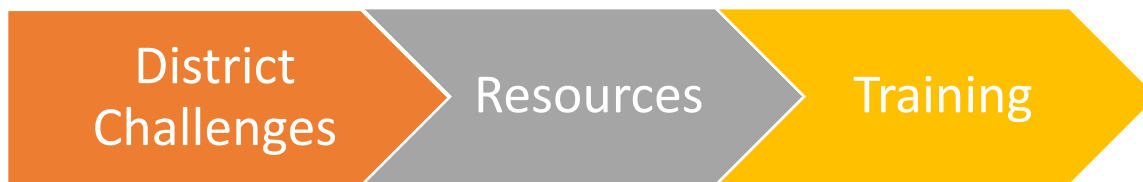
Participants were asked how their district leadership supported their work to meet accountability demands. Most participants identified a lack of resources as a hinderance to do their work effectively. They described a lack of financial resources, a lack of human resources, a lack of training and preparedness, and a lack of competency at the district level to help support the work.

Lack of Resources

Principal Lopez described the challenges of working in a small school district*,* "It's much harder, a smaller school district just has a whole lot less resources." He added "not only the resources, financial resources, building resources, and personnel resources not available." For example, Principal Lopez described his inability to get students what they needed. instructionally when central office seemed to be more concerned about the cost of black versus colored ink

I said, 'You don't understand. You're looking at bottom line . I'm talking about how

students learn. If you're not using color. If you're not using pictures, if you're

not using graphs. If you're not using these instructional strategies, then how are

they supposed to achieve more?'

Principal Lopez added there is just a big "disconnect." He referenced how other departments in

the district just don't realize the impact their decisions are making on a school's ability to do

their work. He further stated that he must find ways to be resourceful because in a small

community there may be greater things to focus on. Principal Lopez shared "high schools are

kind of left, . . . alone, they're left alone to kind of do what they need to do because there's so

many other things that are going on and in a smaller community."

Principal Rainey, who also works in a small district, agreed resources are just harder to

get in a small district. She shared, "you don't get as much support in the smaller districts as you

do at the bigger districts and I'm talking about they just don't have the manpower." Dr. Brown

found that resources were limited in her experience as her district provided more support to

schools that were struggling most which did not include her school. She also felt that no one at

the district level were "rolling up their sleeves and helping us." Yet she was required to

implement all initiatives and directives with little to no support. She described how

district personnel, specialist, and immediate supervisors that would give directives and

had expectations for me but who didn't understand those expectations that they set on

me, if that makes any sense. I remember sitting in school board meetings, having data

presented of my school that I knew, inside and out on that student progress measure;

yet it was being reported to our school board incorrectly because they didn't

understand the definition of student progress, versus student achievement.

Dr. Brown believed if they couldn't understand the accountability expectations, it was difficult for administrators and school boards to provide the appropriate supports.

Knowledge and Expertise

Several principals mentioned how a lack of knowledge on their leadership teams contributed to a hinderance in their work daily. Specifically, Dr. Brown had a supervisor that had no experience at the high school level, therefore she could not provide the guidance and support Dr. Brown was needing. She referenced staff "that are incompetent, that have ulterior motives, that are political, that are playing games to better their own self, and not, you know there for kids." Dr. Brown felt this impeded her ability to do her work as her supervisor would merely "bark" orders at her with a "hammer." This created a huge "disconnect" between Dr. Brown and her supervisor and a bigger "disconnect" in understanding the dynamics of a high school to better support the work at hand. She reiterated in her first job as a high school principal,

> I basically had marching orders going into that campus that I was to not only clean house, but to raise those CCMR scores because they did not meet their CCMR. With that, all I was given was the keys to the school, and a supervisor who not only didn't understand CCMR, but had never been a principal of a high school.

Dr. Brown further questioned whether district personnel can support meeting accountability measures when they did not understand the measures themselves. She added

> When I moved to the middle school, the focus was on progress and student growth, which is a very difficult area to measure and having not only, no support to help move that campus forward. The people who should have been supporting that initiative did not know how to measure growth . . . growth progress for individual students. I still don't think they know what the difference is progress, versus student achievement.

Because of that we were kind of left out there floundering alone, navigating those

waters trying to not only navigate a new accountability system, but to find ways to

support it internally because externally, not only did they not know how to support it,

but they also didn't understand it.

Principal Rainey was running two campuses and again worked for a smaller school

district that lacked resources and personnel. Because she was the principal for two campuses, her

campuses began struggling with "discipline" and just regular operating procedures. She was

unable to be at both campuses full time to train her staff and provide the needed support.

Ultimately, Mrs. Rainey had to meet with her superintendent and demanded, "that he help me"

because both campuses were struggling, both campuses had new administrators in several areas,

and they were merely "stretched too thin." She described the situation as

It's a very unusual circumstance that I'm in right now. So, it's really hard. I'm trying to

balance two different campuses and two different faculties. As a matter of fact, I'm

working on my campus improvement plan, and I have two of them.

Not only is she having to help her campus succeed, but she is also having to do double the work

for two separate campuses.

Principal Lopez explained his frustration with district personnel not knowing how to do

their work effectively to support campuses. He asserted,

You got people at that in the administrative office, whether it's a registrar or somebody at

the district level, that may understand how to calculate different things because this is

what the formula says but they don't understand what this class is, where it is in a

sequence, how much funding it is, or where it belongs in in a particular area, whether it's

health science whether it's engineering. They don't understand.

This complicated his ability to ensure his high school students were receiving proper credit for courses which were tied to accountability.

Resources and Training Makes a Difference

While some experienced a lack of resources, others felt that what made the work easier to do was having sufficient resources to meet the challenges they faced. Dr. Barron described how she was able to thrive in a struggling district because she had all the resources she needed to excel at her disposal. She mentioned that she had a superintendent that listened to her needs and ensured resources were available for her and her school. Dr. Barron mentioned, "I would ask for extra funding for to bring in like a tutor to help and we hired a couple of extra people to come on to help our bilingual students." Dr. Barron said because her district was a high performing district and a "rich" district, they did not lack for resources. Resources were plentiful and teachers were given the tools necessary for effective instruction.

Principal Espinosa also found that her district was very supportive of her work and provided her with what she needed to do the job effectively. She added "we had plenty of resources" not to mention, she was trained properly and had worked at a previous school that was high performing, so she felt she was ready to take on a struggling campus. Principal Espinosa also ensured that her assistant principals had the capacity to lighten her workload. Principal Espinosa explained, "my assistant principals have told me they've appreciated it, you know (sic-the job opportunity), but it's only because I want them to be able to learn and be able to hit the ground running once that door opens up." Principal Lopez found that in a small district, you usually find yourself "alone" to do what you need to do to be successful. While that might not always be a best practice, he did assert the best thing the superintendent was able to do for him was to, "allow me to make decisions and support me with the different things that we want

to do on campus." He found being able to make his own decisions based on what his campus needed was effective.

Theme 3: Improving instruction to meet accountability measures.

Figure 6

Principals find way to cope with the need to improve scores by focusing on instructional improvements. All principals agreed being data driven was important to create interventions to meet the needs of their student populations.

Instructional Improvements

All principals discussed how they continuously sought to change how they were operating their schools from year to year to meet the ever-changing standards of the accountability system. Areas they focused on were instruction, interventions for students, varied curriculums, and training for teachers.

Mr. Lopez described the changes he made yearly to ensure success for his school. He focused on instruction and instructional strategies to improve his scores, "so just utilizing instructional strategies that are out there that we know that that significantly impact, especially at-risk students to be able to achieve more to see things differently to see things better, to have things stand out." Dr. Barron explained how they think through what might be contributing to their score? Asking herself, "where do we need to change our instruction? Like, what is it? What is going on? Why are they so low?" In order to improve her scores Dr. Barron looked closely at how she could improve instructional practices. She stated,

We would model things, we would take walks where we would look at writing and we would talk about needs that the students had . We would look at stations and how stations worked in the classroom and how to set things up. We would model how to really teach a writing workshop lesson.

Dr. Barron also shifted her focus to reading and writing to improve her scores. She added,

We put an action plan into place and we did writing throughout the whole campus. It was a campus wide initiative. We did a writing contest; we had a writing showcase where we had parents and people come in to look at our writing. We showcased our writing. We did lots of different writing contests. We did writing incentives. We had expectations in your math class that students were writing in their math journals. We set goals and we worked really hard at it. We brought in extra resources and extra tutors to work on the pieces of the writing, . . . the grammar pieces, the composition pieces.

Dr. Brown emphasized how if seems that every year students are, "having to relearn all over again" to prepare a game plan for this year. Her work was basically driven by the accountability system, to know what area to focus in on. She kept focused on what the accountability measures were. While principal at the middle school level, she understood, "students making progress" in their scores for reading and math would be where her focus needed to be since it accounted for most her scores. One principal at the high school level, she shifted her focus to CCMR, which measured a student's scores by ensuring they were college, career, and military ready. She understood she could gain "accountability scores" by "focusing on CCMR" so she made sure to keep those measures at the forefront of her planning for her students.

Finally, Principal Espinosa described the background work she must do to ensure she understands what the data is telling them regarding scores. "I try to interpret all that massive

information and I sift through it. I work with my administrators, and we try to make it as simple as possible for teachers." She added that ensuring students have a prescribed intervention has allowed her to ensure her students have better outcomes, when she said, "every student has their own student individualized plan for every single subject that they do in tested subjects." Principal Espinosa created an alternative Friday school schedule where they extended the school day to provide intense interventions for her struggling students. She explained, "we call it *The Friday Night Lights* tutorial program . . . and so it was strategically placed where we would revamp the Friday schedule." She added

> We had about 480 kids stay for tutorials until five o'clock. Now we still ran tutorials, and we did academic rotations amongst the day; we did all of that but that tutorial program is how we how we ran it. The grouping was very intentional. So, it was all databased kids were placed in certain classes and the teachers worked together as departments to place elective teachers with a group of kids that they could handle because they don't know the content.

Providing such intervention allowed her kids to grow academically. She found this academic initiative to be successful and her students were having better outcomes.

Data Driven

Several principals described the emphasis on data that each of their district had. Principal Hewett shared how she must meet with her superintendent after every assessment to discuss the data from assessments. She stated, "it is a conversation between principal and superintendent, we are still talking about data and we're still talking about the fact that we need to improve our scores and close the gap." Utilizing the data to drive instruction is important for Principal Hewitt. She explained the process of meeting with the superintendent, kept her on their toes. "We made

sure that we had plans, we made sure that we were educating kids, we're providing professional development with whatever areas that we were struggling with, so it was a consistent constant basis of everything was the test."

Principal Rainey mentioned that what is important to her is knowing what her campus needs are and providing support for better instructional practices to close the gaps. She said, "So we're trying to implement more. I've had discussions with my staff, and I want them to be using more manipulatives, I want more hands on, you know, get away from those Chromebooks, you know, we need to be teaching more." Principal Rainey worried her kids wouldn't perform well on assessments this year, so she is taking a deeper look at her classroom teachers with outside consultants. She stated,

> I need to get them to come look at my teachers. I need them to look at the art teachers . . . just see what running a classroom looks like. I have a sixth-grade teacher and, this is her second year, and she wants to use nothing but the Chromebooks and I'm like, I've had meetings with her. I've actually consulted with the Education Service Center. I'm part of, it's called the Texas lessons study and they're working with my ELA department. She comes every Thursday. She's here. She worked with them.

Principal Rainey believed that providing extra supports for teachers would allow them to improve their practices. She understood with Covid implications and the lengthening of academic gaps ensuring teachers had ample support will allow them to address the needs of students.

Shared Leadership

Several principals spoke about building capacity in themselves, their administrative teams, and their teachers to better support one another during challenging times. Principal Hewitt

affirmed that building capacity is extremely important in this job. Principal Hewitt explained that

"if you do not have a good support system as a principal," it can make the work more

challenging. She referenced how having a strong superintendent that understood the challenges

she was facing was important. Principal Hewitt added "I do have to say that my superintendent,

when I became a principal, really helped me through the process and sent me to numerous

trainings." Principal Hewitt mentioned that what has helped her do well as a principal is building

her team. She explained "I love to coach people up." She understood that the more she could

develop her team the more capacity she would have to help her to do the work. What is

important to her is to build "her own." Principal Hewitt believed, "the more you invest in a

person you're going to get a lot more out of them, so I've always worked on trying to keep my

staff." Principal Hewitt understood the importance of ensuring stability and consistency in her

staff.

Principal Espinosa asserted that including her team in all her decisions is what has been

effective for her. She regularly meets with her administrative team and her departments so that

she has "everybody's input." Collaboration was very important to her so together, they "voted on

a plan" to improve their practices and eventually improve scores. Principal Espinosa was very

open about her expectations and met regularly with her administrative team to coach them, build

capacity, but also ensure they were included in the planning phases of any instructional initiative,

so they fully understood the expectations.

Principal Lopez agreed with ensuring all stakeholders have input on what happens on a

school campus. Principal Lopez asserted, "I think that the biggest thing is just communication."

He mentioned he did his best to "incorporate as many people as possible" to help push his

campus forward. Principal Lopez described how his training was helped him build capacity in

his leaders. He mentioned "involving people in different areas or at least trainings in different areas where they may not be experienced or have exposure to" was important to build capacity in others. He also found that his district supported his work and allowed him to work with others throughout the district. Principal Lopez stated "as a district we are trying to collaborate and what they did with me as a high school principal, I think it was pretty good. They had me give trainings to other staff and they found different ways for us to be exposed to other staff members in the district." He believed by doing so it not only allowed him to grow professionally but also allowed him to have a greater impact on the district.

Theme 4: Impact accountability has on principals' professional and personal lives.

Figure 7

Principals describe the toll stress has on their personal and professional lives. Stress contributed to health issues, but also contributed to a loss of confidence for some when the challenges were too great to overcome.

Personal/Professional Impact → Health issues → Loss of Confidence
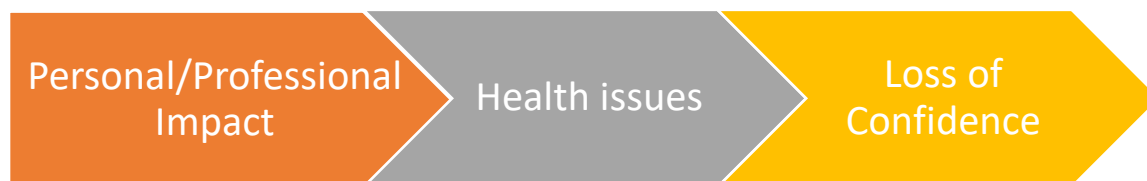
Health Issues

All principals faced negative impacts due to the challenges of meeting the expectations of their work. Dr. Brown unfortunately described how her health has been impacted by the stress of her work. Dr. Brown stated, "I found myself drinking more than I ever had." She asserted that if my schools had a decline in scores she believed "her job would have been on the line." She feared she would be one of those that lost their jobs due to accountability scores as she saw many principals lose their jobs during her time as principal. She explained, "We saw people losing

their jobs or being demoted because of their accountability and performance." These fears only added to her stress. Not to mention the "weight gain" she experienced and also the need she now has for "medication" due to the migraines she experienced. Unfortunately, the toll was too great on her health, so she decided to leave public education for the private sector. The "80-90-hour work weeks" were just too much to continue on this journey for her.

Dr. Barron also describe health issues she experienced working at the various school districts. Dr. Barron stated, "Saturdays were my time to disconnect." However, Sundays were the days that the anxiety would set in, and she would have "anxiety attacks just thinking of going back to work on Monday." Dr. Barron never fully assimilated into her new environment when she switched jobs. At one point in her career, she was at a low performing school, and she added that the "teachers valued her leadership and that she was a teaching principal," but ever since leaving for a high performing campus, she just felt devalued and her work changed in a way that made her feel hopeless. That hopelessness led to a loss of confidence that she has yet to recover from.

Loss of Confidence

Dr. Barron described the "hopelessness" she had felt in her principal role. Having worked at two different districts and experiencing two very different types of stress from working in a low performing district to a high performing district has made her have a lack of "confidence" in her role as a principal. She mentioned she has had "some things knock her down" and it has taken a lot of time and effort to recover. She added, "I'm just flat tired. I'm a different person." She wondered if she really has the "ability" and the "talent" to lead her schools effectively. Dr. Barron had also considered leaving the profession but mentions she is close to "retirement" and

will probably retire as soon as she can as she can no longer deal with the "anxiety" that comes with the work.

Principal Lopez resigned from his position several years ago due to the challenges of the principalship and accountability. He calls accountability, "the beast" that is just never going to go away. He believed the "politics" of education are not "in the best interest of kids" and he could no longer be a part of it. Because Principal Lopez lead high schools in small districts, district personnel played a huge role on what happens on a school campus, and he believed that was detrimental as well. For example, he found his district to be "fragmented" and unable to put "the pieces together" to assist campuses. He added that school district leadership has a "direct impact, and a direct relation to what people on the front lines" are doing. Districts must keep in mind their decisions have a direct impact on "student achievement." Unfortunately, this was not his experience as a principal and ultimately, he decided to walk away from public education to work in the private sector despite having had successful campuses.

Theme 5: Coping

Figure 8

Principals explained how they all dealt with the stress that came with the work as a principal. Many shared their perspective of staying focused on improving themselves and improving student outcomes despite the stress. All principals were able to overcome the challenges of the work and accountability by having success. Their resiliency and commitment grew stronger with every challenge, and all found ways to cope with the stress.

Coping → Resiliency → Strategies

Resiliency

Despite the challenges the accountability system placed on principals, each principal found ways to push forward. All were successful in their schools and all principals affirmed their commitment to their work despite all challenges. Dr. Barron found ways to deal with her "anxiety" because ultimately, she stated that "she is there for kids" and knows she was hired to do a job and it's a "big job," so she shows up every day and finds ways to support her staff and students.

Principal Hewitt said she channels her "growth mindset" to ensure her campus excels. She states, "I love to coach people." Her district has changed how they approach accountability by changing their philosophy. They now focus on individual students, interventions for students, and instructional practices because her district shifted its mantra to "every child is more than a score." That district shift in philosophy and has really changed how they do things and relieved some of the stress the principals and teachers faced daily. Principal Hewitt added, "I love what I do," so she challenges herself to a constantly "learn" new ways of improving herself and her schools.

Principal Espinosa finds joy in her work by investing in people and students. While she understands she has a job to do, she finds joy in "spending time with kids" and focusing on their extracurricular activities. Building relationships is key to her work, so she invests time in doing so by constantly meeting with various groups. Principal Espinosa is very intentional about "creating plans" for her students and staff with their "buy-in" to ensure systems and procedures are put in place to address the needs of her campus. She mentioned while the work is challenging, she is "still a kid at heart" and finds strength in her organization to prosper from.

Dr. Brown mentioned that you just have to find the strength to move forward. She stated, "you just paint it on and move forward. Only the strong survive in that role because you have to be able to take that beating and still put on a smile and strut out the door because you're at the center of attention everybody's looking at you."

Principal Rainey emphasized that she has never been one in it "for the money." It's always been the passion she has for "making a difference in student's lives." Her love and passion for what she does is what has allowed her to excel in her role as a principal. She stated that "she is not ready to give up" and finds her job to be one of the most "rewarding jobs" she has ever had. Principal Rainey believed "every day is a new day" so, "take one day at a time" and never take things personally. She continued to invest in building relationships with her staff, celebrating their accomplishments, and influencing change on her campus by investing in people, because people matter." Principal Lopez affirmed "people matter" and that's what all principals should keep in mind when dealing with hardships.

Strategies

When asked what they do to cope with the daily stressors of their jobs as principals, almost all participants shared that utilizing coping strategies is important in their line of work to ensure they can continue to meet the demands of the job.

Principal Rainey spoke frequently about her "purpose in life." She is passionate about the work she does, and she finds comfort in "prayer." She adds that her "religion" is what keeps her "faith" strong and with her faith she can endure the tough times she faces in her role as a principal. She strongly believes that "everything happens for a reason" and she is exactly where she should be doing what she loves most. She expressed that the "mentors" in her life have influenced the kind of administrator she is and that surrounding yourself with a great "staff" is

important. She also added that "journaling" allows her to "reflect" on her experiences and allows her to have an outlet to express herself.

Dr. Brown reflected on her journey as a principal and states "surrounding herself" with colleagues that are in the same position has allowed her to grow and find support. One way she mentions she coped was by "inserting myself with students." She found comfort in being surrounding herself with her kids so she "did a lot of student activities, just being engaged with them, their night activities and whatnot, which of course was a part of my job, but being more around the students I think was a big coping mechanism." She also found solace with her family. She spent time with her family to keep balance in her life; however, ultimately, she chose *family* over her work and resigned from her position when she could no longer cope.

Principal Espinosa suggested that one way she copes with being a principal is by ensuring she leads "a healthy lifestyle." She said by being healthy she can take on the challenges of the work. She also found strength in "sharpening her skills" by reading motivational books. She also reflected on the "people who have given her feedback," and have "trained" her previously to ensure she was prepared for the job. She too believed that "faith" plays a big role in her ability to do her job. She also attributed her success to the many "mentors" and "role models" that help shape the leader she is today.

Principal Lopez agreed that there have been "many positive influences, mentors, and leaders" in his life that "guided and taught him what it takes to achieve success." He referred to his philosophy that "people matter" and he is grateful for the people in his life that helped shape his success. He further added that working together with all stakeholders is important. He mentioned,

I believe the coping strategy that I used I tried to incorporate as many staff members as many students as many people that I could in order to help resolve the issues that were going on. I work with family members. You know, many times it wasn't parents it was grandparents who are raising kids or an aunt or an uncle or friend of the family, bring them in and try to educate them as best as I could on what we were trying to do, how, and why we were trying to do these particular things.

Principal Lopez found that having everyone's input was effective in ensuring better outcomes for his students.

Dr. Barron also mentioned that keeping a healthy lifestyle is important. She "exercises" daily and tries to eat well to be able to keep up with her work. She invested in "relationships" to help ease her workload and make the work more manageable. She stated she ensures she "disconnects" nights and weekends to deter burnout. She shuts her "mind" and is present with her family to relieve stress. She also likes to read and write as a means of "escaping" so she can enjoy herself outside of work.

Principal Hewett shared that ensuring "you have a good support system" is important in this line of work. Her husband is very hands on and helps her care for the children so she can focus on work. She also believed "building capacity" in your staff is important to assist her with dealing with the work at hand. Principal Hewitt believed in "growing your own" so that everyone can contribute to the success of the school. Principal Hewitt further added "prioritizing" and staying "focused" on the task at hand can help keep you be organized to tackle all the tasks at hand. She found the work can be overwhelming, but she admitted she is "driven", and it is because of her drive to be great that she excels at her work.

Summary

This chapter provided the findings of this qualitative study. It explored the perceptions of campus principals regarding their strategies to navigate and mitigate the challenges of their roles in the context of high stakes accountability pressures. Chapter IV also included a short synopsis of each participant's background and administrative experience. Themes were identified among all participants and results were presented revealing not only the multiple challenges of the work, but also how these principals sought to cope and remain resilient in the work.

Chapter V provides a summary of this qualitative study, discussing findings relative to the extant literature, and making recommendations for further research based on emergent findings from the participant data.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore ways that school administrators cope with the various challenges of being a campus principal. More so, this study sought to share the perceptions of those principals in an effort to rise above the fray of negative conversations around accountability and glean real behind the scenes insight into how school administrators lead campuses. As the lead researcher and former high school principal in an urban Coastal Bend high school, I know it is possible when campus principals do have the necessary support from upper administration and superintendents to focus on building their own capacity and coping skills.

The study included principals who have experienced success while leading schools during this accountability era, as well as principals who may have left the profession of leadership due to accountability constraints. The study sought to address several overarching research questions which focus particularly on the various challenges that cause work related stress for administrators in their work as well as their coping strategies utilized to reduce the stress.

Research Questions

The questions framing this study addressed the various views and perceptions of principals during a high-stake testing accountability era, specifically through the lens of participants who are or have been affected by accountability. This study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding how they mitigate the challenges of accountability?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding approaches to navigating the increased workload often attributed to accountability demands?

RQ3: What strategies do school administrators utilize to cope with stress in their roles as campus principals?

Review of the Methodology

This qualitative study examined the experiences and of six principals leading in public schools. The researcher was interested in gaining insights into how principals navigate accountability demands, how federal and state accountability affects their daily work, and how these principals manage the stress and workload, as well as what insights these principals offered future leaders. All participants have at least two to three years leading in the public school system, and all have lead campuses with a TEA accountability rating of B.

Each principal or former principal were interviewed utilizing a semi-structured interview process. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants for this study. This sampling was utilized due to the "information rich" details that could emerge (Patton, 2015). By utilizing purposeful sampling, the researcher was able to keep the focus on the purpose of the study. The researcher was purposeful in selecting participants with a large range of experience at varied school levels to allow for ample information and details for the study.

All participants were interviewed via Zoom. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed via excel. One transcribed, data was reviewed and coded twice during analysis. Categories and themes emerged from the data analysis process. Findings were discussed in Chapter IV.

Interpretation of the Findings

Major findings are discussed and summarized as they pertain to the research questions. The research questions centered around the challenges of accountability, how it affected their work and what principals do to cope with the stresses of the work. The findings did conclude what the literature in Chapter II indicated that knowing how to cope with stress is essential. Despite the focus on high stakes testing and accountability, all principals found ways to be successful by utilizing various coping mechanisms to ensure they could be effective leaders.

Impact of Accountability

Regarding the first research question around the perceptions of school administrators and how they mitigate the challenges of accountability, several participants shared the impact accountability has had on their work. Almost all participants' felt stress had increased due to accountability and described how challenging accountability made their jobs.

As mentioned earlier in Chapter II, Diehl and Gordon (2016) asserted that most of the pressures principals face in their work is tied to accountability and high stakes testing. Several participants mentioned feeling a great deal of stress due to accountability. They understood that their job was to ensure students achievement was high. Some believed that their jobs were tied to scores and that if their schools did not perform well that they might face repercussions for that. Diehl and Gordon (2016) added that many principals believed if they could not meet the demands of accountability, their jobs might be in jeopardy. This led to an environment of high expectations. Principals, who were participants in this study, knew that their superintendents expected successful outcomes therefore, they understood it was important to address areas of need for their schools and make the necessary improvements to ensure there were closing the

achievements gaps. Some principal's felt this was taking away from enjoying their work and limited their ability to have fun doing the work.

Levin et al. (2019) affirmed that most the turnover rate was much higher for those principals who worked in high poverty areas. In addition, Levin et al. (2019) found that 31 percent of principals leave the profession because they are simply unable to deal with the pressures of accountability.

System Challenges

The accountability system presented several challenges for principals. One participant in this study, principal described accountability system as a "political game," that was overly tied accountability. Additionally, participants felt that people were not making decisions based on what was best for kids but making decisions to gain an upper edge in the scoring of points for accountability. Moreover, principals felt they were always dealing with a moving target as accountability measures and expectations changed yearly. In Chapter II, Acton (2021) emphasized that constant changes to educational reforms contributes to more issues for leaders as they struggle to meet the demands of these changes.

These changes included mastery levels for students, passing standards for schools and changes in skills taught or tested. Principal Lopez described it as a "moving target." He further added "the targets go up every year and you have to meet the mark" or fail to meet overall passing scores for the school. Dr. Brown stated, "you have plans you work on" but then the target changes and "you have to start all over again." Principal Hewitt mentioned how challenging the moving targets can be, so her school remain focused on "instruction and teaching practices" to prepare their students regardless of what the accountability system is measuring.

Furthermore, principals describe the challenge is greater when you work for a school that has a large portion of economically disadvantage students. In Chapter II, Mintrop and Sunderman (2009) affirmed that the accountability system tended to punish those who work in low socio-economic areas as most of these students tend to lag behind and have far more challenges. Therefore, when a particular population makes a group to be measured for accountability, then that group might have particular needs to address and so forth. This meant interventions initiatives and instructional practices needed to be monitored closely which impacted teachers in tested areas greatly. Principals understood this added stress on teachers needed to be managed by providing support and training.

Resources

Resources had a significant impact for principals. Several principals felt that they were merely given marching orders to get the job done. All they knew was that it is was an expectation to succeed and principals how to succeed. What wasn't considered was the mirage of expectations, deadlines, and mandates. As principals they faced many daily challenges that amplified their stress levels. Not only did they have to manage the day-to-day expectations but ensure they were meeting the needs of all their staff. One principal described her experience as being "stretched so thin." Finding the time to accomplish all tasks was difficult. In Chapter II, Lyons and Algozzine (2006) confirmed the role of the principal has changed significantly from being responsible for schedules, budgets and resources to being accountable for student outcomes and achievement.

Two participants shared how they have left the profession due to the pressures and stresses of meeting the state standards. While two participants are contemplating whether they will resume in their role or consider retiring should they be unable to alleviate the stress levels.

Two administrators shared that while the stress is high, they remain focused on the work and remain resilient. These findings indicated that principals must find ways to cope effectively with the stress to be able to manage the challenges of accountability. As stated in Chapter II, DeMatthews et al. (2021) insists that school administrators find ways to lessen the stresses placed on principals or principal turnover continue to increase. Diehl and Gordon (2016) mentioned stress can lead to underlying medical conditions both physically and medically. Le Fevre et al. (2003) concluded that occupational stress is increasing and causing problems for employees which is concerning. Cartwright & Boyes (2000) added this type of stress is causing loss of personnel which in turn may cause a decrease of productivity in organizations if not addressed.

Participants also described the importance of resources of meeting the challenges of their work. Three of the participants felt they did not have the resources they needed to do their work effectively. One participant described the challenges he faced working in small school district which meant resources were limited. This hindered his ability to ensure his staff and kids had the resources needed to be successful. Principal Lopez mentioned "being from a small school district, you just don't have the resources you need." Principal Rainey also faced the same challenges when it came to human capital. Principal Rainey was leading two schools in a small district at the middle and intermediate. In her school district because the schools are so small, she had to lead to separate campuses which put a strain on her as she was running two separate campuses sometimes, with two very different needs. She ultimately, had to insist on more assistance from her superintendent after realizing she could just not hand the workload or properly meet the needs of both campuses due to time constraints. She was finally given a second assistant to help ease the load. Another participant described that working for a

supervisor who lacked the knowledge and expertise to properly train her or coach her as a principal presented its challenges as well. She felt that her supervisor was not competent with high school, as she had never experienced being a principal at that level so she found that her supervisor could not effectively lead her to address challenges they face at the high school level. As referenced in Chapter II earlier, Day et al. (2008) described factors that increased pressure on principals as working conditions, staff shortages, lack of training and a lack of resources. All these factors will alleviate the amount of stress placed on principals therefore, finding ways to support principals is critically important to combat the stress and keep principals mentally and physically well (Beausaert et al., 2016).

Several participants mentioned that resources provided from their district allowed for a positive impact. Two participants found that their school districts provided them the proper training early on as assistant principals which prepared them to better handle the workload of being a principal, while a third participant described how her district always provided for any resources her teachers and students needed. She stated that her school district "was always purchasing" materials that she asked for to meet any initiative to strengthen her instructional environment.

As stated in Chapter II, Mitani (2018) emphasized the purpose behind the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was to require principals to revamp their curriculum and instructional practices to close the gaps for the students not performing well on state mandated exams. Mitani (2018) further concluded that instructional practices and increasing students time spent in classroom would need to be addressed to improve student achievement.

Instructional Improvements

Instructional improvements allowed principals to achieve academic success. All participants described the instructional improvements they made to meet the demands of accountability. Principal Lopez stated his teachers implemented a variety of "instructional strategies" to meet the needs of all students. He played particular attention to special population groups as he understood the challenges students face when they have special needs, and the state mandated test assesses all students on grade level. Chamberlain and Witmer (2017) affirmed that special education students suffer most from these state mandated assessments as the test format does not align to their individual needs. Principal Lopez understood the importance of addressing the needs of all his students to alleviate the pressure it adds to students. Conderman and Pedersen (2010) agreed providing a supportive environment that is inclusive and supportive is important for educators to be mindful of.

Several participants discussed they are providing training and coaching to teachers to support their work. All principals explained how being data driven was important. Participants felt that identifying gaps by disaggregating data would allow for a more intentional intervention plan to support students. Specifically, Principal Espinosa described how she extended her school day on Fridays to provide intentional tutoring with students that target their needs on an individual basis. She explained how she would disaggregate massive amounts of individual student data to help teacher address specific needs of students during the extended Friday interventions.

Two participants described how they turned their attention to reading and writing interventions. They incorporated varied activities in these areas to bring up the scores in reading and writing. They were also creative in doing so by incorporating fun activities such as reading

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contests and allowed students to highlight their work in celebration of their hard work. In

Chapter II, Friere (2000) encouraged the leaders to allow students to have the opportunity to be

creative and inquisitive so that the knowledge students were learning was more relevant and

accepting. Bybee (2020) confirmed that a high-stake testing environment can limit a teacher's

ability to meet the sociocultural needs of students, therefore it is important to principals to allow

teachers to think outside the box when delivering instruction.

One participant described bringing in outside reading consultants to work specifically

with her teachers in the area of reading. Her campus utilized their training to change their

teaching practices in the classroom to better support students. Principal Hewitt described how it

was about "growing" her teachers every day. However, she described a shift in philosophy to no

longer talk about a "test score" but to center her conversations around talking about instruction

and letting the data lead those conversations. All participants were finding success in

implementing interventions plans, changing their instructional practices and building a shared

vision of what they wanted their campus to accomplish. This included a shared leadership

approach. Participants describe how they assessed as a team their current practices to

intentionally address gaps. This reflective approach allowed participants the opportunity to grow

their team, but also allow teachers to be a part of the conversation and decision-making process.

As mentioned in Chapter II, Wright (2009) asserted reflective practices allows leaders to

be open, accountable, and vulnerable as they enter important conversations about how schools

might improve. Schön (1983) emphasized that critical reflection can allow individuals to think

beyond their training to better inform their practices which can lead to professional growth for all

involved.

Impact accountability has on principals' professional and personal lives

The impact of accountability affected all principals personally and professionally. All participants managed to have success turning around their schools, however the stress of the work did contribute to some emotional and physical implications. Two of the participants were high school principals who ultimately decided to change professions. Could it be that the work demands of a high school principal are far more challenging? Maamari and Majdalani (2017) explained a leader's ability to lead their teachers is dependent on their emotional state. Chen and Guo (2020) added that having to deal with all the demands of a principal's job can have an emotional toll on principals. Both participants have switched careers to the private sector despite their success as a principal. An elementary participant described her daily work as stressful. She mentioned the anxiety she feels weekly knowing when describing her emotional state. Not to mention she questions her ability to do the work and describes her emotional state as hopeless. The stress is just far too much for these participants that questioned their ability to do the work effectively. In Chapter II, Brewer and McMahan (2004) described occupational stress as a level where the demands of the work exceed the individual's ability to do the work. Darmody and Smyth (2016) further explained therefore it is important for employers to understand the connection between stress and job performance if they want to ensure the longevity of their workers.

Coping

Despite the stress that came with overcoming all the challenges principals faced, all participants found ways to cope with the stress. All participants exhibited resiliency. Their ability to contribute to a successful campus was admirable despite the conditions they worked under. The stress levels were high and yet each principal demonstrated how resilient they can be when

dealing with the pressures of accountability. Several participants described how they loved their work and working with students. Perhaps, it was an innate quality of wanting to do well and be their best but all of them always placed kids first and did what was best for kids and staff. As referenced in Chapter II, Turk and Wolfe (2019) reiterated that if principals are to be successful, they will need to know how to maintain resiliency to overcome adversity.

Several participants mentioned the role mentors and colleagues have had on their growth and training. They were able to cope with the stress from the challenges because they surrounded themselves with positive influences and people who were dealing with the same stresses. They built their own support systems and leaned on one another during the most difficult times. In Chapter II, Kaufman (2019) stated that principals deal with stress by engaging with those closest to them. Zimmerman (2011) explained creating supportive groups to help alleviate stress decreased feelings of being overwhelmed. Poirel and Yvon (2014) concluded creating social support networks by discussing with other principals was a most used coping strategies for principals.

Most participants described they coped with the demands of the work was by developing capacity in their team. Doing so would help lessen the workload principals faced. As referenced in Chapter II, most recent literature approaches such as distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and professional learning community approaches (Hord, 2009) mentioned that a focus on building networks and communities rather than viewing teachers as subordinates or followers, have supported recognition and enhanced emotional states. Maamari and Majdalani (2017) further added organizations must utilize a variety of methods to train employees by mentoring and coaching to increase a leader's effectiveness and efficacy to have a positive effect on the entire organization. By building capacity in their team, principals found that their teams felt

valued and supported in the work. Principals understood that this type of work required a team effort, and they could not do the work alone as the challenges were far too great. Wise and Jocobo (2010) explained that true change will occur when team are utilized, relationships are forged, dialogue is encouraged, and a culture of trust and support is built.

Other participants described self-care coping strategies they use to manage the stress. One participant described journaling as a means of reflection, while another participant described reading was her escape. Bond (2011) affirmed reflection can be very impactful as it allows them to reflect on how they handle, respond, and approach their decision making.

Several participants spoke about their faith in the work and how their religion provided for an improved state of wellbeing. Other described the importance of staying healthy by exercising and eating well. These participants believed that being physically well could contribute to being emotionally well. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, Day et al. (2008) stress can cause physical and psychological issues that will hinder a principal's ability to do their work effectively which can lead to negative effects on school environment, therefore finding ways to cope is key.

Contributions to the Literature

The results of this study contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the need for coping strategies to deal with the stress that accountability places on principals. All the research indicated that the accountability system places high levels of stress on principals. The research also indicated that the amount of stress faced by principals is leading to principal burnout and principal turnover. The research and the data from the study both indicated a need for principals to know how to manage stress. Much of the research and data describe the various techniques that can be used by principals to deal with the stress.

The research indicated that the principal is the most important component of an effective school. If schools are to be successful, it is imperative that the leader feels supported and is given the tools necessary to be successful. While resources are imperative in their success as the data has indicated as well, knowing how to cope with the various stresses of the work must be as important as resources. There is very little data describing how districts are implementing practices, professional development, and or emotional supports to help principals cope for longevity of their jobs.

The data further indicated that education institutions should find ways to support future principals by providing training and support for self-care. Moreso, the research indicated the need to learn more about Lazrus and Folkman's Psychological Stress and Coping Theory (1984) to identify how one "appraises" stress to better identify how to support principals during that cognitive process. If principals know how to cognitively process "stressors" beforehand, they can avoid reaching levels of stress that may cause negative reactions. This will be key especially post pandemic where the needs of students will be far greater due to larger academic gaps students will be facing. Because there is limited research on post pandemic effects on educators and learning outcomes, it will be important to continue to research the effects the pandemic had on all learners to better support teachers and principals as they are left with repercussions from moving quickly to remote learning.

As stated previously in the data, resources were a contributing factor to the success of a principal and a school, this may only be compounded by the move to remote learning where technology resources and training were scarce causing greater inequities for both students and teachers. High Stakes testing has already contributed to many negative effects on principals, now with a learning gap that has only increased since the pandemic, principals will need better

support, better resources, better training, and a variety of increased skills sets to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study explored the perceptions of campus principals regarding their strategies to navigate the challenges of their roles in the context of high stakes accountability pressures. The data presented indicated the need to better understand the stresses principals face and how the need for coping strategies is important to ensure principals longevity.

The research revealed that stress itself must be alleviated to ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of our principals as they are the most important part of the school environment. Chapter II included the theoretical framework of Lazurus and Folkman's Psychological Stress and Coping Theory (1984). This transactional theory proposes that the "intensity of a stress reaction is influenced by the mediating role of the appraisal, the cognitive process through which meaning is ascribed to events and stimuli (Biggs et al., 2017 p. 352). Further studies should include how an individual "appraises" the stress as the effectiveness of the coping strategy is tied to how the individual responds to once the appraisal process takes place. Knowing more about the "appraisal process" may allow for practitioners to provide better training and support for principals. Knowing what might influence the appraisal process such as attributes, skills, traits, etc. can inform districts and university or college preparatory programs to better prepare principals for the challenges they will face. Furthermore, this study can inform practices and assist preparatory programs and school districts at developing research-based coping techniques to equip principals as they move into principal leadership roles.

Secondly, no participant described any type of training and or support they received from their school districts to ensure the principals self-care or well-being. Several participants describe

how training and support fell short in the area of instructional training and resources but not a single participant described any type of initiative that provided any type of emotional or physical support for their wellbeing. In Chapter II, Maslach and Leiter (2016) asserted that district must afford principals the tools necessary to be successful by developing ways to address the stress and pressures that principals are facing. DeMatthews et al. (2021) recommended that school districts implement strategies to address the principal burnout by providing training for principals to embed self-care techniques to help alleviate on the job stress. Future research should center around how preparatory institutions and school districts can embed training and support systems for principals within their institutions to build upon principals' ability to manage the stress for future use.

Lastly, preparatory programs should embed an accountability system training within their principal preparatory programs that allows for real world experiences. Many of the participants felt that being fully knowledgeable about how the accountability system worked would have been more helpful. They also believed if they had been shown how those accountability measures were tied to instructional practices, they would have ben able to address how to meet the measures. It appeared they never fully understood how this looks in practice as an instructional leader on their campuses until they were forced to learn on their own once in positions.

Several participants mentioned much of their undergrad work did not directly prepare them for the challenges of being a principal facing accountability challenges. Much less understanding the challenges that low performing schools might have due to the varying demographic populations. Some stated they preferred more real-world experiences (practicums) within the program and schools. They described they would have benefitted from the opportunity

to see firsthand, what that leadership role looked like on a daily basis to witness the challenges of dealing with all the responsibilities that principals deal with daily. Principals believed this type of on-the-job embedded experiences might better prepare future principals for the challenges ahead. Sogunro (2012) asserted exposure to the realities of school leadership through internship phases of preparatory programs can help build capacity and competence in dealing with the stressors of principal's role.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the reality that stress continues to be an ongoing issue among principals. Research continues to identify the need for coping strategies to ensure all principals in order for them to be effective and successful. All research concluded that principals are the most important catalyst for change on campuses. In Chapter II, Woulfin and Weiner (2019) affirmed principals are the most important component of school improvement. Principals are the ones that possess the skills, traits, and knowledge to for effective leadership (Woulfin and Weiner, 2019).

This is why this study was so personal as I too have experienced the challenges of leading a school during a high stakes' environment. I chose this research study because I wanted to learn more this topic to better support my leaders. When I first started this study, I was a high school principal facing these challenges on the front line. Now I am in a new position supervising principals and this study is far more important to me as I want to ensure I am doing all I can to support my principals. Each and every participant spoke openly and honestly with me as the lead researcher. I could hear their frustrations and I could feel their pride for the work they do. Principal Espinosa said it best when she stated, "I got to pick this profession." All of them wanted to be successful and all of them loved the opportunity to change the lives of their students by doing right by kids. Just like teachers, no principal does this work for the money. As

the research supported, being a principal is the toughest job there is in education. However, being a principal is the most rewarding profession one could have the privilege and honor of holding. Principal Rainey affirmed "it's the most rewarding job I have every had and you have to have a passion for it." Principal Hewitt affirmed, "I love what I do. I am a lifelong learner, and I am goal oriented. You have to have that internal ambition to be great." This is why it is so important that districts and universities find ways to better assist principals with alleviating the stress and providing ways for them to cope. In Chapter 1, Perilla (2014) urged all preparatory programs to implement teaching that reinvents what a principal use to be to give principals the tools to meet the challenges of future generations. We can no longer allow for principals to leave the profession as we must be reminded that students need and deserve to have strong leadership in their schools. It is my calling and my hope that with this study, we can all find ways to ensure successful principals in all our schools for the sake of our students.

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VITA

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EDUCATION

Doctor of Education Student in Educational Leadership at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, August 2018 – present. Dissertation title: "Use of Coping Strategies to deal with the Effects of Accountability Pressures on Principals."

Master of Science (May 2005) in Educational Administration, Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas.

Bachelor of Science (May 2000) in Kinesiology with a Minor in Reading, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Executive Director for School Leadership, Corpus Christi Independent School District-July 2021-present.
Responsibilities include overseeing all middle school principals, building capacity for instructional leaders to ensure instructional improvements at all schools, ensuring safety of all staff and students, and building community relations.

Principal, Corpus Christi Independent School District, August 2006 – 2021.
Responsibilities include supervision and safety of campus staff and students, instructional leader, discipline, community relations, and managerial duties.

Assistant Principal, Corpus Christi Independent School District, August 2006 – 2012.
Responsibilities include supervision and safety of campus staff and students, instructional leader, discipline, community relations, and managerial duties.

Teacher/Coach, Corpus Christi Independent School District, August 2000-August 2006.
Responsibilities included instruction of content TEKS, lesson planning, community relations, supervision of students and coaching responsibilities.

ACADEMIC AWARDS

Texas Association of Secondary School Principals Regional 2 High School Principal of the Year (2020)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Texas Association of Secondary School Principals

Corpus Christi Principals' and Supervisors' Association