A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON REDUCING HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL BURNOUT

BY

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SIGNATURE PAGE

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ABSTRACT

The varying demands of the principalship create stress and burnout, which can lead principals to quit their jobs. Until researchers understand the specific factors contributing to principal burnout, school districts, supervisors, and principal preparation programs will be unable to support and retain principals effectively. High school principals are licensed administrators responsible for school improvement, instructional leadership, safety, student discipline, and numerous other key areas. Considering the high demand and high-pressure nature of the principalship, this study is important because various factors including the role of teachers, personal issues, working conditions, and others can contribute to the increasing rates of principal burnout. This descriptive qualitative study explored the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. Specifically, this study focused on the factors influencing principals' decisions to leave or remain in their position. The primary research question was "What causes burnout in high school principals?" To identify principal perceptions of burnout, I employed a qualitative descriptive approach to collect and analyze data through semi-structured interviews with 16 principals. A thematic analysis was conducted to interpret key trends in the data set. Key findings included that burnout can be caused by various factors within the principalship including daily scheduling demands, workload, complexity and intensity of job demands, and lack of work-life balance. Further, principals experienced strain from indirect exposure to trauma. Simultaneously, principals rely upon a "do-the-work" approach, their skills, abilities, and attributes to effectively do their jobs. Those who lead and educate principals should implement strategies that support work-life balance, supervisor feedback and support, and trauma-informed practices that can assist principals in their work with students impacted by trauma. Researchers should explore those who serve principals, such as

superintendents and principal preparation programs. These stakeholders should focus on developing strategies to alleviate the job demands of high school principals. One way to do this is to emphasize supporting the individual needs of principals in their specific contexts. Researchers should also explore the specific job demands and exacerbating scenarios that have the greatest potential of increasing strain and burnout.

DEDICATION

First, I would like to dedicate this work to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He alone is my true source of strength and hope.

Second, I am forever indebted to my dad and late mom, Leo and Claudia Doyle. Your sacrifices and support set me on an educational journey that continues to this day. This work is also dedicated to my mom, who always encouraged me to persevere through school in her numerous letters during my undergraduate studies.

Third, to my son and daughter, Ryan and Moriah, and my grandchildren, London, Camaya, Arwen, and Atticus. Remember, you are here on this earth for a reason. Keep learning and growing. I love you.

Finally, to all my friends and family members who stood behind me during this long journey. Your support and encouragement mean the world to me. Thank you!

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Rusty Berkus (poet, composer, lyricist) once said, “There comes that mysterious meeting in life when someone acknowledges who we are and what we can be, igniting the circuits of our potential.” In this way, countless people cross our paths and encourage us throughout life. A study of this magnitude would never have come to fruition without the encouragement and support of numerous individuals. The following people contributed in their own way to helping me fulfill my goal of writing this dissertation. As with any endeavor, it is impossible to acknowledge everyone who played a role in helping me along this journey. Therefore, to those I have forgotten or omitted, please forgive me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Principals in the 21st century experience unprecedented demands and highly nuanced work settings (Diotaiuti et al., 2020; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2021). Local, state, and federal mandates have heightened school leaders' responsibilities (Leventis et al., 2017) including commitments to engaging with various stakeholders, which intensify principal stress (Marsh et al., 2023; Sebastian et al., 2018). Primary sources of stress communicated by principals include increased job demands and time constraints that hinder their focus on teaching and learning (See et al., 2023). Although researchers have focused more on teacher stress, school leaders report even higher levels of stress (Sebastian et al., 2024). Accordingly, principal burnout is a widespread issue in the educational system resulting from chronic stress, responsibilities inherent to the position, and limited autonomy (Beausaert et al., 2016; Tikkanen et al., 2017). In this study, when I referred to principals or school leaders, I specifically meant high school principals. This chapter addressed the study's background, identified the research problem, purpose, methodology, research design overview, research questions, limitations, delimitations, and definitions of key terms.

Study Background/Foundation

Okoroma and Robert-Okah (2007) noted that schools are responsible for fostering an environment conducive to teaching and learning. Principals are key players in sustainable school improvement in underperforming schools and improving student achievement (Shava & Heystek, 2019; Williams & Welsh, 2017). Thus, principal leadership is crucial for improving school outcomes (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Su-Keene et al., 2024) and is a primary factor in the leadership required for school improvement (Wiyono et al., 2023).

High School principals are leaders of complex organizations who work extended hours in pressure-filled environments (Wang, 2022). Marsh et al. (2023) highlighted that principals face increased accountability from multiple stakeholders and expectations to improve the health and well-being of learning communities. In the early part of the 21st century, yearly testing requirements from federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top heightened the emphasis on school accountability (Johnson et al., 2023). Consequently, principals are expected to pay more attention to teaching and learning, thus becoming instructional leaders (Mitani, 2019). The National Association of Secondary School Principals views principals as leaders of instruction who are accountable for fostering a school climate that supports student achievement and well-being (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2025). According to DeMatthews et al. (2021) and Rintoul and Bishop (2019), principals are expected to demonstrate exceptional pedagogy that fosters a safe learning environment for all students while engaging with the learning community. Additionally, researchers such as Grissom et al. (2021a) have pointed out that effective principals (a) make instruction a central focus, (b) foster an environment of professional learning and teamwork, (c) cultivate a positive school climate, and (d) maximize resource efficiency.

Although job stress research in the educational field is well established, most researchers focus on teacher rather than principal stress and burnout (Diotaiuti et al., 2020). Nevertheless, Ionică et al. (2019) and Mahfouz and Gordon (2021) emphasized that burnout rates are high in education, specifically among principals. The demands and resources that contribute to principals' well-being are underrepresented in peer-reviewed publications on education, leadership, organizational, and occupational health (Marsh et al., 2023). However, secondary principals are called to lead in highly complex, stressful, and demanding environments (De Jong

et al., 2017; Luongo, 2021). While shouldering much of the responsibility for solving problems (Güneş, 2022), school leaders face a multitude of challenges including school safety, supervising staff and students, addressing student discipline issues, and complying with statutory requirements (Perry et al., 2024; Silbaugh et al., 2023). Consequently, the current crisis of the principalship centers on a more demanding workload with diminished opportunities to fulfill their responsibilities as instructional leaders (Eacott, 2018).

Current State of the Field in which the Problem Exists

The age of accountability has elevated the role of high school principals, who are expected to continuously adapt to their environments while simultaneously leading the charge toward school improvement and developing inclusive schools that meet the needs of various stakeholders (Bauer et al., 2019; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Educational administration has undergone significant changes over the past few decades (Eacott, 2015), evolving from its inception in the early 19th century as head teachers to pedagogical leaders in the 21st century (Sage reference, 2008). The emphasis on school outcomes in the era of accountability has placed principals in charge of leading efforts to improve teaching and learning, thereby making them instructional leaders (Shaked & Schechter, 2019). For example, federal laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, becoming the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, have fundamentally altered educational oversight, especially for schools in need of improving academic achievement (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Williams & Welsh, 2017). Therefore, school improvement, especially in low-performing schools, hinges on the effectiveness of principal leadership (Shaked & Schechter, 2018).

According to Kafka (2009) and Thornton et al. (2019), added pressures on principals include labeling schools as underperforming and failing to meet test score targets stemming from federal initiatives, as well as institutionalizing test scores to evaluate student and teacher success. Childs and Russell (2017) noted that schools may receive a failing status under state and federal benchmark guidelines if they miss test-score targets in consecutive years, whether for a subgroup of students or the total population. Moreover, Johnson et al. (2023) and Ylimaki et al. (2022) noted that failing test scores that do not meet turnaround expectations necessitate replacing up to 50% of the instructional staff and hiring new principals, which, in turn, affects teacher attrition and school leadership.

Meeting role expectations affects principal stress and burnout. Although researchers generally accept that stress influences organizational and individual well-being in various direct and indirect ways, they have also found similar connections to occupational stress among principals (Denecker, 2019). Principals report increasing job demands, burnout, and turnover as they manage their responsibilities as leaders of important societal organizations (Marsh et al., 2023). Compared to other human services personnel, principals may experience even higher burnout rates due to external pressures to improve student learning outcomes (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021).

Historical Background

Across the expansive landscape of public education, the current principalship context is relatively new (Kafka, 2009) and has continued to develop over the past 150 years (Rousmaniere, 2009). Demands placed on principals have continuously evolved since the one-room schoolhouse era (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). The growth of cities, schools, and age-specific classes in the 19th century led to the emergence of the principal-teacher

role (Kafka, 2009; Kaufman, 2019). Similarly, as children gained access to free public education in the mid-1800s, the need to oversee various school staff led to the development of the principal-teacher (Lattuca, 2012).

The historiography of the principalship is limited in American history (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2009). Whitehead et al. (2017) used specific periods to illustrate how the position evolved and adapted, thereby enhancing understanding of the progression of the principalship. Beginning with the formative years of the 18th and early 19th centuries, Whitehead et al. (2017) suggested the principalship evolved over the next hundred-plus years, depending on the context of the times and changing principal duties. Moreover, a multitude of social pressures during different historical phases realigned perceptions of the principalship, fluctuating between principals being viewed as spiritual and social leaders in the early 20th century to instructional and multicultural leaders, safe school custodians, and leaders of school transformation in the 21st century (Whitehead et al., 2017).

Researchers such as Kafka (2009) argued that by the second and third decades of the 20th century, the principalship had evolved into its current form, with principals assuming instructional, civic, administrative, and supervisory responsibilities. In line with claims from more recent researchers such as Marsh et al. (2023) and Su-Keene et al. (2024), Kafka (2009) pointed out that principals of the 20th century were just as important to school-based outcomes and community engagement as they are in the 21st century. The role of high school principals has evolved significantly from the educational reform movements of the early 20th century (Cox, 1927) to the imposition of taxes for guaranteeing free public secondary education (Koos, 1927). Likewise, since extracurricular programs were added to school programs (Millard, 1930), the

principalship has undergone substantial changes, with increased pressure to fulfill job demands and adhere to school and administrative guidelines (De Jong et al., 2017).

De Jong et al. (2017) and Luongo (2021) emphasized that the high school principalship is complicated, demanding, and stressful. School leaders are primarily responsible for school improvement efforts (Güneş, 2022), as well as for solving problems, supervising staff and students, ensuring school well-being, student discipline, and compliance with statutory requirements (Perry et al., 2024; Silbaugh et al., 2023). The evolving nature of the principalship can influence principals' stress and burnout. Principals are often at the forefront of social and educational change (Wang, 2022). The dynamic landscape of education, combined with pressures from increased accountability and supervision, as well as calls for instructional and culturally responsive leadership, has contributed to increased job stress, principal turnover, and declining work engagement (Diotaiuti et al., 2020). Considering their reports of long hours, bureaucratic processes, increased stress levels, and heavy workload, principal burnout is no surprise (Sebastian et al., 2024; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022).

Kumar et al. (2022) highlighted the value of conceptual frameworks for coherently connecting all facets of a study. A conceptual framework describes a visual or descriptive narrative that outlines the primary areas of an investigation including key factors, variables, phenomena, concepts, and participants, as well as the assumed connections between them (Miles et al., 2020). Thus, the literature review in chapter two of this study is divided into three major sections, one for each of the major constructs mentioned in my purpose statement: (a) stress, (b) burnout, and (c) high school principals.

In the stress section, I presented well-known theories used to conceptualize stress. I then provided current research on stress. I take the same approach for the burnout section. This

approach presented past theories and current research as background for the reader. Finally, I discussed the stress and burnout that high school principals experience. Ultimately, I intended to adopt the primary constructs of the following models as the conceptual framework for my study: conservation of resources, job demands-resources, and secondary traumatic stress.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Interestingly, principals report higher levels of stress than the thoroughly documented heightened stress levels communicated by teachers (Sebastian et al., 2024), with principal burnout being a prevalent issue in the educational system due to prolonged stress, heightened role demands, and limited autonomy (Beausaert et al., 2016; Tikkanen et al., 2017). Researchers agree that principal stress and burnout is a phenomenon in need of further exploration because of (1) the crucial role principals play in cultivating sustainable education, (2) their impact on stakeholders, and (3) principals being generally disregarded in leadership training programs, academic research, and district policies (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Dicke et al, 2022). Scholars do not fully understand how emotional exhaustion, the main component of burnout, impacts principal burnout (Dicke et al., 2022). Consequently, scholars are calling for further research to better understand the breadth of principal burnout, given the unique contextual and occupational demands of this role (Sibisanu et al., 2024).

Even though educators are generally considered at risk for burnout, research has often focused on teacher burnout rather than principal burnout (Ionică et al., 2019). The demands and responsibilities of the principalship have been increasing since before the turn of the century (Whitaker, 1996). Pressure from increased accountability and supervision, as well as demands for instructional and culturally responsive leadership, has increased stress and decreased job satisfaction. As the roles and responsibilities of school principals evolve, more attention is

being directed to how principals influence school improvement, given their significant impact on school achievement and the community (Friedman, 2002). Principals must also know and work with multiple stakeholders (Mahfouz, 2020). Hence, the proposed exploratory study will potentially affect numerous stakeholders including principals, students, school staff, district personnel, principal preparation programs, policymakers, and communities, by exploring factors contributing to burnout among high school principals.

In this study, I explored factors contributing to burnout among high school principals and proposed strategies to reduce its effects (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Thus, school districts, policymakers, and principal preparation programs can tailor their professional development to the individual needs of principals, as wholesale interventions may not be the most effective approach to improving individual and organizational outcomes (Dicke et al., 2022). For example, in their mixed-methods study on novice principal burnout, DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that principals reported not having any training in coping strategies. In essence, principals were left alone to cope with the demands and stressors of the job or with colleagues. Knowing this can help school districts plan and provide professional development opportunities for principals of all experience levels. Finally, this study highlighted the importance of adopting a collaborative approach to designing interventions for principals, as joint efforts between the research and learning communities can influence educational policies and practices in ways that underscore the work principals undertake in their specific leadership contexts (See et al., 2023).

Key Theories / Models / Frameworks

As noted above, I adopted the primary constructs of the conservation of resources, job demands-resources, and secondary traumatic stress models as the conceptual framework of this study. The conversation of resources model was created by Hobfoll (1988) to explain the link

between strains and stressors and the role of social support systems as potential stress mediators (Dean & Lin, 1977; Xu et al., 2024). As noted by Snyder et al. (2020) and Xu et al. (2024), the conservation of resources model provides a framework for understanding how individuals acquire, conserve, and maintain resources and how they respond to workplace stress. Within the conservation of resources framework, Xu et al. (2024) noted that individuals respond to stressful situations by conserving existing resources or by leveraging resources they already possess, thereby offsetting incurred losses. Consequently, stress occurs when individuals feel threatened by the loss of important resources or by the struggle to minimize resource loss and enhance the resources they retain and acquire (Akirmak & Ayla, 2021). In short, this model posits that humans are naturally driven to conserve existing resources and acquire new ones (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 1990). Since the conservation of resources model asserts that job demands deplete employee resources and that the value of resource acquisition is high (Hobfoll et al., 2012; Kim & Beehr, 2020), this model can help explain how principals preserve and acquire resources within the context of the principalship.

Second, this study adopted the job demands-resources model. This model was developed by Demerouti et al. in the new millennium (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), becoming a pioneering framework for understanding how job aspects contribute to workers' well-being and for identifying potential antecedents of burnout (Claes et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2019). According to Demerouti and Bakker (2023) and Drüge et al. (2021), the job demands-resources model posits that health impairment and motivational processes are two causal yet independent processes. Claes et al. (2023) noted that energy depletion, or the health-impairment process, occurs when job demands, such as job aspects that require constant effort, gradually drain employee resources, leading to poor employee health, occupational stress, and burnout. The

motivational process involves the relationship between acquiring and protecting resources, and fostering employee well-being and engagement. In this study, this model can help illustrate how different aspects of the principalship affect principals' well-being and job satisfaction.

Another theory adopted for use in this study is secondary traumatic stress. Secondary traumatic stress, also referred to as vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or empathetic stress, was first used and defined by Figley (1995) as stress that results from helping or a willingness to help individuals who are suffering or exposed to trauma (Wall, 2024). Berger and Nott (2024) noted that the literature defines secondary traumatic stress as an acute stress reaction that results from contact with different aspects of another person's trauma, which can appear in the form of anxiety, sleep problems, and disturbing images. According to Fleckman et al. (2022), a better understanding of the impact of secondary traumatic stress on educator functioning and well-being is needed due to a lack of training in coping with stressors related to working with students subjected to trauma. Because of the psycho-social effects of secondary traumatic stress and its potential contribution to a lack of professional engagement, diminished performance, employee turnover, and others (Bride et al., 2007; Lawson et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024), this theory offers the possibility of assisting with identifying factors that lead to burnout among high school principals.

Problem Statement

General Problem

The general problem is that the varying demands of the principalship create stress and burnout, leading principals to quit their jobs. Much attention is given to how principals affect school outcomes (Friedman, 2002) because school leaders are responsible for adhering to local, state, and federal directives (Leventis et al., 2017; Thornton et al., 2019). Principal stress can

increase due to numerous responsibilities and expectations of working with multiple stakeholders (Marsh et al., 2023; Sebastian et al., 2018). Chief stressors reported by principals that can lead to burnout include workload, limited time to focus on teaching and learning, and interactions with parents and district-level management (Karaevli, 2024; See et al., 2023).

Burnout affects educators in general; however, the literature has focused more on teacher burnout than principal burnout (Ionică et al., 2019). Although varying individual and organizational factors contribute to principal attrition, DeMatthews et al. (2021) noted that principal burnout has received less attention in the research. Indeed, the field of education can benefit from qualitative research that demonstrates how personal decisions and organizational factors contribute to attrition among educators, as school improvement efforts, school stability, and environments conducive to teaching and learning are influenced by principal turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2022). Therefore, future qualitative studies will contribute to the body of knowledge on burnout among high school principals and on how school districts, policymakers, principal preparation programs, and principals can collaborate to reduce or mitigate its effects.

Burnout is a pervasive work-related condition with considerable costs (Lavrenčič et al., 2014; Muir et al., 2023) and is a recognizable problem in education (Beausaert et al., 2016). Principal burnout is a significant issue affecting schools and requires further research and strategies to mitigate its effects (Dicke et al., 2022). Schools are important organizations, and principals play a vital role in organizational effectiveness and successful outcomes for schools and the community (Marsh et al., 2023; Panagopoulos et al., 2024). Likewise, Shava and Heystek (2019) and Wiyono et al. (2023) proposed that principal leadership is a significant factor in leading transformational turnaround and sustainable improvements required from

schools during the age of standardization and outcome-based accountability. Nevertheless, school system leaders worldwide report an increase in principal stress, burnout, and attrition (Horwood et al., 2021; McKay & Mills, 2023).

Moreover, burnout affects principals both physically and emotionally, and can negatively impact their ability to lead schools, influencing organizational commitment, school climate, and school effectiveness (Güneş, 2022). In the era of accountability, principals face increasing public scrutiny from various stakeholders (Marsh et al., 2023). Considering the high demand, high-pressure nature of the principalship, many factors contribute to principal burnout including, but not limited to, the role of teachers, personal issues, working conditions, societal dissatisfaction, student behavior, and parental problems (Karaevli, 2024).

Specific Problem

Consequently, the specific problem is that school districts, policymakers, principal preparation programs, and principals need to learn more about the factors contributing to principal burnout in order to implement preventive measures that reduce or minimize its effects. Until researchers understand the specific factors that contribute to principal burnout, those who serve principals will not be able to support and retain them effectively. Therefore, in this study, I explored the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. This study has the potential to impact stakeholders including students, teachers, district personnel, principals, community members, principal preparation programs, and policymakers. Professional organizations, such as the Association of Washington School Principals, will also benefit from this study because their mission is to support principals, assistant principals, and the principalship in providing equitable access to education for all students (Association of Washington School Principals, 2025a).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to explore the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. Specifically, I focused on principals with varying degrees of experience and the factors influencing their decision to leave or continue in the position.

Research Questions

Overall, this study aimed to explore "What are some of the causes of strain and burnout in high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state?" With this overall aim in mind, this study pursued the following specific research questions:

RQ1. How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?

RQ2. How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?

RQ3. How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?

These questions are addressed in Chapters 4 and 5, where the findings are presented and then explored in light of the literature. The adopted conceptual framework for this study is aligned with my research questions in the following ways, displayed in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1

Research Question and Conceptual Framework Alignment

Research Question	Aligned Theory	Concepts Explored from Theory
RQ1. How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?	JD-R Model	job demands
	Conservation of Resources	strain, stress, social support
	Secondary Traumatic Stress	vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or empathetic stress
RQ2. How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?	JD-R Model	job demands
	Conservation of Resources	strain, stress, social support

	Secondary Traumatic Stress	vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or empathetic stress
RQ3. How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?	JD-R Model	job demands
	Conservation of Resources	strain, stress, social support
	Secondary Traumatic Stress	vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or empathetic stress

Note. JD-R (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017); Conservation of Resources (Hobfoll, 1988; Figley, 1995).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for both researchers and practitioners. First, this research answered numerous scholars' recommendations for future research by exploring factors contributing to burnout among high school principals, for the principalship is highly demanding, stressful, and complex (De Jong et al., 2017; Luongo, 2021). For example, Mahfouz (2020) found that school leaders are experiencing rising stress levels, calling for additional research to better understand principals' workplace conditions and how to effectively combat stress. Therefore, in this study, I explored factors contributing to principal burnout including working conditions. Additionally, Wells and Klocko (2018) recommended that future researchers conduct studies on principal stress and consider offering principal preparation programs to enhance principals' effectiveness and resiliency. Because the current study focused on principal burnout, it may offer principal preparation programs and principals' strategies to enhance leadership effectiveness and resilience. Further, Sibisanu et al. (2024) advocated for more empirical studies to better understand the full spectrum of principal burnout and to develop effective interventions to address the specific difficulties integral to sustainable education. This study contributed to the understanding of principal burnout and potential strategies to reduce it.

Second, this research heeded the advocacy of numerous groups that support principals. For example, the mission of the Association of Washington School Principals is to support principals and assistant principals, and the principalship, in equitable education for all students, because effective leaders inspire high-performing schools and high-achieving students (Association of Washington School Principals, 2025b). This study supported efforts to enhance the principalship, thereby fostering transformational school leadership and improved student outcomes. The Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, a program funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, emphasized the importance of prioritizing principals' health and well-being (Ball, 2023). Because this study focused on reducing principal burnout, it prioritized the health and well-being of principals. Accordingly, this study was well grounded in the research and practitioner community.

Methodology

Morse (2020) and Nowell et al. (2017) pointed out that qualitative inquiry is a globally respected method for conducting research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also highlighted that qualitative inquiry provides researchers with a structured approach closely connected to people, as a core principle of qualitative research is that humans construct reality through their social relationships. Qualitative research aims to learn about or interpret meaning as constructed by humans by analyzing data extracted from the words and observations of human beings (Adler, 2022; Phillips et al., 2024). Therefore, I employed qualitative rather than quantitative methods because descriptive research methods enabled me to stay close to participants' words and perspectives, rather than relying primarily on numerical data typically associated with quantitative studies (Adler, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Additionally, descriptive qualitative methods helped me encapsulate the emotions and ideas expressed in participants'

voices, aligning with this study's aim to explore factors contributing to principal burnout without integrating other methodologies or frameworks (Kraft et al., 2020). I recognized the link between research questions fulfilling the purpose of a study and their role in addressing the research problem (Bloomberg, 2023). Thus, I developed open-ended questions including those on the conservation of resources and job demands-resources models, as well as secondary traumatic stress, to explore the factors contributing to principal burnout.

Design

In 2025, I interviewed 16 high school principals from public schools in Washington state using a basic descriptive qualitative approach to explore factors contributing to principal burnout, analyze data, and identify principal perceptions of burnout. The following researchers' claims supported my design for this study. First, Davenport et al. (2023) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlighted that a basic interpretative study, also known as a basic qualitative study, is an approach used in qualitative research across various applied fields encompassing education, social work, business, exercise science, and others. Second, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that researchers employ a basic descriptive approach rather than specifying other possible approaches such as ethnography, case study, narrative analysis, or grounded theory. Finally, according to Sandelowski (2010), this design is appropriate when the purpose of a study is to obtain clear descriptions of phenomena close to the data. For these reasons, a basic descriptive qualitative approach was used to address the problem statement and research questions discussed earlier.

Population and Sample

The target population of this study was high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state. Principals are often at the forefront of social and educational

reform (Wang, 2022), with responsibilities that include instructional leadership, stakeholder engagement, problem-solving, adherence to state and federal mandates, and more (Güneş, 2022; Perry et al., 2024; Silbaugh et al., 2023). Generally, principals must undergo training specific to their state, though some states offer alternate certification routes. Specifically, a principal in Washington state must hold a master's degree, complete a state-approved administrator preparation program, possess a valid teaching license, and complete a practicum. Accordingly, principals can be defined as licensed administrators accountable for school improvement, instructional leadership, school safety, student discipline, and many other responsibilities. While the population of this study is high school principals in Washington state, the sample consisted of 16 principals. Following Phillips et al. (2024), this study employed purposeful sampling to select a diverse population of high school principals, aiming to recruit participants who could provide a broad spectrum of perspectives and realities. Given my background in teaching and administration, I recruited participants through the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) by asking the organization to email its members about participating in this study. I also recruited participants through snowball sampling and from my professional contacts obtained during this study. Inclusion criteria for participants included public high school principals (rural, urban, and suburban) who are currently in the role or previously served as a principal in Washington state in the past five years. Therefore, elementary, private, and middle school principals, as well as those who were principals more than five years ago, were excluded from this study.

Data Collection

Researchers have traditionally used in-person interviews to collect data in descriptive qualitative research because they gather participants' perspectives and understandings,

determining how they make meaning from their social interactions (Bayeck, 2021; Punch, 2014). However, I considered how technological advances could help me conduct non-traditional interviews (Hawkins, 2018). Hence, I incorporated virtual interviews into this study because COVID-19 transformed how researchers conduct their studies (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). These types of interviews have become an option for researchers in social work, sociology, and other disciplines, primarily when in-person interviews are difficult to implement (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). Consequently, this study used virtual interviews as its primary data collection method. Notwithstanding, I recognized potential confidentiality issues during interviews, given limited control over participants' environments and challenges separating public and personal aspects of social media (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022).

Donalek (2005) and Edwards and Holland (2013) indicated that qualitative interviews are among the most commonly used foundational methods in qualitative research studies across various disciplinary fields. Therefore, I collected data from 16 semi-structured interviews with high school principals with varying levels of experience, using a descriptive qualitative research design. The semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and incorporated data analysis to identify principals' perceptions of burnout. An interview schedule was developed after explaining the purpose of this study and obtaining participant consent.

Data Analysis

I used qualitative data analysis to identify themes that documented experiences, perspectives, and driving forces related to principal burnout. Since qualitative research entails closely following the data without the help of varied data analysis frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), I collected and analyzed data from interview notes, Zoom video recordings,

and, if necessary, follow-up emails. ATLAS.ti was also used in my analysis to code data from Zoom-recorded transcripts.

Interview questions were used to explore factors contributing to principal burnout and identify themes that may lead to potential strategies for reducing it. Adhering to the suggestions of Taheri Ezbarami et al. (2017), I read transcripts repeatedly to scrutinize the data while listening to the interview recordings extensively. This study involved codifying data through line-by-line coding, breaking codes into focused codes and focused categories, and breaking down focused codes into themes. As noted by Belotto (2018), the coding process enabled me to thoroughly analyze large amounts of data, allowing me to take a fresh look at the information and uncover emerging patterns and themes. Additionally, since thematic analysis is a method for identifying patterns embedded within and throughout data sets about participants' perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2017), I followed Woodall's (2016) recommendations to conduct a thematic analysis.

Trustworthiness

According to Adler (2022), research must be trustworthy to be relevant. Researchers generally agree on the criterion used to evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative research despite scholarly debate concerning the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Kakar et al., 2023). Criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity have been highlighted by numerous researchers as methods for evaluating and ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Connelly, 2016; Kakar et al., 2023; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Therefore, the following six methods were incorporated to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. First, I used member checking, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement to enhance credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Second, I used an audit trail comprising process logs, peer

debriefings, and a coding record to enhance dependability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Third, I incorporated reflexive notes and journaling to improve reflexivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Fourth, this study enhanced transferability by comprehensively describing the context, location, and participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Fifth, I implemented suggestions from Cloutier and Ravasi (2021) and incorporated tables to enhance transparency in gathering and interpreting information and to efficiently compile and assess data. Finally, per Woodall (2016), I demonstrated trustworthiness at every stage of data collection and analysis by ensuring that themes and ideas could be traced back to the source data.

Limitations

Bloomberg (2023) and Marshall et al. (2022) emphasized that study limitations are inherent to all planned research projects and can pose hurdles, stemming from researchers' inability to control study conditions. This descriptive qualitative study had the following limitations. First, I recognized that participants respond differently during in-person interviews than in other modes of interviewing, thus presenting a possible limitation. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), limitations intrinsic to interviews include (1) the filtering of information through participants' viewpoints, (2) the gathering of information in a set place rather than natural surroundings, (3) the researcher's proximity could encourage prejudiced answers, and (4) the varying expressiveness and understanding of interviewees.

Second, Söylemez (2023) emphasized the importance of applying ethical principles and rules to enhance the reliability and trustworthiness of qualitative research, addressing underlying concerns associated with this methodology. Neutrality is one criterion for increasing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Kakar et al., 2023). This entails the researcher's impartiality while examining and drawing conclusions from the data. Therefore, when collecting

and compiling key points from the data, I used direct quotes from participants (Kakar et al., 2023). Ethics in this study were also enhanced by protecting participants' identities and by complying with Phillips et al.'s (2024) suggestions to exclude personal details when directly quoting participants.

Finally, I acknowledged this descriptive qualitative study could have been conducted using different qualitative or quantitative methodologies (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008; Marshall et al., 2022). For instance, future research could potentially employ diverse sampling techniques, such as stratified or cluster sampling, to assess relevance through sampling and take a more expansive view of leadership or educational contexts (Cîrşmari et al., 2023). Moreover, because I collected data from public high school principals in Washington state, they were the only principals in this study.

Statement of Bias

Siddiqui (2011) observed the challenge of eliminating bias in research. Cypress (2017) and Sica (2006) noted the potential for bias to threaten the validity of a study, given significant differences between the exploratory nature of qualitative research and the quantitative research paradigm. As a qualitative researcher, I agreed with Bloomberg (2023) and Phillips et al. (2024) in recognizing the challenges of understanding how my positionality, bias, and presuppositions can influence the development of knowledge and the existence of positionality in research, as subjectivity can influence qualitative research.

This descriptive qualitative study explored factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience. According to Anderson (2017) and Dempsey et al. (2016), qualitative inquiry stresses that individuals construct and shape reality from their milieu. Keeping this in mind, I recognized the need to declare my positionality given

my background as a teacher and principal, which could lead to a potential conflict of interest arising from prior experiences and assumptions brought to this study (Phillips et al., 2024). This opened the door to skewing data to support my biases about principal burnout. Thus, to mitigate the effects of personal bias, I focused on the most commonly documented forms of systematic bias including information and selection bias (Malone et al., 2016). To achieve this, I selected women, people of color, and men who are representative of the high principal population in Washington state, ensuring accurate reporting of findings.

Following the suggestions of Kakar et al. (2023), this study incorporated reflexivity and bracketing to further counter bias and demonstrate my potential influence in collecting and analyzing data. Using these techniques enabled me to temporarily suspend my assumptions and prejudices about principal burnout and seek to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants. Additionally, I understood the importance of being critically reflexive, as this enabled me to question the assumptions inherent to my subjectivity (Dodgson, 2019; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Hence, I implemented suggestions from Cypress (2017) and Korstjens and Moser (2018) by incorporating reflexive journaling and reflexive notes during the interview process and data analysis. This helped me reflect on biases and experiences related to principal burnout, thereby improving the reliability of this study (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Delimitations

According to Bent (2016) and Bloomberg (2023), delimitations help researchers establish the limits of their studies. Theofanidis and Fountouki (2019) also noted that delimitations justify research in comparison to others. Therefore, I leveraged the following delimitations in this descriptive qualitative study to explore factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. First, one delimitation

concerned the use of high school principals from Washington state. Considering the design of this research, vice principals and elementary and private school principals were eliminated as participants. Second, exploring the high school principal burnout phenomenon using purposeful non-probability sampling methods presented another delimitation. Finally, to reach saturation, 16 high school principals with varying degrees of experience were interviewed to meet my university's dissertation requirements. Thus, in agreement with Vasileiou et al. (2018), I deliberately adjusted the sample size criteria to be suitable for a qualitative study of this nature.

Definitions of Key Terms

Burnout. Bianchi et al. (2019) defined burnout as a job-induced syndrome combining emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. Burnout is considered a chronic response to occupational stressors characterized by emotional exhaustion and physical and mental burnout, which can intensify employee turnover, absenteeism, and work accidents (Lan et al., 2020; Soares et al., 2023).

Conservation of Resources Theory of Stress. The conservation of resources theory is a motivational stress theory introduced by Hobfoll (1988) as a framework for understanding how individuals obtain, conserve, and maintain resources, illuminating how they cope with stressful conditions in organizational settings (Snyder et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2024). The conservation of resources theory posits that humans are innately motivated to acquire new resources and safeguard their existing ones (Hobfoll et al., 1990; Niazi et al., 2024). As one of the resource theories of occupational stress, the conservation of resources theory contends that job demands diminish employee resources. (Kim & Beehr, 2020). Considering that the conservation of resources theory posits that resource loss is the primary cause of adverse outcomes resulting

from stressful situations, this theory highlights the importance of resource loss and the need to attain resources (Hobfoll et al., 2012).

Job Demands-Resource Model of Burnout. This theoretical framework emphasizes that, regardless of job type, the combination of high job demands and limited job resources can lead to job strain culminating in burnout, as such working conditions deplete energy and undermine employee motivation (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Cao et al., 2024). Additionally, the job demands-resources model proposes that workplace conditions can be divided into two broad general classifications: job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). According to the model, job demands are defined as job characteristics that involve continuous physical or psychological effort including work overload, role ambiguity, and poor working relationships that can cause stress and potential burnout. In contrast, job resources are viewed as the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that facilitate goal achievement, mitigate the negative impact of excessive job demands, and promote employee personal and professional development (Cao et al., 2024; Demerouti, 2018).

Secondary Traumatic Stress. The literature defines secondary traumatic stress as an acute stress reaction that can appear in the form of sleep problems and disturbing images from exposure to the trauma of others (Berger & Nott, 2024), resulting from the spreading of trauma responses from individuals impacted by trauma to those in close contact with them (Castro Schepers & Young, 2022; Juárez & Becton, 2024). The term secondary traumatic stress was first introduced by traumatologist Christ Figley (1995), who explained secondary traumatic stress as stress from helping or desiring to help people who were suffering or traumatized.

Summary

Using semi-structured interviews from 16 principals, this descriptive qualitative study explored the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. By interviewing principals with varying degrees of experience, this study provided insights into how job demands related to principal strain and burnout. These included how principals are strained by daily scheduling demands, the complexity and intensity of daily job demands, and how working with students impacted by trauma impacted the work of principals. This study employed an interview protocol based on the job demands-resources, conservation of resources, and secondary traumatic stress models to investigate how job demands influenced principals' work and the resources they used to mitigate burnout. This study may hold significance for all stakeholders considering the following statistics: (a) one in five principals leave their schools each year, naming high levels of stress as a primary factor (Kim & Pendola, 2022); (b) principal turnover is higher in schools serving low-income students and students of color (DeMatthews et al., 2022), (c) half of new principals quit during their third year (School Leaders Network, 2014), and (d) one-quarter of the principal population left their jobs by the end of the 2022-2023 school year (Washington STEM, 2024). Bearing the above-mentioned statistics in mind, this study provided school districts, principal preparation programs, policymakers, and principals with valuable strategies to reduce or diminish the effects of principal burnout. The following chapter presented a review of the literature.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature reviews are vital to research (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2021), for they advance knowledge in a particular field or discipline and identify gaps that lead to further research (Leite et al., 2019; Paul & Criado, 2020). Reviews of the literature also enhance the knowledge of scholars who have focused their research on a specific aspect of a much larger topic (Hulland & Houston, 2020). In this study, I added to the body of knowledge on high school principal burnout. Accordingly, I divided this review into themes with subcategories including stress, burnout, high school principals, and factors that influence stress and burnout among high school principals. I also sought to understand the gaps in the literature regarding the causes of principal burnout and strategies to reduce it.

Stress

Stress is a part of life (Boyatzis et al., 2021). As stated by Mihai and Oprea (2020), stress is a significant problem in the 21st-century workplace and an important issue facing employees. More than 100 theories, models, and frameworks populate the landscape of job stress research (Moon et al., 2024). Correspondingly, various job stress models have historically guided research on stress, and theories suggest that stressors, such as workload, can cause strain and even lead to burnout (Guthier et al., 2020; Hobfoll, 1989). This study proceeded with a discussion of stress theories, followed by an examination of current research on stress.

Theories of Stress

Occupational stress is a pervasive issue that impacts public health worldwide (Mulugeta et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Before examining the current research regarding stress in the workplace, the following section explored relevant theories of stress put forward by scholars including (a) the transactional model of stress and coping, (b) the conservation of resources, and

(c) the job demand-control model. These theories laid the groundwork for understanding current research on this topic.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The transactional model of stress and coping originated from the work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and is one of the most prominent theories in stress research (Sweet et al., 1999). Initially proposed by Lazarus (1966), the stress-coping theory describes an individual's process when experiencing a stressful situation, enabling them to cope and adapt their behavior effectively (Abu Shosha & Al-Kalaldeh, 2020; Chen et al., 2019). The transactional model of stress and coping posits that people continuously appraise demands in their environments relative to their perceived coping abilities, maintaining that when demands exceed perceived coping abilities, stress and undesirable emotions occur (Knol & Brantley, 2021; Lim et al., 2023).

In the 1970s, the cognitive movement in North American psychology ignited the concept of appraisal. This process mediates between the pressures, limitations, and resources of the environment and the convictions and goal structures of the individual (Lazarus, 1993). According to Abu Shosha and Al-Kalaldeh (2020), the transactional model of stress and coping encompasses two primary methods for regulating stressful experiences, which are considered person-environment transactions: cognitive appraisal and coping methods. Correspondingly, Ghaffari et al. (2021) emphasized that the central proposition of the transactional model of stress and coping is that primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, and coping strategies explain the mechanism between stressors and the results of stress in individuals, which enable them to administer a suitable coping strategy given the exchange between their environment and others.

Since the 1960s, a central aspect of work stress research has been the concept of coping (Dewe, 2004). Folkman and Lazarus (1980) theorized that coping strategies are applied when the

surrounding environment is stressful. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141). The coping process involves two continuous stages, cognitive appraisals and coping efforts, with the appraisal process being divided into primary and secondary appraisals (Ghaffari et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019). Primary appraisal occurs as a person recognizes exposure to and the severity of potential stressors, whereas secondary appraisal occurs as a person analyzes available resources and options for adjusting to perceived stressors (Lim et al., 2023; Sharifabad et al., 2020). According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980) and Denecker (2019), when an event is assessed regarding what is a stake (primary) and potential options and coping resources, the cognitive process of appraisal occurs. Similarly, Ghaffari et al. (2021) noted that coping strategies are influenced by individuals performing appraisals, whether these be from a person determining the severity of the stressor (primary appraisal) or a person perceiving the stressor as threatening (secondary appraisal), and their evaluation of personal resources to deal with the stress. Folkman et al. (1986) further specified that primary and secondary appraisals unite to determine whether the transaction within the person-environment is viewed as important for well-being, in which case it can be perceived as primarily threatening, with the possibility of harm or loss, or as challenging, with the potential for benefit or mastery.

The transactional model of stress and coping also recognizes problem-focused coping (e.g., directly identifying and solving the problem) and emotion-focused coping (e.g., regulating emotions) as coping strategies individuals employ for problem-solving or emotional regulation (Folkman et al., 1986; Yazdanmehr et al., 2023). In short, the transactional model of stress and coping offers a structure for examining how individuals think about and interpret perceived

stressors, thereby providing researchers and practitioners with applicable data for designing interventions in a variety of fields such as education, health, and sports performance (Kaveh et al., 2023; Knol & Brantley, 2021).

Conservation of Resources

The conservation of resources theory is a motivational stress theory introduced by Hobfoll (1988) to augment the surge of research in the 1970s and 1980s on the role of social support as a resource in overall stress theory and to explain the connection between strains and stressors and the role of social support systems as probable mediators of stress (Dean & Lin, 1977; Xu et al., 2024). Since the inception of this model and the emphasis on the importance of resources, the conservation of resources theory has been one of the most referenced resource theories in organizational psychology and organizational behavior. This theory has been applied by researchers in studies spanning various fields such as education, burnout, and traumatic stress (Farquharson et al., 2022; Wang et al, 2022).

The conservation of resources theory suggests that humans are innately motivated to attain new resources and protect their current resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 1990; Niazi et al., 2024). As one of the resource theories of occupational stress, the conservation of resources theory contends that job demands diminish employee resources. (Kim & Beehr, 2020). According to Bettini et al. (2020) and Snyder et al. (2020), resources include anything that employees believe can help meet their job demands, such as conditions, social supports (e.g., from colleagues or supervisors), personal characteristics or internal resources (e.g., skills and knowledge), energies, and objects valued by individuals through which they can acquire more resources. Given that the conservation of resources theory postulates that resource loss is the

primary cause of adverse outcomes in stressful situations, this theory underscores the importance of resource loss and the need to attain resources (Hobfoll et al., 2012).

Within the conservation of resources framework, resource losses are viewed as more substantial than gains because individuals lacking resources tend to experience additional resource losses (Huth & Chung-Yan, 2023). Hollebeek et al. (2023) also noted in their study on consumer engagement, stress, and conservation of resources theory that this theory recognizes stress results from an individual's perceived pressure or strain. Accordingly, stress occurs when an individual detects a threat to their resources, an actual net loss of resources, or a shortage of resources gained after they have been used. Barling and Frone (2017) studied the impact of passive leadership on employee well-being, examining how it can undermine well-being through role stressors and psychological resource depletion. They emphasized that when individuals are exposed to the threat of potential resource loss, lose resources, or are unable to recover resources after investment, they experience stress-related outcomes. This leads to declining levels of employee well-being due to the psychological effects of long-term resource depletion. In the context of the conservation of resources framework, when individuals encounter stress, they respond by either preserving the resources they already have or by securing resources through the investment of existing resources, thereby compensating for the losses they incur (Xu et al., 2024). Therefore, stress arises from the threat of losing valued resources or from resources lost in the struggle to minimize resource loss and maximize the resources individuals can keep and gain (Akirmak & Ayla, 2021).

In sum, the conservation of resources model offers a framework for identifying how individuals acquire, conserve, and maintain resources and illuminates how they navigate stressful conditions in their organizational settings (Snyder et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2024). This theory is

also valuable because it offers a broad range of propositions beyond other theoretical frameworks that emphasize only one fundamental resource, such as control, or discuss resources in general terms (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Job Demand-Control

According to Van der Doef and Maes (1999), the job demand-control model, also known as the job strain model, is one of the most influential models in research on the relationship between work and health. Karasek (1979) developed the job demands-control model to study organizational work-related stress (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2022). Emerging from research in the 1940s that demonstrated the adverse effects of high workloads coupled with limited worker autonomy or decision latitude (Parker et al., 2017), the job demands-control model examined the connection between the mental strain that can occur as a result of the interaction between an individual's job demands and their decision latitude or control in their job (Gonzalez-Mulé & Cockburn, 2021). The model differentiates between two main aspects of the job, specifically psychological demands or stressors such as workload, unexpected tasks, and job-related interpersonal conflicts, and job control such as autonomy, skill discretion, and the ability to control one's work situation over where, when, or how employees complete their tasks (Hayes et al., 2022; Wemken et al., 2021). In their study about how managing disability accommodations influences supervisors' job strain and motivation, Alamo et al. (2024) noted that job control has two dimensions: decision authority and skill discretion. Gonzalez-Mulé et al. (2021) and Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2022) further emphasized that job control refers to people's autonomy or discretion in completing their work. In contrast, job demands are the difficulties people face in their work, such as physical challenges and psychological aspects including heavy workload,

time pressure, role conflicts, monotonous work, and poor leadership. Together, job demands and control are used to examine workplace stressors and determine how they can be mitigated.

A fundamental aspect of many occupational and health stress theories is that organizational resources, such as human resource practices, and personal resources including emotional intelligence and forward thinking, can mitigate the effects of job demands on workers' well-being (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Huth & Chung-Yan, 2023). Johnson and Hall (1988) found that supervisor and co-worker support buffered the influence of job demands and job control. Consequently, the job demand-control model was extended to include social support as another factor that buffers the adverse health effects of high job demands (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Widar et al., 2021). According to Nylén et al. (2019), the job demand-control-support model posits that job resources, such as control over decision-making and professional development, along with support from colleagues and supervisors, can yield positive health benefits. Considering job demands, job control, and social support as the three components within the job demand-control-support model, the buffer hypothesis suggests a triad effect between job demands, control, and support on employee strain, with high levels of control and support potentially minimizing the positive relationship between job demands and strain (Dawson et al., 2016).

Although there are similarities between the theories mentioned above, which include how individuals cope with and experience stress biologically, physically, and psychologically, and the broader societal implications of their stress (Mustafa et al., 2020), there are also differences. For example, Karasek's (1979) job-demand-control model and Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources model have added to the knowledge of work stress. However, these theories fail to account for how individuals consider workplace demands and the strategies they use to address

them (Denecker, 2019). Gonzalez-Mulé and Cockburn (2021) emphasized that one limitation of the job demand-control model is that it focuses on the relationship between job control and job demands but fails to account for how individuals differ in their perceptions of the stressor-strain relationship. Wemken et al. (2021) also noted that the transactional model of stress and coping posits that primary appraisal occurs when an individual evaluates a stressor as a possible threat, while secondary appraisal involves assessing their resources to determine whether they are adequate to cope with the stressor. Considering the job demand-control model, potential stressors in the primary appraisal process are job demands that an individual perceives as threatening. In contrast, job control offers strategies for coping, such as control over scheduling, to cope with stressors during the secondary appraisal process (Wemken et al., 2021).

Hobfoll et al. (2018) also underscored the value of the conservation of resources theory in developing an understanding of organizational stress, as it is fundamentally at odds with the appraisal theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which posits that perceptions of stress make situations stressful. In this respect, stress-appraisal theories are limited because an individual must experience a stressful situation before recognizing it as such. Consequently, theories based on appraisal are individualistic and unpredictable because they give the individual the opportunity to determine what is stressful to them and whether or not they are capable of coping with the stress (Mustafa et al., 2020) rather than group-centered, thereby enhancing the suppositions of the conservation or resources theory because of the emphasis on stressful situations in general (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Current Research about Stress

Since the first published papers on job stress in the 1960s and 1970s, job stress theories have evolved and improved to explain workplace stress and comprehend employee well-being

more fully, thereby leading to job stress research comprising more than 100 theories, models, and frameworks (Cîrşmari et al., 2023; Moon et al., 2024). Although work can bring opportunities for advancement personally and professionally (Bakker & de Vries, 2021), the stress that can result from today's challenging and constantly evolving work environment requires learning more about how individuals analyze their work environment and their prospects for growth and coping with ensuing stressors, thus becoming an important aspect of organizational behavior research (Xu et al., 2024). Therefore, employee stress and well-being are important topics for organizations and researchers worldwide (Gameiro et al., 2020), as occupational stress has become a significant risk factor for adverse health outcomes in both individuals and organizations (Baka, 2020; Kaveh et al., 2023). Given the importance of recognizing how stress affects individuals and organizations and the broader factors in understanding stress experiences (Mustafa et al., 2020), the following section explored the causes, physical, psychological, and work impacts of stress.

Causes

According to Birhanu et al. (2018) and Mulugeta et al. (2021) occupational stress is a widespread problem that influences health outcomes on a planetary scale. Thus, researchers and organizations are concentrating on the universal problem of occupational stress (Cîrşmari et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Factors such as role ambiguity, supervisor and organizational support, job demands, job control or decision latitude, and collegial support have been found to increase or diminish the effect of occupational stress, as Foti et al. (2023) found that individuals who lack the technical and relational skills to meet expected job demands can experience stress. Conversely, Guthier et al. (2020), who conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of longitudinal studies investigating the stressor-effects and strain-effects of job stressors on burnout over time,

suggested that increasing job support and job control can be effective methods for breaking the endless loop between job stressors and burnout. Due to deficiencies in previous research that focused primarily on Western developed and democratic populations, Moreno Fortes et al. (2020), a researcher studying the cross-cultural differences in the relationship between occupational stress and complete mental health among Cabo Verde and Chinese employees including the investigation of the mediating role of burnout and the moderating role of optimism in accounting for the empirical link, noted that according to the assertions of positive psychology, personal attributes of employees such as confidence can protect their mental health from the influence of stress.

As stated by the American Psychological Association (2023), the extent of toxic work environments differs by profession, with almost 20% of workers reporting they experience toxic workplaces. The resulting stressors from toxic work environments negatively impact organizational and project effectiveness. Nevertheless, organizational support can play a vital role in reducing toxic workplace environments, thereby improving workplace stress (Wang et al., 2020). Similarly, toxic workplace environments decrease employee engagement and foster the dispersion of feelings such as bullying, ostracism, and harassment that can be harmful and contribute to employee stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety (Rasool et al., 2021).

Organizations can enhance their workplace environments by incorporating humor. Although individuals with similar jobs perceive and experience job demands differently, Wang et al. (2018) highlighted the potential advantages of using humor to combat workplace stress, emphasizing the importance of considering how different cultures view and respond to humor, as well as the need for organizations to tailor professional development accordingly. Recognizing that chronic stress can result from employees being in stressful jobs or jobs lacking appropriate

fit, organizations can also improve workplace environments by encouraging flexibility and nurturing employee job crafting such as giving employees autonomy in designing their own work tasks, in doing so molding job fit to employee strengths and minimizing stress that can occur in poor person fit environments (Smallfield & Kluemper, 2022). Organizations can further enhance employee health and well-being by encouraging job resources such as job crafting and job redesign (Lesener et al., 2019), as well as mitigate the effects of occupational stress by helping workers identify their temperaments, because workers and organizations that recognize various temperaments in employees can design workplace environments around worker temperaments, thereby providing possible relief from occupational stress (Deguchi et al., 2016).

Physical Impacts

Stress is ever-present and a vital part of our survival, yet chronic exposure can lead to decreased engagement at work, cognitive impairment, immunosuppression, and physical disorders such as adrenal fatigue and heart disease (Boyatzis et al., 2021; Colligan & Higgins, 2006; Luigi et al., 2019). The behavioral and psycho-social impacts of occupational stress are grave, with many studies showing adverse health effects such as musculoskeletal disorders, depression, and rheumatologic and endocrine conditions as a consequence of experiencing stressors (Mihai & Oprea, 2020; Mulugeta et al., 2021). Employees who experience high occupational stress for extended periods may also be at risk for metabolic disease due to the destruction of the individual's metabolic balance (Zhang et al., 2024).

The number one morbidity and mortality disease cluster in industrialized societies is cardiovascular diseases, leading to one in every three deaths globally and nearly 18 million deaths per annum (Abdul Ghani et al., 2023; Hertiš Petek et al., 2022). Consequently, some researchers investigate the impact of stress on cardiovascular health. Vancheri et al. (2022)

studied mental stress as a risk and prognosticative factor for coronary artery disease and stroke apart from prevalent risk factors, emphasizing that acute mental stress can result from job strain, anger, fear, and natural disasters. In contrast, chronic stress may be an outcome of repetitive or prolonged experiences of stress involving vocational stress, money issues, depression, poverty, and personality traits. Thus, independently of traditional risk factors, individuals experiencing acute and chronic mental stress are exposed to the ongoing progression of the hardening of arteries and the triggering of severe heart conditions (Vancheri et al., 2022). Furthermore, because the link between occupational stress and cardiovascular health is still being explored, Ogunmoroti et al. (2024) conducted a multiethnic community-based study of men and women free of cardiovascular disease at the time of the study to examine occupational stress as a psychological risk factor for cardiovascular disease. The authors found that work-related stress was associated with an increased risk of developing adverse cardiovascular health outcomes, thereby supporting the value of occupational wellness programs aimed at coping with stress, promoting cardiovascular health, and reducing the likelihood of cardiovascular disease events (Ogunmoroti et al., 2024).

Mao et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of quantitative studies published between 2011 and 2022 to examine the link between work stress and sleep quality. Cross-sectional studies across regions, countries, and industries have consistently shown a negative association between employees' sleep quality and occupational stress, highlighting these factors as important issues affecting employees across diverse work environments (Mao et al., 2023). Given that sleep quality is an integral part of employee health and well-being, Matti et al. (2024) investigated the mediating role of rumination in the relationship between chronic occupational stress and a progressive decline in sleep quality. The authors found a direct correlation between

occupational stress and reduced sleep quality, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally, with work-related stress predicting greater affective rumination and detachment. These results highlighted the importance of recognizing the effect of occupational stress on sleep quality and the need for well-designed interventions geared to augmenting employee mental health and sleep quality. Finally, Su-Keene et al. (2024) used a mixed-methods approach in their study examining the sleep quality of school principals and the connection with occupational stress, leadership effectiveness, and health awareness, finding a relationship between principals' quality of sleep and stress, anxiety, depression, and alcohol use, as well as elevated work stress and poor sleep quality during the school year versus the summer.

Psychological Impacts

The International Labour Organization (2024) of Switzerland stated that workplace stress is a damaging physical and emotional response brought on by the disparity between perceived job demands and perceived resources and abilities to cope with those demands, which can result in adverse health effects such as burnout, suicide, anxiety, depression, and other issues. Nakao (2010) acknowledged that the term stress is used to represent the individual's physical and mental response to conditions that necessitate behavioral modification, while Mihai and Oprea (2020) highlighted that stress represents a psychosocial bodily reaction set off by stress agents acting through a mixture of neurovegetative and endocrine reactions, thereby significantly affecting the body. Studies have also shown that occupational stress is a risk factor for employee mental health (Moreno Fortes et al., 2020), with prolonged stress causing a host of problems including depression, anxiety, weakened immune systems, cognitive impairment, and various illnesses, along with mental and physical exhaustion (Boyatzis et al., 2021; Jeanguenat & Dror, 2018).

Work-related stress can intensify fear, isolation, loneliness, grief, ambiguity, and other mental health challenges that negatively impact mental health (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). Reducing stress in the workplace is paramount for employee mental health because the World Health Organization emphasized that anxiety and depression are two of the top mental disorders in the world; therefore, reducing workplace stress is beneficial to safeguarding mental health (Tao et al., 2024). Stress can also impact employees' cognition, mental and physical health, and concentration ability, fostering illogical decision-making and unprofessional behavior (Davies, 2022; Jones & Daigle, 2018). In terms of mitigating the effects of occupational stress, ethical leadership and perceived organizational support have been shown to enhance employee engagement and job satisfaction, thereby reducing occupational stress and its consequences from an employee's perspective, as well as actions leading to stress (Silva & Lopes, 2023; Yasir & Javed, 2024).

Work Impacts

Many professionals worldwide experience occupational stress during their careers (Alkhawaldeh, 2023). Work-life balance has become more competitive and intensified in the 21st century (Zampetakis & Gkorezis, 2023), with stress influencing organizations and employees (Pahng & Kang, 2023) and the blending of high job demands and low job resources characterizing stressful working environments that have the potential to cause burnout (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Nylén et al., 2019). As a consequence of societal development, work environments frequently changing, and job demands mounting (Tao et al., 2024), occupational stress is swelling globally, becoming a leading barrier to the physical and mental health of employees and negatively impacting organizational efficiency, strength in the marketplace, and

along with depression and anxiety, credited with over 50% of lost working days due to sickness (Davies, 2022; Silva & Lopes, 2023).

Even though digital transformation has benefited organizations, the pace of its implementation can increase employee stress as information and communication technologies are introduced. COVID-19 further exacerbated employee stress by accelerating digital transformation and its impact on remote employees (Makowska-Tlomak et al., 2023). Computers have also transformed interpersonal communication in the workplace, albeit with negative consequences. Stich et al. (2017) studied the impact of computer-mediated communication applications on employees' workplace stress, finding that employees varied in how dissimilar forms of media contributed to stress, with email being the most significant due to individual preferences for using email.

Considering occupational stress is a common issue in the workplace and directly associated with the decline of employee well-being, adverse health effects, economic losses due to absenteeism, and diminished performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Park & Jang, 2019), leadership style and the relationships leaders have with subordinates and co-workers can affect how they cope with job stress and indirectly influence workplace satisfaction and efficiency (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Zampetakis & Gkorezis, 2023). Perceived organizational support can also mitigate the effects of stress, as employees who feel supported during stressful situations tend to engage more in their work, thereby fostering job productivity and reducing stress (Silva & Lopes, 2023).

Scholars agree that occupational stress is ubiquitous across 21st century work environments impacting public health worldwide (Lovern et al., 2024; Mulugeta et al., 2021), with factors such as toxic work environments, excessive workload, decision latitude, career

advancement challenges, relationship problems with supervisors or coworkers, organizational climate, and many others contributing to workplace stress (Colligan & Higgins, 2006; Wang et al., 2020). Because occupational stress is a significant risk factor for adverse health outcomes in individuals and organizations (Baka, 2020; Kaveh et al., 2023), employee stress and well-being are crucial topics for organizations and researchers worldwide (Gameiro et al., 2020). However, scholars do not fully understand the specific characteristics of stress, its broader influences, or effective ways to reduce stress and help individuals rejuvenate and flourish (Boyatzis et al., 2021; Mustafa et al., 2020). Thus, scholars are calling for future research concerning how individuals react to and cope with stress, especially during overwhelming times analogous to COVID-19 or threats to racial or social identity (Ganster et al., 2024). Scholars are also advocating for research that focuses on developing strategies and best practices for cultivating supervisor and collegial support, career growth, and decision latitude. By doing so, they aim to foster greater job control by developing individual resources (Foti et al., 2023).

Burnout

The psychological stress associated with work including consequences such as exhaustion, job dissatisfaction, and mental health difficulties, can lead to a psychological response known as burnout (Akirmak & Ayla, 2021; Drüge et al., 2021). To understand employee well-being, job stress theories have evolved since the first published papers on job stress in the 1960s and 1970s to explain the effects of workplace stress on employee well-being, thereby leading to job stress research comprising more than 100 theories, models, and frameworks (Cîrşmari et al., 2023; Moon et al., 2024). Recently, the International Labour Organization (2024) expressed workplace stress as a damaging physical and emotional response brought on by the disparity between perceived job demands and perceived resources and abilities

to cope with those demands, which can result in adverse health effects such as burnout, suicide, anxiety, and depression.

Theories of Burnout

The impact of stress on employees and organizations is noteworthy (Demerouti et al., 2021; Pahng & Kang, 2023). Likewise, there is the potential for burnout due to the blending of high job demands and low job resources characteristic of stressful workplaces (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Nylén et al., 2019). Consequently, numerous researchers have created theories to help conceptualize burnout. Accordingly, the following section examined the Maslach Burnout Inventory, job demands-resources theory, and social exchange theory.

Maslach Burnout Inventory

Since the emergence of the term burnout in the 1970s from the work of psychologist Herbert Freudenberger (Demerouti et al., 2021; Parker & Tavella, 2021), the Maslach Burnout Inventory has become one of the most important and widely used scientific measures of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2021; Soares et al., 2023). Recognized as the gold standard for measuring burnout (De Beer et al., 2020; Schaufeli et al., 2020), the Maslach Burnout Inventory was developed and subsequently used internationally to understand and contribute to the prevention of the burnout syndrome due to the nature of stress and burnout syndrome being common in human services professionals such as education and the medical field (Abdelmounaim et al., 2022). The core dimensions of burnout syndrome, as defined by Maslach et al. (2001), are emotional exhaustion resulting in fatigue, depersonalization or cynicism associated with negative work behaviors, and a lack of professional efficacy (Mariscalco, 2019; Wongtrakul et al., 2023). The burnout construct is defined by Maslach and Leiter (2016) as a psychological syndrome resulting from an extended response to interpersonal stressors, primarily employment-related

comprising the main dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment (or inefficacy). Emotional exhaustion refers to loss of energy, depletion, or fatigue. In contrast, depersonalization refers to negative attitudes toward clients and work (cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in achievement or productivity, as well as a lack of resilience or poor stress management (Yıldırım & Solmaz, 2022).

Different versions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory have been translated to investigate burnout syndrome in various work settings. In addition, various versions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory have been translated, validated, and adapted such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory General Survey (MBI-GS), which can be used across professional fields (Soares et al., 2023). Furthermore, Wongtrakul et al. (2023) stated that the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS) is the most widely used assessment of burnout syndrome among pre-clinical and collegiate student populations.

Dominating the literature to the present day (Doherty et al., 2021), the three-dimensional conceptualization of burnout by Maslach et al. (2001) is considered the gold standard for measuring burnout (Mariscalco, 2019). The adapted version of a 22-question assessment tool for measuring burnout among human services workers is the Maslach Burnout Inventory Human-Services Survey (MBI-HSS). Despite its widespread use and acceptance, the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been criticized because different definitions of burnout syndrome identify numerous causes, leading to disagreement in the literature about its definition and diagnostic criteria (Soares et al., 2023; Tavella et al., 2020).

Considering that research has shown adverse outcomes for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole, particularly in social welfare systems where absenteeism from sickness and

the inability to work are paid for by social funds, Hadžibajramović et al. (2020) highlighted the need for alternative burnout questionnaires due to the Maslach Burnout Inventory exhibiting several flaws, along with it being subject to empirical and theoretical criticism. For example, Schaufeli et al. (2020) identified the following flaws of the Maslach Burnout Inventory: (a) problems with the conceptualization of burnout, (b) technical psychometric deficiencies, and (c) limitations in its practical applicability. Hadžibajramović et al. (2020) also noted psychometric criticisms, such as skewed response patterns that may affect reliability, reversing positively worded items to assess a negative psychological state, and rating burnout using three subscale scores rather than a consolidated score. To address the shortcomings and criticisms of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, alternative burnout measures such as the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, and the more recent COVID-19 Burnout Scale have been developed to measure burnout (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008; Kristensen et al., 2005; Yörük & Güler, 2021).

Given the criticisms of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the intensification of job stress resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, De Beer, Schaufeli, and Bakker (2022) argued that a valid, theoretically grounded measure is needed to identify the risk of burnout within organizations and the workforce as a whole. Researchers such as Schaufeli et al. (2020) proposed a new definition of burnout in their examination of the psychometric properties of the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT). The authors suggested that it can be viewed as an alternative burnout measure because it assesses burnout syndrome as a total score, using cognitive impairment, mental distance, emotional impairment, and psychosomatic complaints as the four main components, and psychological distress and psychosomatic complaints as secondary symptoms. Thus, the BAT conceptualizes burnout as a second-order factor that serves as a syndrome,

emphasizing that the four main components are interrelated and constitute a higher-order burnout construct. In contrast, the Maslach Burnout Inventory views mental exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment as distinct measures of burnout (Sinval et al., 2022). The BAT has also been modified in many countries, showing supporting evidence for its validity (Redelinghuys & Morgan, 2023). Using data from nine countries to investigate the validity and invariance of a BAT-assessed global score, De Beer et al. (2024) found the BAT to be a valid and dependable instrument for measuring burnout complaints and for explaining the burnout phenomenon as a global (whole) score within organizational contexts.

JD-R Model

At the turn of the 21st century, Demerouti (2018) introduced the job demands-resources (JD-R) theoretical model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which has become a groundbreaking framework for understanding how job characteristics promote the well-being of workers and identify potential precursors of burnout (Claes et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2019). In 2010, the job demand-resources model replaced the job demand-control-support model as the most cited theory in the stress literature, as it served as an extension of the latter. The JD-R model differed in that it allowed for varying job demands and resources, unlike the job demand-control-support model, which stressed specific demands such as time pressure and only control and support as resources (Moon et al., 2024). In contrast to Karasek's (1979) job demand-control model, which focused on the job aspects of control and support, the JD-R model added important elements such as rewards and security (Parker et al., 2017). Furthermore, this model emphasized how these elements could potentially lessen the effects of job demands, foster development, and improve performance while allowing for the interplay between demands and resources, thereby

supporting the contention that demands damage health through strain and burnout, and that resources foster achievement through engagement (Parker et al., 2017).

In the JD-R model, scholars detail the impact of high job demands in the absence of sufficient job resources. According to Lesener et al. (2019) and Wissell et al. (2022), this model suggests that employee well-being and mental health are adversely impacted when job demands are high, and job resources and personal resources are low, with job demands predicting burnout and job resources predicting work engagement and influencing burnout. This model also posits that every job inherently contains factors that influence workplace conditions and well-being, with work strain and eventual burnout resulting from excessive job demands and insufficient job resources (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Cao et al., 2024).

The JD-R model further contends that workers are confronted with specific job demands, such as emotional or quantitative demands, and specific job resources including social support and opportunities for advancement, with both job demands and job resources affecting stress, motivation, and work fulfillment (Drüge et al., 2021). The model defines job demands as aspects of a job that involve continuous physical or psychological effort, such as work overload, role ambiguity, and poor working relationships, which can cause stress and potential burnout. In contrast, job resources are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that support goal achievement, mitigate the negative impact of excessive job demands, and foster employees' personal and professional development (Cao et al., 2024; Demerouti, 2018).

Moreover, the JD-R model suggests the health impairment and motivational processes as two causal yet independent processes (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023; Lesener et al., 2019). The energy depletion or health-impairment process occurs when job demands, such as aspects of work that involve continuous effort, deplete employee resources over time, thereby leading to

poor employee health, work stress, and burnout (Claes et al., 2023). The second process, or the motivational process, comprises the association between the gaining or preserving of resources and increased job satisfaction and engagement (Drüge et al., 2021). According to Huth and Chung-Yan (2023), job demands and job control lay the groundwork for some of the oldest theories of job characteristics. In view of this, and that job demands and job control are two main job characteristics that can predict employee well-being (Gameiro et al., 2020), it is important to highlight the main difference between JD-R and the job demand-control model. Essentially, the difference is in how job control is viewed. JD-R posits that job control is one of many resources that an employee can utilize to buffer the impact of job demands and foster job commitment. These resources can be in the form of feedback or social support. Unlike the JD-R model, the job demand-control model is limited in that it focuses only on the relationship between job demands and employee control, and their impact on stress.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory is a sociological theory that explains how humans engage in social exchange (Zhang et al., 2018). Emerging from the work of Homans (1958), Blau (1968), and earlier social scientists, social exchange theory claims that interactions among people are interdependent, with exchanges fostering high-quality relationships (Awais et al., 2024). Therefore, positive workplace environments and supervisor support can decrease turnover intentions and improve employee self-confidence and job productivity (Zeb et al., 2023). As one of the most significant theories in the social sciences covering disciplines such as organizational psychology, anthropology, social psychology and influential theoretical perspectives in management (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017), social exchange theory is one of the oldest theories of social behavior describing how people fashion and uphold relationships in the

exchange of material and non-material goods based on their positive net worth (Bourguignon et al., 2023; Homans, 1958). It encompasses an individual's free will to act, because what individuals give and receive in return can be mutually beneficial for everyone (Blau, 2017; Romani-Dias & Carneiro, 2020).

According to Thomas and Gupta (2021) and Kemp et al. (2021), reciprocity is fundamental to social exchange and social life, commonly occurring between employees and their workplaces. The stress and impacts of COVID-19 shutdowns affected organizations and individuals universally (Foti et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2022). The ambiguity of the pandemic and the demand for postsecondary education, driven by rising student enrollment, highlighted the importance of student well-being and resilience, underscoring the need to examine the reciprocal exchange between college students and their universities (Awais et al., 2024). Considering that reciprocated exchange can cultivate trust and commitment, allowing for individuals and organizations to achieve their goals, Awais et al. (2024) found that increased student demands for support from their college helped with the development of resilience with coping and overall student outcomes, thus suggesting that colleges can further their organizational goals by effectively supporting students by doing so fostering reciprocal responses to support from the university.

Researchers such as Kilroy et al. (2023) also examined the concept of reciprocity in their study of different styles of frontline managers, expanding social exchange theory by referring to a zone of reciprocity. A zone of reciprocity can link workplace attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. It highlights multiple sources influencing workplace reciprocity rather than a single source, thus suggesting that advantageous treatment from frontline managers can stimulate reciprocity and boost employee productivity (Kilroy et al., 2023). Because exchange theories

avow that social structure involves relationships among individual and collective actors exchanging items of value such as material, informational, or symbolic, and an aspect of human exchange involveing mutual social and material resources (Cook & Whitmeyer, 1992; Kemp et al., 2021), reciprocity has the potential to benefit stakeholders and therefore should be communicated as such (Kemp et al., 2021). Using social exchange theory to investigate apparent organizational value and benefits to collegiate student work-based learning opportunities, Kemp et al. (2021) found that exchanges between placement organizations and the university during student placement negotiations engendered mutual obligations, therefore demonstrating reciprocity in partnerships where benefits equaled supposed disadvantages to the organization and exchanges between all participants being viewed as generally positive and worth the effort as a result of overall outcomes.

Social exchange theory is considered to be one the most significant theories in the social sciences covering disciplines such as organizational psychology, anthropology, social psychology, and influential theoretical perspectives in management (Ahmad et al., 2023; Awais et al., 2024). However, it is necessary to examine it through the lens of psychological transactions rather than purely social transactions to advance this theory and identify the path for future research (Ahmad et al., 2023). In their critical review of social exchange theory, Cropanzano et al. (2017) argued that it is a unidimensional framework that lacks theoretical accuracy and general usefulness. The authors addressed the following concerns in their review: (a) overlapping constructs that need to be more precise, (b) inadequate appreciation for the positive and negative hedonic value of the different constructs, (c) an assumption of bipolarity, which views negative constructs (e.g., abuse) as the absence of positive constructs (e.g., support), and (d) theoretically vague predictions of behavior. Cropanzano et al. (2017) further suggested

that social exchange theory enables scholars to explain numerous social phenomena post hoc. Yet, it severely limits their capacity to make theoretical predictions about workplace behavior.

Current Research on Burnout

Introduced by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s to explain the slow emotional depletion and demotivation of volunteers working for aid organizations, the term burnout continues to be a current occupational health problem stemming from ongoing workplace stressors and challenges faced by organizations and employees (De Beer et al., 2020; Demerouti et al., 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Although many factors can contribute to burnout with no easily recognizable cause (Kleinpell et al., 2020), occupational burnout is a significant international public health concern and widely regarded as ubiquitous across 21st-century work environments (De Beer, Schaufeli, and De Witte, 2022; De Beer et al., 2024). Maslach and Leiter (2016) suggested that prolonged experiences with chronic interpersonal job stressors can result in the psychological syndrome known as burnout, therefore ushering in a response from one of the three core dimensions of overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and disconnection from work, and a sense of ineptitude or reduced sense of accomplishment.

Recently, the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (World Health Organization, 2024, code QD85) included burnout syndrome as a work-related psychological syndrome. Considering that work-related stress can lead to a psychological response known as burnout (Akirmak & Ayla, 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), referring to extended work-related stress and exhaustion that is a reaction to persistent occupational relational expectations (Simionato et al., 2019; Soares et al. (2023), and the negative consequences for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole, especially in welfare societies where sick leave and

occupational incapacity are paid for by state funds (Hadžibajramović et al., 2022), the following sections addressed the causes, physical impacts, psychological impacts, and work impacts of burnout.

Causes

Occupational burnout is recognized worldwide as a concept indicative of mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to work-related problems (Hadžibajramović et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2021). Job burnout is considered a significant international public health concern and is widely regarded as a pervasive issue across 21st-century work environments (De Beer et al., 2024; De Beer, Schaufeli & De Witte, 2022). Although burnout has been defined as a psychological syndrome or state of exhaustion resulting from a lengthy response to ongoing and excessive interpersonal workplace stressors with adverse health and work-related outcomes (Bakker & de Vries; 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), there is no consensus on how to define, measure, or treat burnout (Ahola et al., 2017; Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2023).

Demerouti et al. (2021) noted that, despite the abundance of research on burnout since the term emerged in the 1970s and the subsequent broadening of knowledge, pervasiveness, conceptualization, predictors, and effects, a consensus is lacking on how to accurately measure and conceptualize burnout. Likewise, Heinemann and Heinemann (2017) and Tavella et al. (2020) emphasized that despite the relevance of burnout in society and the term being used in daily life, there is wide-ranging debate among researchers and practitioners about the term burnout, what characterizes burnout, how to define and measure it accurately, and whether burnout is a recognizable mental disorder. De Beer, Schaufeli, and Bakker (2022) further highlighted that the measurement of burnout is subject to criticism, specifically in its operational definition as a syndrome, while Canu et al (2021) pointed out that, irrespective of fifty years of

research knowledge on the pervasiveness, etiology, treatment, and prevention of burnout, there is no universally accepted definition for burnout.

Even though burnout has been defined as a job-induced syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment (Bianchi et al., 2019), burnout lacks a unified definition, which can hinder the determination of its antecedents. For example, in their systematic review in MEDLINE, PsychINFO, and Embase from January 1990 to August 2018 to ascertain available burnout definitions, Canu et al. (2021) discovered 88 different definitions. Bianchi and Schonfeld (2023) also noted that numerous definitions of burnout have emerged over the past 50 years, inheriting fundamental flaws from Maslach's predetermined definition.

Adding to the disagreement on defining and measuring burnout in medicine and other disciplines, as well as the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' neglect to define burnout, Hewitt et al. (2020) highlighted that diagnostic uncertainty has led to the development of many measurement tools and published thresholds without a clear-cut standard. Burnout assessments that have been accepted include the American Medical Association of Mini Z, which enables individuals to use their definition of burnout in one-item evaluations to more complicated inventories that are multi-dimensional, such as the Copenhagen, Maslach, and Oldenburg burnout inventories (Hewitt et al., 2020). Furthermore, alternative burnout measures, such as the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, and the more recent COVID-19 Burnout Scale, have been assigned to assess burnout (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008; Kristensen et al., 2005; Yörük & Güler, 2021) and address the shortcomings and criticisms of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, one of the most important and widely used scientific measures of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2021; Soares et al., 2023). Hewitt

et al. (2020) continued to stress that the purpose of these assessment tools is to measure burnout academically in the form of statistical associations rather than for clinical diagnosis; therefore, these tools are not designed to recommend or provide a clinically validated threshold or cutoff suggesting a burnout diagnosis because these measurement tools evaluate burnout on a continuous scale.

There is also debate about the link between depression and burnout as potential causes of burnout (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2023; Shreedar et al., 2024). For instance, Shreedar et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between chronic health conditions and occupational burnout among early care and education workers. Analyses from multiple hierarchical linear regression models showed a significant association between depression and overall burnout, along with each burnout construct of exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Likewise, Bianchi et al. (2017) suggested that burnout symptoms are a reflection of depression, yet viewed under psychological labels; hence, the view of burnout being synonymous with depression presents a barrier to a collaborative approach that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries in efforts to understand the burnout phenomenon better. Besides, reasons for using exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy as the primary symptoms of an exhausted workforce are still uncertain, mainly because the burnout construct fails to recognize different symptoms associated with the way individuals respond to chronic workplace stress, such as anhedonia, dysphoria, cognitive impairment, and neurovegetative symptoms (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2023). Thus, a consequence of the widespread use of the burnout label may be regularly covering up conditions related to depression, thereby heightening the risk of depression going undetected and untreated (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2023).

Debate among scholars also exists as to the overlap of depression and burnout, as well as whether or not burnout constitutes a depressive condition or an archetype needing legal or medical recognition (Bianchi et al., 2021; Parker & Tavella, 2021). To illustrate, Parker and Tavella (2021) critiqued the principal burnout model, arguing for expanding symptom constructs to include a diathesis-stress model where perfectionist personality style contributes to occupational burnout. Researchers such as Bianchi et al. (2021) investigated burnout-depression overlap using 14 samples of individuals from six different countries and occupational sectors involving seven different languages, finding evidence to support the contention that burnout and depression overlap. Considering the deep-rooted belief that depression and burnout are different and arguments that the burnout construct was thrown together from subjective observations and personal accounts before getting reified by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Bianchi et al., 2021; Bianchi et al., 2022) and the reality of the enormous economic, health, and social costs associated with depression (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2023), occupational health specialists may want to redirect their attention from the standard view of burnout to job-related depression to more precisely and extensively address unresolvable work-related stress (Bianchi et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding the debate regarding the definition and conceptualization of burnout, the job demands-resource model may elucidate potential causes of burnout, for this theoretical framework emphasizes that regardless of the type of job, the combination of high job demands and limited job resources can bring about job strain culminating in burnout because such working conditions lead to energy depletion and sabotaging employee motivation (Cao et al., 2024; Demerouti et al., 2001). According to Lesener et al. (2019) and Wissell et al. (2022), the job demands-resources model suggests that employee well-being and mental health are adversely impacted when job demands are high, and job resources and personal resources are low, with job

demands predicting burnout and job resources predicting work engagement and influencing burnout. Claes et al. (2023) also found a direct link between job demands and job resources, with job resources positively associated with employees' subjective well-being and job demands negatively affecting it. This suggests the value of fostering a positive work environment and improving job resources to enhance employees' subjective well-being.

The job demands-resources model suggests that every job inherently contains factors that influence workplace conditions and well-being, with work strain and eventual burnout resulting from excessive job demands and insufficient job resources (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Cao et al., 2024). According to the job demands-resources framework, employee health and well-being are impacted when excessive job demands are not met with supportive and personal resources (Drüge et al., 2021; Wissell et al., 2022). Behaviors such as workplace ostracism serve as an example, as Qian et al. (2019) empirically tested the job demands-resources model to shed light on the relationship between workplace ostracism and burnout. The study demonstrated that workplace ostracism constitutes a form of resource loss, thereby contributing to burnout. To further illustrate the impact of job resources on employee well-being, Zampetakis and Gkorezis (2023) examined workplace resources as predictors of employees' effective coping with occupational stress, finding evidence for their influence on effective coping with occupational stress. Claes et al. (2023) further noted that job demands and job resources can enhance or hinder employees' subjective well-being. Finally, concerning the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Demerouti & Bakker (2023) found outcomes were predicated on the combination of individual, job, and family demands and the importance of not only individual regulatory strategies but also family, leader, and organizational or team regulatory strategies in mitigating the effects of job demands and resources on overall outcomes.

Physical Impacts

The consequences of burnout are solemn, with individuals feeling exhausted and exploited by a job they may once have enjoyed (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Burnout can have enduring effects on the health and well-being of those affected (Demerouti et al., 2021). Although cardiovascular disease is a global health problem and the leading cause of death worldwide (Feng et al., 2022), there is still debate as to the various health consequences of burnout, amidst which cardiovascular disease has been the focus of the most in-depth research (John et al., 2024). In their meta-analysis and systematic review of the influence of burnout on cardiovascular disease, John et al. (2024) found that burnout appears to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, despite the limited number of studies and the weakened causal inference from cross-sectional studies. Shi et al. (2021) also discovered that high levels of burnout were inversely associated with heart rate variability, and job burnout was ultimately a potential risk factor linked to poor prognosis in patients with acute coronary syndrome.

In terms of COVID-19, the stress and impacts of social distancing measures affected organizations and individuals worldwide (Foti et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2022). Concerning COVID-19, cardiovascular disease, and burnout, Alameri et al. (2022) found a link between burnout and cardiovascular risk. They suggested that sleep disturbances resulting from autonomic nervous system impairment may also represent a causal relationship between burnout and cardiovascular disease.

When individuals experience exhaustion, symptoms from stress involving headaches, chronic fatigue, gastrointestinal disorders, muscle tension, hypertension, cold and flu symptoms, and sleep disturbances, can occur (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). From a biological standpoint, Bayes et al. (2021) and Parker and Tavella (2021) emphasized that ongoing activation of the autonomic

nervous system, immunosuppression, chronic microinflammation, and dysfunction of the sympathetic-adrenal medullary axis, accompanied by changes in cortisol levels, occur in individuals experiencing burnout. Structural changes in the brain, such as reduced volume in the regions of the amygdala, anterior cingulate cortex, and medial frontal cortex, produce not only the basic features of burnout (e.g., exhaustion and cognitive impairments) but also explain heightened vulnerability to medical conditions (Bayes et al., 2021; Parker & Tavella, 2021). Occupational burnout also negatively affects the physical and mental health of employees in the form of cardiovascular disease, anxiety, depression, musculoskeletal disorders, insomnia, and psychosomatic complaints (Hadžibajramović et al., 2022).

Psychological Impacts

The frantic pace of organizational settings can lead to occupational burnout, a common negative physiological and psychological response to occupational stressors (Shi et al., 2021). Burnout has been defined as a job-induced syndrome combining emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment (Bianchi et al., 2019). Burnout is considered a chronic response to occupational stressors, characterized by emotional exhaustion and physical and mental fatigue, which can intensify employee turnover, absenteeism, and work-related accidents (Lan et al., 2020; Soares et al., 2023). Maslach and Leiter (2016) further stressed that prolonged experiences with chronic interpersonal job stressors can result in the psychological syndrome known as burnout, thus ushering in a response from one of the three core burnout dimensions of overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and disconnection from work, and a sense of ineptitude or reduced sense of accomplishment. Recently, the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (World Health Organization, 2024, code QD85) included burnout syndrome as a work-related psychological syndrome.

The psychological impact of occupational burnout is that employees distance themselves from their jobs due to lengthy exposure to high job demands (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Although work can satisfy individuals' psychological needs, burnout, a combination of chronic exhaustion and negative, cynical attitudes toward work due to excessive occupational stress (Bayes et al., 2021), can occur as a result of overwhelming work experiences (Demerouti et al., 2021). Employees who are burned out feel exploited and exhausted by the same occupation they may have once enjoyed, lacking motivation to contribute positively (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). As a consequence, more than half of workdays are lost due to poor health being associated with anxiety, stress, and depression (Davies, 2022).

In accordance with Bayes et al. (2021), burnout is a syndrome that arises from ongoing psychological tension, reinforced by the visceral motor system and its interactions with the endocrine and immune systems. The repercussions of burnout not only include psychological effects and fatigue associated with exhaustion but also affect individuals physiologically and biologically with systemic inflammation, weakened immune systems, heart disease, and insulin resistance syndrome (Bayes et al., 2021; Parker & Tavella, 2021). Similarly, after extensive experiences with high job demands and limited resources such as social support, autonomy, and professional advancement, chronic exhaustion can ensue with employees developing negative attitudes and detaching themselves psychologically as work loses significance and frustrates fulfillment of psychological needs, thereby contributing to burnout (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Demerouti et al., 2021). Given that employees with dyslexia can face challenges in the workplace such as fatigue and mental exhaustion, exposing them to the risk of occupational stress and burnout, Wissell et al. (2022) incorporated the job demands-resource model of burnout in their study of employment experiences of Australian adults with dyslexia. The authors found

that reducing job demands, increasing job resources, improving psycho-social work settings, and improving employee involvement can lessen the effects of stress and job burnout while minimizing work challenges including excessive fatigue and mental exhaustion.

Stress and impacts from COVID-19 shutdowns affected organizations and people universally including school personnel (Brown et al., 2021; Foti et al., 2023), leading to the most significant worldwide disruption to education in modern times (Arastaman & Çetinkaya, 2022). The reported psycho-social effects of COVID-19 included depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, nosophobia leading to intolerance, and symptoms of trauma (Nicoara et al., 2023). Research has also shown a positive correlation between burnout and stress due to COVID-19, and a significant positive correlation between COVID-19-associated stress and the main burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of ineffectiveness or reduced sense of accomplishment (Nicoara et al., 2023). Likewise, in their systematic literature review of remote work, burnout, professional job stress, and employee emotional exhaustion during the COVID-19 pandemic, Costin et al. (2023) found that challenges in handling remote work and the struggles with effectively fulfilling professional expectations led to workers experiencing heightened job demands, a lack of self-confidence, emotional depletion, burnout syndrome, and an acute response to occupational stress.

Work Impacts

Occupational burnout is a typical negative physiological and psychological response that occurs when individuals experience job-related issues (Shi et al., 2021). Individuals experiencing burnout often feel overworked and undervalued, resulting in a diminished capacity to make positive contributions to their organization (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Every year, burnout costs taxpayers and employers billions from increased presenteeism and absenteeism (Simionato et al.,

2019; Parker & Tavella, 2021), with burnout affecting employee productivity and effectiveness, as well as substantial costs to healthcare professionals and organizations (Demerouti et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 2020).

As Soares et al. (2023) and Lan et al. (2020) mentioned, burnout is a chronic response to occupational stressors characterized by emotional exhaustion and physical and mental burnout, which can intensify employee turnover, absenteeism, and work accidents. This chronic response to occupational stress can also lead to early retirement, along with growing rates of burnout attributed to the daily 9-to-5 routine and the expectation of around-the-clock internet accessibility (Parker & Tavella, 2021). Hadžibajramović et al. (2022) further emphasized that occupational burnout can negatively affect the physical and mental health of employees in the form of cardiovascular disease, anxiety, depression, musculoskeletal disorders, insomnia, and psychosomatic complaints. Organizationally, burnout can increase replacement costs due to turnover, absences from ill health, and employees' inability to perform their job duties, whereas occupational burnout also impacts client satisfaction, poor business outcomes, and workplace safety (Hadžibajramović et al., 2022; Lan et al., 2020).

From an organizational perspective, a lack of job autonomy or decision latitude in the workplace has also contributed to burnout (Brenner, 2023). As workers become exhausted or experience fatigue, they may resist meeting job expectations, lose commitment, demonstrate indifference, become cynical, or disengage from the work (Schaufeli, 2021). Additionally, in their systematic literature review of peer-reviewed publications covering scholarly databases such as Web of Science, ProQuest, and Scopus, Costin et al. (2023) found evidence for the relationship between how remote employees limited social connections and continuous backing from their organizations during the COVID-19 outbreak led to intensified job demands, work-

related stress, diminished satisfaction and productivity, workplace loneliness, and perceived stress, thereby leading to heightened burnout levels negatively affecting work-life balance and job satisfaction.

Behaviors such as workplace ostracism and workplace bullying have also been found to negatively impact the workplace and contribute to burnout (Buonomo et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2019). For example, Buonomo et al. (2020) investigated the direct and indirect associations between workplace bullying and personal burnout, specifically via work-life conflict, confirming their hypotheses that workplace bullying predicts burnout and that work-life conflict mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and burnout. Ribeiro et al. (2022) further identified high degrees of burnout among employees experiencing workplace bullying.

Wang et al. (2023) examined the association between workplace ostracism and knowledge-sharing behaviors, incorporating the conservation of resources theory and the perspective of university teacher resource scarcity. They found that increased workplace ostracism diminished valuable teacher resources, thereby triggering occupational burnout. Furthering the association between workplace ostracism and burnout, Feng-Hua & Shih-Lin (2023) investigated the effects of workplace ostracism on emotional labor and burnout among nursing staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, discovering that ostracism had a considerable positive effect on burnout and surface acting. Finally, Qian et al. (2019) empirically tested the job demands-resources model, which can shed light on the relationship between workplace ostracism and burnout, demonstrating that workplace ostracism constitutes a type of resource loss and therefore contributes to burnout.

Foti et al. (2023) and Hayes et al. (2022) highlighted that COVID-19 shutdowns affected teachers, students, and school administrators among others. In terms of the occupational impacts

of the COVID-19 pandemic, Costin et al. (2023) conducted a systematic literature review of remote work, burnout, professional job stress, and employee exhaustion. The authors found that challenges in handling remote work and struggles to effectively meet professional expectations led to workers experiencing heightened job demands, reduced self-confidence, emotional depletion, burnout, and an acute response to occupational stress. Demerouti & Bakker (2023) also found that outcomes were predicated on the combination of individual, job, and family demands, as well as on individual, family, leader, and organizational or team regulatory strategies in lessening the effects of job demands and resources. Costin et al. (2023) also noted that chronic occupational stress, job burnout, psycho-social distress, and intent to leave escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering how organizational climate can contribute to positive employee behavior (Lan et al., 2020), and the role organizations play in harnessing job resources such as social support and operating standards that enhance self-efficacy and career advancement, as well as circumventing overwhelming job demands such as excessive workload, role conflict, community fairness and values, and lack of autonomy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Simionato et al., 2019; Wissell et al., 2022), the significance of burnout should be emphasized for its pervasiveness and outcomes at the organizational level (Demerouti et al., 2021). Organizations can mitigate the effects of job strain and burnout by implementing effective human resource practices and supportive leadership that provides employees with strategies to manage short-term fatigue, thereby reducing the impact of burnout (Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

Researchers have found a link between job demands and job resources and how these factors can enhance or hinder employees' subjective well-being (Claes et al., 2023). Therefore, organizations should cultivate an environment that supports employees’ positive perceptions and

reduces their motivation to leave, as occupational burnout is associated with job stress and a willingness to remain on the job (Lan et al., 2020). Since appreciation and incentive, limited support, rigid hierarchies, and perceptions of injustice are among the many organizational factors that can contribute to burnout (Simionato et al., 2019), organizations can also cultivate a resource-oriented working environment by promoting cooperative working conditions, autonomy, job crafting, and job redesign (Lesener et al., 2019). Because burnout can have enduring effects on employees' health and well-being, leaving them feeling exhausted and exploited by a job they may have once enjoyed (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Demerouti et al., 2021), organizations can reduce burnout by improving psycho-social workplace environments, promoting employee engagement, augmenting job resources, and limiting job demands (Wissell et al., 2022).

Despite the broad range of definitions for burnout, there is mutual understanding among scholars concerning the concept, with exhaustion playing a key role in the burnout syndrome (Demerouti et al., 2021; Klusmann et al., 2021), and burned-out individuals experiencing increasing levels of exhaustion and cynicism due to lingering and excessive occupational stress (Bayes et al., 2021; Schaufeli, 2021). Although burnout negatively affects individuals, organizations, and society (Ahola et al., 2017; Demerouti et al., 2021), researchers admit consensus is lacking on the burnout construct and how to define, operationalize, diagnose, and treat burnout (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2023; De Beer et al., 2024). Accordingly, scholars do not fully understand the relationship between depression, anxiety, burnout, and their coinciding features (Bianchi et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021). Thus, scholars are calling for more research concerning the relationship between burnout, depression, and anxiety, especially in the post-COVID-19 era (Bianchi et al., 2021; Crudden et al., 2023). By doing so, researchers conducting

studies to investigate the impacts of burnout interventions can benefit from generally accepted practices in defining and assessing burnout (Ahola et al., 2017).

High School Principals

High school principals serve in demanding, complex, and highly stressful leadership positions (De Jong et al., 2017; Luongo, 2021). While principals are primarily responsible for achieving school goals and success criteria, along with shouldering much of the responsibility for solving problems (Güneş, 2022), they deal with a multitude of challenges, such as student discipline, school safety, adhering to legislative mandates, and supervision of students and staff (Perry et al., 2024; Silbaugh et al., 2023). The National Association of Secondary School Principals views principals as instructional leaders who are fully accountable for fostering a school climate that supports outstanding academic performance and comprehensive student welfare (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2025). Similarly, in their synthesis of 20 years of research on how principals impact students and schools, Grissom et al. (2021a) identified fostering an effective school climate, prioritizing instruction, promoting an environment of teamwork and professional learning, and optimizing resource allocation as core practices of effective principals. Specifically, an individual in Washington state must hold a master's degree, complete a state-approved administrator preparation program, possess a valid teaching license, and complete a practicum to become a certified principal. Accordingly, principals can be defined as licensed administrators accountable for school improvement, instructional leadership, school safety, student discipline, and numerous other responsibilities. The following section presented a brief historical background of the principalship and current research about principals.

History of High School Principals

In the expansive realm of public education, the principalship in its current context is relatively new (Kafka, 2009), having emerged from the evolution of the public education system over the past 150 years (Rousmaniere, 2009). The demands of the principalship have expanded since the days of the single-room school (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010) when the principal-teacher position entered the school system in the 1800s due to the growth of cities, schools, and the addition of age-appropriate classes (Kafka, 2009; Kaufman, 2019). Similarly, the role of the principal-teacher emerged as children gained access to free public education in the 19th century, thereby creating a need to manage a diverse range of school staff (Latucca, 2012). The following section included a brief historical background of the principalship during the 20th century, the age of accountability, and the age of leadership.

In 20th Century

Although the historiography of the principalship in American history is scant (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2009), the principalship has developed over time (Whitehead et al., 2017). Using metaphorical analysis to broaden understanding of the evolution of the principalship, Whitehead et al. (2017) proposed the following eras: (a) the formative period prior to the 1920s, (b) value broker of the 1920s; (c) scientific manager of the 1930s, (d) democratic leader of the 1940s, (e) theory-guided administrator of the 1950s, (f) bureaucratic executive of the 1960s, (g) humanistic facilitator of the 1970s, (h) instructional leader of the 1980s, (i) school reform leader of the 1990s, and (j) guiding force from 2000-present. As a consequence of a myriad of social influences, each of these periods shifted perceptions of the principalship that ranged from the principal being viewed as a spiritual and social leader in the 1920s to principals as instructional

leaders, guardians of safe schools, multicultural leaders, and responsible for school outcomes in the new millennium (Whitehead et al., 2017).

In contrast to the view that the modern principalship occurred in a historical vacuum, Kafka (2009) argued that by the second decade of the 20th century the principalship in many ways resembled the principalship today with comparable administrative, pedagogical, civic, and supervisory obligations. According to Kafka (2009), factors contributing to the establishment and status of the modern principalship include principals championing for increased authority, bureaucratic expansion creating the impetus for principals, increasing supervisory authority over teachers, and principals working to professionalize the principalship. This culminated in the establishment of the National Association of Secondary School Principals in 1916 and the National Association of Elementary School Principals in 1921, distinct organizations from the National Education Association, founded in 1857. Kafka (2009) further emphasized that principals were regarded as key players in educational improvement initiatives by the 1920s, supporting similar claims by researchers such as Su-Keene et al. (2024) and Marsh et al. (2023) that 21st-century principals are vital to school improvement, as well as to the fabric of school and community life. In terms of high school principals, their role has continuously evolved from early arguments for educational reform (Cox, 1927) to the right to levy taxes in support of free public secondary education (Koos, 1927), and instituting extra-curricular activities (Millard, 1930) to undergo significant shifts in educational practices, policies, and heightened expectations (De Jong et al., 2017).

Age of Accountability (2000s)

The age of accountability has elevated the role of high school principals, who are expected to continuously adapt to their environments while simultaneously leading the charge

toward school improvement and developing inclusive schools that meet the needs of various stakeholders (Bauer et al., 2019; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Educational administration has undergone significant changes over the past few decades (Eacott, 2015). Thus, it underwent a complete revolution from its inception in the early part of the 19th century as head teachers to its status as pedagogical leaders in the 21st century (Sage reference, 2008).

In the era of outcome-based accountability, principals are responsible for leading school improvement efforts, making them instructional leaders (Shaked & Schechter, 2019). For example, federal laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which became the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, have significantly transformed school accountability, especially for schools with low and declining standardized test scores (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Williams & Welsh, 2017). Consequently, improving student outcomes, especially in schools with the greatest need, rests on the effectiveness of school leaders (Shaked & Schechter, 2018). Additionally, principals are pressured to improve schools due to federal initiatives, comparable state mandates, and various societal forces including the institutionalization of test scores to evaluate student and teacher success (Kafka, 2009; Thornton et al., 2019). Adding to this pressure are state and federal guidelines that label low-achieving schools as failing when they miss test-score targets for two consecutive years, whether for a subgroup of students or the total school population (Childs & Russell, 2017). More recently, Johnson et al. (2023) and Ylimaki et al. (2022) noted that schools that do not meet adequate yearly progress or are designated as turnaround schools must hire new principals and replace half of the teaching staff, thereby impacting teacher retention and school leadership.

Age of Leadership

School administrators are responsible for cultivating an environment conducive to teaching and learning (Okoroma & Robert-Okah, 2007). In the new millennium, schools in America began to operate under heightened accountability, driven by the promotion of the Common Core and annual testing requirements stemming from the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top mandates (Johnson et al., 2023). As a result, principals are expected to focus on teaching and learning and become instructional leaders (Mitani, 2019). For example, the National Association of Secondary School Principals views principals as instructional leaders who are fully accountable for fostering a school climate that supports outstanding academic performance and comprehensive student welfare (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2025). Similary, Grissom et al. (2021a) consolidated the findings from 20 years of research highlighting the core practices of principals who effectively impact students and schools: (a) they foster an effective school climate, (b) they prioritize instruction, (c) they promote an environment of teamwork and professional learning, and (d) they optimize resource allocation. DeMatthews et al. (2021) and Rintoul & Bishop (2019) further emphasized that principals are expected to demonstrate exemplary pedagogy that enhances learning for all students including those historically marginalized, while engaging with the learning community and fostering a safe, inclusive, structured learning environment.

School improvement hinges on principals' leadership (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Su-Keene et al., 2024). Researchers have found principals to be key players in sustainable school improvement in underperforming schools and improving student achievement (Shava & Heystek, 2019; Williams & Welsh, 2017). Principal leadership is a significant factor in leading transformational turnaround and sustainable improvements required in schools (Wiyono et al.,

2023). Nevertheless, despite contemporary studies highlighting the positive effects of diversity within the principalship, such as improving teacher retention and student outcomes, gender and equity gaps persist in the principalship, with deleterious effects across the educational spectrum (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

In sum, secondary principals serve in demanding, complex, and highly stressful leadership positions (De Jong et al., 2017; Luongo, 2021). While principals are primarily responsible for achieving school goals and success criteria, along with shouldering much of the responsibility for solving problems (Güneş, 2022), they deal with a multitude of challenges, such as student discipline, school safety, adhering to legislative mandates, and supervision of students and staff (Perry et al., 2024; Silbaugh et al., 2023). Consequently, Eacott (2018) argued that the current crisis of the principalship revolves around a heavier workload and limited time to engage in their duties as instructional leaders.

Current Research of High School Principals

The principalship in the 21st century is complex and more demanding than ever (Diotaiuti et al., 2020; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2021). School leaders are responsible for adhering to local, state, and federal directives (Leventis et al., 2017). As their responsibilities expand, they often work with numerous stakeholders, which can increase principal stress (Sebastian et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2023). Indeed, workload and limited time to concentrate on teaching and learning are among the chief stressors reported by principals (See et al., 2023). Likewise, pressures from increased accountability and supervision, as well as calls for instructional and culturally responsive leadership, have led to increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and higher principal attrition rates. In fact, one in five principals leave their schools each year, naming high levels of stress as a primary factor, turnover being higher in schools serving low-

income students of color, and 50% of new principals quit during their third year (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Kim & Pendola, 2022; School Leaders Network, 2014). Similarly, 25% of the principal population in Washington state left their positions by the end of the 2022-23 school year (Washington STEM, 2024). With the above-mentioned in mind, the following section explored the impact of workload, stress and burnout incidents, job isolation, secondary stress, and job demands and resources on principals.

Workload

Diotaiuti et al. (2020) and Kafa and Pashiardis (2021) noted that the principalship in the 21st century is complex and more demanding than ever, with role overload unlikely to diminish amid the acute stress principals face (Bauer et al., 2019). As leaders of complex organizations (Marsh et al., 2023), principals work long hours under intense pressure in scattered, multifaceted environments (Wang, 2022) and play a crucial role in the life of learning communities while experiencing heightened public scrutiny from various stakeholders (Marsh et al., 2023). Principal burnout is not surprising given their reports of long hours, administrative red tape, heightened stress levels, managing taxing workloads, and irregular and unreliable workdays (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022; Sebastian et al., 2024). According to Oplatka (2017), workload can be both quantitative and qualitative, and numerous factors influence it across industries. Wang (2022) also noted that the role of principals has grown considerably, with more governance responsibilities, the most demanding elements of which involve workload, time pressure, and cognitive demands. Similarly, data from Elomaa et al. (2023) showed that work overload, self-imposed strain, limited resources, and interpersonal conflicts were primary sources of principal stress. Analysis of principals' voices also revealed workload in the form of diverse

responsibilities, time constraints, inconsequential tasks, and incomplete job expectations (Oplatka, 2017).

The demands of the principalship undermine the quality of work and professional capabilities of school leaders (Wang, 2022). Work settings characterized by overwhelming workloads and high job demands can foster employee exhaustion and job pessimism and contribute to a diminished sense of accomplishment (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Organizational climate can contribute to positive employee behavior (Davies, 2022; Lan et al., 2020). Likewise, organizations play a vital role in harnessing job resources such as social support and operating standards that enhance self-efficacy and career advancement, along with circumventing overwhelming job demands such as excessive workload, role conflict, community fairness and values, and lack of autonomy (Simionato et al., 2019; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Wissel et al., 2022). Thus, school districts can help their principals in the most demanding elements of workload, time pressure, and cognitive demands by providing support and services geared to meet the individual needs of principals within their unique leadership contexts (Wang, 2022). De Jong et al. (2017) also emphasized the importance of addressing heavy demands coupled with impractical expectations, navigating challenging stakeholder relationships, maintaining a poor work-life balance, and the significance of compensation.

Incidents of Stress and Burnout

Stress and burnout are psychological phenomena that progress gradually, often due to difficulties in detection, as they exhibit indefinite symptoms and individuals' reluctance to acknowledge and report their struggles (Beausaert et al., 2016; Marsh et al., 2023). Principals report higher levels of stress than the thoroughly documented heightened stress levels communicated by teachers (Sebastian et al., 2024), despite principal burnout being considered a

prevalent issue in the educational system due to prolonged stress, heightened role demands, and limited autonomy (Su-Keene et al., 2024; Tikkanen et al., 2017). Occupational research related to stress and burnout in the educational field is well established, but most researchers focus on teacher stress and burnout rather than principal stress and burnout (Ionică et al., 2019; Diotaiuti et al., 2020), showing how principals can influence teacher attrition through supportive resources that mitigate the effect of job demands (Kaiser & Thompson, 2021). Burnout rates are high in education, especially among principals (Ionică et al., 2019; Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021). However, research has given more attention to teacher burnout than principal burnout, with comprehensive longitudinal studies of the demands and resources that contribute to leader well-being lacking in peer-reviewed publications of education, leadership, organization, occupational health, and psychology journals (Marsh et al., 2023).

School leaders are responsible for adhering to local, state, and federal directives (Leventis et al., 2017), and as their responsibilities grow, they often work with numerous stakeholders, which can increase principal stress (Sebastian et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2023). Indeed, workload and limited time to concentrate on teaching and learning are among the chief stressors reported by principals (Oplatka, 2017; See et al., 2023). The ever-changing landscape of education, along with pressures from increased accountability and supervision, to calls for instructional and culturally responsive leadership, has led to increased occupational stress, decreased job satisfaction, principal attrition, and various adverse health effects such as ischemia and cardiovascular problems (Diotaiuti et al., 2020). Researchers have also shown a host of other adverse health effects such as decreased engagement at work, depression, cognitive impairment, immunosuppression, adrenal fatigue, and metabolic and heart disease (Boyatzis et al., 2021; Luigi et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). In addition to this, one in five principals leave

their schools each year, naming high levels of stress as a primary factor, turnover being higher in schools serving low-income students of color, and 50% of new principals quit during their third year (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Kim & Pendola, 2022). Also, one quarter of principals in the state of Washington left their jobs by the close of the of the 2022-23 academic year (Washington STEM, 2024).

Job Isolation

Principals experience significant job isolation. Since the age of accountability, high school principals are expected to perpetually adapt to their environments while simultaneously leading the charge toward school improvement and meeting the diverse needs of all stakeholders (Bauer et al., 2019; De Jong et al., 2017). Consequently, school leaders may experience loneliness or isolation as they come to realize that school outcomes largely depend on their leadership (Howard & Mallory, 2008). Although educators and non-educators have experienced isolation in their profession for decades (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer et al., 2019), the 1990s revealed the adverse impact of principal isolation on their job performance (Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997). Nevertheless, research has been scant on how isolation affects the well-being, persistence, and effectiveness of principals (Bauer & Silver, 2018). Consistent with the findings of Frederici and Skaalvik (2012) that burnout, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction are associated with principals' motivation to quit, Bauer and Silver (2018) highlighted the connection between job isolation and burnout among new principals because job isolation can influence principals' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, perseverance, job burnout, and a desire to leave the profession. Researchers have presented three themes relating to principals' isolation: perceptions of accountability, stress and burnout, and diminished instructional leadership capabilities.

First, principals are considered personally accountable for school improvement. School leaders are often viewed as individually responsible for school improvement and therefore may feel alone because of expectations to make important decisions in isolation (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Denecker, 2019). According to Elomaa et al. (2023) and Perry et al. (2024), regardless of principals' desire to foster cooperative working environments, their position can be lonely due to the nature of their decision-making responsibilities, accountability for school performance, and expectations for following confidentiality procedures. Thus, Bauer & Brazer (2013) emphasized the value of networks and greater substantive assistance from district offices to enhance job satisfaction and decrease principal isolation, substantiating the findings of Watt's (2023) synthesis of research over the past decade that the absence of professional support for beginning principals amplified feelings of isolation, burnout, and attrition.

Second, researchers have indicated how social isolation leads to stress and burnout. Occupational social isolation and loneliness have been shown to influence job satisfaction and increase burnout within the workforce (Meese et al., 2024). Principals lead complex organizations (Marsh et al., 2023) that can present substantial, specific conditions that may play a role in an individual's susceptibility to environmental-related burnout (Kruse & Edge, 2023). School leaders work long hours under intense pressure in scattered and multifaceted environments, playing a crucial role in the life of their learning communities (Wang, 2022), while experiencing heightened public scrutiny from various stakeholders (Marsh et al., 2023). The demands of the principalship can negatively impact their competence in both professional and personal spheres, influencing their effectiveness and well-being (Wang, 2022). Stephenson and Bauer (2010) also found that isolation has a significant influence on physical and emotional burnout, which are important outcomes for the professional well-being of new principals.

Third, as the role of the principalship expands to encompass multifaceted social relationships, principals may experience feelings of isolation, which can impact their instructional leadership responsibilities (Bauer & Brazer, 2013). Principal isolation can impact the school setting, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, school improvement efforts, and overall leadership effectiveness (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Bauer et al., 2019). Considering that schools can present substantial, specific conditions that may contribute to an individual's susceptibility to environmental-related burnout (Kruse & Edge, 2023), principals require support and services tailored to meet their individual needs within their unique leadership contexts (Wang, 2022). Likewise, Perry et al. (2024) and Sibisanu (2024) highlighted the importance of district leadership providing principals with strong emotional and professional support systems to enhance their psychological well-being, decrease feelings of anxiety and stress, and improve perceptions of workplace safety. Correspondingly, Sibisanu et al. (2024) indicated that feelings of isolation and burnout can be diminished by cultivating a mutually supportive school atmosphere. In contrast, a lack of professional support for beginning principals can intensify feelings of isolation, burnout, and principal turnover. In summary, principals experience job isolation that stems from feelings of personal accountability, stress, and burnout, as well as diminished instructional leadership capabilities.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress may be a contributing factor to principal burnout because secondary traumatic stress is vicarious occupational stress encountered by doctors, first responders, some leadership groups, and anyone who works with victims of trauma in a supportive role (Kruse & Edge, 2023; Ludick & Figley, 2017). Traumatologist Christ Figley (1995) first introduced and explained secondary traumatic stress as stress from helping or

desiring to help people who were suffering or traumatized. Researchers define secondary traumatic stress as an acute stress reaction that can appear in the form of sleep problems and disturbing images from exposure to the trauma of others (Berger & Nott, 2024), as a consequence of secondary trauma and the ripple effect of trauma on individuals and their social circles (Castro Schepers & Young, 2022; Juárez & Becton, 2024).

Negative impacts of secondary traumatic stress were also noted by Lawson et al. (2019) and Wall (2024) to include work detachment and underperformance, with ripple effects on educators' personal spheres, potentially leading to educator attrition. Accordingly, Essary et al. (2020) suggested the following strategies for preventing or mitigating the effects of secondary traumatic stress in principals: (a) release time, (b) paperwork assistance, (c) workload support, and (d) employee assistance programs with therapeutic support. Since vicarious trauma or emotional exhaustion can occur in individuals interacting with people who have experienced trauma and the possibility of burnout and secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue coinciding with professionals exposed indirectly to trauma in their work (Castro Schepers & Young, 2022; Cieslak et al., 2014), the work of principals makes them prone to secondary traumatic stress and therefore the possibility of burnout.

DeMatthews et al. (2023) highlighted that a possible antecedent of burnout among novice principals could be secondary traumatic stress, therefore suggesting that the effects of secondary traumatic stress on principals should be a priority in principal training and professional development programs. Considering that secondary traumatic stress can affect the entire learning community and influence principal burnout, Wall (2024) and Lawson et al. (2019) suggested incorporating schoolwide secondary traumatic stress training, while DeMatthews et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of district and university partnerships taking a proactive approach to

addressing secondary traumatic stress. DeMatthews et al. (2023) further emphasized that infusing research best practices centered on burnout coping strategies is important for helping novice principals deal with secondary traumatic stress and workplace conditions.

Job Demands and Resources

The principalship is demanding (Hayes et al., 2022; Tikkanen et al., 2017). Despite international research having established the position of principal as being emotionally demanding and stressful (Denecker et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2022), principals are accountable for school transformation, the health and well-being of students and staff, and the leadership necessary for creating an environment conducive to student learning and achievement (Dussault& Thibodeau, 1997; Perry et al., 2024). Studies dating back to the 1980s have documented many stressors principals face (Mahfouz, 2020). Nevertheless, as work requirements and public scrutiny continue to mount, principals are expected to lead complex and demanding organizational environments with heightened job demands and limited resources, which can contribute to occupational stress, burnout, leadership ineffectiveness, and principal turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Mahfouz, 2020; Su-Keene et al., 2024). Researchers have presented three issues related to principals' job demands and resources including the impact of demands on work quality and professional capabilities, the effects of COVID-19, and the limited resources that hinder principal effectiveness.

First, the demands of the principalship can interfere with the work quality and professional capability of school leaders (Wang, 2022). Work settings characterized by overwhelming workloads and high job demands can foster employee exhaustion and job pessimism and contribute to a diminished sense of accomplishment (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Considering that organizational climate can contribute to positive employee behavior (Davies,

2022; Lan et al., 2020), and the role organizations play in harnessing job resources such as social support and operating standards that enhance self-efficacy and career advancement, as well as circumventing overwhelming job demands such as excessive workload, role conflict, community fairness and values, and lack of autonomy (Simionato et al., 2019; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Wissel et al., 2022), school district leaders can help principals in the most demanding elements of workload, time pressure, and cognitive demands by providing support and services geared to meet the individual needs of principals within their unique leadership contexts (Wang, 2022). Elomaa et al. (2023) also recommended that school district leaders and policymakers decrease workload and improve resources to assist principals in managing or coping with job responsibilities to mitigate the effects of mounting principal job demands. Elomaa et al. (2023) and Meese et al. (2024) highlighted further the importance of being mindful of the social aspects of principals' occupational well-being and how social connections can positively affect job performance and satisfaction.

Second, COVID-19 added to the stress and increasing job demands of principals (Zheng et al., 2022). Stress and impacts from shutdowns lead to the most significant worldwide disruption to education in modern times (Arastaman & Çetinkaya, 2022), affecting organizations and people universally (Brown et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2022). Consequently, with the rise of new jobs and occupational expectations, significant burdens were placed on teachers and principals together with instigating hygiene practices, transitioning to remote learning, inadequate staffing, and the needs of all students taking center stage (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Lücker et al., 2022). As for school leaders, 45% of principals indicated heightened plans to leave their positions in a 2020 survey conducted by the National Association of Secondary Principals (Virella, 2023).

Third, limited resources can also hinder principal effectiveness. Pindek et al. (2019) noted that organizational constraints, resulting from limited resources, can impact employee motivation and job performance, while also increasing their workload. Interestingly, constraints that appear to impact employees the most are not typically due to inadequate resources, but rather to supervisors, coworkers, and institutional practices (Pindek et al., 2019). Since researchers have shown the link between job demands and job resources with enhancing or hindering the subjective well-being of employees (Claes et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2019), school districts need to cultivate an environment that supports principals' positive perceptions and decreases their motivation to leave because occupational burnout is associated with job stress and a willingness to remain on the job (Lan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, since appreciation and incentive, limited support, rigid hierarchies, and perceptions of injustice are among the many organizational factors that can contribute to burnout (Simionato et al., 2019), school district leaders can cultivate a resource-oriented working environment for principals by minimizing constraints and promoting cooperative working conditions, autonomy, job crafting, and job redesign (Lesener et al., 2019). District leaders might also want to consider how different job features influence different job demands, which may necessitate multiple ways of managing stress in order to provide principals with contextualized support and service that accommodate their diverse needs (Wang (2022). Considering the profound impact on individuals' health and well-being, as well as the enduring effects of burnout (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Demerouti et al., 2021), organizations can also reduce burnout by enhancing psycho-social workplace environments, promoting employee engagement, augmenting job resources, and mitigating job demands (Wissell et al., 2022).

Regarding high school principals, researchers agree that principal stress and burnout are phenomena that require further study due to the vital leadership role principals play in nurturing sustainable education, their significant impact on stakeholders, and their general disregard in district policies, leadership preparation programs, and academic research. (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Dicke et al, 2022). Scholars do not fully understand how emotional exhaustion, the main component of burnout, impacts principal burnout (Dicke et al., 2022). Therefore, researchers are asking for subsequent studies to understand the breadth of principal burnout while considering their unique contexts and occupational demands (Sibisanu et al., 2024)

Factors Influencing Stress and Burnout for High School Principals

Chronic occupational stress is a pressing concern in education, potentially limiting principals' effectiveness (Su-Keene et al., 2024). Chronic stress promotes negative behaviors, thoughts, and problems linked to physical and psycho-social well-being, impeding successful school governance (Diotaiuti et al., 2020). Interestingly, principals report higher levels of stress than the thoroughly documented heightened stress levels communicated by teachers (Sebastian et al., 2024), with principal burnout being a prevalent issue in the educational system due to prolonged stress, heightened role demands, and limited autonomy (Beausaert et al., 2016; Tikkanen et al., 2017). As leaders of complex organizations (Marsh et al., 2023), principals work long hours under intense pressure in scattered and multifaceted environments (Wang, 2022) and play a crucial role in the life of learning communities while simultaneously experiencing heightened public scrutiny from various stakeholders (Marsh et al., 2023). Three factors identified by researchers that can promote principal stress and burnout include the changing landscape of education, increasing job demands, and role responsibilities.

Principals are often at the forefront of social and educational change (Wang, 2022). The dynamic landscape of education, combined with pressures from increased accountability and supervision, as well as calls for instructional and culturally responsive leadership, has led to increased occupational stress, decreased job satisfaction, and principal attrition (Diotaiuti et al., 2020). Indeed, the attrition rate of principals is 20% per year, naming heightened levels of stress as a fundamental cause, with elevated turnover rates prominent in high-poverty schools, and approximately half of newly appointed principals no longer being in their role by their third year (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Kim & Pendola, 2022; School Leaders Network, 2014). Also, in the state of this study 25% of the principal population left their positions at the conclusion of the 2022-2023 school year (Washington STEM, 2024).

Another factor influencing principal stress and burnout relates to role expectations. Researchers generally accept that stress influences organizational and individual well-being in multiple direct and indirect ways, with studies identifying similar connections to work-related stress in principals (Denecker, 2019). Principals face extremely high stress levels as they navigate their roles as important leaders of societal institutions, leading to an escalation of job demands, burnout, and turnover (Marsh et al., 2023). According to Mahfouz and Gordon (2021), principals may experience higher rates of burnout than those in other helping professions due to external pressure to improve student achievement scores. School leaders face continuous societal and educational changes every day, with mounting expectations to meet the diverse needs of students, address staff issues, and work with limited resources, all while dealing with escalating occupational demands and clashes between management and leadership (Wang, 2022). Hence, principals' health is at risk due to expectations placed on leaders to effectively implement externally imposed changes while simultaneously developing

improvement initiatives from within (Denecker et al., 2019). Perry et al (2024) also highlighted that the isolation principals often feel from the burden of being responsible for school improvement outcomes intensifies stress, anxiety, and maltreatment. Specifically, secondary principals occupy leadership roles that are highly complex and demanding, stemming from school improvement initiatives and elevated expectations (De Jong et al., 2017).

The heightened demands of the principalship can likewise increase occupational stress and burnout. The contemporary principalship is characterized by significant complexity (Diotaiuti et al., 2020; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2021), with job demands unlikely to diminish due to the acute stress principals face (Bauer et al., 2019). School leaders are responsible for adhering to local, state, and federal directives (Leventis et al., 2017) and mounting obligations that include working with numerous stakeholders, friction related to student affairs, and human resources management (Elomaa et al., 2023; Sebastian et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2023). Indeed, workload and limited time to concentrate on teaching and learning are among the primary sources of stress identified by principals (Oplatka, 2017; See et al., 2023). According to DeMatthews et al. (2021), school closures, reopening, and social distancing requirements associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated demands on the principalship, thereby necessitating a paradigm shift in understanding burnout among principals and school personnel more broadly. Karaevli (2024) and Mahfouz and Gordon (2021) also noted that factors contributing to principal burnout include challenges from various stakeholders, work overload, limited decision latitude, community fragmentation, and maltreatment. De Jong et al. (2017) further emphasized the importance of focusing on excessive demands, unrealistic expectations, a lack of support, and an imbalanced work-life dynamic within the principalship.

Given that school organizations can present substantial, specific conditions that may contribute to an individual's susceptibility to environmental-related burnout (Kruse & Edge, 2023), principals require support and services tailored to their individual needs within their unique leadership contexts (Wang, 2022). The findings of Perry et al. (2024) and Sibisanu et al (2024) stressed the importance of district leadership providing principals with emotional and professional support systems to enhance their psychological well-being, decrease feelings of anxiety and stress, and improve perceptions of workplace safety. Sibisanu et al. (2024) reiterated that feelings of isolation and burnout can be diminished by cultivating a mutually supportive school atmosphere. In contrast, the lack of professional support can intensify feelings of isolation, burnout, and principal turnover (Sibisanu et al., 2024).

Summary

In considering stress, scholars agree that occupational stress is ubiquitous across 21st-century work environments, impacting public health worldwide (Lovern et al., 2024; Mulugeta et al., 2021), with factors such as toxic work environments, excessive workload, decision latitude, career advancement challenges, relationship problems with supervisors or coworkers, and numerous others contributing to workplace stress (Birhanu et al., 2018; Colligan & Higgins, 2006). However, scholars do not fully understand the specific characteristics or broader influences of stress, nor the ways to reduce stress or support individuals in rejuvenating and flourishing (Boyatzis et al., 2021; Mustafa et al., 2020). Given that occupational stress has become a risk factor for adverse health outcomes for individuals and organizations (Kaveh et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024), employee stress and well-being are important topics for organizations and researchers internationally (Gameiro et al., 2020). Thus, Ganster et al. (2024) and other scholars recommend future research on how individuals respond to and cope with stress,

especially during periods of overwhelming stress analogous to COVID-19 or threats to racial or social identity. Suggested avenues for further investigation also include developing strategies and best practices to cultivate supervisor and collegial support, career growth, and decision latitude, thereby fostering increased job control through individual resource development (Foti et al., 2023).

Occupational burnout is recognized worldwide as a concept indicative of mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to work-related issues (Hadžibajramović et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2021). Although burnout has been defined as a job-induced syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment (Bianchi et al., 2019), it lacks a unified definition, which can hinder the identification of its antecedents. Despite the broad range of definitions for burnout, there is mutual understanding among scholars concerning the concept, as most agree that exhaustion plays a key role in the burnout syndrome (Demerouti et al., 2021; Klusmann et al., 2021), with burned-out individuals experiencing increasing levels of exhaustion and cynicism due to lingering and excessive occupational stress (Bayes et al., 2021; Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017). Considering that burnout negatively affects individuals, organizations, and society (Ahola et al., 2017; Parker & Tavella, 2021), researchers admit consensus is lacking on the burnout construct and how to define, operationalize, diagnose, and treat burnout (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2023; De Beer et al., 2024). Scholars do not fully understand the relationship between depression, anxiety, burnout, and their coinciding features (Bianchi et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021). Therefore, scholars are calling for more research concerning the relationship between burnout, depression, and anxiety, especially in the post-COVID-19 era (Bianchi et al., 2021; Crudden et

al., 2023), because researchers investigating the impacts of burnout interventions can benefit from generally accepted practices in defining and assessing burnout (Ahola et al., 2017).

Concerning high school principals, researchers agree that principal stress and burnout warrant further study due to the vital leadership role principals play in nurturing sustainable education, their impact on stakeholders, and their frequent disregard in district policies, leadership preparation programs, and academic research. (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Dicke et al., 2022). However**,** scholars do not fully understand how emotional exhaustion, the main component of burnout, impacts principal burnout (Dicke et al., 2022). Consequently, researchers are calling for subsequent studies to better understand the breadth of principal burnout, taking into account their unique contexts and occupational demands (Sibisanu et al., 2024). Therefore, this descriptive qualitative study explored the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025, as well as the factors influencing their decision to leave or continue in the profession.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

The principalship is more demanding than ever. The general problem is that the varying demands of the principalship create stress and burnout, causing principals to quit their jobs. The specific problem is that until researchers understand the specific factors that contribute to principal burnout, those who serve principals will not be able to support and retain them effectively. Therefore, I used a descriptive qualitative study to explore the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. Overall, this study aimed to explore "What are some of the causes of strain and burnout in high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state?" With this overall aim in mind, this study pursued the following specific research questions:

RQ1. How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?

RQ2. How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?

RQ3. How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?

This chapter included the research method, design, participants, and data analysis methods of this study.

Research Method

This study employed qualitative methodology. Qualitative inquiry is a widely respected method for conducting research worldwide (Morse, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). This method provides researchers with a structured approach that is deeply intertwined with the human experience, as a fundamental tenet of qualitative research is that humans shape their perception of reality through social interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In contrast to quantitative research, which aims to gather precise details and accurate measurements, qualitative methodology seeks to gain an understanding of complicated reality in specific contexts (Queirós

et al., 2017). That is, qualitative research aims to learn about or interpret meaning as constructed by humans by analyzing data extracted from human beings' words and observations (Adler, 2022; Phillips et al., 2024). Hall and Liebenberg (2024) highlighted the value of descriptive studies, noting that they offer a practical and results-oriented approach, with strengths in their direct approach, focus on participants' points of view, and adaptability to various research areas. Creswell and Creswell (2023) further emphasized that the descriptive method in qualitative research is a design approach in which the researcher pays close attention to the data, using minimal frameworks and interpretation to understand it, and then categorizes the data into themes. Because qualitative research values how meaning is constructed and how people make sense of their lives, uncovering and interpreting these meanings is one of the primary purposes of a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Therefore, my rationale for employing a descriptive qualitative study rather than quantitative methods was threefold. First, descriptive research methods enabled me to stay close to participants' words and perspectives, rather than relying primarily on numerical data typically associated with quantitative studies (Adler, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Second, I utilized a small sample size to explore factors contributing to burnout among high school principals in Washington state because data saturation is affected by sample size and is unique to each study (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Thus, the findings of this study are limited in scope and may not apply to a broader population of principals (Mulisa, 2022). Third, Kraft et al. (2020) drew attention to how descriptive exploratory methodology can assist researchers in capturing the feelings and thoughts through participants' voices, thereby aligning with the focus of this study, which explored factors contributing to principal burnout without integrating other methodologies or frameworks (Kraft et al., 2020).

Research Design

There are numerous forms of qualitative research including case study, ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. In contrast to the basic descriptive qualitative design employed in this study, Creswell and Creswell (2023) and Marshall et al. (2022) emphasized qualitative methodologies such as mixed methods, narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies, among others. I could cite numerous reasons for choosing a descriptive qualitative study over those mentioned above. However, I provided three.

First, grounded theory is relevant for studies that require more research due to a limited understanding of a phenomenon, where theory is formulated from within or revealed by the data (Bloomberg, 2023). In this study on reducing burnout among high school principals, theory does not need to be constructed because research has shown that occupational stress can lead to a psychological response known as burnout (Akirmak & Ayla, 2021; Drüge et al., 2021). Moreover, to understand employee well-being, the first published papers on the consequences of job stress emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, culminating in a hundred-plus theories, models, and frameworks (Cîrşmari et al., 2023; Moon et al., 2024). Therefore, I did not use grounded theory for this study.

Second, when employing an ethnographic approach, researchers usually study organizations, cultural groups, communities, or grassroots movements through long-term engagement in the setting and by employing diverse data collection techniques (Marshall et al., 2022). Ethnography focuses on interpretation through a cultural lens (Punch, 2014). Although ethnography can provide researchers with deep insights into a phenomenon and opportunities to investigate emerging research, it is a time-intensive approach requiring an in-depth understanding of the subject area (Queirós et al., 2017). As mentioned by Merriam and Tisdell

(2016), ethnographic researchers gather data primarily from observing participants in their specific context. Therefore, since this study involves interviewing 16 high school principals through virtual interviews in Washington state in 2025, I ruled out ethnography as a qualitative methodological design.

Finally, I concurred with Queirós et al. (2017) that there is no one-size-fits-all method for conducting educational research. In the case of mixed methods research, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that this research approach has developed and progressively gained acceptance. Mixed-methods research approaches can serve as an operational framework that amalgamates qualitative and quantitative approaches (Queirós et al., 2017). However, I chose not to use mixed-methods research because this study focused on collecting qualitative data rather than quantitative data, which are central features of mixed-methods research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Moreover, a case study was not pertinent to my study as I did not study burnout in a specific school district or group of principals within the same district. Likewise, because I was not conducting research to study the lived experiences of high school principals to answer questions such as, "what is it like to experience burnout?" (Peoples, 2021) a phenomenological approach was not utilized. Additionally, this study examined the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals in Washington state in 2025, which limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of principals (Queirós et al., 2017).

Notwithstanding the merits of the above qualitative approaches, I conducted a basic interpretive or basic qualitative study because it is an approach used in qualitative research in the applied fields of education, social work, counseling, business, exercise science, and so on (Devenport et al., 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers typically employ a basic descriptive approach rather than specifying other methods, such as ethnography, case study,

narrative analysis, or grounded theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), when the study aims to provide precise descriptions of phenomena based on proximity to the data (Sandelowski, 2010). Additionally, Percy et al. (2015) highlighted that basic qualitative inquiry is a viable methodological approach when other qualitative research designs are unsuitable for a particular study's focus. Considering that my study explored burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025, a basic descriptive qualitative design focusing on collecting and analyzing data through interviews (Busetto et al., 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2023) was appropriate for this research.

Participants

In this study, I employed purposeful sampling to select a diverse population of high school principals, thereby recruiting participants who represent a comprehensive range of viewpoints and realities (Phillips et al., 2024). Therefore, I selected 16 principals for this study. Given my background in teaching and school administration, I approached the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) to obtain sample information on high school principals. I created a list of potential participants based on input from the AWSP. Participants were also recruited through snowball sampling and from my professional contacts, which I acquired throughout this study. Since I am aware that ethical research involves human beings and requires transparency in informing participants about the purpose of my study including the potential drawbacks, advantages, and possible outcomes (Phillips et al., 2024; Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022), I contacted principals to explain the purpose of the burnout study and data collection procedures to inquire if they were willing to participate, as noted in Appendix B. Current high school principals (rural, urban, suburban) or those who had served in the role in Washington state within the last five years were included in this study. Thus, principals who have

been out of the profession for more than five years, as well as elementary, middle, and private school principals, were excluded from this study.

Hennink et al. (2019) and Malone et al. (2016) noted that estimating sample size is important in research planning. However, determining the sample size is a complex issue in qualitative research, sparking debate about what constitutes an appropriate sample size and the meaning of saturation (Mthuli et al., 2022; Sim et al., 2018). Researchers tend to value saturation because different factors influence sample size and data collection in qualitative research (Mason, 2010). Generally, saturation refers to the number of interviews conducted in a study and the amount of data that can be collected from these interviews. According to Busetto et al. (2020) and Saunders et al. (2018), saturation occurs when data collection has reached a satisfactory point and further data collection will not yield additional insights, potentially leading to repetition in subsequent sampling. In contrast to data saturation, which determines sample size and varies across qualitative studies, power calculation determines sample size in quantitative research (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Nevertheless, I adhered to my university's dissertation requirements by conducting interviews with 16 participants.

According to the Association of Washington School Principals (M. Bruhy, personal communication, February 19, 2025), 266 of the 344 high school principals who are members provided gender information to the organization (99 female, 166 male, and one non-binary). Further demographic data showed 211 principals having provided ethnicity information, which includes three principals identifying as Native Indian/Native Alaskan, five identifying as Asian, seven identifying as black/African American, 11 as Hispanic/Latino, two as native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, five identifying as two or more races, and 178 principals

identifying as white (M. Bruhy, personal communication, February 19, 2024) Table 3.1 presents the demographics of AWSP.

Table 3.1

Participant Demographics

Demographic Identifier	Frequency
Gender	
Male	166 (62%)
Female	99 (37%)
Non-Binary	1 (.38%)
Total	266
Ethnicity	
American Indian / Native Alaskan	3 (84%)
Asian	5 (2.3%)
Black / African American	7 (3.3%)
Hispanic / Latino	11 (5.2%)
Native Hawaiian	2 (.94%)
Two or more races	5 (2.3%)
White	178 (84%)
Total	211

Note. AWSP members opt in to provide demographic information of their choosing. Those providing their gender was 266 and 211 members provided ethnicity data.

I recruited and interviewed 16 principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state through the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP). This organization distributed recruitment through a written agreement for me (see Appendix B). First, I distributed an invitation message (see Appendix C) to principal contacts known to me personally and professionally outside my employment. Potential participants who viewed the recruitment message clicked a link to an interest survey that provided informed consent and asked them to schedule their interview (see Appendix D).

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the interview process by protecting participants' personal information. After obtaining IRB approval and participants' consent, I followed the suggestions of Denny and Weckesser (2022) and Belotto (2018) and recorded

interviews verbatim. This was done using Zoom transcription. Then I checked the interview transcriptions by watching and listening to the interviews numerous times. This approach was in agreement with the claim by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) that data analysis commences at the outset of a study, with word-for-word transcription offering the best, albeit laborious, method for data examination and interpretation.

Protecting participants' identity and role in the research process is paramount (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Hence, to further safeguard confidentiality, I implemented guidance from Kamya et al. (2024) and Ngozwana (2018), excluding sensitive information from recordings and analyses by assigning unique transcript identifiers or codes that are only clear to me. All participants were given pseudonyms instead of their real names to protect their identities. Additionally, all collected data was stored through a password-protected OneDrive cloud account, secured by my university login.

Data Analysis Method

Qualitative data analysis in this study aimed to identify themes that document perspectives, experiences, and motivating factors related to high school principal burnout. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), descriptive qualitative research involves closely following the data without relying on numerous data analysis frameworks. Considering this, I collected and analyzed data from interview notes, Zoom video recordings, and, if necessary, follow-up emails. In my analysis, I used ATLAS.ti to code data from my Zoom-recorded transcripts.

Interview questions were used to explore factors contributing to principal burnout and identify themes that could lead to potential strategies for reducing it. Following the

recommendation of Taheri Ezbarami et al. (2017), I read transcripts multiple times while listening to the audio recordings to thoroughly explore the data.

Thematic analysis is an effective technique used across various philosophical and conceptual frameworks that enables researchers to analyze and interpret key trends within data sets (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Likewise, thematic analysis is a method for identifying patterns embedded within and throughout data sets about participants' perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Therefore, I conducted a thematic analysis outlined by Woodall (2016). First, I coded the data line by line. This process helped me control my assumptions and avoid imposing abstract representations of code. By coding this way, I described what the principals told me and did not interpret anything; I described what was happening (Research with Dr. Kriukow, 2018). Punch (2014) also noted that line-by-line coding, or opening coding, is the initial stage of thematic data analysis, enabling the extraction of key information from the data. Next, I broke down the codes into focused categories. Finally, I broke down focused codes and focused categories into themes.

The aforementioned coding process enabled me to analyze voluminous data in greater detail, thus leading to the reframing of information and the discovery of emergent patterns or themes (Belotto, 2018). I also employed the six-step process laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) by (a) familiarizing myself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report.

Limitations

Bloomberg (2023) and Marshall et al. (2022) emphasized that study limitations are inherent to all planned research projects and can serve as possible hurdles, stemming from the researchers' inability to control study conditions. This descriptive qualitative study had the following limitations. First, I recognized that participants respond differently during in-person interviews than in other modes of interviewing, thus presenting a possible limitation. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), limitations intrinsic to interviews include (1) the filtering of information through participants' viewpoints, (2) the gathering of information in a set place rather than natural surroundings, (3) the researcher's proximity could encourage prejudiced answers, and (4) the varying expressiveness and understanding of interviewees.

Second, Söylemez (2023) emphasized the importance of applying ethical principles and rules to enhance the reliability and trustworthiness of qualitative research, addressing underlying concerns associated with this methodology. Neutrality is one criterion for increasing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Kakar et al., 2023). This entails the researcher's impartiality while examining and drawing conclusions from the data. Therefore, when collecting and compiling key points from the data, I used direct quotes from participants (Kakar et al., 2023). Ethics in this study were also enhanced by protecting participants' identities and by complying with Phillips et al.'s (2024) suggestions to exclude personal details when directly quoting participants.

Finally, I acknowledged this descriptive qualitative study could have been conducted using different qualitative or quantitative methodologies (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008; Marshall et al., 2022). For instance, future research could potentially employ diverse sampling techniques, such as stratified or cluster sampling, to assess relevance through sampling and take a more

expansive view of leadership or educational contexts (Cîrşmari et al., 2023). Moreover, because I collected data from public high school principals in Washington state, they were the only principals in this study.

Biases

There was a potential for bias that threatens the validity of this study, due to the exploratory nature of qualitative research and its fundamental differences from quantitative research (Cypress, 2017; Sica, 2006). Although bias is challenging to eliminate in research (Siddiqui, 2011), I acknowledged the importance of clarifying my positionality (Miles et al., 2020). Considering my background as a teacher and principal, I recognized that a conflict of interest could arise from the previous experiences and assumptions I brought to this study (Phillips et al., 2024), potentially leading to data slanting in favor of my biases toward principal burnout. To mitigate the effects of personal bias, I was aware of the most common documented forms of systematic bias such as information and selection bias (Malone et al., 2016). I accomplished this by accurately presenting findings in that I selected women, people of color, and men who were representative of the high principal population in Washington state.

In this descriptive qualitative study, I explored the factors that contribute to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. As a qualitative researcher, I recognized the challenge of understanding how my positionality, bias, and prior assumptions could impact the development of knowledge. I also understood how positionality can affect the research process, as subjectivity can influence qualitative research (Folkes, 2023; Phillips et al., 2024).

This study incorporated reflexivity and bracketing to further mitigate bias and acknowledge my potential influence in data collection and analysis (Kakar et al., 2023). These

techniques helped me identify and momentarily put aside my assumptions and prejudices about principal burnout by seeking to understand participants' viewpoints and experiences. Dodgson (2019) noted that reflexivity has been expressed in the literature of diverse disciplines as a means through which to increase the rigor and quality of qualitative research. I understood the importance of being critically reflexive throughout the research process (Dodgson, 2019), for it provided a way to question assumptions related to my own subjectivities (Rose & Johnson, 2020), and how these could influence everyone involved with this study, including the research process (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). Therefore, following suggestions from Cypress (2017) and Korstjens and Moser (2018), I incorporated reflexive journaling and reflexive notes when conducting interviews and analyzing data to help me reflect on and be observant of my biases and experiences about principal burnout, thereby enhancing the reliability of this study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Moreover, I conducted bracketing interviews with colleagues to discuss and address potential biases, as I was aware that bracketing could help mitigate bias in data analysis and interpretation (Stahl & King, 2020).

Although the trustworthiness of qualitative data has been questioned (Kakar et al., 2023), researchers generally agree on the criteria for evaluating qualitative research. For example, Korstjens and Moser (2018) and Adler (2022) pointed out the following criterion used by qualitative researchers for evaluating and ensuring the trustworthiness of their studies: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, (d) confirmability, and (e) reflexivity. Ataro (2020) also emphasized that validity can be strengthened throughout the research process, especially during data collection and analysis, by employing strategies such as internal auditing from start to finish, reader resonance, validation by research participants, or member checking, and bracketing.

In assessing the trustworthiness of this study, I followed the suggestions of the above authors by incorporating the following five methods: first, I used member checking, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement to enhance credibility. Second, I used an audit trail comprising process logs, peer debriefings, and a coding record to enhance dependability and confirmability. Third, I incorporated reflexive notes and journaling to improve reflexivity. Fourth, I enhanced transferability by providing a comprehensive description of the context, location, and participants studied. Finally, I followed the recommendations of Cloutier and Ravasi (2021) and incorporated tables to increase transparency when gathering and interpreting information, as well as to efficiently assemble and evaluate data.

Additionally, I understood that for research to be relevant, it must be trustworthy (Adler, 2022). Thus, I demonstrated trustworthiness in every stage of data collection and analysis by ensuring that themes and ideas could be traced back to the original raw data (Woodall, 2016). I also improved the transparency of my study by employing the practices identified by Stahl and King (2020) and Adler (2022). These included (a) reflectivity, (b) triangulation, (c) bracketing, (d) making raw data available to research consumers, and (e) reporting data and data analysis in tabular format.

Delimitations

Delimitations help researchers set the boundaries and limits of their studies (Bent, 2016; Bloomberg, 2023). Delimitations are essentially reasons for conducting a research study in a specific way rather than others (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Consequently, I employed the following delimitations in this descriptive qualitative study to understand factors influencing burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025.

First, one delimitation was the use of high school principals in Washington state. Due to the nature of this study, private and elementary school principals, along with vice principals, were excluded as participants. However, researchers such as Denecker (2019) pointed out the need for future research centered on the work experience of vice principals. Accordingly, the findings and results of this study may or may not apply to other subjects, leadership contexts, or future periods.

A second delimitation was the use of convenience and purposive non-probability sampling. These techniques were used to explore burnout among high school principals. A quantitative study could have employed cluster, systematic, or simple random probability-based sampling techniques, offering a broader range of principals in different leadership contexts.

Third, I conducted interviews with 16 high school principals in this study, each with varying degrees of experience, to achieve saturation. I was aware that determining an appropriate sample size is challenging (Kelly et al., 2010) because each study has different expectations for data saturation, which, in turn, affects sample size determination (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Disagreement exists in the research community regarding the concept of sample size and how qualitative researchers determine adequate sample size (Vasileiou et al., 2018), with Tutar et al. (2024) emphasizing that the absence of established guidelines for determining sample size in qualitative research diverts attention away from scientific research and places the decision on the researcher. Hence, I deliberately controlled sample size criteria at the expense of other qualitative or quantitative methods (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Summary

This chapter described the research methodology, design, participants, data analysis method, limitations, biases, and delimitations of this descriptive qualitative study that explored

factors contributing to burnout among high school principals in Washington state in 2025. Before commencing with data collection, IRB approval and subsequent informed consent from participants was obtained. I collected data from 16 principals through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom's recording features.

I chose a descriptive qualitative study because this methodology offered an upfront approach that centers on participants' perspectives and is adaptable to diverse research fields (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). This methodology also enabled me to stay close to the data, thereby reducing the need for frameworks to analyze and categorize it into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Therefore, this study used a basic descriptive qualitative design to explore the phenomenon of principal burnout, focusing on data collection and analysis through interviews (Busetto et al., 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Interview questions explored factors contributing to principal burnout and identified themes that could lead to strategies to reduce it. Since thematic analysis is employed across many philosophical and conceptual frameworks to identify key trends within datasets (Kiger & Varpio, 2020) and to explore participants' perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2017), I incorporated methods for conducting thematic analysis as outlined by Woodall (2016). Adhering to insights from Creswell and Creswell (2023) and the importance of protecting the identity of participants during the research process, this study safeguarded participants' confidentiality by excluding sensitive information while recording and analyzing data by issuing unique transcript identifiers or codes only clear to me (Kamya et al., 2024; Ngozwana, 2018). Additionally, collected data was stored through a password-protected OneDrive cloud account, secured by my university login.

Participants' confidentiality was maintained throughout the interview process by protecting their personal information. After obtaining IRB approval and participants' consent, I

followed the suggestions of Denny and Weckesser (2022) and Belotto (2018) and began interviewing, recording, and transcribing interviews verbatim. This process aligned with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) claim that data analysis commences at the outset of a study with word-for-word transcription, offering the best, albeit laborious, method for data examination and interpretation.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Principals in the 21st century experience unprecedented demands and highly nuanced work settings (Diotaiuti et al., 2020; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2021). The general problem is that the varying demands of the principalship create stress and burnout that causes principals to quit their jobs. Consequently, the specific problem is that school districts, policymakers, principal preparation programs, and principals need to learn more about the factors contributing to principal burnout to implement preventive measures that reduce or minimize its effects. The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to explore the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025. The following chapter presents the findings.

This study involved interviewing 16 principals from different school districts in Washington state in 2025. The following table provides a portrait of each participant. While the following presents the district's size by the number of students enrolled, participants' confidentiality is protected by generalizing the district's size into three categories: small (200-2500 students), medium (2501-6000 students), and large (6000-52,000 students).

Table 4.1

Participant Portraits

Participant	Gender	Years of Experience	Size District
1	M	5	Small
2	M	16	Small
3	M	3	Medium
4	F	5	Small
5	M	21	Small
6	M	20	Large
7	M	16	Large
8	M	8	Large
9	M	18	Small
10	M	16	Medium
11	F	7	Medium

12	F	1	Small
13	F	5	Small
14	F	4	Large
15	M	10	Medium
16	M	6	Small

Presentation of Findings

Three primary research questions led this research. The following sections explored the emerging findings for each research question. In all, 10 themes are discussed. The following table presents the categories and themes that emerged from the analysis.

Table 4.2

Categories and Themes

Categories (Subtheme)	**Themes**
Staff issues Student issues	Strained by the Complexity and Intensity of Daily Job Demands
Unpredictable schedule Beyond the "workday"	Strained by Daily Scheduling Demands
"It's my job!" Expecting the unexpected	Maintain a "Do the Work" Approach
Lack of self-care Taking work home	Lack Work-Life Balance
Knowing strengths and weaknesses Self-awareness and being true to oneself	Rely on Their Skills, Abilities, and Attributes as Primary Resources
Trust Freedom to do the job	Empowered by Supervisor Support and Feedback
Financial and benefits compensation Suggestions made to improve	Fair Compensation
Workload strain due to students impacted by trauma Workload strain in working with staff to aid students in trauma	Indirect Exposure to Trauma Increases Workload
Emotional strain due to students impacted by trauma Emotional strain in working with staff to aid students in trauma	Indirect Exposure to Trauma Creates Emotional Strain
Suicide, homicide, sexual assault, and self-harm Staff lack understanding and awareness of the impacts of trauma	Challenged by Complexities of Working with Traumatized Students

As seen in the table, there are 10 themes. Each section below explores these themes.

The first research question asked, "How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?" Through the analysis, the four themes that emerged were: strain due to the complexity

and intensity of daily job demands; principal strain resulting from daily scheduling demands; principals' tendency to maintain a 'do-the-work' approach (a can-do attitude with a positive outlook); and a lack of work-life balance. The following explores each of these themes.

Strained by the Complexity and Intensity of Daily Job Demands

All principals in this study reported feeling strained by the complexity and intensity of daily job demands related to staff and student issues.

Staff Issues

Principals described strain arising from the daily job demands connected to staff issues. For example, all participants described conflict management as a necessary aspect of their jobs. In describing the strain associated with their job demands, P1 emphasized, “My job ends up being heavier because if I have staff that don’t effectively communicate and interact with people that have been through trauma, then that creates more conflict, more discipline, [and] it affects school morale [and] school climate.” P10 also commented on the reality of diverse stakeholder needs and the conflict that can arise when they pointed out,

> One of the challenges of this role is that you have demands from your district office. You have demands from your teachers’ union. You have demands from parents. You have demands from kids and staff, and sometimes they're in conflict. And so you [do] as best you can, trying to shepherd your organization through that without throwing people under the bus. And that’s a hard job.

Specifically, P1 and P10 recognized the toll that conflict management took on them, thereby demonstrating an understanding of the inherent conflicts within the principalship and the strain they can cause.

As noted by P12, P3, P6, and P4, another challenging staff issue involved staff not understanding the demands of the principal’s role. When sharing about their commitment to working before and after contractual hours so they could be available for staff, P12 declared,

> I think probably what folks wouldn't understand, and frankly, I didn't either before sitting in at least the assistant principal or Dean of Students role, is the number of demands of this position. Not just okay. Here is the job as it sits on paper, or how we think it looks. But I mean the demands. I could have like… I had somebody from the utility district call me the last couple weeks of school because they're going to be doing some work over the summer on campus, and so I had to respond to the utility district. And then, of course, parents, teachers, students, and the coaches come in, or somebody who wants to use your facility, or the library wants to partner with the community, or the community library wants to partner with us. Anyway, just the sheer number of different entities or stakeholders that public schools and administrators face.

That is, P12 demonstrated their awareness of the time required to meet the needs of various stakeholders, as well as stakeholders' limited understanding of the demands of their position.

Misconceptions can also occur when staff see the principal in the halls or lunchroom during passing periods, making assumptions that the principal stands around, as noted by P3 when they remarked,

> I think a lot of people don't understand because they see me standing in the halls. But what I'm doing is supervising kids during passing time in the bathroom. So, I get up and leave whatever I'm doing to supervise just because we need adults out. And I think a lot of people just see me standing around. But they don't see [that] I'm stopping what I'm doing to go out to supervise.

Thus, P3 acknowledged misconceptions held by staff and other stakeholders regarding their role. This awareness of staff misconceptions about the principalship and the array of entities with which principals must regularly interact was recognized by P6 when they observed,

> I don't think anybody who's other than a principal understands the load that we carry. So people look at it from their own perspective. So security. The only thing they care about is security stuff. Counselors. The only thing they care about is counseling stuff. They don't understand the broad scope of everything that we have to do day in and day out, and the wide variety of things.

That is, P6 pointed out that while many people have specific focuses on a school campus, staff often do not realize that principals face far more complex issues and situations than most staff do.

P4 echoed the sentiments of P12, P3, and P6 when they shared their thoughts on staff misconceptions about what a typical day looked like as a principal:

> So it's funny. You'll get an email, or someone will call, and I think the perception is that I must just be sitting at my desk with nothing to do. Because oftentimes they expect that if they show up at the front office that I can meet with them right then. Or I'm at the other end of my phone line, and I can take their call right then. So I think that's the misconception. And if I got to do my job during the day and actually take care of the paperwork piece of it and those things, I wouldn't have so many late nights and early mornings. And I could actually get my job done. That's not the reality.

Specifically, P4 emphasized that people usually perceive the principal as someone who can easily stop what they are doing and meet any given demands because they have lots of time on their hands.

Student Issues

According to all participants in this study, an additional daily job demand that strains high school principals is student issues. One of these student issues was pointed out by P15 when discussing the impact of working with trauma-impacted students:

> I think when you're dealing with high-trauma individuals, more is required. More emotional control is required, more time is required, more mental acuity is required because of the complexity of their needs and the complexity of the solutions you may have to work through, and the complexity of the bureaucracies that you have to navigate outside of that in order to find ways to best help that particular student. And so students, when they're affected by trauma, whether it's poverty, systemic racism, physical or emotional abuse, homelessness, learning disabilities, or physical disabilities, those things require more of us.

In their description of the life of a principal, the comments of P9 resonated with those of P15 when they shared,

> There are times when the work can take it out of you, and there are times when the work is what keeps you going. You know when I think about the hard parts of the job it usually has to do with… an employee issue, a disciplinary issue, or loss of a loved one. House fire. Those things happen. I've been through all of that, you know, lost numerous kids. And, it's my 14th year at [my school], and I probably had an empty chair at eight graduations, you know. And so those things weigh on you as a human. And so that's the hard part of the job.

Both P15 and P9 essentially said that the complexity and intensity of working with trauma-impacted students added to their workload and required more of them emotionally, thereby increasing job strain.

When considering the various student issues that high school principals must address, ensuring the safety and security of all students is paramount. For example, P1 stated, "Student safety and school safety issues, you know, have to take priority." Likewise, P7 mentioned, "Safety is the most important thing. I just can't even fathom losing a kid from some incident, and I wasn't here to help. So, I don't miss a lot of work."

Ensuring the safety and security of all students often involves discipline. As they considered an example connected to student discipline, P5 discussed the complex nature of a hazing incident and how it impacted them when they stated,

> There was a hazing incident where some football players tied younger ones up with rope and threw them into the shower… Nobody was saying anything about anything. One of them was a school board member's kid that was one of the kids that I had to call in for the hazing. Other school employees' children were either involved in the hazing or were one of the victims… Everyone was lying. Nobody wasn't telling the truth. Everybody was trying to shield themselves and/or trying to protect others… And all it ended up doing was destroying any political capital I had because you don't go after football, and so because I had gone after football and I had gone after board members' kids and I had done something that had shaken everything up and making everything unpopular, it kind of ended up hurting me as an administrator and as a person.

In their explanation of the student hazing incident, P5 alluded to one of many challenging issues related to ensuring school safety and security, and to how the discipline administered negatively affected them, increasing their workload and subsequent strain.

Similarly, when reflecting on the complexity and intensity of student issues, P8 provided an example of the time and effort involved with students vaping and how student issues like vaping diminished their self-efficacy:

> So if you have, you know, vaping that's setting off alarms and you're trying to catch kids or diminish how many of those happen, or quit losing so much instructional time to it, you work hard towards that. You use technology. You equip your safety and security folks, and you keep data on how we're getting faster at it. We're getting there less often. But still, every time you hear an alarm, you're like, oh man, that's on me, and that's how I feel. Anyway, my best solution was not enough.

In essence, P8 discussed how the complexity and intensity of their daily job demands related to student issues affected them and contributed to their strain.

Strained by Daily Scheduling Demands

Every principal in this study described being strained by their daily scheduling demands. The unpredictability of principals' schedules can cause strain because they are often expected to adjust their previous plans to meet various needs such as addressing staff issues, conflict management, problem-solving, parent concerns, student issues involving fights or vandalism, and other safety and security concerns. In discussing what being a high school principal was like, P11 shared,

> You can't go into this job thinking that it's going to be the same every day, and you can't go into this job thinking you're going to have set hours. It's going to be stressful. We work in a people business. And so people are unpredictable and things just change. And there's a lot of emotion involved. We need the school to be safe. So there's a lot of emotional and mental wear and tear on you. Big things that happen like students pass away of a drug overdose. You have violence that happens out in the community. That isn't part of your school. But your kids go to school, and so that impacts you. Fights in the building. I mean there's just things. So I would say there's an emotional and mental component. And then the physical components of just the sheer number of hours that you put in as an administrator.

P2's discussion on the life of a principal also concurred with comments by P11 when they declared,

> I guess I could use an analogy that you're almost like a firefighter. And you're just running around trying to put out fires before they get too big. It's worrisome. It's hard. It's really hard. You address things as they come. 90% of the time, you are cleaning up somebody else's mess, whether a student mess, a parent mess, whatever it is, and at any given time, you have no idea what's going to come on the phone, going to walk through the front door, or what email it is.

That is, both P 11 and P12 acknowledged the reality of competing demands within their daily schedules and how these affected them, thereby contributing to their job strain.

Unpredictable Schedule

A high school principal's schedule is unpredictable due to numerous challenges, ranging from the pressing needs of students, staff, parents, community members, and others. This unpredictability can create strain and potentially burnout. As P14 communicated, "You can have a completely empty calendar when you walk into the school day, and you [know] it's going to blow up in your face." Daily scheduling demands can also create unpredictability from the start of the day to its end. For example, P4 communicated how the unpredictability of their schedule affected their self-efficacy when they reported,

> By the time I get to school…It's all hands on all day. And then there are things that you know you can't. You can't just leave for the next day when you're done. Like there's a CPS call. I don't ever feel comfortable like not passing that on, just because if something happened to me that message didn't get sent... So there are times at the end of the day when it's just like, Well, I'm going to be here another two hours because I have to communicate with teachers before that kid comes tomorrow. That this situation happened, or I have to let them like some things you just can't get done because of the situations in the day. And so it impacts me because that takes my evening. And then I'm stressed out. And I'm not getting to see my own kids, which you know I'm loving other people's children. But I need to be home for mine, too, because we have five. And so that impacts [me]. Then the stress of like I have an expectation for myself and the things that I do, and how I support our staff. And so when I'm not able to do it like that's stressful, [a] stressful feeling like I'm under par, like I just mean it doesn't feel adequate."

Specifically, P4 recognized the effects of the unpredictability of their daily schedule and the resulting stress and strain.

In describing a typical workday and a student issue involving vaping, P10 emphasized,

> We'll come in on a Tuesday… and we might have a whole day laid out. And then three kids are vaping in the bathroom that sets the alarm off… The fire department has to come out, and then we have to change the schedule, and its like, very complex. So you think one thing, and something completely different happens.

In other words, P10 communicated their understanding of the complexity of adapting pre-planned schedules due to external factors, specifically student choices that alter their plans.

P5 added to the conversation about the subsequent strain caused by daily scheduling demands and the unpredictability of their schedule when they voiced,

> I'm dealing with people all day long, and people are unpredictable, and people have their own needs and their own stories and motivations and their own things. And sometimes people aren't always nice, or there are things that aren't going to go the way you want them to go. They're not going to be perfect… If there is conflict, and I don't mean yelling and screaming necessarily. But to people, you know, having disagreements, or conflict, or ugliness, or just conflict, I would describe myself as a sensitive person. And so if I don't feel like I've done a good job. Or sometimes when I can't make everyone happy, it upsets me more than it should. At this point, I should know better that that's how it's going to go. When I'm my best self I can probably deal with that and know that. Yeah, I think dealing with all the imperfections of working with people can really wear me down.

Even though P5 recognized who they are and how interactions with staff and students should go, the main takeaway from their comments is that the unpredictability of working with students and staff can strain them.

High school principals also experience unpredictability in their schedules due to classroom issues, angry parents, or other stakeholders being upset because of an incident that occurred during the day or at an extracurricular event. For example, when asked how much job control they had, P1 responded,

> You don't know on any given day which classroom is going to have challenges, or which students are going to erupt. Or which parents… Like today. One of the things that happened today that became a big deal was our kitchen staff cooked hamburger patties [that] looked pink. They were properly cooked but were a little pink and some kids took issue to that. Then they started sending pictures home to their parents. Then their parents are posting things on Facebook. Then they're calling the office or whatever. That's not something, you know, or you don't know when somebody's going to bully somebody on social media, or when there's going to be a fight. So, I guess you know there are unexpected things that you have limited control over

Essentially, P1 recognized the issues that contributed to the unpredictability of their daily schedule, which created strain and impacted their job control.

Before and Beyond the Workday

High school principals are often strained by their schedules, which extend before and beyond the workday. P13 remarked, “There are no such things as eight-hour days... Most days are not less than 10 hours, but often 12 to 14, depending on supervision… No matter what, you’re always on call…It’s a year-round 24/7-day job.” For high school principals, this year-round job involves not only opening the school each day but also often requires them to stay late to supervise band performances, sporting events, and parent-teacher conferences. They may also need to stay late to catch up on work they were unable to complete during their contracted workday. In response to being asked what their life as a principal was like, P12 stated, “My days are long…I laugh when somebody says…It’s an eight-hour day. It’s not…[A] pretty regular day for me is 10… 12, sometimes 14 [hours], depending on supervision of student activities and meetings at night.” Thus, comments from P13 and P12 illustrated that they recognized their schedules were always in flux and that, no matter what time of day, they were always on call.

High school principals often work on weekends, holidays, and during their vacation time. In this study, many principals scheduled interviews while working in their offices on “off” days. P9 articulated this well when they expressed, “So it’s very similar to the life of a doctor when you’re on call… Your time is never really your own, even when you’re on vacation, because the buck stops with you in your building.” In addition, these principals deal with tragedies and crises at all hours of the day and night, which include receiving reports of potential safety and security issues. While describing the strain that results from the demands of the high school principalship and how it regularly involves working beyond the workday, P10 commented,

> It’s a 24-hour a day job. Even if I’m not at work, I’m on call. Now with the way technology is we have a couple of anonymous reporting systems that allow students, if they or their families are concerned about some kind of threat or safety, they can access those 24 hours a day. And we have a thing called Security. So if a student is using their

> school-issued Chromebook and they type the magic words in a document, even in a search engine, we get alerts around that too. So, it might be on a Sunday night at 3 o'clock, and I get a self-harm report that I have to follow up on or a safety concern that I have to follow up on… Now this job is 24/7.

Specifically, P10 recognized the demands placed on them as a high school principal and the requirement of being available twenty-four hours a day.

High school principals in small schools may also face added strain due to daily scheduling demands and the inherent nature of the position in a small community. As noted above, P9 likened the demands of principals to those of doctors when describing the on-call nature of their work. P9 also declared, "The buck stops with you [the principal] in your building, and that might be even more amplified in a smaller district than a bigger one." Similarly, P12 highlighted, "In a small district, what I have found is that state reporting falls on me. Facebook, or I mean social media presence… All that stuff falls on the school leader here, as opposed to layers of staffing in a large district." Moreover, P11 added, "I'll speak from a small district perspective. We are asked to do a lot, and wear many hats…In principal school, I assumed the job meant one thing… When I got into the job, I was like Whoa." Finally, P16, another principal from a small school district, shared how principal workload combined with their personal work ethic impacted them:

> I think it burns you out in the end. You're working a lot, you know, especially when it's like that and you come back on a Saturday for whatever event there might be… and maybe that's my own doing, maybe I don't need to be [at] every event, except I'm a rural high school principal, and I just feel like being present.

Specifically, P9, P12, P11, and P16 acknowledged that being a principal in a small school district can add to workload strain due to scheduling demands and their desire to be visible within the community.

Maintain a "Do the Work" Approach

Despite the many demands placed on principals, all of the participants in this study maintained a "do the work" approach, making statements such as P8, "I love my job," and P12, "It's my job to take care of the students, their families, and then occasionally staff members." Expecting the unexpected emanated from the way they approached their work. They viewed their jobs as opportunities to make a difference and positively influence the next generation of students. The following highlights the "it's my job" and "expect the unexpected" mindsets of the principals in this study, despite the numerous challenges they experienced and the subsequent strain caused by the enormity of their job demands.

It's My Job

Principals maintain a positive outlook and have a do-the-work approach, saying things like "it's my job!", "I'm having fun!", or as P9 emphasized, "I love my job! I love the kids that give me energy," when challenges arise. While discussing the life of a principal, P16 and P12 declared, "You get a chance to make things happen that impact students' lives in a positive way and staff members' lives in a positive way," and "We're having an impact. We're doing the hard work. We're making a difference." Principals in this study believed they were entrusted with a job, regardless of the daily challenges they faced. P1 expressed, "You are responsible for so much. I do think it's part of what makes it worth it." Principals said they are compensated fairly for their job and were not in education for the money, with P11 and P12 declaring, "We're not in it for the money, that's for sure. Nobody went into education for that," and "I never chased money." This mindset was evident in the statements from principals in this dissertation, despite the strains and stressors associated with the position. Overall, principals reported a desire to make a positive impact and the energy that comes from working with students, with P9

proclaiming, “I can tell you that contact with kids is what gives me energy every day. So every time the bell rings I drop what I’m doing… I’m in the hallways talking to kids, greeting kids with high-fives and fist bumps.” Principals also discussed the rewards of seeing staff and students succeed, thereby offsetting negative feelings or emotions associated with the principalship.

Although all principals highlighted the demands and challenges characteristic of their positions, they often also emphasized the positive aspects, such as building relationships with various stakeholders. P3 expressed, “I’ve worked hard to build partnerships with our families and community and make myself very available and very public. And so I think that has also been a positive for me.” P4 further supported the comments of P3 when they stated, “I’d say, I really like, my favorite part is just building relationships with staff and students. That’s why I get excited… The other tasks do not excite me.” P15 also emphasized,

> I think the one thing I have to remind myself consciously is remember, this isn’t personal. Remember, there’s a lot of needs coming your way, that people will have, that you need to be able to support them. Remember, what your job is. You’re running a very large enterprise that really gets down to children. And so you gotta be able. You gotta be available. You have to be ready to help people to be their best self and solve problems so they can be their best selves. So, there’s a lot of what in some spaces I’ll refer to as the giving tree, like, I just have to be ready to give what anybody needs.

That is, P3, P4, and P15 communicated their positive outlook and the value they placed on relationships within their leadership milieu.

Expecting the Unexpected

The high school principals I interviewed also maintained an attitude of “expect the unexpected.” Because they often came to work with a plan that could be diverted within minutes of arriving on campus, they recognized the importance of holding their priorities loosely so they were not overtaken by negative emotion when unpredictability struck. Despite the

unpredictability of their position, they often emphasized the fulfillment experienced from their work. When asked what their work as a principal was like, P8 conveyed, “Really unpredictable. Pretty fulfilling work. But yeah, highly unpredictable. But in a good way. I like it.” Likewise, commenting about how rewards impacted them and their work, P15 observed,

> Another intrinsic thing that I really enjoy is just watching the impact of the work with kids and staff. I think when you are able to see students become their best self in whatever endeavor that is, and watch staff be great in their space, however that is. Not everybody gets to do that, and you can’t buy that… I recognize that for me at this stage of my life. That’s really important.

In other words, P8 and P15 recognized that, despite the nature of their job, there were intrinsic rewards such as job satisfaction and seeing others succeed.

In this study, all participants acknowledged the value of experience, peer encouragers, mentors, and thought partners as resources to guide them through unexpected events or challenges they may experience. For example, in discussing how support from supervisors impacted them and their work, P9 noted, “I think it’s incredibly impactful and to have a thought partner can change the way your career goes… I’ve been very fortunate. Two great superintendents.” In terms of the role experience played in their growth as a principal, P5 highlighted,

> Being in the district I am in now, things are little more predictable. There’s still stuff that happens, but it’s not hour to hour, moment to moment, hanging by the, you know, hanging by a thread, flying by the seat of your pants constantly. And then my first principal job was more like that, whereas now it's definitely more predictable, depends on the time of year, time of, you know, time of day, day of the week.

Specifically, P9 and P5 identified how thought-partners and experience helped them navigate and expect the unexpected.

Although the most common leadership lesson and/or resource emphasized by high school principals in this dissertation was extended experience, it is essential to share more of their voices, specifically regarding feedback and its impact on them. Because the unexpected can come in the form of angry emails in the middle of the night, student or teacher blowouts in a classroom, or an upset parent showing up at the office unannounced and demanding immediate attention, principals in my study emphasized the importance of gaining leadership and other job-related experience to deal with the challenges intrinsic to their position. When discussing how their view of feedback from parents and families changed over time, P11 declared, "I think now after doing it for seven years, it doesn't feel so much like it's critical. It's more like, let's just improve… For me it [feedback] it's not a negative… It's just how can we get better."

Additionally, when asked how stakeholder feedback impacted them and their work, P8 shared,

> I would say three years ago, or four years ago, I would have taken the feedback and then felt like I was doing something wrong. And now I feel like I take feedback and I kind of go. Okay how can we… Because sometimes parents or teachers will provide feedback that is out of our control, like we cannot fix that one thing. It's just not anything we can do. But now we look at it from a different angle. As our team, we're… So, I kind of refer back to Ted Lasso and his box right? So he had the box and changed the water pressure. If there's one thing we can take away from that feedback that will make what they are suggesting better. Then we'll see if not we will go back to them and find out. Let them know why we can't… Then we'll try to come up with something that will help them.

Moreover, in a follow-up question about their experience and how it shaped their views on feedback, P14 responded, "One-hundred percent. I would say experience is why I am successful now, this second go around, than the first time." Thus, P11, P8, and P14 essentially stated that experience in the principalship helped them change their perspective on feedback, thus serving as a catalyst for their growth as leaders.

Lack Work-Life Balance

Although a few principals, such as P2 and P5, did not specifically address work-life balance, all principals in this study discussed their overwhelming workload and the perception that they were always available to serve students, staff, and the community whenever needed, with statements such as those from P13 and P7, “It’s a year-round, twenty-four seven job” and “I’m on call for my staff twenty-four seven, and that’s whether I’m in town or out of town.” Principals often struggled with achieving a work-life balance. This was evident in their lack of self-care and the tendency to take work home. Poor eating and sleeping habits, along with few outlets to mitigate the inherent strain of the position, characterized most principals in this study. Additionally, they often took work home because the work scheduled for the day didn’t get done due to various issues involving students, staff, parents, and community members. The following explores the lack of work-life balance among principals, which manifests in a lack of self-care and a tendency to bring work home.

Lack of Self-Care

Although few principals in this study mentioned organizations such as the Association of Washington School Principals as a means of support, nearly all described having little sleep, overeating, and working longer than they thought their bodies could handle. Additionally, they described not having emotional or physical outlets after working with students, staff, and the community impacted by trauma, or simply from their job demands in general. This included not exercising, unhealthy sleep patterns and eating habits, and internalizing the challenges they experienced. Only one principal, P13, mentioned engaging with mental health professionals to process and work through their occupational stress:

> The more that we [principals] are trying to do the work of counselors and mental health folks, we don’t have the training. And, so for me that means more therapy… like you’ve

> got to take the feeling and emotion somewhere else. You know, and be able to do something with it… Districts really got to get better about supporting their principals in these ways, and having the stigma of counseling and therapy [stripped away]. We got to continue to work on stripping that away. That it's not a problem, and that it's not a stigma. Mental health is not a stigma.

Specifically, P13 emphasized the importance of destigmatizing mental health and providing principals with the support they need to cope with the strains and stressors of the principalship.

One issue related to principals' lack of work-life balance and self-care is sleep loss. Principals in my study reported that stress and job demands often kept them up late at night. Also, supervision responsibilities comprising extra-curricular events required them to work late during the school year, with P6 mentioning, "So during the 2024-2025 school year I had 106 evening supervisions… So I've been doing it a really long time, and it's just kind of the grind that we do." In a similar way, while discussing the impact of their job demands, P16 stated, "You know. I don't sleep much." P7 also acknowledged, "Us older guys don't sleep much. So even when you get home at nine or ten o'clock, the body and the brain wake you up about four." P4 added to the previous principal reports when they shared how being a new principal affected them:

> Last year was really hard. Like I didn't know. I really thought I was going to die before the end of the year. I had so many nights where I'd pull all-nighters and stay up because there were things that had to get done, and people were expecting that they get done… It impacts me because I live in a world of stress. It's better this year, but there's no way I could not work on the weekend, so I just have to have it in my mind. in a couple years it will be better. A couple of years from now. It will be better once we have things done. So, it really impacts. It impacts my home life. Last year, I really thought I was going to die from the stress in every way. So, it impacts me that way. The stress is huge.

That is, P6, P16, P7, and P4 reported that their job demands lead to a lack of work-life balance and self-care, which manifested as working late during the week and on weekends, as well as losing sleep and experiencing stress.

In considering issues related to principals lacking self-care and work-life balance, the nature of the job is a significant factor. Working early, late, on weekends, and even while on vacation is a typical pattern for most principals. However, in this study, a few principals discussed the importance of taking care of themselves. In response to being asked if they had anything else to add to this study on reducing high school principal burnout, P11 articulated,

> I think the biggest thing would be that you have to find your own boundaries. You have to set those boundaries. I talked about it a little bit earlier, like, I don't work or email at night. I don't take my work home on the weekends. I don't work on the weekends unless I have to be at an event. But you have to take care of yourself. I think that self-care is the biggest thing, and whatever that looks like for people. Like I go walking five times a week… I self-care by getting pedicures. I go meet with friends. And then during the summer I take one big vacation. Like you have to do something that is going to fill your cup, because if you don't, and you come back the next school year and [your] cup is empty, there's nothing you can give… And then you're not a good administrator, because you're frustrated. You're short. You have a temper like you don't have the emotional capacity… So, self-care and boundaries, I think, are the two biggest things to help prevent burnout… And then, find your support… And then how can you make sure that you're reaching out to those people when you need it.

In other words, P11 recognized the importance of self-care and setting boundaries as important strategies for the sustainability of the principalship.

Taking Work Home

Principals in my study often took their work home or established a policy of never taking work home, opting instead to stay at work longer. P15 emphasized, "I don't work at home. I don't think that would be good for anybody, me included, my work included, my family included… I will work six-or seven-day work weeks and long days, but do that in the office." Unlike P15, other principals admitted to leaving school and working when they got home, as P1 explained,

> There are so many demands and so many competing demands. You know, if I'm being honest at times, that it feels impossible… Sometimes you end up short-changing things or cutting corners. I hate to use that phrase because I don't ever intentionally do that,

> because the reality is what I end up doing oftentimes is going home, and one of the first things I do is, I've got four kids and a [spouse]. And oftentimes I'm right back on my computer… You know there is a professional cost. Sometimes, you know, the less balanced you are, the less you take care of yourself to some degree. It takes a toll on me professionally, and it probably takes a toll more on my personal life and my family time, where my [spouse] has been pretty gracious and supportive, but periodically will remind me that it would be nice to have an hour of uninterrupted time. But when you get home, if you could just, my [spouse] is reminding me that the kids are trying to talk to you. And you're not tuned in.

P7 also specified,

> You know, supervision plays a huge role as a high school principal… So you know, I would say, on average during sports seasons, particularly winter sports, it is probably 14 to 16 hour days. And then I work every weekend, so because I can't get done what needs to be done during the week, I usually spend four hours every Sunday prepping for the next week.

That is, P7 acknowledged the role that supervision plays in the life of high school principals.

When asked how their daily schedule impacted them and a lack of work-life balance, P3 noted,

> Yeah, it's tiresome. I mean, I'm here at about 7:15 every day. And I walk out most days at 5:00 or 5:30. And then, and then I go home and do some email when I get home. And then we have supervision. There's at least one, frequently twice a week, I'm here from seven to ten o'clock at night.

Essentially, the main point of what P1, P7, and P3 said is that the demands and workload of high school principals are such that having a work-life balance is difficult, and therefore, taking work home is a common practice of many principals.

Finally, P14 communicated their thoughts on the impact of the job demands of being a high school principal and the importance of having an outlet:

> I think it's just really important that you have an outlet. So, whether that's exercise or therapy or a spouse that you can, you know, at least vent to. Not necessarily share everything, but if you can't get it out, you'll burn out. So, I mean, that's a really great catch phrase, right? If you can't get it out, you will burn out. It's just impossible to do that job without feeling it at some point.

At the heart of P14's suggestions was the idea that to achieve a work-life balance, principals need an outlet to manage the stress of their position. According to P14, having an outlet can take many forms, but it is vital for reducing the demands of the principalship and achieving a work-life balance.

Rely on Their Skills, Abilities, and Attributes as Primary Resource

When asked how their skills and attributes helped them perform their jobs effectively, all principals in this study identified specific skills, abilities, and attributes as their primary resource. They easily articulated their strengths and weaknesses, as well as recognized the importance of being self-aware and authentic to oneself, as noted by P2 when they stated, "My biggest strength is organization and clear communication… I think the other that I rely on is I'm a culture guy. I firmly believe in a positive school culture... And so that's what's important to me." The following explores how the principals I interviewed relied on their skills, abilities, and attributes as their primary resource, which involved recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, being self-aware, and being true to themselves.

Knowing Strengths and Weaknesses

Every principal in this study identified the skills, abilities, and attributes that enabled them to perform their job effectively as their primary resource. For example, P1 communicated, "I think I build relationships well, and I think that's pretty crucial in this role because you're responsible for it." Using their background as a strength, P12 noted, "Some of my strengths come from my counselor background, listening, just really wanting to understand where people are coming from… Given my background and my training in it, it informs my practice… It impacts everything I do… That I think is unique to me." P8 echoed the comments of P12 in recognizing how their background in education played to their strengths: "I think one of the

skills is I've been hardworking for a long time, and I've put in long hours for a long time… Administrative hours never seemed crazy to me... It's been that way for 30 years… It's just always been how I do it."

Considering the potential strain and burnout associated with the principalship and the daily challenges high school principals face, many of the principals I interviewed emphasized the importance of being good communicators and adept at solving problems and resolving conflicts. "Like I said, declared P14, I was a [former] PE teacher [which is] organized chaos in and of itself. I thrive on problem-solving in the moment." Similarly, P11 expressed, "I think one of my attributes that you know, listening for understanding and problem-solving, and really just having difficult conversations in a kind, compassionate way." P7 also acknowledged their strengths and weaknesses when they expressed,

> I want to help kids. And so I have to check myself occasionally. And that's a stressor. Right? You know, I got somebody who comes into my office, and I want to help, and then you know what never leaves your office sometimes, right? You know you don't know what story could be told based on that conversation. So. You know, again, I think going back to, and I know that I've mentioned this numerous times. So, student safety and the culture and climate of our building are paramount. There are so many other administrators in this world that are way smarter than me, and have all kinds of degrees and pedagogy and theology, and all that. That's not who I am. I am a relational person who cares deeply about kids and giving them a shot, and I'm going work. That's the priority of my work. Would I love it to be, you know, assisting teachers more than coaching them better than I have. Of course. But I'm not going, I'm not going to trade one for the other.

The comments of P14, P11, and P7 reflected an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as the most important resource in meeting their job demands, as well as the core values that drive their leadership.

Because job resources, or the lack thereof, can contribute to principal strain and burnout, principals acknowledged professional growth as one of their strengths. They indicated that improving as a school leader occurs when they engage with their peers, collaborate with others

outside of education, utilize feedback for reflection and growth, and participate in professional development opportunities offered by organizations such as the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP). P9 furthered these ideas when they observed,

> One of the greatest professional growth opportunities for my life was relationships with my peers. So, I've been a member of AWSP for a very long time in the state … Peer relationships have been a big part of my career. It has helped me be the principal I wanted to be, so I don't think there's enough opportunities to make that happen a lot of times… And then, as a small district sometimes you're siloed, and unless you're a part of something like AWSP, you don't connect with people from other districts and learn.

That is, P9 indicated that peer relationships through organizations such as AWSP are a means of growing and thriving within the principalship.

At the conclusion of their interview, when asked if they would like to add any final thoughts, P6 also communicated the importance of principals engaging in collaboration outside their domain:

> I think that it's important that you have some non-school leaders in your life that you can talk with. One of my workout partners is a leader in private industry, and we have some of the same challenges. My brother is in the corporate world, corporate ladder, corner office type world. And what he deals with is sometimes similar, sometimes different. But we can bounce ideas off each other…You get different ideas. You get an understanding. You get a judgment-free… a place to process without any blowback.

The comments from P6 highlighted the importance of high school principals using non-educational resources to reduce the impact of principal strain and burnout.

Self-Awareness and Being True to Oneself

Being self-aware and authentic to oneself were additional skills, abilities, and attributes of principals in this study. Principals emphasized the importance of holding fast to personal convictions and values, with P6 stating, "I think it's part of leadership and understanding kind of what your true North is and why you go into leadership… As long as you have your true North, you're going to be okay." Admitting to areas in need of growth was another aspect of self-

awareness exemplified by principals in comments such as those from P1: “So something that I don’t do enough of that I need to get better at, though, is to also delegate some things and relinquish some control and power…That’s something I’m growing in slowly that I could get better at. P2 also recognized the value of peer encouragement and collaborating with other principals when they remarked, “I’ve been on the AWSP board for 13 years…Without that support system and those friendships that I made, I would not be here today… That’s [why] I’m still here.”

In discussing self-awareness and being true to oneself, P13 mentioned,

> The one thing I’ve learned is that you have to stay grounded in your values. And for me, that is integrity. That is one of my core values and beliefs. As for me as a leader, I have to stay grounded in those, especially when things get hard. Because when I don’t, that’s when I start making bad decisions. And that’s when it starts to impact my staff and students. So, I have to lean into that.

That is, P13 suggested that being self-aware and true to oneself can be a valuable job resource that helps principals engage in their work more effectively and mitigate the effects of strain and burnout.

In considering job resources related to principal strain and burnout, principals in this study emphasized how experience and background contributed to their ability to navigate the demands of the principalship, citing experience in counseling, psychology, special education, and other fields. Principals also discussed how they used feedback to grow professionally. P10 explained, “I have to seek out feedback… What I try to do is model for my staff. I share it back with them [and] talk about here are the things based on what you said that I’m going to work on.” Likewise, when asked how feedback impacted them and their work, P4 responded,

> “Feedback from parents I’d say is really important because I use it to kind of help gauge the direction for things. Some of the feedback, I expect, and you know just I’m a parent, too. I had [kids] who have graduated… So I get it. I get all those parent pieces, but I

> appreciate hearing from another parent. So that feedback I use just kind of to gauge things to make adjustments if needed…If there are frustrations a lot of times they're just misunderstandings… But just hearing those feedback pieces, even though they're grumblings, it gave me an opportunity to like in the next newsletter, like did you know…So like, how could I mix this in there? That kind of corrects that misconception. So, I use feedback in a lot of ways.

Specifically, by recognizing that they were a parent, too, P4 emphasized the value of using feedback to grow and communicate with various stakeholders, in this case, parents.

The high school principals in this study also acknowledged that being a principal can lead to stress, fatigue, and exhaustion. Feelings of loneliness and a sense of low self-efficacy also emerged in principals due to their daily job demands, with principals declaring "The stress is huge" (P4), "It's got its rewards and definitely got its stresses" (P16), and "I felt inadequate, I felt inept" (P12). Being self-aware and true to oneself was also reflected in a response by P8:

> But what is my job? Is my job to save every kid that's trauma-affected? Is my job to end generational poverty? To remove addiction from the face of the earth? No. my job is to run this school the best I can with the skills, attributes, and resources that I have at my disposal. If I thought I could do all those other things, there might be other jobs or positions that I would go into, but I didn't. I chose to be a principal and do the best I can with that job.

In other words, P8 realized the value of accepting who they were as a principal and the agency that came with it.

Empowered by Supervisor Support and Feedback

In this dissertation, principals were empowered by their supervisors' support and feedback. Trust and job autonomy characterized this relationship. When principals experienced a trusting relationship with their supervisor, usually the superintendent, they received support in the form of their supervisor acting more as a thought partner and collaborator, rather than a micromanager. P16 observed, "He was always available to me… He never told me what to

do…He taught me about asking questions and listening. To figure out my leadership style and what I really valued." In terms of job autonomy, principals had the trust of their supervisors to do their jobs, which led to enhanced feelings of self-efficacy and empowerment. The following illustrates how principals were empowered by their supervisors' support and feedback, particularly regarding trust and job autonomy.

Trust

Principals in this study were empowered by their supervisors' confidence and trust, namely superintendents who fostered an environment of peer encouragement, collaboration, and active listening. Superintendents also viewed them as thought partners, thereby enhancing principals' self-efficacy. Having a positive relationship with their supervisor is what enabled principals to be empowered with such trust. This trust took many forms, one of which was superintendents supporting their principals when community members or parents tried to bypass their authority. When asked how support from their supervisor impacted them, P11 mentioned,

> Our community is really small. Some of our families still think their direct line of communication is with the superintendent, and they bypass the building principals. So, she is really good about… Have you talked to the building principals… So she always redirects [and] is super supportive… She's awesome… So, I really feel supported by my supervisor. We work together on my student growth goals for my evaluation. I always run ideas by her to see what she thinks.

Specifically, P11 noted that a trusting relationship with their superintendent empowered them to perform their job effectively.

P2's response to the question about how supervisor support impacted them and their work further illustrated the role trust plays in increasing principal self-efficacy:

> I would say that it's [supervisor support] the biggest piece to job satisfaction. That if you know that your supervisor has your back that is a super comforting feeling. Bar none, that is the best. That you know that if you go into that wildfire, you know that you have somebody else fighting that fire with you.

In essence, P2 was describing one of the psycho-social effects of having a supervisor who supported them and would stand by them no matter what.

Conversely, principals also reported the effects of not having the support of supervisors and superintendents. One factor contributing to a lack of support was the high turnover rate in the superintendent position. Many participants mentioned having several superintendents in a short period, which left insufficient time to build a trusting relationship. In response to a question about job security, P9 proclaimed, "I'm one superintendent away from not having a job…Two board members change out… Then the superintendent is gone. The first thing they get rid of is [you]…As principals, your job security is really limited." Similarly, in discussing how the superintendency churn impacted them, P7 remarked, "Well, I would say that's an increased stressor, because you don't know what you're going to get… They have their agendas… Waiting to find out how those agendas roll out… Puts everybody on alert." P9 and P7 recognized that attrition with the superintendent position affected their ability to receive support and build trusting relationships with their supervisors.

Autonomy

Principals described feeling empowered and having the freedom and autonomy to do their job as a direct result of supervisor feedback and support. Often, it was a positive relationship that empowered principals with such trust. Many principals described trust as a gateway to autonomy. In this study, a significant resource highlighted by nearly all principals was their supervisor, usually the superintendent. Principals reported that they were largely allowed to do their job without interference or micromanagement from their supervisors.

After contacting their superintendent about the need for support on a specific parent issue, P3 described the interplay between their supervisor and themselves: "You can either figure

out how to work with this parent and fix the problem and not have me undermine you, or I'm going to go ahead and do it… [So] let me call the parent back… And figure out how I'm going to work with the parent." Likewise, P5 shared their views on supervisor support and job autonomy when they added,

> As long as I'm smart and know when to ask for help and learn to deal with things on my own, I feel that if I'm too needy, then it will backfire. But I'm fortunate to have a boss… At one point was a school administrator. So, he's willing to delve into things that maybe a superintendent wouldn't have to worry about. He's willing to give opinions and sometimes he'll say, well, you can do what you want, but here's what I think about it. And there's times where he gives me the ability to do the thing that he might not have done. So, one might see that as giving enough rope for someone to hang themselves. But one might also see that as him trusting my experience and my decision-making and that kind of thing. But the door is definitely open if I need help, so I do feel supported that way.

The statements of both P3 and P5 fundamentally emphasized the importance of supervisor feedback and support as a resource that empowers principals with the necessary autonomy to make daily decisions during stressful situations, thereby potentially reducing principal strain and burnout.

Fair Compensation

Although every principal I interviewed believed their financial compensation was fair, they offered suggestions for improving the compensation package. Principals emphasized the importance of being in education to make a difference, not to make a profit. Flex days and vacation buyback were among the different suggestions offered by principals to improve their compensation packages. The following examines why principals believed their compensation was fair in terms of financial and benefits compensation, along with suggestions for improving their overall compensation package.

Financial and Benefits Compensation

In considering financial benefits and compensation, P6 noted, “I do a lot of work with bargaining units and bargaining for principals, and I think compensation, while it’s important, is not the most important. But compensation is one way to give honor to people.” Equally, P9 proclaimed, “I look at compensation as a representation of value and respect… I’ve never chased money…If I wanted to chase money, I’d be a principal in [a bigger district] ... I make good money.” P15 supported this when they declared, “I wouldn’t work for free, but I don’t work for free. So I feel like I am fairly compensated.” P3 also responded to the question about how compensation impacted their job by saying,

> So the compensation. I am fine with it. A lot of people in education need to take a step back and realize that yeah we work a lot of hours. And, we have a hard, stressful job. But we’re also community employees. And we need to recognize where we’re at funding-wise in the state and calm down a little bit.

That is, P6, P9, P15, and P3 articulated the position, as did principals throughout this study, that their financial and benefits compensation were fair.

Despite all principals agreeing that their compensation was fair, a few discussed potential discrepancies within the profession, and even within their own communities. For example, while describing a recent conversation they had with their spouse about how principals were compensated, P16 shared, “I’ve started to look around the state… As I talk to more principals, I think some are underpaid… Some [aren’t]… but in the end… I just want to make an impact and do a really good job.” Additionally, while admitting their job was one of the highest paying in their community, P1 communicated, “I don’t feel over-compensated… I earn every penny of it. I mean, the reality is, it’s not a 40 or 50-hour-a-week job. So, I mean it helps, and maybe to some degree makes it feel at least partially worth it.” Primarily, P16 and P1 recognized that their

compensation was fair, while simultaneously acknowledging possible inadequacies within and outside the educational system.

Suggestions for Improved Compensation

Although every principal in this study believed their compensation was fair, they did offer suggestions on how to improve their compensation package. Principals recommended that districts provide flex days and dedicated time off. They also suggested an additional benefit: compensation for a specified number of days for ongoing supervision duties required in the high school principalship. They further discussed being compensated for taking supervision duties not represented in their contracts and having equitable buy-back options related to their vacation days.

During their discussion on how compensation impacted their job, P11 voiced their perspective on ways to improve the compensation and benefit package of principals:

> I feel like we get paid for doing the job that we do. There are things I wish we could negotiate with our districts. I spend three weekends out of the year… We have our prom and homecoming. We have all the things that get clumped into the salary. All the evening stuff. I worked in a previous district where every administrator was able to submit for three additional days of pay. And you shouldn't have to work weekends, so if you do here is a form that you could get up to 3 additional days. Just something that acknowledges that.

That is, P11 stated that they believe they were fairly compensated. However, they shared personal insights into how school districts could offer additional incentives within principal contracts.

Considering the demands of the high school principalship and the fact that principals in this study stated they were fairly compensated, they often discussed the enormity of the position. In response, they addressed issues such as the inability to roll over a certain number of sick or vacation days, unlike teachers. "Buy-back days" are when principals can "sell" their accrued vacation time for payment, on the same terms as those of teachers. Sometimes the ratio was 4:1.

So, for every four days a principal would buy back, they were only compensated for one day. Principals even engaged with their supervisors about how their compensation package could be improved. While sharing their thoughts on compensation, P10 responded,

> I get paid really well. I have nothing to complain about. [But] during the last bargain I was trying to talk to the superintendent and say, instead of money, give us some time like, take five days of our contract and say we don't have to work. Don't change our pay. Take away five days. Close the system down in July around the 4th. [Then) get all your building principals [to] take an extra day off, and it's not going to cost you any money. And they just didn't really want to do that.

In other words, P10 acknowledged they were fairly compensated. Yet, they engaged in conversations with their superintendent about how principal compensation packages could be improved.

Indirect Exposure to Trauma Increases Workload

Although principals in this study had different reactions and responses to questions related to indirect exposure to trauma, they all spoke about their workload increasing. The workload strain of principals is increased due to students impacted by trauma and working with staff to aid students in trauma. Helping students impacted by trauma can compound the workload strain of principals for job demands, such as preparing to notify the school of a student's death or suicide, or when they have to take over workload responsibilities of trained professionals due to staffing or budgetary issues. In terms of strain from working with staff to aid students in trauma, principals are often required to help develop plans that support teaching and learning, as well as facilitate restorative conversations aimed at cultivating success among both students and staff. The following explores how principals' indirect exposure to trauma increases workload from students impacted by trauma and working with staff to aid these students, thereby increasing principal strain and potentially burnout.

Workload Strain Due to Student Trauma

Principals' indirect exposure to trauma can increase workload, leading to strain and burnout. Students have all kinds of trauma in their background. The many faces of trauma that impact principals and their workload include fighting, instability at home, poverty, substance abuse, and other forms of abuse. Because principals work with students who are impacted by trauma, they are indirectly exposed to the trauma students experience and bring with them to school. P15 described in detail the impact of working with students impacted by trauma:

> It takes a lot, and that probably goes back to one of the answers I gave you earlier, just about the quote wearing down. I think that when you're giving of yourself in normal situations or in stable situations, it still takes a lot. But when you're dealing with high trauma individuals, more is required. More emotional control is required. More mental acuity is required because of the complexity of their needs and the complexity of the solutions you may have to work through, and the complexity of the bureaucracies that you may have to navigate outside of that in order to find ways to best help that student. And so when students are affected by trauma, whether its poverty, systemic racism, physical or emotional abuse, sexual abuse, homelessness, you know, learning disabilities or physical disabilities. Those things require more of us.

Likewise, when asked about the time demands of working with students impacted by trauma, comments from P4 mirrored those of P15:

> It's like the follow up steps. Like, okay, now we just figured out that a kid is living in their car with their mom. And so now I need to get a hold of the resource advocate and I fully have to give them the whole story, so they know exactly the extent of it. And then, at the same time, the parent has requested like counseling services. So now I need to do an intake form, and I need to explain the details… And then I need to let the teachers know because if you have a kid in your class that's going through something that's really hard, you know, it's helpful to know… This is what they're carrying with them… You got some things in order, but it's all those communication pieces, and it's just from one situation… And all of that falls on you.

In effect, P15 and P4 affirmed the heightened demands of working with students impacted by trauma, which increased their workload and contributed to workload strain.

Another issue related to workload strain due to students impacted by trauma relates to a lack of resources. This can occur due to budget cuts and funding issues, such as a district lacking

the funds to hire a certified trauma specialist or counselor. Consequently, principals have another responsibility added to their already heavy workload. When asked if they felt they had the resources necessary to effectively do their job in working with students impacted by trauma P8, P6 and P16 responded, “No, I don’t have the resources to do my job”, “We always need more resources,” and “Like anybody, I wish we had more.” P2 continued,

> Not at all, not at all…I think that [we’re] a state in crisis of trying to provide resources for young adults who are dealing with trauma... I don’t know the answer, but every day I would say between my counselor and I, we’re dealing with probably five to seven students who are dealing with some sort of trauma… It makes it difficult. We just try to love them and let them know that they feel welcome here. And try to make sure that they know that this is a safe place for them.

Specifically, P8, P6, P16, and P2 affirmed the need for more resources to do their jobs effectively when working with students impacted by trauma.

Workload Strain Due to Staff Aiding Students in Trauma

The complexities and demands within the high school principalship are immense. Adding to the daily challenges is working with staff to aid trauma-impacted students, thus contributing to the principal's workload and strain. Because indirect exposure to students in trauma can negatively impact those around them, principals are often called upon to help staff understand the effects of trauma. This may involve collaborating with staff on strategies to enhance communication with students, developing plans that support teaching and learning, and facilitating professional development, as well as restorative conversations aimed at promoting success among both students and staff. In addition, the lack of resources or funding can also lead to workload strain, as principals are expected to meet the needs of everyone involved with students impacted by trauma.

P3 described the effects of trauma on students and staff and the workload strain that results from having to help staff become more aware of how trauma affects students.

> And I think a lot, you know, I think it affects not just our kids, our staff. I think our staff are coming to work sometimes having experienced trauma. And I think there is a direct impact. I think kids react to us sometimes in ways that are more related to trauma or their other experiences than to us. Or we do things unwittingly that can, I hate to use the word. But it triggers kids, you know. And so I think there's a direct impact. And then it can make some of our interactions with kids and other people that have, you know, a little more contentious. I think it impacts my job, too, in the sense that have, I'm responsible for also making my staff more informed, more educated about. So I guess a secondary impact for me is that you know, sometimes my job ends up being heavier because I have staff that don't effectively communicate and interact with people that have been through trauma. Then that creates more conflict, more discipline. It affects school morale, school climate.

That is, P3 pointed out the toll trauma has on students, staff, and school culture, and how this added to the workload strain due to staff aiding students in trauma.

In considering workload strain increasing due to working with trauma-impacted students, principals may also have to provide or lead professional development opportunities for staff. P1 noted, "I'm increasingly cognizant [that] we need to get better in this school... One of the biggest effects right now is it's critical that I give some proper training and professional development to our staff… [We] need to get better at it, because it is a huge effect on us." Essentially, Pl acknowledged the need to improve their school's approach to supporting trauma-impacted students, which in turn increases the principal's workload strain due to additional job expectations.

Indirect Exposure to Trauma Creates Emotional Strain

Principals in this dissertation varied in their answers to the question, "How does working with students impacted by trauma impact your work?" Yet, all principals described how they internalized and/or approached the topic of trauma and the emotional strain that can result from being indirectly exposed to trauma. Principals' indirect exposure to trauma created emotional

strain. This emotional strain increased due to students being impacted by trauma, and working with staff to aid students in trauma because principals are required to spend more time, resources, and their own empathy in dealing with the effects of trauma including fights, suicide, and outbursts in classrooms. According to P15, "When you're dealing with high trauma individuals, more is required." The following examines how principals' indirect exposure to trauma creates emotional strain as it relates to student trauma and working with staff to aid students in trauma.

Emotional Strain Due to Student Trauma

In terms of the various aspects of the principalship that can cause emotional strain, working with trauma-impacted students is one. The effects of trauma on students can manifest themselves in the form of attendance issues, drug abuse, conflicts with staff, suicide, conflicts with peers, and self-harm. P1 noted, "We have all kinds of kids and trauma can range from instability at home, poverty, substance abuse, abuse, etc." These effects add to the principal's job demands as well as contribute to stress and internalizing their indirect exposure and experiences with trauma-impacted students, with P6 declaring, "You have to walk alongside them [students], challenge them, support them… tons of trauma out there… I think any leader is impacted by it…It's important to take care of yourself physically because of those stress dumps that you're getting." Thus, the challenges that principals experience due to working with trauma-impacted students require more time, resources, and empathy, which can lead to emotional strain and potentially burnout.

When asked about the effects of working with trauma-impacted students, P11 elaborated further on the comments above:

> It's emotionally draining. There's not a lot left in the tank. I am on the district staff wellness committee, and we talk a lot about secondary trauma. We have students who have stories that are horrific and they don't just tell their story to anybody. So when they do, you take it in and then now you're holding it right like you have that on you and in

> your heart. And so when those kids are going through hard times, you know their story, you're giving them grace. And then you see other people who don't know their story who aren't giving them grace. And it's so emotionally taxing.

P16 also described the emotional toll of working with students impacted by trauma when they expressed,

> You just feel like you want to run a big, you know, mansion for all of those kids and help them out. You feel it's tough, you think you're going to miss one. And that's hard for me. But that's probably the hardest part about it, and that part that I lose sleep over at night. When trauma resurfaces in a student's life, and they're really struggling through a tough time, for whatever reason and whatever they're choosing, however they're choosing to cope with it. It has created a compounding issue. That's really difficult when we have to watch that for weeks or months, and sometimes with an unsuccessful result.

Based on their experiences, P11 and P16 explained the emotional strain that resulted from being indirectly exposed to working with students impacted by trauma.

Emotional Strain Due to Staff Aiding Students in Trauma

Indirect exposure to trauma and the effects it has on students and staff creates emotional strain on principals. A lack of resources, due to budget cuts or insufficient funding, can exacerbate the emotional strain of working with staff to support students in trauma. Consequently, principals' workload can increase because they may be expected to do more, such as teaching staff about why a student is acting a certain way or skipping class, rather than having access to trained support staff or professionals, like social workers and mental health counselors. Working in smaller communities can also affect principals because they are visible everywhere they go. The more that is required of principals and the more they give of themselves, the more exhausted they become as they internalize the trauma themselves.

P15 acknowledged a lack of resources necessary to effectively do their job, considering trauma-impacted students when they stated,

> No. I feel like that's an area where more support in terms of a social worker. A trauma counselor would really help because that takes the load off the administrator or guidance counselor. All of us have some level of training in that, but none of us are necessarily

> experts in that, and having a social worker or trauma counselor who are experts in these types of areas, I think, would help.

In considering the emotional toll inherent in the position of a high school principal and the effects of trauma, P11 noted,

> I don't think you can go into this thinking that it's going to be the same every day, and you can't go into this job thinking you're going to have set hours. It's going to be stressful. We work in the people business. And so people are unpredictable and things just change. And there's a lot of emotion involved. There is really a lot of emotional and mental wear and tear on you. Big things that happen, like students who pass away from a drug overdose. You have violence that happens out in the community that isn't part of your school. But your kids go to school. And so it impacts you, fights in the building. I mean, there's just things. So, I'd say there is an emotional and mental component. And then the physical component of just the sheer number of hours that you put in as an administrator.

The comments from both P15 and P1l highlighted the emotional strain that resulted from a lack of resources and the inherent job demands of a high school principal.

Another issue related to the emotional strain in working with staff to aid students in trauma is that staff may be experiencing trauma themselves. This trauma comes from working with trauma-impacted students or from their own life experiences. As P5 highlighted, "Everybody's got their stuff they're carrying around with them. And then we're all just bumping into each other and figuring it out, or sometimes we don't figure it out." Because staff can be trauma-impacted themselves, principals must work with them to help them understand the impacts of trauma, thereby increasing their workload and emotional strain. In discussing the challenges related to working with staff to aid students, P6 observed,

> I think any leader is impacted by it. One of my son's is a fireman and what they see and they experience is very different than what we see and experience. If you're in the military, that's what you bring. [A] military point of view is very different than a police point of view. But it's all trauma coming in, and then you've got to filter it and grind it and figure out a way to make it into a positive s that you can deal with what your experiencing and then help others to develop their skills so that they can deal with it.

To put it another way, P6 described the ubiquitous nature of trauma and how each person was affected differently.

Challenged by Complexities of Working with Traumatized Students

Every principal in this study shared their own stories about being challenged by the complexities of working with students impacted by trauma, albeit each of them dealt with the issues surrounding trauma differently, with P14 disclosing, “The kids we are seeing in our schools today come with things we never would have imagined… And when we were in school, or even when we first got into teaching, like can’t even fathom.” The high school principalship is complex by nature; however, principals deal with trauma-impacted students due to issues ranging from poverty, homelessness, suicide, gangs, sexual assault, homicide, teacher deaths, and others. In sharing a human trafficking story about one of their students, P7 emphasized, “Parents were pretty sure she was being trafficked, or at least passed around by groups or gangs… They ended up having to move her out of state.”

Many staff lack understanding or awareness of the impact of trauma. Consequently, principals are often called upon to help staff be aware of or understand the effects of trauma. This may involve providing professional development opportunities or helping teachers understand the reasons behind student behaviors, such as fights, truancy, or classroom disruptions. The following investigates how principals are challenged by the complexities of working with students impacted by trauma and a lack of staff understanding or awareness of the impacts of trauma.

Suicide, Homicide, Homelessness, Sexual Assault, and Self-Harm

High school principals are frequently faced with the complexities of their role. P15 indicated being a principal “Is a complex job” with P16 stating, “Somebody said being a

principal is the most complex, impossible job you could have." Community dynamics is one of many factors that magnify the complexities of the high school principalship, especially in the realm of working with students impacted by trauma. For example, when talking about a lack of resources for mental health supports, P10 reported,

> I feel like we're just scratching the surface… We live in a community that's under-resourced as far as mental health goes… We live in a community that's very anti-LGBTQ+. So, anybody dealing with anything around being transgender, or being gay, or being gender fluid. They don't want us to talk about it at all, and you know… These are the kids that have the greatest risk of suicide or self-harm… And ignoring it doesn't make it better.

Specifically, P10 recognized the need for additional mental health supports in working with trauma-impacted students. They also acknowledged community barriers that can hinder progress, thereby increasing their workload strain.

Considering that the complexities of the high school principalship are magnified due to working with students impacted by trauma, the ensuing time demands and lack of resources that often accompany their role make them susceptible to experiencing psychological reactions to stress. Among these are exhaustion, low self-efficacy, job dissatisfaction, thoughts of carrying a heavy burden, and feelings of guilt, among others. P9 alluded to these potential psycho-social effects in their comments about working with students impacted by trauma:

> I don't know how many times I've sat in my living room and cried with my wife because of things that have happened to kids at school, you know, parents passing away, kids passing away, sexual abuse. You know all of the things you experience, you know, as being head of a building of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, in some cases, thousands of kids. And you're there to rescue them you have to rescue them and be a part of the system that helps them deal with these things, and that things kids shouldn't have to deal with. And so, I deal with the trauma all the time. And, and, I'm thankful I have an amazing wife and a family I am able to and a group of friends and colleagues that I can share those burdens with. But they're still burdens I carry… I'm starting my 15th year at my school and 18th in administration. I haven't burned out yet, but I've come close several times. And so that idea of wanting to do something out of education. Those are real things. This job carries a burden.

P11 concurred with P9 when they communicated,

> I would say that it's emotionally draining. And sometimes that's even more difficult than the physical aspect of being a building administrator. Because you know the hours are long, whatever you're doing all the things. But when it's a person and a child or a student that's hurting, or has been hurt. And then, you see the parent hurting because their child's hurt…[It] just really pulls at your heart.

In other words, comments from P9 and P11 illustrated how they were impacted by working with traumatized students.

P5 added similar sentiments about the pain principals carry from their work with trauma-impacted students when they shared, "I always try to do the best I can, especially with bullying and harassment. But it hurts me. And I just… It's up to me to figure out how to deal with the hurt." Likewise, in discussing their decisions made before a teacher's suicide and other decisions such as suspending a student, P13 stated, "And so it's those kinds of things that are the ones that you're like, did I make the right decision? Those are the things that sit heavy and are like, I don't know if I can do this job anymore." Simply put, P5 and P13 emphasized how working with trauma-impacted students affected them, thus contributing to strain and potentially burnout. As many principals alluded to in this study, the challenges principals faced from the complexities of working with students impacted by trauma, manifested in the form of inner conflicts and emotional pain they carry with them every day. These psycho-social effects enhanced principal stress and strain, potentially leading to principal attrition and burnout.

Staff Lack of Understanding or Awareness of the Impacts of Trauma

Principals are challenged by the complexities of working with students impacted by trauma because indirect exposure to students in trauma can negatively impact those around them. Thus, principals are often called upon to help staff be aware of or understand the effects of trauma. This may involve providing professional development opportunities or helping teachers

understand the reasons behind student behaviors, such as fights, truancy, or classroom disruptions, thereby increasing the workload of principals as they spend time teaching or communicating with staff about the reasons for truancy and student behaviors connected to trauma. Likewise, amid the already heightened demands of the principalship, high school principals provide time and support to staff, especially when they lack adequate resources. This includes spearheading plans to help students succeed, conducting restorative conferences, following through, and developing proactive systems to prevent student trauma.

P3 summed up the demands required of principals when working with students impacted by trauma when they shared,

> I think that the way that impacts our work is really through getting … the work you have to do with teachers more than anything. Like, how do we build systems that support these students to be successful because every student deserves an opportunity to be successful without having that [trauma] student negatively impacting everybody else in the classroom or everybody else in the school. And so, sometimes it takes a lot of work… It absorbs a lot of your time, right?... So they [the hardest kids] take more time building relationships. And then you got to build support systems in there and then you've got to support the teachers because they're frustrated with the student's behavior. And maybe they don't understand trauma as much, and how students are going to behave. And so restorative conferences. Behavior plans, follow through systems that help prevent the student from having trauma. And then what do you do when it blows up, and you still got to earn credits for them. So yea, those take a lot of the time… Sometimes it's coaching that person [teacher]. Sometimes the teacher just needs to know a little bit about why the kid's behavior that is…So a lot of times it's this plan of support for the teacher, knowing that we're not going to let that kid just blow up their class and make them feel terrible every day… Somebody's got to help them because these are kids are going to be in their community."

Put in another way, P3 highlighted the time required to effectively communicate with staff in working with trauma-impacted students, which increases the workload of principals and adds to the stress inherent in the challenges and complexities of the high school principalship.

In discussing the challenges about the complexities of working with staff who lack awareness or understanding of the impacts of trauma, P14 added to those of P3 when they replied,

> You just have to approach it [trauma] differently [than] when I first got into administration back in 2012… And so you have to be informed about how to approach a student, even their parents. How to approach a parent is different… We run the gamut between having 26-year-olds, teaching or having 70-year-olds teaching in our building. And so something the 70-year-olds that are teaching are more compassionate and empathetic than the 26 year olds. So, you have to, again as a principal, I feel like my role is more about mentoring teachers. How to be, you know, not only be empathetic, but how to have a balance between you being their friend and actually holding boundaries.

Specifically, P14 concurred with P3 in their assessment of what is required to help staff understand or become more aware of the impacts of trauma.

In discussing how working with students impacted by trauma impacted their work, P2 contributed further to the statements of P3 when they remarked,

> Students impacted by trauma impacts my work because I've done a lot of research study of adverse childhood experiences. I've been to three or four different conferences on dealing with students of trauma. So how it impacts my work [is] that not all staff members understand how to deal with a student who comes from [trauma]. So, I get frustrated when you have a staff member upset at a student who comes from trauma and blows their lid."

Essentially, P2 identified the frustration that can occur with principals when working with staff who do not understand the effects of trauma and the student behavior that can be a consequence of it.

Principals were also challenged by the complexities of working with students in trauma due to a lack of awareness within the learning community. For example, in response to a question about community awareness in terms of trauma-impacted students, P12 stated,

> I think it varies from community to community… In the community I [currently] live and work there is not much work or awareness around compassion fatigue, or secondary

> trauma impacts. In fact, in my professional development I'll be providing in August when we come back to school is a little bit of work around secondary trauma… [There] is some legislation around what school districts need to do to address that for their employees. So there's awareness. And, in fact, legislation around that. But sharing that knowledge or sharing that information is what varies in my experience from school to school and district to district.

That is, P12 acknowledged awareness about the effects of trauma varies from one community to another, thereby adding to the workload of principals and the challenges they experience in their work to broaden awareness about the impacts of trauma.

When asked about their work with trauma-impacted students and losing resources due to budget cuts, P4 shared,

> It impacts my workday. And that's why its like hands on. By the time, I like, get to school its hands on all day. And then there are things that you can't. You can't leave until the next day when your done like if there's a CPS call. I don't ever, I don't ever feel comfortable like not passing that on, just because if something happened to me that didn't. That message didn't get sent, or I got really sick, or I don't know things happen. So there are times at the end of the day where it's just like, well, I'm going to be here another two hours because I have to communicate with teachers before the kids come tomorrow that this situation happened, or I have to let them, like there are some things that just you can't get done because of the situations in the day. And that impacts me because that takes my evening. And then, then I'm stressed out. And I'm not getting to see my own kids, which you know like, I'm loving other people's children. But I need to be home for mine because we have five… I have an expectation for myself and the things that I do, and how I support our staff. And so when I'm not able to do that, like that's stressful, feeling like I'm under par, like I just mean, it's not. It doesn't feel adequate.

In other words, P4 stated how working with trauma-impacted students impacted them.

Summary

This chapter presented the results from interviewing 16 high school principals in the state of Washington in 2025. Ten key themes emerged from analyzing the data as the most fundamental findings of this basic descriptive study on reducing burnout among high school principals. These themes included:

- Strained by the complexity and intensity of daily job demands

- Strained by daily scheduling demands
- Maintain a “do-the-work” approach
- Lack of work-life balance
- Rely on their skills, abilities, and attributes as primary resources
- Empowered supervisor support and feedback
- Fair compensation
- Indirect exposure to trauma increases workload
- Indirect exposure to trauma creates emotional strain
- Challenged by complexities of working with students impacted by trauma.

Principals described the demands of their work along with the resources that equipped them to meet the needs of various stakeholders including students, staff, teachers, parents, and the local community. Principals also described the impact of their job demands and what was required of them, often citing the need to be on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Their work with students who have been impacted by trauma and its effects on them was also highlighted.

Chapter 5 will discuss the application of the themes surrounding reducing burnout among high school principals. It will also include conclusions from the data, the application of the findings and conclusions, their relevance to leadership, recommendations for action, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The principalship is more demanding than ever. The general problem is that the varying demands of the principalship create stress and burnout, causing principals to quit their jobs. The specific problem is that until researchers understand the specific factors that contribute to principal burnout, those who serve principals will not be able to effectively support and retain them. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the factors that contribute to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington State in 2025. Overall, I aimed to explore "What are some of the causes of strain and burnout in high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state?" With this overall aim in mind, I pursued the following specific research questions:

RQ1. How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?

RQ2. How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?

RQ3. How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?

The table below lists the research questions and the corresponding themes.

Table 3.1

Research Questions and Corresponding Themes

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1 How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout? Student issues	Strained by the Intensity and Complexity of Daily Job Demands Strained by Daily Scheduling Demands Maintain a "Do-the-Work" Approach Lack Work-Life Balance
RQ2 How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?	Rely on Skills, Abilities, and Attributes as Primary Resources Empowered by Supervisor Support and Feedback Fair compensation
RQ 3 How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?	Indirect Exposure to Trauma Increases Workload Indirect Exposure to Trauma Creates Emotional Strain Challenged by Complexities of Working with Traumatized Students

The following chapter discusses the findings in light of the existing literature, presents applications to leadership, provides recommendations for action and future research, and offers a conclusion to this work.

Discussion of Findings

To add to the body of knowledge concerning principal burnout, three specific questions guided this study. First, a discussion of job complexity and intensity, daily scheduling demands, maintaining a "do-the-work" approach, and lack of work-life balance emerged from the question "how do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?" Then, a discussion of principals relying on their skills, abilities, and attributes, their sense of empowerment through supervisor support, and belief in fair compensation stemmed from the question, "How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?" Finally, a discussion on increased workload, emotional

strain, and student challenges came from question three, “How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?”

RQ1. How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?

In response to the question, “How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?” four themes emerged. First, principals were strained by the complexities and intensity of job demands. Second, principals are strained by daily scheduling demands. Third, principals maintained a “do the work” approach. Finally, principals lacked work-life balance. The following explores each of those themes.

Strained by Complexity and Intensity of Daily Job Demands

One theme that emerged from this study was that the complexity and intensity of daily job demands strain principals. Varying job demands create intense complexity and work intensity for principals. For example, staff and student issues exacerbate the already challenging job demands principals face. Because the role of high school principals has significantly expanded to take on greater executive duties, and because of time pressures from competing administrative and leadership responsibilities involving disputes or needs from various stakeholders, the intensity and complexity of their workload were heightened (Wang, 2022). My study complements Wang's (2022) findings, which showed that principals reported heightened role demands, further underscoring the complex and intense nature of the principalship. My study found that principals’ workdays are continually in flux due to time pressures, cognitive demands, unending paperwork, working beyond regular contracted hours, and numerous additional daily responsibilities. Similarly, my findings further those of Kołodziejczyk et al. (2025) by highlighting how principals described the intense pressure to meet daily scheduling demands. Similar to the findings of Kołodziejczyk et al. (2025), the participants in my study reported an

enormous burden of responsibilities and the inability to complete all tasks within the scheduled workday, which augmented the complexity and intensity of their workload, thereby increasing principals' workload strain. Consistent with the findings of Kołodziejczyk et al. (2025), principals in my study reported an increase in job complexity and intensity as their workload increased, thereby adding to existing time pressures to meet the demands of their daily responsibilities. Additional pressures exacerbated principals' work challenges.

Strained by Daily Scheduling Demands

Daily scheduling demands strain on principals was another theme discovered in my analysis, as principals described being strained by their daily scheduling demands. Due to the unpredictability of their schedules, principals were often strained by having to make adjustments to accommodate the varying needs of diverse stakeholders such as students, staff, parents, and others. Issues that added to their daily scheduling demands included conflict management, parent concerns, problem-solving, student fights, safety and security issues, and the resolution of various crises involving students, staff, or others in their community. Principals' schedules also required them to work regularly before and beyond the workday. The findings of my study revealed that daily job demands including excessive workloads, conflicting obligations, and educator turnover strained principals. This aligns with researchers such as Karaevli (2024) and Mahfouz and Gordon (2021), who highlighted that factors contributing to principal burnout include challenges from various stakeholders, work overload, limited decision latitude, and others.

Further, my study found that time pressures strained principals, as constraints and heavy workloads prevented them from completing tasks they considered meaningful. Likewise, due to insufficient time to complete work duties, the participants in this study reported having to adjust

their schedules and rearrange their work responsibilities, thus requiring them to work before or beyond contractual hours. Just like in Denecker (2019), principals acknowledged that their workload increased due to conflicts with their previously planned schedules. Unlike Denecker (2019), the principals I interviewed indicated that their workday often extended into the evening and on weekends due to pressing needs or issues that could arise at any time, day or night.

The findings of this research, consistent with the scholarship of many others, highlighted the expansive role principals have in their communities beyond the scheduled workday. Denecker (2019) studied the work stress of school principals in an "era of new education governance," in which they are accountable to federal, state, and local mandates. The principals in my study described having to work beyond the scheduled workday to accommodate unexpected policy shifts, such as new testing requirements, COVID-19 protections, and unforeseen budget cuts. Because the Washington principals in this study were already beyond their ability to work within the scheduled workday, they were particularly burdened by the escalation of attrition, burnout, and excessive work demands among their peers in their school community (Marsh et al., 2023). Similar to the findings of Marsh et al. (2023), the principals in my study reported heavy burdens in meeting excessive work demands on their regularly scheduled days as they worked to develop their students, staff, and the communities around them. In this dissertation, principals clearly discussed the weight of being responsible for their stakeholders and that this responsibility could not be fulfilled on a "normal" workday.

Maintained a "Do the Work" Approach

A third theme that came from this study was that principals maintained a "do the work" approach. Despite the never-ending demands of the principalship, participants often communicated a "do the work" mindset. This was evident in their positive outlook, desire to

foster relationships with stakeholders, and commitment to making a difference in the lives of young people. Additionally, they believed in the work they were doing. Statements such as “it is my job,” “I love my job,” “I love my community," and “I love my kids” characterized their mindset of expecting the unexpected in their role as principals.

First, the principals in my study demonstrated awareness of how to perform their jobs effectively. Similar to the principals in Kutsyubura et al.’s (2024) study, the principals in this study demonstrated emotional intelligence, management competencies, and an understanding of their strengths, enabling them to perform their jobs effectively. Like those in Kutsyubura et al. (2024), the principals in my study relied upon their strengths to get the job done. However, unlike those in Kutsyubura et al. (2024), participants in my study did not acknowledge or recognize their weaknesses as principals. So, while the principals in this study demonstrated strong awareness of how to do their jobs effectively, it was unclear whether they recognized their weaknesses as they carried out this “do the work” approach.

Second, the principals I interviewed reported a passion for doing their jobs. Resembling the principals in Horwood et al. (2021), the principals in my study showed harmonious work passion, which can buffer burnout and increase job satisfaction. One example of this was principals’ reporting that they were empowered with decision latitude and the choice of how they responded to problems. In contrast to the principals in Horwood et al. (2021), who reported high levels of burnout alongside high levels of passion and job satisfaction, principals in my study did not report high levels of burnout. While principals in my study discussed stress and other factors that caused strain, only one principal reported experiencing burnout.

Lack of Work-Life Balance

A final theme that emerged from the relationship between job demands and principal strain and burnout was principals' lack of work-life balance. Principals' overwhelming workload strains them, thereby potentially leading to burnout. Their excessive workload causes them to take work home because they are unable to finish their planned work during the school day. They assume they are always available to students, parents, staff, and community members. Thus, their lack of work-life balance is evident in their poor self-care, characterized by unhealthy eating habits, sleep deprivation, minimal exercise, and a lack of outlets to buffer the stress of their job.

Consistent with Mahfouz (2020), principals in my study reported that stressors such as a lack of work-life balance, insufficient self-care, bureaucracy, and constant change could affect their well-being and job performance. Principals also reported that their daily job demands and workload often led to a lack of self-care and poor work-life balance. Although Mahfoutz (2020) noted that stressors and self-care needs could be managed through knowledge and the development of stress management skills, few principals in my study reported awareness of or skills in practicing self-care. Therefore, it is unclear if the principals in my study incorporated their own self-care and stress management strategies to address work-life imbalance.

Similar to Doyle Fosco et al. (2025), participants in this dissertation communicated high levels of role-related stress primarily due to communication with families and other stakeholders, external work pressures, and administrative duties. However, unlike female school leaders who reported higher stress levels than their male colleagues due to concerns over the well-being of others and engagement with staff and other personnel (Doyle Fosco et al., 2025), female participants in my study did not report higher stress levels. Additionally, in contrast to many of the principals in this study, who did not report using self-care strategies, school leaders in Doyle

Fosco's et al. (2025) study employed cognitive, emotional, occupational, spiritual, and physical self-care strategies to manage stress effectively. Furthermore, unlike Kim's (2022) study, which highlighted a plethora of mindfulness practices that could be implemented in any setting at any time to improve principals' well-being and work-life balance, principals in my study did not report using mindfulness techniques to lessen stress. Hence, it is inconclusive whether all the principals in my study employed specific self-care techniques similar to those described by Doyle-Fosco et al. (2025) or mindfulness strategies noted by Kim (2022) to improve their work-life balance.

RQ2. How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?

Three recurring themes emerged from the analysis of responses to "How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?" First, principals relied on their skills, abilities, and attributes as their primary resources. Second, principals were empowered through supervisor support and feedback. Finally, principals felt their compensation was fair.

Skills, Abilities, and Attributes as Primary Resources

Principals relied on their skills, abilities, and attributes as their primary job resources. High school principals in this study acknowledged unique characteristics that enabled them to perform their jobs effectively. When referencing their skills, abilities, and attributes, principals communicated personal qualities such as self-awareness, building trust and fostering relationships, resolving conflicts, and being grounded in their values, among others. In agreement with Gómez-Leal et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of emotional intelligence skills in the context of school leadership and the predominant leadership skills and abilities of self-awareness, self-management, and empathy, principals in my study recognized the role self-awareness, empathy, and self-management played in identifying their skills and abilities to do

their jobs effectively. Similar to Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) and others, Constantinides (2023) found that effective school leaders foster professional collaboration with numerous stakeholders, build trusting relationships, and have the capacity to problem-solve, thereby enabling them to lead change efforts. In the same way, principals in my study communicated the importance of nurturing positive relationships within the learning community as they sought to meet their leadership responsibilities by acknowledging their unique skills and abilities.

Although my study did not focus on emotional intelligence, prior studies such as Silbaugh et al. (2023) and Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) have emphasized its role in effective leadership. Principals in my study demonstrated self-awareness by explaining how they relied on their skills and abilities, and how these enhanced their leadership capacity. However, unlike the recommendations and findings of Silbaugh et al. (2023), who highlighted the importance of school districts improving principals' job resources through emotional intelligence training and education as a proactive approach to mitigating the effects of principal burnout, participants in my study did not report receiving any emotional intelligence training. Thus, it is unclear whether they received any emotional intelligence training or education to develop leadership agency and mitigate the impact of burnout.

Empowered by Supervisor Support and Feedback

A second theme emerging from data analysis was principal empowerment through supervisor support and feedback. Trust and job autonomy characterized the relationship between principals and their supervisor, namely superintendents. Due to positive support and feedback, principals described the confidence and self-efficacy they experienced. Thus, principals were empowered to do their jobs when they had supervisors who believed in them and trusted their decision-making capabilities, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

The self-efficacy reported by participants in my study was a direct result of superintendents giving principals decision latitude, trusting their judgement, treating them as thought partners, and supervisor affirmations and support. They also stated that their decision latitude stemmed from the relationship and the subsequent feedback they received from supervisors. Similar to Durrani and Makhmetova (2024) finding that school autonomy was a risk factor for the well-being of principals, participants in the present study communicated high levels of job autonomy, which contributed to their self-efficacy and overall well-being. Conversely, unlike the findings of Durrani and Makhmetova (2024), who found that school leaders' well-being was significantly influenced by gender, principals in the current study did not differ by gender in their reports on job autonomy and well-being.

Comparable to the findings of Su-Keene et al. (2024), who highlighted factors such as a lack of job autonomy, entrenched bureaucratic systems, standardized testing, and budgetary limitations, principals in my study emphasized that these factors often increased their workload and affected their health and well-being. When principals in my study had job autonomy, facilitated by supervisor support and feedback, they were more empowered to navigate the challenges of their role defensively and reactively. Job autonomy, despite bureaucracy and budget limitations, was a vitamin that helped stave off stress and strain even during challenging times.

Principals in this dissertation reported that perceived district support empowered them to meet the varied demands of their jobs. In agreement with Perry et al. (2024), who noted that principals' intentions to transfer or quit were diminished when they perceived district leaders' support, participants in the present study acknowledged how district support influenced their ability to do their jobs, thus improving their self-efficacy. In contrast to principals reporting

intentions to quit or leave their positions due to student violence against them (Perry et al., 2024), principals in my study did not discuss violence against them or how their districts supported them after the fact. Thus, it is unclear whether this was an issue for participants, as the topic of student violence against principals did not arise in this study.

Fair Compensation

A final theme related to how job resources relate to principal strain and burnout was principals' belief that their compensation was fair. The 16 principals interviewed in this dissertation communicated that their compensation and benefits were fair. According to them, rewards came in the form of making a difference and improving student outcomes. However, they did offer suggestions on how school districts could improve their compensation packages.

In contrast to the findings of this study and the principals' reports of being fairly compensated, Groß et al. (2025) found a significant link between perceived reward crisis, as measured by the effort-reward imbalance model, and a heightening of principals' psychological stress and increased susceptibility to burnout. Even with the intensity and stress of their positions, principals in this dissertation emphasized rewards being intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Additionally, unlike Blaum and Tobin (2019), who reported high levels of principal burnout, participants in my study did not report high levels of burnout. Similar to Blaum and Tobin's (2019) findings, however, principals in the present study showed a natural inclination to serve and help students succeed. Likewise, principals in the present study, as well as in Blaum and Tobin (2019), demonstrated being extrinsically motivated by approval from students and other stakeholders. Principals in my study also expressed a sense of satisfaction with their work, rather than with the amount they are paid.

Despite all principals in the current study communicating that their compensation was fair, Karaevli (2024) found that school principals did not feel adequately compensated for the responsibilities and workload inherent to their roles. When considering compensation, it is noteworthy that the female principals in this study did not report discrepancies in pay compared to their male colleagues. Nevertheless, research by Grissom et al. (2021b) found gender pay gaps among principals both nationally and in the state of Missouri. Although the principals in my study were asked a general question about how compensation affected their jobs, it is unclear whether pay gaps existed among these principals.

RQ3. How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?

In terms of the question, "How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?" three themes emerged. First, principals' indirect exposure to trauma increased workload. Second, principals' indirect exposure to trauma created emotional strain. Third, principals were challenged by the complexities of working with students impacted by trauma.

Indirect Exposure to Trauma Increases Workload

Principals' indirect exposure to trauma can increase workload strain because they may need to work with staff who do not understand how trauma affects students. Likewise, principal workload intensifies due to them having to work with trauma-impacted students or having to take the place of trained professionals because of budgeting or staff issues. Fighting, poverty, violence, substance abuse, family mental health, and others further increased the workload of principals as a result of indirect exposure to trauma.

In considering how indirect exposure to trauma increases the workload of principals, this study found that workload increases from principals having to educate teachers and other staff about the impacts of trauma. Trauma is a widespread problem impacting a significant number of

students in the United States (Williams, 2023). As Smith and Quick (2023) did, the principals in this dissertation emphasized the demands of working with students affected by trauma. To improve teachers' awareness of the effects of trauma, Smith and Quick (2023) recommended that schools provide teachers with educational opportunities on the impacts of early childhood trauma and facilitate learning that focuses on students' social-emotional needs. Principals in my study stated they intended to plan and implement trauma-informed training for their staff. It is worth noting that Smith and Quick (2023) recommended considering culturally responsive teaching and focusing on students' social-emotional needs. Both Smith and Quick (2023) and the principals in my study stated that principals should educate teachers and staff about the impacts of trauma.

Another finding from this study was the effects of secondary trauma on principals themselves. Consistent with findings from DeMatthews et al. (2023) reporting how secondary trauma can traumatize principals, especially if they do not have the resources or feel they have failed in helping trauma-impacted students, principals in my study discussed that they often felt like they had failed in their work with traumatized students. Principals reported that this responsibility burdened them and that they often lacked the resources to address the problem. Principals in my study also discussed how issues such as suicide, human trafficking, and gun violence were a significant emotional burden. They recounted time and time again that vulnerable students were most likely to experience trauma. These vulnerabilities included poverty (Berger et al., 2018), mental health (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021), gun violence (Luongo, 2021), and immigration status (DeMatthews et al., 2023). Principals described a heightened emotional burden when discussing situations related to these vulnerabilities and when working with such students.

Only a few principals in this dissertation discussed how COVID-19 impacted their work. However, the impact of COVID-19 on principals' workload cannot be underestimated. Although Urick et al. (2021) noted pre-existing job demands of the principalship before the pandemic, the authors noted these escalated as principals were expected to serve as chief communicators of school communities, technology experts, managers of food distribution, providers of psycho-social supports to stakeholders, and others. While few principals in my study discussed how COVID-19 affected their work, the post-COVID context was very apparent in the interviews. For example, principals discussed a "post-COVID mentality" in which parents expected immense flexibility regarding student absenteeism and academic performance, which increased their professional workload. Concerning secondary trauma, principals discussed a "recent" and "in recent years" rising awareness within themselves and their educator peers about secondary trauma, its effects, and how to approach such trauma. In hindsight, asking more specific post-pandemic-related interview questions may have captured more details about the influence of the pandemic on principal-experienced indirect exposure to trauma. That is, where principals drew their stories from during the pandemic and prior, more specific interview questions could have elucidated recent developments in working with secondary trauma as a principal.

Indirect Exposure to Trauma Creates Emotional Strain

The second theme that emerged from analyzing data related to how principals' indirect exposure to trauma creates emotional strain. This emotional strain can increase due to students being impacted by trauma and from working with staff to aid students in trauma. Moreover, emotional strain can surface as a result of principals needing to spend more time and resources on trauma-impacted students, as well as provide training and professional development to help

their staff be more aware of how trauma affects students. Principals may also need to draw on their own empathy when working with students and staff who have been impacted by trauma.

In agreement with studies such as DeMatthews et al. (2019), who found that principals experienced psycho-social effects from internalizing trauma from students they felt responsible for, participants in my study communicated the emotional strain that comes from working with trauma-impacted students in numerous ways. In the case of my participants, these included crying at night, losing sleep, feeling as if they were carrying a heavy load, and others. Berger et al. (2022) emphasized that external support from mental health professionals should be available to school leaders and staff to assist them with responding to the impacts of trauma. Only one principal in this study indicated that they used a therapist to help them navigate the burdens of the principalship and the emotional strain that comes from working with traumatized students. Interview questions were specifically not designed to explore how principals cope with their work involving trauma-impacted students. However, principals described coping through friendships, relationships, exercise, and even taking a drive to unwind. Principals were not explicitly asked if they sought mental health counseling to help them with the emotional strain of working with students impacted by trauma. Indeed, future studies exploring such strain should consider asking this question.

Principals in my study utilized trauma-informed practices to ease their emotional burden and help students. They also promoted these trauma-informed practices among staff. While Castro Schepers and Young (2022) found trauma-informed practices to be a mitigating factor in secondary traumatic stress, principals in this dissertation described numerous interventions undertaken for students experiencing trauma. Some of these included “restorative conferences,” building and relying upon relationships and trust, and having non-threatening one-on-one

conversations with traumatized students. Principals in my study did not discuss “trauma-informed practices” by name, but clearly integrated them into their work. Trauma-informed practice can also be inward (self) focused, where one recognizes the trauma being experienced secondarily through another person’s trauma. Self-care strategies, like those discussed by Clay et al. (2024), such as reflection, taking time off, and quality time with family, were discussed by my participants as a way to restore themselves from the impacts of the demands of their role. Clay et al. (2024) asserted that practices like these played a key role in how their participants detached emotionally from the impacts they experienced as a result of working with children impacted by trauma. Further, the authors found that secondary traumatic stress and a lack of support were factors in high turnover rates among educators (Clay et al., 2024). Principals in this dissertation had numerous strategies to cope with the impacts of working with students of trauma.

Amidst student trauma, principals relied upon their years of expertise as a resource to mitigate the effects of emotional strain resulting from working with trauma-impacted students. Similar to Dicke et al.’s (2022) finding that emotional exhaustion varies by level of principal experience, participants in the current study emphasized that the emotional strain resulting from indirect exposure to students experiencing trauma was mitigated by their ability to draw on similar situations in their principal experience for consolation. They highlighted the importance of years of experience in navigating the demands inherent to their role when relating to the emotional strain from working with students impacted by trauma.

Principals utilized many resources to cope with the emotional strain from working with traumatized students. Essary et al. (2020) recommended strategies such as reducing principal workload, providing time off, offering professional development, fostering collaboration, and others. Similarly, principals in my study communicated the importance of professional

development, principal networking, and taking time off as measures to lessen their workload and the emotional strain associated with indirect exposure to trauma.

Challenged by Complexities of Working with Traumatized Students

The complexities of working with students impacted by trauma can further intensify the challenges faced by principals, thereby influencing principal strain and burnout. The workload intensity of principals is heightened due to students impacted by trauma and working with staff to aid students in trauma. Challenges arise from staff lacking understanding or awareness of the impacts of trauma and the need for training, adding to the complexities of working with students impacted by trauma. Additionally, helping trauma-impacted students can increase principal workload and strain in times such as having to notify the school community of a student's death or suicide.

Considering that 25% of students in America have experienced some form of trauma (Smith & Quick, 2023), and educators receive minimal training or support on how to manage stressors associated with working with trauma-impacted students (Fleckman et al., 2022), it comes as no surprise that principals represented in my study were challenged by the complexities of working with trauma-impacted students. Consistent with Fleckman et al. (2022), who found the need for supplementary training and support for school personnel in how to work with trauma-impacted students, principals in this dissertation highlighted the need for their staff to be adequately trained in how to work with students impacted by trauma.

Similar to the principals in my study who indicated the need for additional training to help them in their work with trauma-impacted students, Berger et al. (2022) found that principals reported the need for ongoing trauma-specific training and guidance in implementing trauma-focused programs to improve their ability and confidence in helping trauma-impacted students,

along with research-based frameworks and additional training to help them cultivate school environments sensitive to the effects of trauma. Principals in the present study also reported a lack of resources due to budgetary and personnel issues, rather than the need for, or the importance of, trauma-focused programs to guide them in creating system-wide trauma-informed practices. As noted in previous sections on the nature of this study's interview questions, a specific question about system-wide support or interventions might have elicited different responses, thereby shedding light on how high school principals are challenged by the complexities of working with trauma-impacted students.

Wassink-de Stigter et al. (2022) highlighted the challenges of implementing a trauma-informed approach in schools, due to the inherent complexities and the time required, with themes ranging from professional development and leadership support to engaging stakeholders and buy-in. Considering buy-in, participants in my study highlighted the challenges they faced in helping stakeholders understand the importance and need for trauma-informed practices in schools. In response to interview questions related to working with trauma-impacted students and the resources needed to do their jobs effectively, principals often communicated the need for more resources to train school staff and educate the community about the effects of student trauma.

Interestingly, schools use system-wide approaches to tackle issues such as discipline and social-emotional learning. However, when it comes to trauma-informed practices, few do. According to Howard (2019), trauma is ubiquitous across schools and classrooms, yet many schools have not incorporated a whole-organization approach. As suggested by Howard (2019), solutions for dealing with trauma may be due to the complex nature of school systems. Nehez and Blossing (2022) and Shaked and Schechter (2019) also noted that schools are fundamentally

complex organizations with continuous and varied interactions between people, activities, and motivations. Principals in this dissertation highlighted the complexities of system-wide challenges in working with students impacted by trauma, such as encouraging teachers to examine why students exhibited behavioral problems and truancy and exploring how students' home lives impacted academic work. Additionally, they celebrated students who experienced incredible odds to attend school.

Application to Leadership

The principalship is more demanding than ever. Modeled from the constructs of the JD-R (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1988), and secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995) theories, this study aimed to understand the specific factors contributing to principal burnout including job demands, job resources, outcomes, strain, and burnout. Workload, time pressures, and cognitive demands were confirmed as the most challenging aspects of the principalship. Principals face intense pressure to meet their daily scheduling demands and assume immense responsibilities including numerous duties, interminable paperwork, demands from multiple stakeholders, and working beyond contractual hours (Kołodziejczyk et al., 2025; Wang, 2022). In contrast to the stress and strain of job complexity and intensity, effective principals demonstrate emotional intelligence in their awareness of personal skills, abilities, and attributes, as well as their imperfections, that enable them to meet the all-consuming demands of their jobs, thereby contributing to their occupational well-being (Kutsyubura et al., 2024). However, as Mahfouz (2020) highlighted, principals communicated the complexity of the principalship, lack of self-care, and lack of work-life balance as job stressors. It is worth noting that school leaders who cultivate collaboration and mutual trust among stakeholders and possess problem-solving skills can nurture a culture that

embraces change and innovation (Constantinides, 2023). Principals in my study communicated the importance of building trust throughout the learning community. Thus, leaders guiding and supporting principals should not underestimate the importance of team (and supervisor) trust, aiming to create a learning community between principals that is an authentic system of support.

Leader support and feedback were perhaps the most impactful resources that helped principals manage their strain and stress. Even in dire circumstances, principals were strongly supported by leaders (including superintendents) who provided timely, encouraging feedback and granted them job autonomy. Leaders should recognize that school autonomy is a risk factor for the well-being of school leaders (Durrani & Makhmetova, 2024). Among the many factors that contribute to occupational stress and principal well-being, according to Su-Keene et al. (2024), are a lack of job autonomy, bureaucracy, mandatory testing, and budget issues. Although high burnout rates are reported among principals, Blaum and Tobin (2019) found that principals are naturally motivated to serve and help students succeed, as well as extrinsically motivated by approval from students and other stakeholders. While Grissom et al. (2021b) discussed gender pay gaps as a source of principal stress, principals in my study reported being fairly compensated for their role. They also discussed institutional reform, feedback, and autonomy. That is, while much of the dialogue around educator strain focuses on pay, the principals in this dissertation emphasized the importance of job autonomy and feedback.

The heavy workload of principals is exacerbated by the effects of secondary trauma on principals, thereby causing emotional strain (DeMatthews et al.,2023). Secondary trauma can traumatize principals, especially when they do not have the resources or feel they have failed in helping trauma-impacted students (DeMatthews et al., 2019). For reasons such as these, numerous researchers have discussed the need for training principals, faculty, and staff to

manage and address secondary trauma experienced as educators working with traumatized students (Berger et al., 2022; Fleckman et al., 2022). Principals require ongoing trauma-specific training and school policies to improve their ability and confidence in helping trauma-impacted students, as well as to aid teachers who help these students (Berger et al., 2022). Public educators working in marginalized communities lack supplementary training and support for school personnel working with trauma-impacted students and how they can learn to manage their own emotional health, especially in light of student-based trauma around them (Fleckman et al., 2022). Participants in my study repeatedly discussed the need for educators to get further training on how trauma affects those exposed to it. Therefore, another important lesson for leaders connected to the principalship is the need for professional development that helps prepare all stakeholders to work effectively with trauma-impacted students.

Recommendations for Action

Awareness

Those who teach and serve principals should learn and be aware of the causes of principal burnout. Schools are fundamentally complex organizations with continuous and varied interactions between people, activities, and motivations (Eizaguirre et al., 2020; Nehez & Blossing, 2022). The principalship is as complicated as schools themselves. Principals worldwide work in complex environments, often requiring them to perform under intense pressure due to the enormity of their job demands (Kołodziejczyk et al., 2025; Mahfouz, 2020). Researchers such as Dicke et al. (2022) have further emphasized that principal strain and burnout are complex problems that necessitate rigorous inquiry and actionable solutions. Accordingly, legislative bodies, school districts, and principals need to recognize and mitigate the effects of burnout to enhance the well-being of school leaders and maintain their critical work

(DeMatthews et al., 2023). Likewise, since burnout can affect school leaders mentally and physically, and have negative effects within their leadership contexts and school systems in general (Hancock et al., 2019; Karaevli, 2024), stakeholders must understand the causes of burnout among high school principals, how this process occurs, and how we can better support and understand principals who experience burnout. Principals whose teachers and leaders are aware of the causes of principal burnout may be able to help them mitigate its effects.

Social Support

Schools are critical workplace settings for our society. With principals experiencing extreme stress levels (Marsh et a., 2023) and international research highlighting the heightened threat to principal's well-being due to increasing job demands and the integrated and interconnected aspects of their work (Chen et al., 2023), those that guide principals should be aware of these factors that promote strain and burnout and those actions that can reduce the effects of such job demands. Thus, awareness of the strain of daily scheduling demands on principals can help school district employees mitigate burnout by reducing principals' workload and cultivating work environments that empower them in their leadership roles (Şevgin & Uçar, 2023). Considering that the nature of the principalship is stressful and burnout is common (DeMatthews et al., 2021), school districts, principal preparation programs, and practitioners should also provide social support and include stress management and coping strategies in their work with principals as a means to reduce stress and principal burnout (Lücker et al., 2022).

Ongoing Assessment by Peers and Supervisors

To enhance their jobs without adding to their existing strain and potential burnout, a good start would be to follow the suggestion from Kutsyubura et al. (2024) and provide an ongoing well-being assessment to help principals identify their strengths and weaknesses and pinpoint

sources of stress. Similar to principals in Kutsyuruba et al. (2024) who emphasized the importance of mentoring opportunities, peer networking, and others, participants in my study communicated the value of having peer encouragers to help them navigate their role. Likewise, considering that social support has been shown to mitigate the effects of stress, burnout, and depression (Beausaert et al., 2016), the above stakeholders should listen to their principals in what types of social support they would benefit from as they strive to help principals with their positive outlook and "do-the-work" approach.

Mentorship

School leaders who do not value their well-being are susceptible to burnout and other work-related stressors, which are among the many factors contributing to principal burnout (See et al., 2023). Therefore, it is incumbent upon district leaders, researchers, and principal preparation programs to advocate for and support the implementation of self-care strategies to enhance principals' leadership capacity and promote work-life balance. Likewise, those who support principal well-being would do well to adhere to the advice they often give others and provide it to principals by setting boundaries, prioritizing their own well-being, and utilizing mental health supports when necessary (Rea & Slavin, 2023). Given that self-care plays a crucial role in a principal's ability to reduce stress levels and provide support to others (Durrani & Makhmetova, 2024), school districts need to follow the suggestions from Doyle Fosco et al. (2025) and utilize resources geared toward mentorship and continuing professional development, specifically designed to foster principal wellness. Finally, school districts and principal preparation programs should be aware of the research on mindfulness and its potential to mitigate the effects of stress (Kim, 2022). Accordingly, helping principals develop and

implement mindfulness activities into their daily routines is a cost-effective way to improve principals' stress and work-life imbalance.

Autonomy

Given that job autonomy and feedback positively impact principals' self-efficacy and the empowerment that follows, school districts and legislators should adopt Elomaa et al.'s (2023) suggestions and support principals by reducing job demands and increasing job resources. The findings of this current study clearly demonstrate that supervisor support and feedback can increase the likelihood that principals can withstand the strain and stress of their job demands, even when faced with diminishing job resources. Beyond superintendents, stakeholders (such as policy-makers, elected officials, and principal preparation programs) should also be aware of the relationship between principal autonomy and principals' organizational commitment. Results from Tong and Wei (2024) showed a positive correlation among principal autonomy, job satisfaction, and increased principals' self-efficacy. Similarly, the present study's research revealed that principals experienced increased job satisfaction and greater self-efficacy with higher levels of job autonomy. Therefore, by giving principals greater autonomy, school districts and principal supervisors can further support principals' well-being, enhance their self-efficacy, and empower them through supervisor support and feedback.

Impacts of Secondary Trauma

Taking into account there is awareness worldwide of the need for schools to be ready to respond to children experiencing trauma and hardship (Martin et al., 2024) and burnout and secondary traumatic stress have been found to occur together in professionals who work with trauma-impacted individuals (Cieslak et al., 2014), educators must receive training on how to understand the signs and individual and interpersonal risk factors (Juárez & Becton, 2024). To

accomplish this, awareness and training are required, often initiated by school leaders. It is also important to note that assisting students who live in poverty or who have experienced trauma intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic (Wall, 2024). Furthermore, exposure to adverse interpersonal events and trauma is linked to increased occurrences of mental and physical health issues which can cause post-traumatic stress disorder, potentially leading to depression, anxiety and other mental health problems (Brooks et al., 2018), Thus, as suggested by Berger et al. (2022), external supports from mental health professionals should be available to school leaders and staff to assist them with responding to the impacts of trauma on children.

In describing how the trauma of principals in their study affected them as researchers, DeMatthews et al. (2019) further highlighted the importance of districts being proactive in supporting principals' emotional and psychological needs due to the mental health needs of principals being frequently neglected in educational administration, professional development, and principal preparation programs. Therefore, it is incumbent upon these stakeholders to provide more support to principals as they continue their work with trauma-impacted students by guiding school leaders to mental health counseling. As principals described the emotional strain from the effects of working with students impacted by gun violence, suicide, parental drug abuse, and other issues, best practices, alongside the urgings of the studies mentioned above, highlight the need for principals to work with mental health professionals. Thus, as previously mentioned, future studies should examine principals' assessments of mental health.

Nearly one-fifth of school principals leave their jobs each year, citing high levels of stress as a primary reason (Kim & Pendola, 2022). According to Doyle Fosco et al. (2025), stress is a common aspect of educational environments; therefore, understanding its causes is essential so we can implement stress-reducing strategies to mitigate its effects. Additionally, further

investigation by those who guide and lead principals is warranted regarding initiatives and protocols that will enhance principal wellness and promote sustainability within the principalship (Doyle Fosco et al., 2025).

Recommendations for Future Research

Emerging from the discussion of this study's findings and the literature, several recommendations for future research should be considered by scholars. These areas of future research include (a) factors enabling principals to serve with less burnout, (b) strategies to support high school principals, (c) policies and strategies to reduce principal workload, and (d) increasing the awareness of staff concerning working with students impacted by trauma. The following explores each of these areas of recommendations.

Discover Factors that Enable Principals to Serve with Less Burnout

Future research should explore the factors that enable principals to serve with fewer incidents of burnout. Studies worldwide have shown that the principalship is a stressful and highly demanding role, with principals reporting higher levels of stress than teachers, who have been extensively studied in this regard (Denecker, 2019; Sebastian et al., 2024). According to DeMatthews et al. (2023), principal burnout is a pivotal area of investigation that warrants further research to understand its causes and how the work environment, secondary trauma, and coping strategies influence its progression. In considering my study, the most unexpected finding was that principals did not report high levels of burnout. Only a few mentioned almost burning out during their career. However, principals reported increasing stress levels associated with the high school principalship. Therefore, researchers should explore the specific job demands and exacerbating factors that have the greatest potential to increase strain and burnout. Future studies

should also examine the factors that contribute to high school principals' resilience and coping mechanisms, thereby helping principals serve with fewer incidents of burnout.

Explore Strategies to Support Principals

Prospective research should also focus on strategies to best support high school principals. Because principals are at risk of burnout, district leadership should, in response to findings from researchers such as Perry et al. (2024) and Sibisanu et al. (2024), focus on providing emotional and professional support systems to improve principal psychological well-being, reduce feelings of anxiety, stress, and others, among the intense stress of job demands. Interestingly, principals in my study emphasized the importance of supervisor support, specifically their superintendents, as a crucial resource for navigating the challenges inherent to their role. The self-efficacy of principals in this study was also boosted by supervisor support and feedback. As a result, trust and job autonomy increased. Thus, future studies should investigate how supervisor support can be leveraged to mitigate the effects of stress and lessen the job demands of high school principals. These studies could also examine how school districts and principal supervisors can expand decision latitude, build trust, and foster a supportive work environment for high school principals.

Application of Findings and Conclusions to the Problem Statement

The principalship is more demanding than ever. Prior to undertaking this study, the apparent general problem was that the varying demands of the principalship create stress and burnout, causing principals to quit their jobs. Accordingly, the specific problem guiding this study was that until researchers like me sought to understand the factors contributing to principal burnout, those who serve principals were unable to support and retain them effectively. Having conducted the study, the findings provide valuable insights into understanding the specific

factors that contribute to principal burnout. First, in terms of how job demands relate to principal strain and burnout, varying job demands create intense complexity and work intensity for principals. Workload, time pressures, and cognitive demands were the most challenging aspects of the principalship (Wang, 2022). Job complexity and intensity, daily scheduling demands, maintaining a "do-the-work" approach, and a lack of work-life balance characterized principals in this study. In line with international research showing that the principalship is highly demanding and stressful, principals in the current study reported that time pressures are a significant issue due to increasing workloads, often preventing them from engaging in purpose-driven work (Denecker, 2019).

Second, regarding how job resources relate to principal strain and burnout, principals in my study relied on their skills, abilities, and attributes as primary resources to perform their jobs; they were empowered by supervisor feedback and support, and believed their compensation was fair. Principals reported high levels of job autonomy and leadership self-efficacy, driven by supervisor support and feedback (Su-Keene et al., 2024). In contrast to all principals in my study (female and male), who reported fair compensation, gender gaps have been found in other studies across the United States (Grissom et al., 2021b).

Finally, as to the question, "How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain and burnout?", principals experienced increased workload, emotional strain, and student challenges. Adding to the heightened workload of principals are the effects of secondary trauma on principals themselves. Indirect exposure to trauma can traumatize principals, especially if they lack resources or due to low self-efficacy from not helping students in trauma adequately (DeMatthews et al., 2023). Increased workload also occurs as a result of school leaders being responsible for improving trauma awareness in their staff, such as educating teachers on the

impact of early childhood trauma, providing new teachers with training on the impact of early childhood trauma, and facilitating learning geared to culturally responsive teaching and the social-emotional needs of children (Smith & Quick, 2023). As presented earlier in this chapter, my study often supported the findings of previous studies that have explored factors contributing to principal burnout. However, what emerged most poignantly beyond the findings of other studies was that principals, for the most part, exhibited a "do-the-work" mindset amidst significant occupational stress and high job demands. Additionally, my study aimed to understand the factors that influence principal burnout and to explore possible strategies to mitigate it. Indeed, it seems that this "do-the-work" mentality provided significant aid to so many of these principals.

Reduce Principal Workload

Another area of future research concerns strategies and policies to reduce the workload and job demands of high school principals. Twenty-first-century high school leadership is complex and more demanding than ever, with role overload unlikely to diminish amid the acute stress principals face (Bauer et al., 2019; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2021). Principals work long hours under intense pressure in complex environments, serving a critical purpose in learning communities while facing accountability and transparency demands (Marsh et al., 2023; Wang, 2022). Heightened workload, self-imposed strain, limited resources, and interpersonal conflicts are primary sources of principal stress (Elomaa et al., 2023), with principals reporting workload demands in the form of time constraints, varied duties, insignificant tasks, and role ambiguity (Oplatka, 2017). In my study, principals described round-the-clock demands and availability. They frequently communicated being on call day and night, amid responsibilities connected to

student safety and security, and supervision of co-curricular activities during the week and on weekends.

Considering the above, future research should investigate ways to alleviate the workload and job demands of high school principals. Future lines of inquiry could also examine how to mitigate the effects of stress and strain associated with the principalship, stemming from heightened job demands and workload. Given that principal burnout is a prevalent issue in the educational system due to limited decision latitude, increasing role demands, and chronic stress (Beausaert et al., 2016; Su-Keene et al., 2024), researchers might also study the specific job demands and exacerbating scenarios that have the greatest potential to increase strain and burnout. More empirical studies that contribute to the body of knowledge on principal burnout should be conducted, enabling the development of impactful strategies tailored to meet the specific and contextual needs of principals (Sibisanu et al., 2024). By doing this, strategies and policies can be developed to reduce the workload and job demands of high school principals.

Future research should explore the emotional and psychological impacts of secondary trauma on principals. According to Kruse and Edge (2023) and Ludick and Figley (2017), secondary traumatic stress may be a contributing factor to principal burnout because secondary traumatic stress is vicarious occupational stress encountered by those who work with victims of trauma in a supportive role. Likewise, principals are prone to secondary traumatic stress and burnout because vicarious trauma or emotional exhaustion can occur in individuals who interact with people experiencing trauma, thereby increasing the possibility of burnout and secondary stress (Castro, Schepers & Young, 2022; Cieslak et al., 2014). In terms of my study, principals described the emotional strain that results from indirect exposure to trauma. They also reported psycho-social effects such as stress, anxiety, low self-efficacy, sadness, grief, and others.

Therefore, further research should focus on how school leaders respond to different types of student trauma, such as child abuse and others (Berger et al., 2022). Future studies on high school principal burnout should also consider exploring how different contextual, situational, and personal factors can foster emotional strain in school leaders indirectly exposed to trauma. Bearing in mind that the decline of school leaders' well-being has become a focus of academics and experts internationally, researchers such as Doyle Fosco et al. (2025) and Kutsyuruba et al. (2024) noted the importance of future studies focusing on evidence-based system level supports designed to foster and preserve principals' well-being and promote long-term professional viability as they experience emotional and psychological impacts from secondary trauma. Based on my study's findings, I echo these recommendations.

Enhance Staff Awareness of Student Trauma

Further investigation on how principals can enhance staff awareness of the impacts of student trauma is also warranted. As reported by Berger et al. (2022), this research should explore the professional development and resources offered to school leaders, as well as the impact of their training and resources on staff awareness and capabilities in working with students who have been impacted by trauma. Principals in this dissertation communicated the need to train staff about working with trauma-impacted students. They also discussed planning and providing staff with professional development on the impacts of student trauma. Consequently, subsequent studies should explore which aspects of the principalship (e.g., teacher support, providing trauma-informed care, connecting families to community resources, etc.) are most challenging for principals and what resources are needed to assist them in dealing with student trauma (Berger et al., 2022), thereby providing principals with specific strategies to foster staff awareness on the impacts of student trauma.

Concluding Statement

The principalship is complex and demanding; therefore, all stakeholders need to understand the causes of high school principal burnout so that we can implement effective strategies that reduce burnout and promote the well-being of our school leaders (DeMatthews et al., 2023). Stakeholders also need to recognize that if high school principals' existing workload and job demands, which often involve working before and after contractual hours, continue unabated, and their work-life balance and self-care are lacking, they are at risk of burnout. The 24/7 mentality and the reality it creates are not sustainable in the long run.

First, high school principals need school districts and principal preparation programs that support them through training and development, diminished workload, designated days off, and stakeholders who act as champions for one of our school systems' most important resources: Principals. A good place to start is with principal training programs that offer courses in stress management (Hancock et al., 2019). In terms of reducing the workload of high school principals, researchers such as Kutsyuruba et al. (2024) found that taking time off positively impacted principals' well-being. Accordingly, this can be systematically managed by school districts through workload regulation and specific policies that enable principals to recuperate for extended periods.

Second, high school principals need strategies to cope with the stressors and strains inherent to their role, as occupational stress is widespread in the principalship (Mahfouz, 2020). Consequently, as suggested by DeMatthews et al. (2023), a self-care professional standard could help promote positive coping strategies in both preparatory and continuous leadership training. The authors also recommended that districts utilize existing resources, such as school counselors, or employ training strategies, like the train-the-trainer approach, to build leadership capacity and

enhance principals' awareness of healthy coping. Given that budgetary constraints often limit the professional development opportunities offered by school districts, using the resources they already have will go a long way toward providing the much-needed support principals need.

Third, the importance of supervisor support must not be overlooked. This endorses recommendations from research advocating that principal supervisors give school leaders significant flexibility or autonomy in how they operate their schools and in complying with district mandates (Leithwood, 2023). Similarly, in their systematic review of the literature over the past 10 years, Watts (2023) examined how to support beginning principals in surviving and thriving in their roles. Results revealed positive outcomes for beginning principals who accessed professional support, whereas principals without such support were more likely to experience burnout, isolation, and a desire to leave the profession. Furthermore, since research has shown that school leaders use social support to take care of themselves (Doyle Fosco et al., 2025), school districts should also offer high school principals formal mentorship opportunities. These mentors could be accessed through the Association of Washington School Principals or within the school district itself. Thus, school districts need to cultivate strategies and enact policies that promote the well-being of high school principals guided by supervisors, mentors, and other forms of support.

Finally, the support high school principals need can also be augmented by the research community. Considering the complexities of the principalship and the phenomenon of burnout, researchers must continue their efforts to broaden our understanding of burnout so that we can apply new knowledge in the context of school leadership. Research designs and methodologies vary. Findings vary. Nevertheless, our efforts must continue. Discussion and debate within the research community are essential to advancing the body of knowledge on high school principal

burnout. Hence, to follow the call of researchers such as Sibisanu et al. (2024) who suggested the need for more research to develop a comprehensive view of principal burnout to optimize intervention strategies designed to meet the inherent barriers in advancing educational sustainability, my study on reducing high school principal burnout has contributed to this need, broadened scholarship on this topic, and inspires a call for further research as outlined above.

AI Statement

In this dissertation, I used AI in the following ways. First, I used Grammarly's AI style checker to make sure my language was professional. I also used Zoom's AI-based transcription to transcribe the recorded interviews. Third, I used AtlasTI's "suggested codes" to recommend existing codes I created for specific blocks of text I selected in each transcript. All AI use was checked and verified by me as correct.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

RQ1. What are some of the causes of strain and burnout in high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state?

Hello! My name is Steve Doyle, and I am a doctoral student at City University of Seattle. As you may recall, I am studying factors that contribute to principal burnout. Before meeting today, you received and signed an informed consent form. Before we begin today, do you have any questions about that informed consent form?

[address questions from participants]

As part of my data collection, I would like to record our session together. The recording will be used to create a transcript which I will send to you to ensure accuracy. Then, the recording will be deleted. No one besides myself will see or hear the recording. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

[receive answer and address questions]

Great! I will record the interview.

[hit record button]

It is now recording.

Introduction

1. What led you to become a principal?
2. What is your work as a principal like?

Job Demands

RQ1a. How do job demands relate to principal strain and burnout?

3. As a principal, how does the workload of your job impact you? Your work?
4. As a principal, how do time pressures impact you? Your work?

5. How does contact with your subordinates, peers, and others impact you? Your work?
6. As a principal. How does your physical environment impact you? Your work?
7. As a principal, how does your daily schedule impact you? Your work?
8. How does feedback impact you? Your work?

Job Resources & Conservation of Resources

RQ1b. How do job resources relate to principal strain and burnout?

9. As a principal, how do rewards impact you? Your work?
10. As a principal, how much control over your job do you have?
11. As a principal, do you feel like you have job security?
12. As a principal, how does support from supervisors impact you? Your work?
13. How does the availability of resources impact your job?
14. How does your compensation impact your job?
15. How do your skills and attributes help you affectively do your job?

Secondary Traumatic Stress

RQ1c. How does indirect exposure to trauma influence principal strain burnout?

16. How does working with students impacted by trauma impact your work?
17. Specifically considering trauma-impacted students, to what degree do you have the resources necessary to effectively do your job?

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Dear School Leaders,

My name is Stephen Doyle. I am currently a doctoral candidate at City University of Seattle writing my dissertation in Educational Leadership. I have served as both a principal and teacher in public schools for the past 20+ years. The demands placed on school leaders has heightened my awareness of principal burnout. Therefore, I have chosen to conduct a research study exploring the factors that contribute to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in a Pacific Northwest state in 2025. You are invited to participate in this study because you meet the criteria for being a public high school principal in a Pacific Northwest state: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GCL2TK8

I firmly believe you can provide school districts, principal preparation programs, policymakers, and the principalship as a whole with useful strategies to reduce principal burnout. Your level of involvement will include a 45-90 minute in-person or virtual interview, a follow-up phone call or meeting that accommodates your schedule, and email correspondence during the study.

There are many benefits to participating. You should experience no more risk than is normally associated with your job. All measures to assure confidentiality will be taken; however, as with all qualitative research, one may be able to guess that you are a participant if you are part of a small group of professionals – even if all identifying information is removed and replaced with pseudonyms. To ensure confidentiality, I will record interviews on Zoom, a secure, encrypted conferencing service. This will enable me to read transcripts multiple times and use a technique known as member checking which involves you reviewing and confirming my interpretation of your interview responses. I will also maintain your confidentiality by using

unique identifiers, codes, or pseudonyms on transcripts only known to me. Your privacy and confidentially are of the utmost importance to me. Therefore, I will conduct my research with the highest standards of ethical conduct. Your name will never be used during the writing and/or publication of my dissertation.

You have the right to withdraw from this study for any reason at any time during this research study. If you have questions during the process, you are welcome to call me directly on my cell phone or through email, whichever is most convenient for you.

Thank you for considering taking part in this study. You participation is truly appreciated. To begin your participation please click the following link to our interest survey: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GCL2TK8

APPENDIX C: MOU

1 May, 2025

Stephen Doyle
2001 NW Mullridge Place #U-302
Issaquah, WA. 98027

RE: Memorandum of Understanding, Stephen Doyle and AWSP

Having read a summary of Stephen's research, the Association of Washington School Principals agrees to email its membership on behalf of Stephen Doyle a recruitment letter. Specifically, AWSP agrees to:

- On a single occasion email Mr. Doyle's recruitment letter to current members; and
- On another occasion, likely 7-10 business days later, email a reminder message to membership.

Mr. Doyle agrees to:

- Provide his recruitment letter;
- Be willing to revise his recruitment letter if it does not meet our professional or organizational standards;
- Never represent his study as being affiliated with AWSP;
- Never represent himself as a representative of AWSP.

The term of this agreement shall be one year unless terminated in writing (including email) by either party.

Regards,

[Representative Name Here]
[Representative Title Here]

APPENDIX D: INTEREST SURVEY

Hello! My name is Steve Doyle, and I am a doctoral student at City University of Seattle. I am studying factors that contribute to principal burnout. By participating in this study, you may help principals like you learn more about factors that contribute to principal burnout. Further, the findings of this study may help develop strategies to prevent principal burnout. To begin your participation, click the button below.

Inclusion Criteria

To participate in this study, you must be able to answer yes to the following questions:

1. I am a high school principal in the state of Washington.
2. I am a principal in a public school.
3. I have been a principal for at least one year.

Informed Consent

CityUniversity of Seattle

CITYU RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study:
Reducing Principal Burnout Among High School Principals in Washington state in 2025

Name and Title of Researcher(s):
Stephen Doyle

For Student Researcher(s):
Faculty Supervisor: Stacey Malaret
Department: Doctor of Education in Leadership
Telephone: 4075952221
City U E-mail: malaretstacey@cityu.edu

Program Coordinator (or Program Director):
Dr. Pressley Rankin

You are being invited to participate in a research study.

Key Information about this Research Study

The researcher will explain this research study to you before you will be asked to participate in the study and before you sign this consent form.

- Your participation is voluntary and you can decide not to participate or withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or negative consequences.
- It is your choice whether or not you want to participate in this research.
- The purpose of the research is to explore the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025.
- If you choose to participate you will be asked to participate in a one-hour interview via zoom.
- The risks or discomforts from this research include feeling mild to moderate emotional discomfort in discussing your work and work-related stresses.
- The direct benefits of your participation are contributing to the field of principal leadership that may help other principals like you understand the factors that contribute to principal stress and burnout. Further, this knowledge may assist those that train or supervise principals.

You should talk to the researcher(s) about the study and ask them as many questions you need to help you make your decision.

What should I know about being a participant in this research study?

This form contains important information that will help you decide whether to join the study. Take the time to carefully review this information.

- You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a high school principal in a Pacific Northwest state
- You will be in this research study for approximately six months, doing a single one-hour interview.
- About 10-16 individuals will participate in this study.

Why is this research being done?

Purpose of Study: This descriptive qualitative study aims to explore the factors contributing to burnout among high school principals with varying degrees of experience in Washington state in 2025.

Research Participation.
You will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

I understand I am being asked to participate in this study in one or more of the following ways (initial options below that apply):

☐ Respond to in-person; and/or, ☒ online interview questions; Approximate time five minutes.

☐ Answer written questionnaire(s); Approximate time _____

☒ Participate in a virtual video interview using this video program/app Zoom; Approximate time 60 minutes.

☐ Other, specifically, _____. Approximate time _____

You may refuse to answer any question or any item in verbal interviews, written questionnaires or surveys, and, you can stop or withdraw from any audio or visual recording at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.

Are there any risks, stress or discomforts that I will experience as a result of being a participant in this study?

Taking part in this research involves certain risks: This could include: mild to moderate emotional discomfort while describing work and work-related stress.

Will being a participant in this study benefit me in any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your participation in this research. However, possible benefits may include benefiting the field of knowledge related to principal burnout and stress.

☐ You will receive _____ for your participation in this research.

☒ You will not receive any payment for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means.

If the student researcher's cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be initialed by the researcher. ☐

Steps will be taken to protect your identity, however, information collected about you can never be 100% secure. Your name and any other identifying information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from data collected as part of the research study. The results of this study will be published as a thesis and potentially published in an academic book or journal, or presented at an academic conference. To protect your privacy no information that could directly identify you will be included.
All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and computer files will be encrypted and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for five years (5 years). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

I AGREE TO PARTICPATE IN THIS STUDY

I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this research study at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand that I will be asked to pay the costs of photocopy and mailing.

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated or think that I have been harmed as a research participant, I may contact the following individual(s):

Dr. Pressley Rankin, Program Coordinator (and/or Program Director), City University of Seattle, at 206.239.4773, rankinp@cityu.edu, City University of Seattle, 521 Wall St., Suite 100, Seattle, WA 98121

This study has been reviewed and has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of City University of Seattle. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the IRB at IRB@Cityu.edu.

Do you agree to take part in this study?

A. Yes, I agree to participate in this study.
B. No, I do not agree to participate in this study.

Interview Sign-up

Please click the following link to schedule your interview: [LINK].

Did you select and sign up for an interview date?

A. Yes.

APPENDIX E: AUTHORIZATION

CityUniversity of Seattle

Organizational Informed Consent Form

Name of Organization Association of Washington School Principals

Address 1021 8th Avenue SE
City, State, Zip Olympia, WA 98501
Telephone 800-562-6100

By signing this consent form, I understand that Stephen Doyle (the researcher) is a ☒ candidate for an advanced degree, or ☐ a faculty member of City University of Seattle. I understand that the researcher is conducting a study entitled Reducing High School Prinicipal Burnout. The purpose of this research is to Explore factors that contribute to bunrount among high school principals.

I understand the findings of this research study are solely the responsibility of the researcher. It is understood that any and all information/data the researcher collects from contacts within and/or about our organization outside the research protocol will not be part of the research findings. I understand the researcher may publish findings following completion of this study. Any information published will be limited to the findings of the research. No research participants will participate in this study without organization and City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board (IRB) knowledge and approval.

☒ I grant the researcher permission to contact members of the organization for the purpose of requesting participation in the study as required by the research design.
☐ I grant the researcher permission to use organizational premises as necessary to conduct the research.
☐ I grant the researcher permission to collect, use, and store organizational documentation related to the project under study. I understand that in granting permission to access organizational documentation, the researcher will store copies in a secure manner outside of the organization in a secure manner as approved by the City University of Seattle IRB.
☒ The researcher will maintain all documentation and findings regarding this organization in confidence and confine its use to this research study.
☒ On behalf of the organization, I request a final copy of this research report.

Organization Representative and signature

May 12, 2025
Date

Print Name and Title Associate Director
Organization Association of Washington School Principals

Name of Research Supervisor or Advisor: Dr. Stacey Malaret
Contact Information malaretstacey@cityu.edu

APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL

CityUniversity of Seattle

www.CityU.edu

206.239.4800 [Main]
800.426.5596 [Toll-Free]
City University of Seattle
521 Wall Street, Suite 100
Seattle, WA 98121

Institutional Review Board
Certificate of Approval

IRB ID# Doyle_Malaret_SEL
Principal Investigator (if faculty research):
Student Researcher: Stephen Doyle
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Stacey Malaret
Department: SEL

Title: A Qualitative Study on Reducing Principal Burnout

Approved on: 4/30/2025

- ☐ Full Board Review
- X Expedited Review (US)
- ☐ Delegated Review (Can)
- ☐ Exempt (US)

CERTIFICATION

City University of Seattle has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The Faculty Advisor and the student researcher have the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original Ethical Review Protocol submitted for ethics review. This ***Certificate of Approval*** is valid provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process, or documents. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures are required to be reported to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board in advance of its implementation.

Bryan Carter, Ph.D.
IRB Chair, City University of Seattle

IORG-IRB REGISTRATION: IORG 0009788/IRB registration number: IRB000627 CITY UNIVERSITY of SEATTLE IRB #1. FWA00030892