

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

BURNOUT PREVENTION IN CHRISTIAN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERS:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Rhonda Grider Purchase

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

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ABSTRACT

There is a momentous problem in academic settings today regarding stress and burnout among academic school leaders (Francis et al., 2017). The focus of this study was to examine the prevention of professional stress in the lives of middle school academic leaders. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of what the selected participants believed was the prevention of stress and burnout in middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. For this study, school leaders were defined as certified principals who hold a bachelor's level or above degree and contribute to the academic environment within the 6th and 8th grade public or private school with experience in education. Also, for the purposes of this study, burnout was generally defined as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Self-care was defined as the process of taking care of oneself with behaviors that promote health (Santana & Fouad, 2017). The theory guiding this study was Maslach's burnout theory, which utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to assess a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion via a 22-symptom inventory pertaining to occupational burnout (Maslach et al., 2021). It included three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2021). Nine middle schools in Newton County, Georgia were examined. Seven participants were selected. To gather data needed for this study, interviews and observations were conducted. Data analysis was based on the discussions and reflections of direct perceptions and experiences of the researched phenomena.

Keywords: academic leaders, self-care, stress, burnout, middle school, coping strategies

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this to my children, Joseph Curtis and Rhonda Adelann Grider Purchase. I remember when I first considered this journey, Joseph was a toddler and Rhonda was an infant. Being a mom and supporting all their endeavors meant my doctorate dream would be put on hold for several years. Now I have two teenagers that encourage and motivate me toward the end of my doctorate dream. During a summer campus visit to Liberty University, I appreciated how they were so supportive of my doctorate. This motivates me to reach even stronger towards the end of my program. I desire to complete my degree before the time they initiate their college studies. I love them both so much. I could never have completed this without them, and I am forever grateful.

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I am also so grateful for my husband, family, and friends who encouraged me to pursue my degree and were supportive as well. My husband, who is a military veteran, proudly encouraged me to continue my education and grasp the ultimate degree, which he described as a doctorate. Thanks also to my family, who read papers, provided critical words needed, and boosted me to press forward to the mark of completion of the program. My friends were a thorn in my flesh, as they refused to let me quit writing and pursuing my dream. They were both encouraging and would listen to my whining and complaining, only to tell me to get busy. To everyone who sang encouraging songs (CeCe Winans), preached the Word of God (Tomlinson, Creflo Dollar), and taught powerful messages (Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen), I am thankful. For the entire professional staff at Liberty University, especially Dr. Mary Lowe, I am appreciative. I could never have completed this without all of you and I am forever grateful.

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List of Abbreviations

Liberty University (LU)

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators (MBI-ES)

English Standard Version (ESV)

New International Version (NIV)

Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

The middle school academic setting has become both strenuous and demanding for educators, with incessant rules and regulations, curriculum changes, and a stressful atmosphere, leading to an elevated rate of burnout when compared to other professions (Aguilar, 2018). The pressure educators receive from school planning to parent interaction, community support, and student instruction can be overwhelming for any leader (Aguilar, 2018). Data from Greenberg (2017) supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reflected that 46% of educators reported high daily stress throughout the year. The principal's job has also become more complex and stressful: 75% of surveyed principals felt the job has become too complex, 69% said the job responsibilities are very different from five years ago, 48% reported great stress several days a week, 58% stated they have little control over curriculum and instruction, and 57% felt they have little decision-making power over teachers (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2012). A January 2022 survey from the National Education Association (NEA) showed that more than half of educators (67%) intend to leave the profession due to stress, burnout, and the latest school violence. With these alarming statistics, stressors must be decreased within the academic environment (Prechel, 2022). There is a need to focus on self-care as a way of demonstrating the connection between spirituality, inner strength, and community support to prevent stress and burnout in academic school leaders (Mandar-Bichu, 2022). Many educators experience a convergence of stress from both their professional and personal lives, which results in burnout and leaving the educational system early in their careers (White, 2022).

Several issues have been presented throughout Chapter One. First, the theological segment focused on the Word of God and how stress is identified and addressed. Leaders within

the Scriptures dealt with stress and addressed it in several ways which were discussed. Second, the historical segment focused on how past circumstances still affect educator burnout in the system today. Next, the sociological segment focused on how educators experience high levels of stress and how they cope with these stressors. Lastly, the theoretical segment focused on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which was the theory behind this study. Chapter One, as outlined, included the background and statement of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, assumptions and delimitations, definitions, significance, and summary pertaining to the study.

Background to the Problem

Since 1985, the United States has made significant changes to the way academic success and leaders are evaluated (Rupesh & Bibbas, 2017). These changes include accountability and policies on the local, state, and federal levels (Rupesh & Bibbas, 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Ryan et al. (2017) reported that experienced and new educators find the profession to be more stressful due to these alterations, which include test-based accountability in performance evaluations, merit pay, and tenure decisions, all of which may lead to burnout.

The theory guiding the present study is Maslach's Burnout Theory by Maslach and Leiter (1997). Maslach and Leiter defined burnout as the prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors. Much of the available research has suggested that burnout is generally defined as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Additionally, Santana and Fouad (2017) defined self-care as the process of taking care of oneself with behaviors that promote health. Maslach's theory assesses a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion with a 22-symptom inventory pertaining to occupational burnout. It includes three

dimensions of burnout: “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment” (Maslach et al., 2021, p. 2).

Theological Context

The Bible addresses stress through various contexts and leadership approaches (Meyer, 2016; Grace, 2022; Beck, 1986). These include, but are not limited to, Moses (New International Version, 2022, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers), Elijah (NIV, 1 Kings 17), Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel (NIV, Genesis 37-50), Daniel (NIV, Chronicles 3:1; Daniel 6), and Job (NIV, Job 1-42). According to Pittman et al. (2022) it is helpful for Christians to understand stress and how to manage it in daily life circumstances. Learning from stress may be more appropriate for the Christian than simply managing or reducing it to live a peaceful life (Pittman et al., 2022). By studying characters in the Bible who dealt with stress, one can identify coping strategies to apply in present-day circumstances (Christian Stress Management, 2015; Meyer, 2016; Woolfe, 2002).

Moses was a Bible character who suffered (Grace, 2022) several instances of hardship and stressful situations (NIV, Exodus 4:10-14; 33:12-23; Getz, 2021). God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and called him to lead the Israelites (Woolfe, 2002; Grace, 2022; NIV, Exodus 3). As a leader, Moses likely dealt with stress when the Israelites complained about their circumstances (Grace, 2022; Woolfe, 2002; NIV, Numbers 20:2-7). The Israelites wandered in the desert for a number of years grumbling and moaning to Moses. While being stressed by the negativity of the followers, Moses sought God for provisions (NIV, Exodus 16; Getz, 2021; Woolfe, 2002), and they experienced deliverance in miraculous ways (NIV, Exodus 16:1-35; Getz, 2021). Since death is a stressful time (Colbert, 1999) another example is when Moses' sister, Miriam, died and was buried at Kadesh (NIV, Numbers 20:1; Getz, 2021). The Bible also

shows how Moses looked to God instead of to his problems (NIV, Exodus 3:1-10; Grace, 2022). Moses demonstrated humility, prayer, and worship as he fell face down and was silent before God (Grace, 2022; Getz, 2021; NIV, Exodus 33:20; 33:22). This could be considered a principle of stress management (Grace, 2022; Woolfe, 2002). As a result, the glory of the Lord appeared and gave Moses a new direction on how to handle his stressful circumstances (NIV, Exodus 33:20, 34; Getz, 2021; Woolfe, 2002).

In 1 Kings 19:3-14, Elijah saw the Cherith brook gradually drying. The Bible describes how he felt hopeless, alone, and afraid (NIV, 1 Kings 19:10; Roi, 2012). He wanted to sleep and had to be encouraged to get up and nourish himself (NIV, 1 Kings 19:5-18; Baxter, 2017). Elijah was emotionally drained and needed coping skills to deal with the stress he was experiencing (Ambrosion et al., 1999). Beating the exhaustion Elijah felt is not easy for any leader (Ambrosion et al., 1999). Others helped him through his stress (NIV, 1 Kings 17; Sala, 2013), and Elijah was taken into heaven in 2 Kings 2 (Roi, 2012; Baxter, 2017).

Joseph was falsely blamed and punished for accusations that did not reflect what happened (NIV, Genesis 39:11-20; Rubin & Sulack, 2014; Woolfe, 2002). He was placed in jail (NIV, Genesis 41:1; Getz, 2021) and lacked familial support (NIV, Genesis 37:1-4; Getz, 2021). These and other struggles he faced may be regarded as stressors for Joseph (Sala, 2013). Joseph encountered tough times, but he was rewarded with a position of leadership later in his life due to his posture towards God (NIV, Genesis 39:4, 39:22-23, 45:5-7; Rubin & Sulack, 2014; Woolfe, 2002).

The Bible tells the story of Daniel being thrown into the lion's den (NIV, Daniel 6:12-28; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019). Throughout all of this, Daniel and his friends fasted and prayed,

despite the clear and present danger to their lives, which was no doubt stressful even though they experienced deliverance (Clark, 2020; Sala, 2013; Baxter, 2017).

Finally, the Old Testament recounts the story of Job, who suffered more than any other biblical human character as tragedy entered his life (NIV, Job 1; Roxberg et al., 2013). Job cried out to God because he lost everything, yet he did not curse God but rather praised His name (NIV, Job 3, 42; Getz, 2021). It may be assumed that this is one way to handle the stress and lack of consolation Job endured in his life (Roxberg et al., 2013).

There is a deep connection between these incidences, individuals, and biblical events regarding stress. Through the biblical examples, it was observed that leaders indeed suffered from stress, so they were included in this study. They dealt with stress by praying to God, fasting, getting alone with God, praising, and worshipping God, and respecting and honoring God. These methods were found to be effective coping strategies in leadership positions (Getz, 2021). All of these biblical men model ways to handle stress as leaders (Clark, 2020).

Christian Perspective

Different studies have shown that the key to success over stressful situations is not just cognitive intelligence, but emotional intelligence (Purnomo, 2020). There are five competencies of emotional intelligence, including “internal motivation, self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and social awareness” (Purnomo, 2020, p. 83). Linking emotional intelligence to biblical concepts can assist in managing stress (James et al., 1999; Purnomo, 2020). Approaching stress from a biblical worldview instead of a secular worldview is one way to navigate this issue (Purnomo, 2020). Purnomo addressed this by identifying a presuppositions analysis of emotional intelligence, reviewed it theologically and reconstructed it so it aligned with biblical applied truth.

James et al. (1999) found that dealing with a great amount of stress in life is connected to spiritual growth and development under the right circumstances. The Scriptures include coping strategies that if followed may reduce stress in various situations (James et al., 1999). 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV) states, “Cast all anxiety on him because he cares.” Jesus said to cast all care on Him because He cares (James et al., 1999). The Scriptures recognize the need for believers to give their stress to the Lord (James et al., 1999). Psalm 55:22 (NIV) also reads, “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.” Additionally, assurance is seen in the New Testament gospel of Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV) which states:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.

The Bible explains where to go when stressed and what to do with stress in life (Marrs, 2021).

By applying this theological literature and self-care, one could avoid burnout (Cook, 2020).

Olpin et al., (2014) stated that in the Scriptures, God gives believers all the keys they need for restoring mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness. Philippians 4:6 (NIV) states, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God.” This Scripture illustrates a method to avoid stress (here referred to as anxiousness) (Marrs, 2021). Luke 12:25 (NIV) further says, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” These Scriptures support the fact that stress is a problem and illustrate the need to alleviate the stress that leads to burnout in leaders (Meyers, 2006; Marrs, 2021). By relating to biblical leaders, drawing from Christian educators, and including a theological perspective, stress leading to burnout may be reduced (Purnomo, 2020).

Educators' Role

There is a significant connection between faith, education, and leadership (Bredfeldt, 2006). This study attempted to connect the three elements in order to find coping strategies that mitigate stress experienced by Christian public and private middle school principals. To understand the role of educators from a Christian viewpoint, Purnomo (2020) proposed four characteristics found in those in leadership positions. First, the educator is a manager who views students and staff as unique individuals in God's eyes and communicates that God loves them (NIV, John 3:16; Purnomo, 2020). Second, the educator is a person of competence who teaches every subject as a great subject that can be viewed with awe and wonder (Bredfeldt, 2006; Purnomo, 2020). Luke is a good biblical example of an individual who was concerned with diligence and a strong desire to spread the gospel (Purnomo, 2020; Woolfe, 2002; NIV, Luke 1:1-4). The Bible states that Luke wrote with careful and accurate investigation of past biblical events so the reader could comprehend what was written (NIV, Luke 1:3). Next, the educator is a motivator who encourages others to learn (Maxwell, 2010; Purnomo, 2020). Educators are representatives of the Master Teacher Christ (NIV, 2 Corinthians 5:20; Purnomo, 2020; Bredfeldt, 2006). The apostle Paul said that "whatever you do in word and deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (NIV, Colossians 3:17). Finally, the educator is a priest, which means the role of an educator is a calling (Purnomo, 2020). God enables those who are willing to learn and grow in understanding the tasks and roles of their profession (James et al., 1999; Purnomo, 2020). Acknowledging these roles and relying on Christ to minimize stress and burnout may be evident in an educator's performance (Purnomo, 2020).

The power to defeat deep and difficult stressful emotions comes from God and involves the Holy Spirit (Purnomo, 2020). Five values used by Christian leaders and seen in Jesus'

teaching are “truth (a call for integrity), love (a call for care), faith (a call for action), hope (a call for courage), and joy (a call for celebration)” (Purnomo, 2020, p. 87). The Christian educator’s role draws upon the Holy Spirit’s power and guidance to avoid burnout while teaching and leading others (Purnomo, 2020).

Historical Context

Without burnout prevention in Christian public and private middle school leaders the concern of finding eligible educators is an issue (Harmsen et al., 2018). Boser (2000) conducted a U.S. Department of Education study of students who earned college degrees and began teaching in public and private schools by 1994-1995. Among them, nearly one out of five had left the profession by 1996-1997 (Boser, 2000). Even though the study was published years ago, educators are still leaving the profession at alarming rates, and the strenuous and dynamic occupation of teaching has led to a high rate of burnout when compared to other professions (Rupesh & Bibhas, 2017). Educator stress has been linked to negative professional outcomes, including burnout, absenteeism, and stress (Ryan et al., 2018). Gender, age, socioeconomic status, experience, educational background, and work hours influence stress levels, attitudes, and burnout (Szigeti et al., 2016). Educators report leaving the profession due to stress, low salaries, lack of administrative support, lack of student motivation, student discipline problems, and lack of involvement in decision-making (Boser, 2000). Furthermore, performance evaluations are based on test results, merit pay, and tenure decisions, which increase job stress (Ryan et al., 2017). Retention of educators is an important issue for school climate (Harmsen et al., 2018). A principal who remains in a school to nurture the climate as a productive leader is an asset to the entire environment, including the students and staff (Boser, 2000). However, if history predicts itself, finding eligible educators will get harder in the future (Szigeti et al., 2016).

Sociological Context

The education profession is a highly stressful profession and principals from many countries report high levels of stress regarding their job duties (Harmsen et al., 2018). Educators also experience a great deal of stress and burnout in their personal and work lives (Harmsen et al., 2018). Harmsen et al. (2018) found that some educators reported feelings they were giving more than they were getting back, the feeling of exhaustion, lack of energy, and emotional depletion. Educators also reported feeling social pressures regarding concerns due to lack of funding, curriculum demands, deficient classrooms, and problems within the school structure (Harmsen et al., 2018).

Accountability policies may affect teacher stress, which is a predictor of teacher turnover (Embse et al., 2016). Additionally, greater educational experience may be related to lower migration between schools. Young and inexperienced educators often display similar intent to leave the profession (Embse et al., 2016). Different types of leadership influence the performance of the staff, job contentment of employees, and stress level experienced at work (Fullan, 2010; Fuming & Jiliang, 2007). Effective principals should always apply the principles of empowerment to create a positive work environment and to retain talented teachers (Bernard, 2016). This may also ease the principal's stress levels, knowing competent staff are employed in the district (Fullan, 2010).

As the leader of the school, the principal is under the greatest stress pressure for the school to succeed in every way (Robeck, 2019). The school tone is set by the leadership and to prevent school turnaround there must be unity among the staff (Harmsen et al., 2018). A good principal with effective leadership will provide such motivation as well as help guide employees through various challenges such as stress (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007).

There are various types of leadership, and using a variety should be chosen to prevent stress in the individual school environment (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Bernard, 2016).

Transformational and transactional leadership both affect teacher perception of the principal and may alleviate stressful interactions (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). Transformational leadership inspires educators to strive beyond required expectations and to work towards a shared vision (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). By using this method of unity, the work environment is less stressful and more peaceful. Transactional leadership focuses on extrinsic motivation for the performance of specific job tasks (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). The use of this method provides rewards for exceptional tasks and encourages positivity in the school environment. A combination of these leadership methods is essential to prevent stress in the workplace (White, 2022). Learning to balance these styles can help principals reach their full potential and prevent burnout (Bernard, 2016; Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Maxwell, 2011).

Recent studies have shown that educators feel pressure to increase student test performance, to hire for teacher shortages, and to deal with violence and threats, leading to higher reported stress levels and a poorer school climate overall (White, 2022; Russell, 2020). The pressure to increase test performance has also caused some educators to focus on student achievement test scores instead of retention and mastery of academic material (Embse et al., 2016). Bernard (2016) noted that professionals retire from the field of education due to stress at a higher rate than teachers still teaching. The roles of principals, teachers, counselors, and academic support are all connected (White, 2022; Bernard, 2016). Effective leadership may alleviate or increase stress in the school atmosphere (Bernard, 2016). The quality and type of leadership present have a tremendous effect on the stress and pressure felt in the school environment (Fullan, 2010). This information could influence how stress is perceived and dealt

with in an academic middle school setting.

Theoretical Context

Burnout research might be limited because of the difficulties of conducting longitudinal studies (Maslach et al., 2021). Maslach's (1997) theory examines a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion via a 22-symptom inventory pertaining to occupational burnout. When these are analyzed, an individual can monitor personal stress. Maslach's theory identified burnout syndrome as a response to excessive stress in the workplace, as described by emotional exhaustion, negativity towards others, and loss of ideals (Maslach et al., 2021).

Maslach's (1997) theory broke burnout down into six categories: "workload (too much work, not enough resources), control (micromanagement, lack of influence, accountability without power), community (isolation, disrespect, conflict), reward (not enough pay, acknowledgment or satisfaction), fairness (favoritism, discrimination) and value (ethical conflicts, meaningless tasks)" (Wicke, 2021, p. 30). The six-area burnout criteria have been included in some organizations' assessment programs (Maslach & Leiter, 2000). The information acquired can be used to determine which areas are difficult for these groups and to design methods that improve the specific areas of concern (Maslach & Leiter, 2005).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) has been validated by extensive research for over 35 years as the leading measure of burnout (Maslach, 2022). The instrument includes three dimensions of burnout: "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment" (Maslach et al., 2021, p. 2). These dimensions were reviewed further in the MBI-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) that focuses on the same three areas: emotional exhaustion (which measures feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work), depersonalization (which measures an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's instruction),

and personal accomplishment (which measures feelings of competence and achievement in one's work) (Maslach, 2022).

Every occupation has its share of specific job demands that can lead to poor health (Baka, 2015). These include stress, bad working conditions, job routine, workload, interpersonal conflicts, and organizational constraints (Baka, 2015). Studies have confirmed that high job demands are directly related to low mental and physical health, which can lead principals and other academic professionals to feel pushed to the edge of sanity (Baka, 2015; Heffernan, 2023). The main factors responsible for this mental burnout include job strain and deterioration of the immunological system (Heffernan, 2023; Baka, 2015). Job demands trigger the energetic process that through high job burnout results in health problems (Baka, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on educators' professional and personal lives (Sparks, 2022). The primary focus was to assess the effect of a blended Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR) on educators' well-being. The program aimed to focus on resilience, burnout, mindfulness, and stress among educators during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021; Lee, 2022). This program and its findings further confirm that academic leaders are continually faced with stressors that lead to burnout (Heffernan, 2020).

Burnout negatively affects academic faculty members' quality of life, regardless of their field of knowledge (Alves et al., 2019). Mandar-Bichu (2022) suggested the implementation of programs and actions to prevent burnout be used by faculty members. By participating in such programs, burnout may be prevented, and quality of life maintained (Alves et al., 2019). To improve areas of educator burnout, schools need to identify problem areas and design and implement solutions for improvement (Maslach & Leiter, 2005).

Researcher's Relationship to the Problem

Being an educator has been both rewarding and challenging for this researcher. Educators must navigate complex roles, COVID-19, physical violence, bullying at work, teaching knowledge, and developing students' skills (Singhal, 2018; Lee, 2022). However, burnout is still one of the largest problems in the field of education (Will, 2022). As many educators leave the profession within five years of being employed, states regularly need an increasing number of new educators to take their place (Purnomo, 2020).

This researcher's motivation for this study was based on experiences as a Christian professional educator in both public and private schools and as the owner of a personal academic support program for over 30 years. Through this research, the researcher discovered the need to meet the challenges of educators as a ministry of giving and serving others. Due to the overwhelming amount of stress from the workplace, educators' health may have been adversely affected, causing them to leave the profession (Hade, 2018; Heffernan, 2023). It was an earnest desire of this researcher to assist Christian educators by identifying stressors, reducing said stressors, and encouraging methods to reduce burnout. This research attempted to identify coping strategies and use self-care, spirituality, and community support to prevent burnout in the field of middle school education.

Statement of the Problem

There is a momentous problem in academic settings today regarding stress and burnout among academic school leaders in America (Francis et al., 2017). The pressure principals receive from school planning to parent interaction, community support, and student instruction can be overwhelming for any leader (Hade, 2018; Harmsen et al., 2018). Further, the educator shortage in the United States is one of the worst problems facing schools today (Newberry & Allsop,

2017). Principals' well-being is influenced by the level of daily pressure from staff, students, and parents (Harmsen et al., 2018). Burnout theory (1997) has been supported by the research (Maslach, 2003) and as such, this study examined Christian public and private middle school principals' anxiety, stress, and burnout prevention. This study also investigated the self-care and coping mechanisms used or not used by Christian middle school principals while dealing with anxiety, stress, and burnout. The problem of this qualitative study was the prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school principals.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine what the selected academic leaders believe is the mitigation and prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. For this study, Christian academic leaders were defined as certified principals who hold a bachelor's level degree or above, contribute to the academic environment within 6th through 8th grade public and private schools, and have experience in education. As people of faith, it is understood that a relationship with Jesus changes how life is lived, including a stress response. Faith must play a significant role in managing stress. The understanding is based on scripture, personal experience, and an understanding of what the Bible tells us about trusting God in all situations. Evidence is seen in scripture that various individuals addressed what was likely a stressful situation by praying, trusting God, and maintaining key relationships with other believers. In light of this precedence of the relationship between faith and our response to stress, this was a key and critical consideration in this study (Ben-Hador et al., 2020). Also, for the purposes of this study, burnout was generally defined as the state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Self-

care was defined as the process of taking care of oneself with behaviors that promote health (Santana & Fouad, 2017). As previously stated, the theory guiding this study was Maslach's (1997) burnout theory, which defined a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion via a 22-symptom inventory pertaining to occupational burnout. In addition to the theory, there is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which includes three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2021). Both the theory and the inventory tool were important to this study because it related to the stress and burnout associated with poor job performance, health problems, and other issues (Zysberg et al., 2017).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the leading causes of anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?

RQ2. What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective means of preventing anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?

RQ3. What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective coping strategies useful in minimizing the effects of anxiety and stress that lead to professional and personal burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

The assumptions of this study include the following:

1. It was assumed that academic leaders would provide knowledge based on their own life experiences in the academic setting.
2. It was assumed that participants would provide information without biases.

3. It was assumed that all Christian public and private middle school leaders experience work-related stress and use effective coping strategies.

Delimitations of the Research Design

The nature of this study among academic leaders in Newton County, Georgia may have an impact on other academic settings and populations. The delimitations of the study include the following:

1. The study was delimited to actively employed and retired (within less than five years) school academic leaders.
2. The study was delimited to middle school educational leaders (principals, vice principals, heads of schools) who contribute to academics.
3. The study was delimited to academic leaders with a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education and state certification.
4. The study was delimited to Christians who lead in public and private middle schools in grades six through eight.
5. The study was delimited to individuals located in Newton County, Georgia.
6. The study was delimited to individuals who are Christians.

Definition of Terms

1. *Stress*: A disparity between a person's perceptions of environmental demands and their perceived ability to cope with those demands (Winefield & Pignata, 2013).
2. *Burnout*: The prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, which is comprised of three dimensions, including exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).
3. *Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)*: Identifies a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion via an inventory comprised of 22 symptoms pertaining to occupational burnout. It includes three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2021).
4. *MBI-Educators Survey (MBI-ES)*: A burnout inventory that addresses emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2022).

5. *Depersonalization*: A psychological withdrawal, including the development of negative or indifferent attitudes toward students (Szigeti et al., 2016).
6. *Emotional Exhaustion*: The chronic feeling of tiredness and fatigue which makes educators lose their enthusiasm (Szigeti et al., 2016).
7. *Anxiety*: An overactivation of negative thought processes particularly involving excessive worry and/or fear (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
8. *Self-Care*: A process of taking care of oneself with behaviors that promote health (Santana & Fouad, 2017).

Significance of the Study

As an experienced Christian, this researcher believes faith plays an important role in coping effectively with stress (Beck, 1986). The Bible contains several scriptures on how to handle stress and offers biblical leadership examples (Grace, 2022). Therefore, it was imperative to include both a theological perspective and Christian participants in the research.

This study provided an in-depth examination of Newton County, Georgia's Christian public and private middle school academic leaders' stress and burnout prevention. This study identified the largest cause of educator stress leading to burnout. It also identified the most critical elements in preventing burnout. Some methods to cope with burnout were also identified. Whereas there are many studies on stress and burnout, no studies currently exist on this location and specific to principals. Further, no studies specifically focused on Christian principals in Newton County, Georgia were found. Therefore, a gap in the literature existed. This study addressed this gap and was necessary to provide schools and learning institutions with relevant information. The benefits of minimizing professional stressors may include improved job satisfaction and higher educator retention rates (Stauffer & Mason, 2013). The identified strategies may be adapted to other locations for school environment improvement.

Since no studies focused on self-care and coping strategies for Christian principals in Newton County, Georgia academic settings exist, this study was a much-needed addition to the empirical research currently available. This study aimed to discover valuable information in an effort for schools and learning institutions to focus on principals' well-being to gain and retain academic leaders. Ebse et al. (2016) suggested that the use of performance evaluations and merit pay increased stress in the leadership environment. The benefits of minimizing professional stressors may include improved job satisfaction and higher educator retention rates (Stauffer & Mason, 2013).

The present study aimed to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation because of the lessons it might provide about the social processes related to theoretical interest. The rationale for selecting a single study research design rather than a multiple study research design is that the single study research design can represent the critical test of a significant theory (Yin, 2018). A single study research design was selected because the search is for a common occurrence (Yin, 2018).

Summary of the Design

This study focused on the prevention of stress and burnout in the lives of Christian public and private middle school academic leaders. It is important to keep these leaders in the school system to ensure the academic success of future generations. A gap in the literature exists with no studies conducted on the causes of stress and burnout specifically related to Newton County, Georgia Christian public and private middle school principals. The purpose was to prevent burnout of leaders and to develop strategies to cope with stress. The study design was the prevention of stress and burnout in the lives of public middle school principals. Strategies public middle school principals use to minimize stress and how these leaders describe the stress that

affects them in their daily lives were investigated. The data was analyzed for the study by interpreting observations, interviews, and documents to find meaningful patterns and themes, thus extending the theory.

This study was qualitative using a phenomenon because it uses words to make sense of the world (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). Phenomenological research design focuses on exploring the essence of human experiences and understanding the meaning people attribute to those experiences (Creswell, 2014). This method studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view (Creswell, 2014). This study is phenomenological research because it helps the reader understand what it is like to experience stress and burnout as a Christian middle school leader (Patton, 2015). The analysis involved the interpretation of this researchers' observations, interviews, and documents to locate meaningful patterns and themes (Patton, 2015). In this study, qualitative data was collected from individual face-to-face interviews, observations, documents, and phone interviews. Interviews included questions such as: How do Christian public and private middle school leaders describe the stress that affects them? How do Christian public and private middle school leaders describe their experiences at work that cause them the most stress? How do Christian public and private middle school leaders describe the coping strategies they use to minimize stress?

A single study design was used to discover more about Christian middle school principals' causes of stress. One reason for using one study instead of several studies is to develop a notable theory. This demonstrates a functional relationship between participants and identifiable coping strategies (Kumar, 2011). The objective of a single study that looks at a common occurrence is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation because of the lessons it might provide about the social processes related to some theoretical

interest (Yin, 2018). The common case studied the stress that impacts Christian public and private middle school principals which may cause burnout. The present study examined strategies Christian public and private middle school principals use to minimize burnout and how Christian public and private middle school principals describe the stress that affects their professional performance.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this literature review was to provide the reader with a detailed overview of relevant studies related to this researcher's study. The resources mentioned and discussed below provided essential information for this dissertation research. This chapter is divided into six parts. First, the theological framework for the study referred to Bible scriptures, theologians, and biblical characters related to the phenomena being studied. Second, the theoretical framework for the study provided the structure and guide for the study based on Maslach's (1997) burnout theory. Third, the related literature demonstrated the study has a background and existing literature pertaining to the study. Fourth, the rationale for the study showed why the study was important. Last, the gap in the literature focused on what was missing in the literature regarding burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia.

Theological Framework for the Study

Some educators experience anxiety, stress, and burnout related to personal or work issues (Lansdown, 2023). This is no less true for Christian educators who encounter stressful situations. The scriptures point us to this reality, and we are reminded of this with Jesus' words, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (NIV, John 16:33). The Bible is full of encouraging scriptures related to life's challenges and promises that a relationship with the person who has overcome the world, Jesus, allows us to manage stress in a way that is perhaps different from those who do not have this connection (Colbert, 1999). According to Clark (2020), humans from all eras of history have suffered from stressful circumstances. Throughout

the Bible, individuals such as Jesus, Jacob, Joseph, Daniel, Moses, Elijah, David, and Job demonstrated how and how not to deal with anxiety, stress, and burnout (Briggs, 2013; Clark, 2020; Grace, 2022; Roi, 2012). These leaders were the basis for this theological framework on identifying the causes of stress, preventing burnout, and developing coping strategies to minimize the anxiety and stress leading to burnout. This theological framework was developed with an integration of theological sources of literature.

Anxiety, Stress, and Burnout in the Bible

Maxwell (2010) recognized the struggle leaders have in leadership positions. Anxiety can feel like a daily battle with great suffering to both the body and the soul (Arroll & Kendrick, 2018). It has been defined as an uneasy feeling of uncertainty, agitation, dread, or fear (Arroll & Kendrick, 2018). Stress can result from physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension (Winefield & Pignata, 2013). The Bible addresses anxiety, fear, and worry as symptoms of stress (Warren, 2006; Colbert, 1999). God's Word offers hope whether one is experiencing nagging worry or debilitating panic (Tautges, 2019). Therefore, Scripture has the potential to heal the soul much like a physician might heal the body (Tautges, 2019). By looking to Scripture for wisdom, educators can adapt and follow the examples displayed by biblical leaders to help them deal with stress and burnout (Tautges, 2019).

According to Briggs (2013), Jesus dealt with the stress in his life by getting alone, getting away, and getting together with others. The first step to becoming more like Jesus is to get alone (Briggs, 2013). Mark 1:35 (NIV) states, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." Luke 5:15-16 (NIV) also references how Jesus often slipped away to be alone so He could pray, despite the many people who came to hear and be healed. Next, to reduce stress Jesus took time to get away

(Briggs, 2013). Matthew 11:19 (NIV) states, “The son of man came eating and drinking.” Jesus took time to relax even when Pharisees accused Him of being a glutton and drunkard (Briggs, 2013). Finally, Jesus handled stress by getting together with others (Briggs, 2013). Matthew 26:38 (NIV) states, “Jesus said to them, ‘my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’” This was at the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus took Peter and Zebedee’s two sons, James and John, with Him. Jesus went there to pray, but He did not go alone (Briggs, 2013). Jesus’ example of getting alone time, getting away, and getting together with others are ways He combated stress (Briggs, 2013). Jesus said:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (NIV, Matthew 11:28-30)

This verse offers a description of what God desires individuals to do when circumstances seem difficult, stressful, and heavy (Briggs, 2013).

The Bible says a great deal about stress and anxiety (Briggs, 2013; Clark, 2020; Grace, 2022). Paul commands believers to not to be anxious about anything, but to operate in prayer and appeal with thanksgiving to make the request known to God (Briggs, 2013; Clark, 2020). The peace of God, which gives all understanding, will guard the heart and mind through Jesus (NIV, Philippians 4:6-7; Clark, 2020). Paul also stated the following:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him, we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us with your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (NIV, 2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

Peter wrote a letter to those facing persecution and encouraged believers to give their burdens to God, “casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you” (NIV, 1 Peter 5:7).

Regarding worry Jesus stated, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself” (NIV, Matthew 6:34). He also said, “Come to me, all who are heavily laden, and I will give you rest” (NIV, Matthew 11:28-30; Looker et al., 2008; Meyer, 2016). Jesus demonstrates how important it is to not worry about everyday life (Kanold & Boogren, 2022; Meyer, 2016). The fact that God will take care of the needs of His children, just as He provides for the birds and wildflowers, should indicate the importance of not worrying about one’s circumstances (Looker et al., 2008; Meyer, 2016; NIV, Matthew 6:34). These are only a few of the many verses referencing anxiety, stress, and burnout throughout the Scriptures.

Olpin et al., (2014) and Meyer (2016) identified several instances of Biblical stress that Jesus may have experienced in His lifetime. These stressors included the following (Olpin et al., 2014; Meyer, 2016):

- He dealt with a group of disciples who needed constant correction (NIV, Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 9:37-56).
- The Pharisees and Sadducees consistently attempted to discredit His ministry (NIV, Matthew 16:1-12).
- His teaching was rejected in His town of Nazareth (NIV, Luke 4:14-9:25).
- Everywhere He went people begged for miracles (NIV, Luke 8:26-39; Mark 1:29-45).
- His own chosen follower, Judas, betrayed Him for 30 pieces of silver (NIV, Matthew 26:15).

And these are small stressors considering Jesus’ overall mission to save the world from sin and reconnect with God (Olpin et al., 2014; Meyer, 2016).

In conclusion, Jesus understood and experienced stress (Pittman et al., 2022; Briggs, 2013). As a high priest, He empathized with human weakness since He was tempted and without sin (NIV, Hebrews 4:15; Briggs, 2013). Jesus left peace that is unlike the world’s and

encouraged others to not be afraid of difficulties (NIV, John 14:27; Briggs, 2013). “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (NIV, John 16:33; Briggs, 2013). Jesus intends for people to have tranquility despite stressful troubling experiences (Pittman et al., 2022; Briggs, 2013).

In addition to Jesus, stress is outlined in the Bible through stories about various individuals such as Jacob, Joseph, Esther, Daniel, Moses, Elijah, David, Deborah, and Job. Just as these human beings dealt with stress in their time, middle school principals deal with stress today (Heffernan, 2023). Some of the methods they used, may be useful for Christian middle school principals. First, Jacob struggled in his relationship with his brother, Esau, and later wrestled with an angel (NIV, Genesis 32:22-32; Getz, 2021). Jacob offered to give Esau a bowl of stew in exchange for his birthright (the right to be recognized as firstborn), and Esau agreed (Detwiler, 2019; Genesis 25:29-34). Upon learning of the deception that his brother used to trick him out of his birthright, Esau became angry and threatened Jacob’s life; he fled before Esau could take his life over this trickery (NIV, Genesis 27:41-30:24; Detwiler, 2019). Jacob was guilty of deceiving Esau and needed forgiveness and mercy (NIV, Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-41; Getz, 2021). It is clear that in this case, deception by one over the other led to circumstances that likely brought about stress as evidenced by Jacob’s concern for his life.

Jacob experienced additional difficult and stressful circumstances throughout his life (Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019). The sons of Jacob sold one of his other sons, Joseph, away as a slave and told Jacob he was killed (NIV, Genesis 37:18-36; Detwiler, 2019). Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob and Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin (NIV, Genesis 35:20; 48:17; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019). Genesis 37:35 states, “All his sons and all his daughters rose

to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’” Jacob would continue to mourn until he died (Getz, 2021). The stress that Jacob experienced from the death of Rachel (Colbert, 1999), and the loss of Joseph was likely overwhelming as he loved both dearly.

When there was a famine, Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt (NIV, Genesis 42:1; Detwiler, 2019). He told his sons to go down to Egypt and buy some grain so they would not die (NIV, Genesis 42:1-9; Detwiler, 2019; Getz, 2021). Then 10 of Joseph’s brothers went to buy grain from Egypt (NIV, Genesis 42:3-5; Getz, 2021). When they arrived and bowed down to Joseph, they did not recognize him (NIV, Genesis 37:5-8; 42:1-38; Detwiler, 2019; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). Joseph told them to bring the youngest son to Egypt (NIV, Genesis 42-46; Getz, 2021; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). However, Jacob stated that his son, Benjamin, would not go with the brothers since Joseph is supposedly dead and he is the only one of Rachel’s sons left (NIV, Genesis 44:18-34; Getz, 2021). If something happened to him, it would have brought Jacob’s gray head down to the grave in sorrow (NIV, Genesis 42:38; 44:29; Getz, 2021). Jacob continued to live in grief and was inconsolable (Getz, 2021). It was not until he discovered his son was still alive and a ruler of all of Egypt that he found peace and could finally die (NIV, Genesis 49:28-33; Getz, 2021). Jacob represents someone who lived a life marked by fear and distress. For some, this can bring about stress and other anxiety-inducing reactions. Through his struggles he humbled himself, repented, and honored God. These are some methods to mitigate stress for Christian middle school principals.

Next, Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob and Rachel (NIV, Genesis 35:20; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). The favoritism that he possessed made his half-brothers jealous (Rubin & Sulack, 2014; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019; NIV, Genesis 37:11-35). Jacob (Israel) loved Joseph more

than any of his other sons because he had been born to him in his old age (NIV, Genesis 37:3; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). Joseph was a dreamer (NIV, Genesis 37-50; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). He told Jacob about his brothers and bragged about his dreams (Genesis 37:11-31; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019). This stirred up anger and jealousy, so the brothers plotted to kill Joseph (NIV, Genesis 37; Getz, 2021). Instead, they decided to sell him to a caravan of Ishmaelites, Midianites who were headed to Egypt (NIV, Genesis 37:11-35; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019). The brothers then lied to Jacob and told him a ferocious animal had devoured Joseph (NIV, Genesis 42; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019).

As a slave, Joseph was blamed and punished for accusations that he did not perform (NIV, Genesis 39; Getz, 2021). He was placed in jail and lacked any familial support (NIV, Genesis 39; Getz, 2021). Yet Joseph did not sin against God (NIV, Genesis 39:9). He continued to use his God-given talents despite his circumstances (NIV, Genesis 40:5-13; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). Joseph relied on God and not on people to solve his problems (NIV, Genesis 40:14-15, 40:23, 41:1-14; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). As he endured these challenging times, Joseph was rewarded through his faithfulness and abilities with positions of leadership later in his life (NIV, Genesis 39:2-6, 39:21-23, 41:41; Rubin & Sulack, 2014). He was later reconciled with his brothers and father, saying it was God who sent him to Egypt to preserve the people (NIV, Genesis 44:33-45:28; Rubin & Sulack, 2014; Getz, 2021). One of the things we know about stress is that it can be brought about by much of what Joseph encountered including false accusations, reprimands, and an inability to connect with others. Joseph's life included many of these same issues but in order to avoid or mitigate stress, we know that Joseph prayed and remained faithful. Prayer and faithfulness are additional ways to prevent stress that leads to burnout in Christian public and private school principals.

Esther was considered as a servant leader in the Bible who was chosen by the king to be a queen (NIV, Esther 2:7,17; Maxwell, 2010). She dealt with stress as she risked her life to save the Jewish people from destruction. When the court official Haman persuaded the king to authorize a pogrom against all the Jews of the empire, she intervened (NIV, Esther 3:1-15; Tucker, 2014). She encouraged fasting and praying to the Lord for help during the stressful time. Her prayers and courage were rewarded, the king stopped the people from being killed and punished the bad advisor (Ngabwa-Kabeya, 2022). Prayer and fasting may be considered as a positive way for Christian middle school principals to handle stress.

The prophet Daniel experienced stress when he was taken into captivity with his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (NIV, Daniel 1:1-21; Getz, 2021; Baxter, 2017). Daniel and his three friends were taken from their families and homeland (NIV, Daniel 3; Detwiler, 2019). Daniel maintained a small group of close friends who shared the loss of family and culture and encouraged one another (Clark, 2020; NIV, Daniel 2). Daniel was focused on serving God's purpose for his life despite the stressful circumstances that he faced (Clark, 2020; Baxter, 2017). As Christian middle school principals remain focused on their purpose stress may be reduced.

Daniel was also thrown into the lion's den (NIV, Daniel 6:12-28; Detwiler, 2019) for praying to God, which was against King Darius's decree (Getz, 2021; Baxter, 2017). The king told Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" (NIV, Daniel 6:16; Getz, 2021). The stone was rolled and placed over the entrance to the den (NIV, Daniel 16:17; Detwiler, 2019). The king could not eat, sleep, or be entertained while Daniel was in the den overnight (NIV, Daniel 16:18; Getz, 2021; Baxter, 2017). The next day, the king was overjoyed when Daniel was found to be alive, stating, "My God sent an angel, and he shut the mouths of

the lions” (NIV, Daniel 16:19-23; Getz, 2021). Daniel, by his righteousness, was delivered from the lion’s den (NIV, Ezekiel 14:14; Baxter, 2017). However, when the king punished those who falsely accused Daniel, the lions devoured them as they reached the floor of the den (NIV, Daniel 16:24; Getz, 2021). Daniel remained faithful to God. He fasted and prayed during his stressful circumstances. He also sought the support of a small group of friends. These are some ways he used to cope with stressful circumstances and Christian middle school principals may do the same.

Moses was also a Bible character who suffered several instances of stressful hardship. Moses was given away by his biological mother to an Egyptian to save his life (NIV, Exodus 2:1-25). He could not identify with the Egyptians or the Israelites (Exodus 2:11-15). As Moses grew, he discovered his identity and left Egypt after accidentally killing an Egyptian (NIV, Exodus 2:12; Grace, 2022). Moses hid in Midian for 40 years without returning to the Egyptians or the Israelites (Getz, 2021; Grace, 2022). While we do not know what his life was like during those years, it is likely he faced struggles and stress as many who encounter these types of situations. One of the purposes of this study is to identify ways in which Christian middle school administrators can mitigate or prevent causes of stress. Moses represents someone who lived through circumstances that can bring about stress but through this, he rose to become a leader of others. It is clear from his life that stress and leadership sometimes coexist, but we also know that he had influences in his life to give guidance on managing difficult situations.

Moses dealt with stressful circumstances when there was no water and the Israelites began to turn against him (NIV, Numbers 20:2-7; Grace, 2022). The Israelites wandered in the desert for a long time, complaining and nagging Moses while seeing God deliver them in miraculous ways (NIV, Deuteronomy 32:10-52; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019). God provided for

them when they were hungry and thirsty (Detwiler, 2019). Despite the complaints of the Israelites and the death of his sister, Miriam, Moses remained a faithful leader (NIV, Numbers 20:1; Grace, 2022). However, despite his exhaustion Moses often looked to God instead of his problems (Grace, 2022). He showed humility, prayer, and worship as he fell face down and was silent before God (NIV, Exodus 18:14-24; Getz, 2021; Grace, 2022). As a result, the glory of the Lord appeared and gave him direction (NIV, Exodus 34; Getz, 2021). Although Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land as punishment for his disobedience when he struck the rock instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded (NIV, Numbers 20:2-13; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019), he remains a memorable biblical leader (Grace, 2022). The way Moses dealt with stress was by getting alone with God and praying until he heard from God.

Elijah was a prophet whom God used to display to the people that He was all-powerful (NIV, 1 Kings 17; Roi, 2012). In front of the people, Elijah prayed, and the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, wood, stones, soil, and water (Detwiler, 2019). Everyone present believed that the Lord is God, and the prophets of Baal were taken away and killed (NIV, 1 Kings 18; Getz, 2021; Detwiler, 2019).

Elijah was stressed when he was threatened by Jezebel (NIV, 1 Kings 19:1-2; Getz, 2021). In fact, was so afraid that he ran for his life. Leaving his servant, he went by himself into the wilderness (Getz, 2021). When he came to a bush he sat down and prayed to God to take his life (NIV, 1 Kings 19:4; Getz, 2021; Shacham-Rosby, 2016; Baxter, 2017). The angel of the Lord came to him and told him to get up and eat (NIV, 1 Kings 19:7; Getz, 2021; Shacham-Rosby, 2016). Elijah was fearful and lacking in self-care, but Elisha and others helped him (NIV, 1 Kings 19; Roi, 2012; Getz, 2021; Shacham-Rosby, 2016).

Elisha was determined to stay by Elijah even when the Lord sent him to Bethel, Jericho, and Jordan (Baxter, 2017). God places people in leaders' paths to enable and strengthen them in stressful times (Roi, 2012; Shacham-Rosby, 2016). Elisha just wanted to receive a portion of Elijah's prophetic leadership spirit (NIV, 1 Kings 19; Baxter, 2017). After Elijah was taken into heaven (NIV, 2 Kings 2), Elisha emerged as a prophetic leader with the same spirit as Elijah (Roi, 2012; Baxter, 2017). Elijah and Elisha prayed to God when they were stressed and relied on the support of others. This is another example of how individuals in ancient Israel handled stress and fear. They understood the significance of prayer despite the fear and trepidation they had in what they were called to do. Similarly, Christian middle school leaders who are called to guide and shepherd others may find that stress can be prevented through a life devoted to prayer as demonstrated by Elijah and Elisha.

David was a leader who took over after Saul and was recognized as a man after God's heart (NIV, Acts 13:22; Ben-Hador et al., 2020; Baxter, 2017). One of David's greatest victories was defeating Goliath (NIV, 1 Samuel 17:41-52; Detwiler, 2019; Getz, 2021), but further military successes increased David's favor among men and more individuals followed him as a leader because of this prowess (NIV, 2 Samuel 8; Ben-Hador et al., 2020).

David dealt with stress and anxiousness (Baxter, 2017; Ben-Hador et al., 2020). In Psalm 139:23 (NIV) he wrote, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." By writing the Psalms, David expressed his feelings (Baxter, 2017). The following Scriptures represent David's relationship and dependency on God (Ben-Hador et al., 2020; Baxter, 2017):

- "I lie down and sleep; I wake again because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear though tens of thousands surround me on every side" (NIV, Psalm 3:5-6).

- “Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in deep anguish. How long Lord, how long? Turn, Lord, and deliver me...” (NIV, Psalm 6:2-4).
- “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall, I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (NIV, Psalm 27:1).
- “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and he delivered me from all my fears” (NIV, Psalm 34:4).
- “Contend, Lord with those who contend with me, fight against those who fight against me” (NIV, Psalm 35:1).
- “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise. In God, I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” (NIV, Psalm 56:3-4).
- “I cling to you; your right hand upholds me. Those who want to kill me will be destroyed, they will go down to the depths of the earth” (NIV, Psalm 63:6-9).

The Psalms are filled with the plea for God to keep David safe and to destroy his enemies (Ben-Hador et al., 2020; Baxter, 2017). David dealt with several emotions that he expressed to God in the Psalms (Ben-Hador et al., 2020; Baxter, 2017; Getz, 2021). Often, he sang praises to God in the middle of stressful times (Ben-Hador et al., 2020; Baxter, 2017; Detwiler, 2019). Leaders should try their best to remember that God is a refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble (NIV, Psalm 46:1; Ben-Hador et al., 2020). This is one way that educational leaders can mitigate or even prevent stress as they call upon the Holy Spirit to intervene on their behalf.

Deborah was a prophetess and judge in ancient Israel, a role traditionally held by men (Detwiler, 2019). She dealt with a significant amount of stress as the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided (NIV, Judges 4:4-10). The Lord also used her to set her people free and to defeat the King of Canaan. (NIV, Judges 4:5-6). Despite the stressful position of leadership, she was described as a woman of distinction and a mediator between God and humans (Tucker, 2014).

Finally, Job was a biblical character that suffered more than any other human character as tragedy entered his life (Roxberg et al., 2013; Getz, 2021). He lost his property, his children died, and he suffered great physical pain and experienced no consolation (Roxberg et al., 2013; Detwiler, 2019). Yet he did not curse God but rather praised His name (NIV, Job 2:1,11, 20-22, 26; Getz, 2021). Job requested an explanation for his suffering (Roxberg et al., 2013; Getz, 2021) and responded to God with a repentant and humble heart, which is another way to handle stress (NIV, Job 38-41; Getz, 2021). In the end, God restored all that Job lost and gave him twice as much as he had before (Roxberg et al., 2013). All these biblical figures model how to and how not to handle stress as leaders.

According to Pittman et al., (2022), it is helpful for Christians to understand stress and how to manage it in their daily lives. Learning from stress may be more appropriate for the Christian than simply managing or reducing it (Pittman et al., 2022; Beck, 1986). By studying the previously mentioned characters in the Bible who dealt with anxiety, stress, and burnout, some coping strategies were discovered (Beck, 1986; Getz, 2021; Baxter, 2017; Briggs, 2015; Clark, 2020; Grace, 2022). These strategies included getting alone with God, fasting, maintaining friendships, worshipping God, and remaining humble and faithful. Writing and singing to God in prayer were additional strategies. These individuals coping with stressful situations provide examples for Christian middle school principals on how to avoid burnout (Purnomo, 2020). As Christians, we look to those who have gone before us as a way of understanding our own modern contexts for navigating stressful situations. Having biblical precedence of stress-inducing encounters, we can more successfully navigate those challenges that we face.

Stress and Spiritual Development

A stressful life may be improved by focusing on spiritual development (James et al., 1999). James et al. (1999) studied the relationship between the experience of common high-stress life events and measures of adult spiritual development. James et al. discovered that the experience of a high-stress life event was associated with a universal spiritual orientation but did not find that intrinsic religiousness was related to the experience of such events. Their study supported earlier research which indicated that spiritual growth can be a constructive consequence of highly stressful life experiences (James et al., 1999).

Spiritual development to overcome burnout and compassion fatigue for administrators may be linked to an increase in self-care (DuBois et al., 2020). Throughout the Scriptures, God provides the keys needed to restore mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness (Meyer, 2006; Evans, 2006). Philippians 4:6 (NIV) states, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God.” This Scripture provides a method to avoid stress, referring to it as anxiousness. Luke 12:25 (NIV) reiterates, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” The process of spiritual development is gradual (NIV, Colossians 3:10). The Bible can be used in this process as a tool for Christians to become more like their Creator (Evans, 2006).

In a phenomenological study of clergy job-related stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was apparent that a relationship with God through prayer benefited leaders (Foxwell, 2022). Several types of leaders rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit when making decisions (Maxwell, 2010). Ministers are among the leaders that use prayer, religious fellowship, and meditation to develop spiritually and avoid stress (Foxwell, 2022). By developing a Christian lifestyle to include spiritual development, stress can be reduced (Foxwell, 2022).

As life becomes more and more stressful, we can rely on spiritual guidance for managing difficult situations. The great leader Martin Luther King Jr. presented a perspective about the meaning and nature of spirituality (Lee, 2008). For King, spirituality did not pertain to a private, interior human religious experience alone, but was both public and political (Lee, 2008). Integrating spirituality into daily life may reduce stress (James et al., 1999). As Christians, a life marked by spiritual maturity and development is one way to demonstrate alignment between what we believe and how we engage that belief (about stress) through how we live.

The Scriptures include spiritual development strategies that if followed may reduce stress in various situations (James et al., 1999). 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV) says, “Cast all anxiety on him because he cares.” This is a call to place all one’s anxiety on Jesus and allow Him to carry those burdens. Further Scriptures recognize the need for believers to give their stress to the Lord. Psalm 55:22 (NIV) says, “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.” Jesus also states:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light. (NIV, Matthew 11:28-30)

The Bible illustrates where to go when stressed and what to do with stressors in life (James et al., 1999). When we spend time reading the Scriptures, in prayer and fellowshiping with other believers, and deploy faithfulness to scripture, we can find effectiveness when dealing with stress (Evans, 2006).

Coping Strategies

Tschierske (2023) discussed several strategies to reduce stress and burnout in leaders in the workplace. First, Tschierske found supporting national awareness and setting up mental health resources was beneficial. Second, providing flexible work initiatives, healthy snacks, and

launching a physical program with exercise challenges helped participants feel more positively about challenging situations in their lives. The third strategy to reduce stress and burnout in leaders was to provide workshops on mental health and offer confidential support. Next, Tschierske affirmed introducing programs to reinforce social outings and taking time off from work. Finally, Tschierske noted it was important to include mandatory lunch breaks and meeting-free days for employees.

The role of an educator or a teacher of God's Word is to encourage others to positively incorporate coping strategies into their lives (Olpin et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2016; Meyer, 2006). There are several methods Christian academic leaders can use to de-stress. The first method was to seek out social support. This may mean engaging in family time, participating in a local church, joining a social club, or seeking counseling (Olpin et al., 2014; Meyer, 2016). The next method was to be proactive and not reactive. Leaders should anticipate problems and take steps to prevent them from happening in the first place, rather than reacting to problems as they arise (Olpin et al., 2014). Another method is to avoid being pressured to make leadership decisions and instead set priorities by ranking resolutions in order of importance and urgency (Olpin et al., 2014). It is important for academic leaders to find a comfort zone and stay in it, while knowing self and exercising talents in an area (McClellan et al., 2010). Leaders should identify followers' gifts and encourage their talents to be utilized (Maxwell, 2010; Meyer, 2016). Maxwell (2016) also emphasized the importance of including nutrition, a healthy diet, and exercise in one's life. Individuals need to make time to exercise and maintain a healthy diet while using vitamins to cope with stress (Colbert, 1999). By incorporating these activities into daily life, stress will be lessened (McClellan et al., 2010, Meyer, 2016). Poor health may increase stress and anxiety in the workplace and at home (McClellan et al., 2010; Meyer, 2016).

Finally, make sure to schedule time to relax. More will be accomplished if time is taken to recharge and refresh (McClellan et al., 2010; Meyer, 2016). These methods may be included as coping tactics for anxiety and stress that may lead to burnout (Maxwell, 2016).

Colbert (1999) stated that even Christian leaders get depressed, which can ultimately lead to burnout. It is important for leaders to not hide their pain and pretend nothing is wrong (Maxwell, 2010). By applying some of the beforementioned biblical stress coping strategies, leaders may effectively lead and motivate within the academic environment without burning out (Colbert, 1999). Colbert (1999) includes six spiritual and practical suggestions for health, nutrition, and fitness that will bring wholeness to life. These include delight instead of sadness, tranquility instead of anxiety, jubilation (living with proper nutrition and diet), triumph (living with vitamins and minerals), joy-filled living with exercise and rest, and delight (living with the Word of God) (Colbert, 1999). To apply joy means it is important to focus on the positives and overcome the negatives (Colbert, 1999). To master peace as Jesus promised, it is important to focus on God's promises and blessings (Colbert, 1999). Studying God's Word is a very important aspect in the process of leadership as one seeks to guide others across the realities of stress and anxiety (Maxwell, 2010; Colbert, 1999).

By providing ways of coping with stress and stressful situations in response to biblical and theological ways of navigating school environments, the school district can do much to support a principal's burnout prevention (Van den Berg, 2021; Kelly, 2023). The following are ways the academic system can support Christian middle school principals. One way to improve social and mental health is to create a positive Christian uplifting school climate with Christian music, scripture reading, and perhaps a chapel service (Colbert, 1999; Evans, 2006; Kelly, 2023). This increases morale, motivation, and productivity, as well as improves wellbeing,

drives retention, and reduces burnout (Kelly, 2023). Another option is to provide leaders with information regarding mental health needs, as well as make available mentors and peer coaches (Van den Berg, 2021; Kelly, 2023). By increasing awareness and reducing stigma around mental health, school leaders could use interventions to promote personal health (Robeck, 2019; Kelly, 2023). By using key strategies that promote biblical responses to stress or difficult situations, burnout may be reduced in Christian school leaders. As a person of faith, it is important to demonstrate ways in which one's relationship with God, one's approach to scriptural fidelity and one's belief in the work of the Holy Spirit can inform and influence behaviors and responses.

Leadership Principles

Warren (2006) noted that Jesus was constantly under pressure and enormous stress that would cause any individual to burn out. Warren formulated eight principles that could be applied by Christian leaders to experience less stress and prevent burnout. The first principle is to know who one is as a leader (Warren, 2006; Maxwell, 2010). Knowing the role and responsibilities of being a principal is important to the leadership position. This prevents stress when challenges to personality and character arise (Barton, 2018). Jesus stated who He was in the following Scriptures. John 8:12 (NIV) states, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." This verse means that the world has no other light than Him. If there is going to be light for the world, it will come through Jesus (Briggs, 2013; Warren, 2006). Jesus further said, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture" (NIV, John 10:9). This verse illustrates that salvation comes through Jesus alone (Barton, 2018; Warren, 2006). When Scripture notes, "I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the father except through me,” Jesus is asserting that everything can be found in Him, and all questions answered by Him (NIV, John 14:6; Stanley, 2015; Warren, 2006).

Jesus calls Himself “the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (NIV, John 10:11). The Lord Jesus used this title to help people appreciate that He is the loving, caring, Savior of the world (Briggs, 2013; Warren, 2006). Jesus also calls himself “the Son of God” (NIV, John 10:36). Finally, Jesus says, “I am One who bears witness of Myself and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me” (NIV, John 8:18). Each verse above affirms who Jesus is (Warren, 2006; Briggs, 2013). Insecurity and not knowing self produces pressure and stress (Warren, 2006; Briggs, 2013; Tautges, 2019).

To prevent stress in a leadership role, it is important to know whom to please, especially since nobody can please everyone (Barton, 2018; Warren, 2006). Jesus said, “By myself, I can do nothing, I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (NIV, John 5:30). Jesus knew whom He was trying to please (Warren, 2006; Briggs, 2013). God was pleased with Jesus, “and a voice from heaven said, this is my son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased” (NIV, Matthew 3:17; Tautges, 2019; Warren, 2006). Next, it is important to know what one is trying to accomplish (Kouzes et al., 2017; Warren, 2006). Leaders live by priorities or pressure. In John 8:14 (NIV), Jesus said, “For I know where I came from and where I am going.” Setting a goal and staying focused is important for leaders (Warren, 2006; Maxwell, 2010). Focusing on one thing at a time is also imperative to decreasing stress and preventing burnout (Warren, 2006). Luke said:

At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns.” (NIV, Luke 4:42-43)

Jesus remained focused on His purpose and kept moving toward the goal (Briggs, 2013; Maxwell, 2010).

It is important to delegate and not try to manage everything oneself to prevent burnout (Kouzes et al., 2017; Warren, 2006). In Mark 3:13, Jesus appointed 12 apostles to help with the mission, sharing the responsibility with others. Jesus also made prayer a personal habit (Warren, 2006; Briggs, 2013). Mark 1:35 (NIV) says, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Prayer and meditation are God-given tools for eliminating anxiety, and time alone with God can be a decompression chamber for life’s stresses (Stanley, 2015; Warren, 2006). These are methods that Christian middle school principals may utilize to prevent stress and burnout.

Lastly, Warren (2006) and Kouzes et al. (2017) recommended taking time off to enjoy life. Jesus knew when to relax and to enjoy life. “Then because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat,” he said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest’” (NIV, Mark 6:31). Finally, leaders need to give their stress to Christ (Warren, 2006; Maxwell, 2010; Briggs, 2013). As discussed previously in Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus wants everyone to bring their stress to Him. These eight principles described by Warren can transform one’s lifestyle as a Christian middle school principal from stressful to satisfying.

Summary

This theological framework outlined the biblical view of anxiety, stress, and burnout. It focused on Jesus, biblical figures, and religious leaders that have studied the context of the Bible. By relating to biblical leaders, drawing from Christian educators, and including a theological perspective, stress leading to burnout may be reduced for Christian public and private middle

school principals. The next section of this literature review examined the theory and terms relevant to the dissertation.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The purpose of this theoretical framework was to examine burnout theory (Maslach, 1997) and better fulfill this qualitative phenomenological study's examination of the prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian middle school administrators in Newton County, Georgia. This theoretical study consisted of a review of the significant terms, Maslach's burnout theory, and the terms related to the study. The following review of the definitions began with a focus on burnout since stress and anxiety may lead to burnout. Maslach and Leiter (1997) defined burnout as the prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. Arroll and Kendrick (2018) defined anxiety as a universal adaptive response to a threat. There is a distinction between normal and abnormal anxiety, which is present when anxiety is disproportionate to the level of threat was described as conditions ranging from even the mildest challenging stimulation to severely aversive conditions (Koolhaas et al., 2011). Another definition of stress was defined as a disparity between a person's perception of environmental demands and their perceived ability to cope with those demands (Winefield & Pignata, 2013).

Maslach's (1997) Burnout Theory Categories

Maslach's (1997) burnout theory introduced burnout to the scientific community and defined it as a gradual process of fatigue, cynicism, and reduced commitment among social professionals (Maslach et al., 2022). The theory breaks burnout down into six categories to properly assess individuals and organizations at risk (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). These six factors provide individuals and organizations with a framework and tools to move out of burnout if necessary (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). The first category of burnout includes workload (too much

work, not enough resources) (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). For a middle school principal, this could be stressful depending on both elements mentioned (Hefferman, 2020). As part of the theory, this would lead to excessive stress at work which is characterized by being emotionally drained.

Control (micromanagement, lack of influence, accountability without power) is the next category described (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). In leadership, it is difficult to avoid being a micromanager and also avoid being micromanaged (Bal et al., 2018). It is difficult for some leaders who give excessive supervision to employees to allow an individual to complete a task on their own. A leader who does not trust their employees might become a micromanager. Depending on the style and level of leadership within the workplace, stress could be increased or decreased (Barton, 2018; Maxwell, 2011). This element of the theory represented leaders who are stressed and out of balance by micromanagement.

Reward (not enough pay, acknowledgment, or satisfaction) was noted as the next area in the burnout framework (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Employees that feel they are well compensated for their talents tend to have a greater sense of job satisfaction (DuBois et al., 2020). Individuals who have these needs met often do not feel burned out or dissatisfied (Lindell, 2023). A reward, as part of the theory, is included because without it the employees are not satisfied and are stressed.

The fourth area within the burnout framework theory is the community (isolation, disrespect, conflict) (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Leaders should respect their staff, students, and the supportive community. Creating a positive atmosphere at work increases morale, motivation, and productivity (Kelly, 2023). The servant leader who develops a close sense of community and family may lower stress in this area (Bal et al., 2018; Maxwell, 2010). Community is included in the theory to promote leaders to alleviate stress by respecting and serving the employees.

The next area is fairness (favoritism, discrimination) in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). By treating everyone in a fair and equal manner, there will be less tension in the work environment (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Leadership should promote fairness within the organization (Barton, 2018). This element of the theory promotes relationships that are less stressful, making the school environment less stressful.

Finally, values (ethical conflicts, meaningless tasks) should be included by the administration of the middle school environment (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Including values in the theory is important to alleviate stressful conflicts among employees. The six-area burnout framework has now been incorporated into assessment programs for organizations (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). To correct burnout, organizations and individuals must identify the areas of concern within the theory for their specific situations and then develop solutions to improve each area (Maslach & Leiter, 2005).

The definition of burnout, its origins, and where burnout most often occurs was investigated (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Maslach and Leiter (2005) also studied who experiences burnout in organizations. The studies conducted on these three areas affirm the need for the Maslach Burnout Inventory to be used by educators, doctors, and other professionals (Maslach, et al., 2001). Maslach and Leiter's research also led organizations to consider how to deal with burnout and what coping mechanisms should be implemented to prevent burnout. The six categories of the Maslach's Burnout Theory make it possible to address Christian middle school principals effectively when burnout is observed.

Burnout and Stress

Stress is the general experience of physical, mental, emotional, and relational factors that cause a person and nervous system to feel overwhelmed (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Phillips,

2022). It can begin suddenly or without warning and is normally short-term (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Phillips, 2022). When the stressor is removed, the stress symptoms may decrease (Phillips, 2022; McClellan et al., 2010). Physical signs of stress are often present, such as muscle tension, jaw clenching, fatigue, headaches, restlessness, and general aches and pains (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Phillips, 2022). Emotional symptoms of stress may include feelings of overwhelm, forgetfulness, and impaired problem-solving (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Phillips, 2022). Behavioral signs include poor sleep quality and changes in appetite or weight, among others (Phillips, 2022). According to Phillips (2022), unlike stress, burnout is preventable in the following ways:

- Establish creative outlets and time for fun.
- Increase feelings of autonomy both inside and outside of the workplace.
- Enhance the mind-body connection and real-time awareness of personal limits.
- Identify and enact supportive boundaries.
- Increase healthy support systems.
- Engage in activities that support nervous system regulation.
- Improve sleep hygiene.
- Be aware of how much mental and emotional energy is devoted to others and work versus self.

Burnout and Anxiety

Stress and anxiety symptoms look similar (Phillips, 2022). The source of stress is often external, but the source of anxiety tends to be an internal response (McClellan et al., 2010; Phillips, 2022). Anxiety differs from stress in its intensity and duration (Kaplan et al., 2021; Phillips, 2022). Physical signs of anxiety include trembling, elevated heart rate, nausea and

stomach pains, rapid breathing, and shortness of breath (Phillips, 2022). Emotional symptoms include constant worry, fear, panic, and racing thoughts (Phillips, 2022). Behavioral symptoms include insomnia or disrupted sleep, changes in appetite, substance use, avoidance of people and activities, and inability to complete normal daily functions (Phillips, 2022). Stress and anxiety are unavoidable, but some stress can produce positive results (McClellan et al., 2010; Phillips, 2022). Burnout is not a condition that happens suddenly; it evolves (Leiter et al., 2000; Phillips, 2022). If anxiety and stress are left untreated, they could eventually lead to burnout (Phillips, 2022).

Summary

Many studies on stress, anxiety, and burnout have been conducted on medical, pastoral, and teaching personnel, but no studies have been completed on anxiety, stress, and burnout with Christian private and public middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia. This study is necessary to provide a successful school with a positive learning environment. This literature review aims to analyze the literature available for the completion of this dissertation study.

Related Literature

Members of the largest group within the largest occupation in the nation have been leaving at relatively high rates, which seem to continue to increase regularly (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Education has been faced with prominent trends and changes, one of which is that it has become increasingly unstable (Russell, 2020). Educators leave the profession voluntarily or involuntarily, for some reasons such as resignation, termination, death, retirement, family or personal issues, and health (Ingersoll et al., 2014). A large group of educators also leave to pursue other careers or further their education (Wicke, 2021). Dissatisfaction regarding school working conditions, salaries, classroom resources, student misbehavior, accountability,

opportunities for development, school leadership, and input in decision-making all play a part in the decision to leave the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

Since educator attrition from burnout ranks like that of police officers and is higher than nursing, engineering, architecture, and law, it should be viewed as critically important to study (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Regardless of race, beginner educators have the highest rate of turnover of any group of educators, and the system fails to attract the brightest and best college students (Ingersoll et al., 2014). According to a study by Taylor (2018), high stress is attributed to negative brain thinking patterns that may lead to depression or burnout. Educators who retired from teaching due to stress scored higher on an evaluation by Bernard (2016). Since it is evident that attrition is problematic in the field of education, the institution cannot afford to lose educators due to anxiety, stress, and burnout (Mandar-Bichu, 2022; Will, 2022). The related literature focused on stress and leadership roles, stress and burnout, stress and health, wellness, and coping strategies.

Stress and Leadership Role

It was important to understand the leadership role and how it relates to stress in principals' lives (Maxwell, 2010; Will, 2022). Educator stress and burnout hinder effective leadership (Simone et al., 2015; Wicke, 2021). Leadership should include all educators in making decisions, as well as listen, accept contributions from everyone, and offer professional training to improve the physical and mental health of all educators within the school (Fullan, 2010; Wicke, 2021). Effective principals are involved in four areas of strategic interaction with teachers: as resource provider, communicator, instructional resource, and visible presence (Fullan, 2010). Leaders can empower their employees and enhance their well-being by influencing and interacting within the work environment (Tuckey et al., 2012). When educators

feel empowered it benefits the students (Tuckey et al., 2012; Wicke, 2021). A leader who acts as a commander or dictator does not obtain positive results regarding motivating employees (Tuckey et al., 2012). Leadership with an empowerment approach establishes independence, teamwork, and personal development (Tuckey et al., 2012; Wicke, 2021).

Leaders are to be followed and are an example to employees. Maxwell (2011) provided five levels of leadership:

- Position (people follow because they must)
- Permission (people follow because they want to)
- Production (people follow because of what the leader has done for the organization)
- People Development (people follow because of what leadership has done for them)
- Pinnacle (people follow because of who the leader is and what they represent)

There are several different types of leadership, including democratic leadership, autocratic leadership, bureaucratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, authoritative leadership, and coach-style leadership (Hughes & Ubben, 1994; Mazan, 2021; Wicke, 2021; Maxwell, 2011). Selecting the right type of leadership for the situation will determine the success of the educators and the performance of the school (Fullan, 2010; Fuming & Jiliang, 2007; Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Wicke, 2021).

A democratic leadership style is where a leader makes decisions based on the input of the team members (Fullan, 2010). It is effective because it includes everyone involved in the school (Mazan, 2021). An autocratic leadership style is when a leader makes all the decisions without the involvement of the rest of the invested individuals (Mazan, 2021). A bureaucratic leader goes

by the book, which means they tend to go along with established practices and traditions (Mazan, 2021). A laissez-faire style of leadership gives employees the freedom to manage themselves (Mazan, 2021). This can be positive as it encourages individuals to attempt new things, but it can also limit growth for the organization as a whole (Mazan, 2021).

Transformational leadership attempts to transform and inspire employees by allowing them to be innovative (Mazan, 2021; Maxwell, 2011). This type of leadership often promotes success within academic settings (Mazan, 2021). Leaders must provide a guide to employees as they try new responsibilities and challenges (Mazan, 2021).

Transactional leadership rewards employees for work done and penalizes them for targets unmet (Mazan, 2021; Maxwell, 2011). Leaders who engage in transactional leadership should use incentives that will motivate employees randomly and avoid stirring up jealousy among individuals who do not reach the goal (Mazan, 2021).

Authoritative leaders are people of vision, but they do seek input and suggestions from other individuals within the organization (Mazan, 2021; Maxwell, 2011). This is unlike the autocratic leadership style (Mazan, 2021). Coach-style leadership focuses on nurturing the strengths of employees to assist them to work better as a team (Mazan, 2021). Effective leadership should utilize a combination of the various leadership styles (Hughes & Ubben, 1994). The transformational style seemed positive in an academic setting, but it is imperative to select and utilize the best leadership method for the individual principal and their school (Maxwell, 2011; Fullan, 2010).

Five functional parts make up a Christian principalship. Four take place within the school and one takes place outside of the school (Hollis, 2019; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). The principal's functions within the school include staffing and instructional improvement, curriculum

development, pupil services, resource procurement, and building utilization (budgeting and maintenance) (Gentilucci et al., 2007; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). Outside of the school, the principal's function is public relations (Gentilucci et al., 2007; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). Seeing the difference between the principal as a person and the principalship is important (Gentilucci et al., 2007; Hughes & Ubben, 1994).

The history of principals includes the roles they play as effective leaders and managers (Heffernan, 2023; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). Maintaining school organization, culture, and understanding of the community is imperative. Some of the tasks and functions they engage in include following guidelines and goals for the school, making sure that school improvement is prioritized, overseeing individual differences and student placement, developing an orderly and positive learning climate, restructuring the curriculum, restructuring learning, restructuring instructional personnel, managing the scheduling of staff and students, staffing the school through recruitment, selection and termination, creative budgeting, building facilities management, public relations, and decision-making at the school site (Heffernan, 2023; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). Anxiety and stress from the responsibility of being a principal may lead to burnout (Will, 2022; Hughes & Ubben, 1994)

There are two dimensions to the five functions of leadership, which are good leadership and effective management (Heffernan, 2023; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). Leadership is the method principals use to create a positive school climate with both staff productivity and student productivity (Gentilucci et al., 2007; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). Management is the systematic approach used to provide an orderly, efficient, and effective school environment (Fullan, 2010; Hughes & Ubben, 1994).

Effective leaders have the following characteristics in efficient schools:

- Stress learning as the most important reason for being in school.
- Express a clear understanding of the school's mission.
- Believe all students can learn and that the school makes a difference between success and failure.
- Know and can apply teaching and learning principles.
- Set expectations for curriculum quality by using standards and guidelines.
- Protect learning time from disruption.
- Maintain a safe and orderly school environment.
- Provide incentives and rewards to encourage excellence from teachers and students.
- Maintain frequent communication with parents, staff, students, and the community.
- Set high expectations for instructional standards.
- Involve others in planning. (Hughes & Ubben, 1994, p. 5)

Principals who utilize these skills empower others and maintain a positive learning environment (Heffernan, 2023; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). A positive school environment helps to prevent anxiety, stress, and burnout in middle school principals by contributing to the well-being of the educators (Tuckey et al., 2012).

Effective Christian principals are also managers and possess skills that assist in management (Hollis, 2019; Hughes & Ubben, 1994). The ability to plan and organize work, work with and lead others, analyze problems and make decisions, communicate orally and in writing, perceive the needs and concerns of others, and perform under pressure are skills needed by principals (Hughes & Ubben, 1994). These skills will assist in the positive atmosphere of the school and alleviate anxiety, stress, and burnout among leadership (Aguilar, 2018).

Principals who can be identified as *principal teachers* are effective leaders (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). They are very effective with behaviors such as approachability and interactive classroom visitations or observation (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). These traits ease the stress on staff, students, and others, thus making the work environment less stressful for the leadership (Tuckey et al., 2012).

Job satisfaction is important in education for all educators and influences mental health and work enthusiasm (Fuming & Jiliang, 2007). Job satisfaction can be increased by an increase in salary and benefits, which in turn affects the school environment (Fuming & Jiliang, 2007). A principal who supports the needs of the teachers will experience support from the teachers (Fuming & Jiliang, 2007). Improving working conditions, reducing exam stress, reducing class sizes, improving teaching conditions, providing pathways for promotions, providing professional development opportunities, and utilizing democratic leadership are some methods to enhance the academic environment (Fuming & Jiliang, 2007). Principals make a tremendous contribution and difference to the school environment. They act as a resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence (Fullan, 2010). The leader needs to be able to cope with the accompanying stress and anxiety to avoid burnout in the profession (Aguilar, 2018).

Administrators should demonstrate the role of taking care of themselves by modeling, and they must permit others to put personal health at the forefront (Aguilar, 2018; Wicke, 2021). Some coping strategies will be discussed further in the literature review.

Stress and Burnout

Burnout is caused by constant stress (Herman et al., 2018; Maslach, 2003; Wicke, 2021). Chronic stress from job demands can cause anxiety, which may lead to depression or even mental impairment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Constant demands from both personal life and job

stressors contribute to this problem (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). As principals overcommit and overwork, their physical and mental health may decline (Szigeti et al., 2016). Leaders may also lose confidence and think negatively of themselves (Bernard, 2016).

Educators thrive from the enjoyment of working with young people; however, with emotional and physical exhaustion, enthusiasm is often lost (Maslach, 2003; Szigeti et al., 2016). Maslach and Leiter (1997) defined burnout as the prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. This definition expresses the concern and the impact anxiety, stress, and burnout have on educators (Will, 2022; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Maslach's (2003), Burnout Theory consists of three dimensions. These dimensions include exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Exhaustion is the state of extreme physical or mental fatigue. Cynicism is the belief that people are motivated by self-interest, which causes deep distrust. Inefficacy is the condition or state of being able to accomplish anything (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). From these definitions, it is evident how one dimension may lead to another problem, resulting in stress, anxiety, and burnout (Maslach, 2003).

Stress and Health

Stress and health are intertwined and include physical and mental health (Bogaert, 2014; Wicke, 2021). Good physical health is when the bodily functions and processes are working at their peak (Bogaert, 2014). A person may feel free of pain and generally well (Bogaert, 2014). Good mental health is when one can cope with the stresses of life and mental illness is absent (Bogaert, 2014). Mental health is an important occupational health issue for educators as work stress is a major factor in anxiety and depression (Borrelli et. al, 2014). Physical effects of stress pressure and anxiety include headaches, muscle tension or pain, fatigue, change in sex drive, and

upset stomach (Kanold et al., 2022). Emotional effects include anxiety, restlessness, lack of motivation, irritability or anger, sadness, or depression (Looker et al., 2008; Meyer, 2016). Some behavioral effects include overeating, angry outbursts, drug or alcohol abuse, tobacco use, and social withdrawal (Olpin et al., 2014; Meyer, 2016). Both physical and mental health is important for excellence as an educator (Lansdown, 2023).

Wellness Dimensions

The four dimensions of educators' wellness are physical, mental, emotional, and social wellness (Kanold & Boogren, 2022). The physical dimension includes maintaining healthy food choices, movement, and sleep routines (Kaplan et al., 2021; Kanold & Boogren, 2022). The mental dimension focuses on making good decisions, balancing routines, and considering how to build confidence (Kaplan et al., 2021; Kanold & Boogren, 2022). Emotional wellness focuses on awareness, understanding, and mindfulness routines (Kanold & Boogren, 2022). The social wellness dimension reflects relationships, trust issues, and purposeful routines (Kanold & Boogren, 2022). Many educators must overcome emotional exhaustion and loneliness daily (Kanold & Boogren, 2022). When they regularly engage in the wellness dimensions mentioned above, they are less likely to experience the anxiety, stress, and burnout that are too often a part of this field of work (Kanold & Boogren, 2022).

Coping Strategies

Educational leaders need to be able to cope with the stress and anxiety of the profession (Will, 2022). There are two main styles of coping strategies: emotion-based coping and problem-based coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wicke, 2021). Problem-based coping is directed at the stressor directly, describing whether the person solves the problem or avoids the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-based coping helps individuals deal with the emotions

triggered by the stressor, describing how the individual regulates their emotions when under stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mc Carthy et al., 2015; Wicke, 2021). Coping strategies are necessary to support a productive academic environment (Gray et al., 2017; Wicke, 2021).

In problem-focused coping, an individual might break a big task into smaller tasks, make adequate preparations for the job, work faster, seek information and advice, and accept personal limitations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An individual might also choose to speak up about personal needs, set aside time to enjoy personal life and family, and set more realistic goals and standards for themselves (McIntosh & Horowitz, 2017).

In emotion-focused coping, the individual might use positive self-talk, withdraw from unsolvable problems, utilize relaxation techniques, and maintain a calm, self-controlled public face (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The individual would also keep cool, accept differences in perspectives, ideas, and personalities, as well as exercise, rest, and relax (McIntosh & Horowitz, 2017).

McIntosh and Horowitz (2017) described several strategies to assist individuals when dealing with stress in the workplace. As a colleague or part of a school, creating good relationships with others is important. Offering space or distractions for stressed colleagues is beneficial. Raising concerns with colleagues when necessary is imperative. It is important to offer a sympathetic ear whenever possible. Be supportive and willing to accept support. Promote a culture in which individuals can rely on each other within the organization (McIntosh & Horowitz, 2017).

Facing stress head-on is important for principals (Robeck, 2019). With God's help, one can attack stress rather than be attacked by stress (Colbert, 1999; Meyer, 2016). Leaders need to begin the day by spending time with God (Maxwell, 2011; Meyer, 2016). They also should

include exercising, getting enough sleep at night, and taking a vacation in their schedule (Kanold et al., 2022; Meyer, 2016). It is important for leaders to reward themselves occasionally and to evaluate what and who has an influence on their decisions and life (Bal et al., 2018; Meyer, 2016). Lastly, it is important to do less by delegating tasks, not more (Bal et al., 2018; Meyer, 2016).

Stress is not unique to this generation, this culture, or even this time in history (Arroll et al., 2018; Meyer, 2016). Every culture has dealt with stress (Kanold et al., 2022). The men and women in the Bible, like Daniel, Moses, Ruth, and Paul, had different perspectives regarding stress (Woolfe, 2002). They knew they could not handle the situations before them in their own strength, so they depended totally on God (Woolfe, 2002; Meyer, 2016). Leaders need to change the way they handle and view work stress as an opportunity for God to manifest and do great things (Barton, 2018; Maxwell, 2010).

Cancio et al. (2018) discussed how schools should provide mental health support for their educators. Cancio et al. and Wicke (2021) asserted that this will lead to school improvement and lower educator stress, anxiety, and burnout. Stress levels can be decreased by recognizing the source and substituting positives for negative triggers (Simone et al., 2015). Stress is unique to each individual and every educator must take care of both their mental and physical health (Ferguson et al., 2017). Educators seem to fear the stigma from both society and the academic environment that labels individuals who pursue their mental health as crazy (Ferguson et al., 2017). To avoid stigma, most educators will not identify their mental health rituals such as a psychologist, therapy, medication, or mental health diagnosis (Ferguson et al., 2017).

Organizational learning and improvement take time, so effective principals are essential for continuous school improvement (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Lindell, 2023). Stable school

leadership is important; therefore, the retention of successful principals is a critical issue (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Fowler, 2018). The high rates of principal turnover nationally and especially in low-income student schools are alarming (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Jared, 2018). Repeated turnover is likely to harm student achievement and schoolworking conditions (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Several factors contribute to principal turnover, such as years of service and time until retirement, working conditions and pay, autonomy, physical violence, and the labor market (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Russell, 2020). Since principals are expected to put the needs of others before their own and work under high demands with limited resources, it is no wonder they often experience symptoms of work-related stress and burnout (Fowler, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2021). In addition, principals often maintain heavy workloads, work long hours, cope with problems that are not planned, and deal with student adolescent problems consistently within a workday (Russell, 2020).

There are two aspects of evidenced-based recommendations to help with principal burnout (Russell, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2021). The first includes recommendations for how school systems can address principal burnout. The second includes recommendations for how principals can be proactive and reactive to address their burnout if the school system fails to provide support (Lindell, 2023; DeMatthews et al., 2021). DeMatthews et al. (2021) described several strategies districts and principals may consider, including:

- investing in training for principals and supervisors on self-care and burnout and having methods for conversations regarding the issue.
- revising principal and supervisors' expectations related to self-care and burnout by having accountability among the leadership.
- redeveloping principal workload and expectations according to district expectations.

- adopting a policy so principals can have release time to visit a health professional.
- creating a school plan where leadership responsibilities are shared so principals can keep a good balance between life and work.
- establishing opportunities to celebrate the success of leadership and the effect it has on students, staff, and the community.
- arranging peer support for principals, where they meet after work to exercise, share a drink, eat dinner, or something of this nature.
- providing training on topics that relate to burnout and coping strategies to encourage therapeutic strategies.
- creating a conversation among peers to discuss burnout, maintaining life balance, and stressful work situations.
- setting aside time both during and after the workday to engage in peer support.
- advertising peer support opportunities so all principals can participate in the district and community support.
- increasing the awareness of burnout, stress, and healthy coping strategies through the self-education of principals.
- arranging a time to delegate responsibilities and plan a calendar that will allow time to de-stress.

Taylor (2017) further identified several coping strategies to reduce workplace stress, such as learning to relax, mindfulness, exercise, sleep, resolving conflict, and positive psychology. Setting a routine for these activities can make a difference in an individual's life and therefore within the school setting (Harmen, 2018; Taylor, 2017). Educators must confront and handle stress from work using coping strategies and support from family, coworkers, and friends (Harmen, 2018). Some educators fight stress by seeking help from friends, family, colleagues, administrators, and healthcare professionals, but shame may prevent others from reaching out (Ferguson et al., 2017). If the school system were to promote self-care and provide a supportive

atmosphere, stress, anxiety, and burnout among educators may be alleviated (Gray et al., 2017; Harmsen, 2018).

Warren (2006) described several ways to cope with stress. These eight principles assist in creating less pressure and more peace in one's life:

- Identification: Know Who You Are (NIV, John 8:12)
- Dedication: Know Whom You Are Trying to Please (NIV, Matthew 3:17)
- Organization: Know What You Are Trying to Accomplish (NIV, John 8:14)
- Concentration: Focus on One Thing at a Time (NIV, Luke 4:43)
- Delegation: Do Not Do It All Yourself (NIV, Mark 3:13)
- Meditation: Make a Habit of Personal Prayer (NIV, Mark 1:35)
- Recreation: Take Time Off to Enjoy Life (NIV, Mark 6:31)
- Transformation: Give Your Stress to Christ (NIV, Matthew 11:28-30; Warren, 2006).

Balancing work and personal life can be difficult but practicing mindfulness (the state of being conscious or aware of something in the present moment) is beneficial (Harmsen, 2018; Mclean et al., 2017). Mindfulness is a coping strategy that can be used to assist in dealing with anxiety, stress, and burnout (Aguilar, 2018). This technique helps one to be present so that clearheaded decisions can be made in the moment (Aguilar, 2018). Often, the job of an educator requires them to react in the moment, and mindfulness helps them to recognize, understand, and respond to emotions as they strengthen their ability to recognize what is being experienced before responding to the situation (Aguilar, 2018; Wicke, 2021).

Huljich (2012) provided nine natural steps to survive, master stress, and live well. These steps include the following: taking charge of one's personal life, kicking bad habits, learning to say no, using personal affirmations, exercising regularly, maintaining proper nutrition, getting

adequate sleep, using the power of awareness, and not giving up. By using some of these coping strategies, Christian middle school principals may be able to prevent some of the anxiety and stress leading to burnout.

Rationale for the Study and Gap in the Literature

The abovementioned research provided the reader with information about the anxiety, stress, and burnout plaguing principals in educational leadership today. However, some educators use theology or religion to cope with the pressures of the academic atmosphere. This researcher's rationale for the study and the gap in the literature is further developed in the next two subsections.

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for this study was to determine the following: How do Christian educators prevent anxiety, stress, and burnout in leadership positions (principal, vice principal, head of school)? How do Christian administrators prevent attrition? How do Christian educators identify effective coping strategies? How do Christian educators recognize the causes leading to burnout? These questions raised curiosity, which led to an interest in pursuing the study.

Studies have shown that 48% of principals say they are burned out compared to 44% of other professionals (Will, 2022; Sparks, 2022). One stressor is that principals work an average of at least 55 hours a week, with many regularly working more than 60 hours a week (Lansdown, 2022). This averages more than 11 hours per day (Lansdown, 2022; White, 2022; Lansdown, 2023; Jared, 2018; Baker, 2018; Lee, 2022). Such a time requirement limits principals' time for personal needs (Wicke, 2021).

Another contributing factor to principals' stress levels is the fact that there are threats of violence, while others are subject to bullying and physical violence (Cook, 2017). Cook (2017)

noted that school leaders are exposed to poor treatment at 10.8 times the rate of the general population. More than 40% of principals in public primary and secondary schools experienced physical violence at school, compared with approximately 24% of principals in Catholic primary schools, 18% of Catholic high school principals, and more than seven percent of principals at independent schools (Singhal, 2018). Students were the main perpetrators of violence, although eight percent of principals experienced violence from parents (Cook, 2017; Singhal, 2018; Lansdown, 2022; White, 2022; Baker, 2018; Heffernan, 2023; Chrysanthos & Prytz, 2020). This is job stress that unnecessarily adds to anxiety, leading to burnout (Lansdown, 2022).

From this researcher's experience in education, several individuals were either removed from the academic setting due to health-related issues, family concerns, inadequate job reviews, poor student interactions, or personal issues. Some educators also experienced the need to leave the educational field due to financial concerns. Regardless of the reason educators are leaving the profession, this attrition must be addressed and resolved to ensure the best learning environment for children.

Chapter Two explained the theological and theoretical framework and provided a related literature review of the research conducted on anxiety, stress, and burnout to identify coping skills for Christian principals in Newton County, Georgia middle schools. Leaders, authors, and the Bible were the foundation of the theological framework that focused on biblical characters' methods of coping with anxiety and stress. The five levels of leadership were reviewed, as well as the characteristics of effective school leaders. The areas of anxiety, stress, and burnout were discussed. These areas of concern were found to be related to one another, and anxiety and stress were found to be contributors to burnout. The literature review supports this study's research questions.

Gap in Literature

This literature review found much research on burnout theory and teachers. Many studies have been conducted on teacher stress, but few studies have been done on Christian public and private middle school principals' stress. Due to the increase in school violence across the nation, principals are faced with greater challenges than ever before in their daily work (White, 2022). These problems fester in and out of schools but become administrative problems to be handled by principals (Cook, 2017). These issues require much effort, patience, and time management, increasing the anxiety and stress levels of principals (Cook, 2017; White, 2022). Therefore, this study was important.

Maslach and Leiter (2021) explored anxiety, stress, and burnout in schools, but no research was found within the context of Christian principals, vice principals, or heads of schools in Newton County, Georgia middle schools. This is the gap this researcher pursued throughout this dissertation process. The hope was that this qualitative phenomenological study would answer the following research questions: What do Christian academic leaders who are principals in Newton County, Georgia middle schools describe as the largest cause of stress leading to burnout? What do academic leaders who are principals in Newton County, Georgia middle schools describe as the most critical element in preventing burnout? How do academic leaders who are principals in Newton County, Georgia middle schools describe coping strategies used to minimize the stress that impacts them in their professional and personal lives? Answering these questions was necessary to provide school and learning institutions with clear approaches to the prevention of professional anxiety, stress, and burnout in Newton County, Georgia middle school principals.

Profile of the Current Study

Chapters One and Two of this dissertation outlined this researcher's concern and provided a literature review of relevant sources in the field. Throughout Chapter Two, biblical leaders were discussed to demonstrate methods to alleviate anxiety, stress, fear, and burnout (Roi, 2012; Shacham-Rosby, 2016; Roxberg et al., 2013; Ben-Hador et al., 2020). Through studying these characters, the researcher may add methods of self-care within the study of the theological framework.

The theoretical framework consisted of the definitions and theories related to the study. Areas of anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), stress (Winefield & Pignata, 2013), and burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) were defined and examined. The theory was related to educators (Maslach et al., 2022) and discussed throughout the section.

In the section of related literature, the areas of stress and leadership were discussed as well as stress and coping strategies. Ingersoll et al. (2014) identified several methods to be included in future research. Both emotional-focused and problem-focused stress were identified.

The rationale for the study included the reasons for the study. This research is needed to find coping strategies to make the Newton County school system aware of the distress principals experience due to work-related anxiety and stress, and to increase a positive learning environment for children (Lansdown, 2022).

The gap in the literature specified what was missing in the available research. There are no studies on Newton County, Georgia's principals' distress due to anxiety, stress, and burnout. The gap in the literature section also included how to prevent the attrition of principals and strategies to reduce burnout (Mandar-Bichu, 2022). The summary reiterated the content of the study as described in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three will examine the research methodology utilized by the researcher (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Chapter Four presented an analysis of this researcher's findings. Finally, Chapter Five presented the researcher's conclusions. In sum, this dissertation examined the theological and theoretical information found in researching the anxiety, stress, and burnout experienced by Newton County, Georgia Christian public and private middle school principals.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter was to provide the reader with a detailed overview of the research plan. The research information provided assisted in the completion of the research for this dissertation. This researcher divided this chapter into seven parts: Research Design Synopsis, Setting, Participants, Role of the Researcher, Ethical Considerations, Data Collection Methods and Instruments, and Data Analysis.

Research Design Synopsis

The plan for this qualitative phenomenological research study was to examine the prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. Participants were believers in Christ and the study took place in an academic school setting. The rationale for the research was to gain insight into how leaders cope with the anxiety and stress placed upon them from leadership roles and prevent the stress from impacting both their personal and professional lives. The five research objectives were to thoroughly describe the participants, develop a verbal screening questionnaire, interview individuals, collect the information, and analyze the data. The proposed methods for data collection and recording formats and/or questionnaires and interview guides will be described in detail throughout this chapter. The researcher chose to utilize the qualitative study design to find methods to prevent burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders. To begin this chapter, the research problem, purpose, and questions were reviewed.

The Problem

There is a significant problem in academic settings today regarding anxiety, stress, and burnout among academic school leaders (Francis et al., 2017). The pressure principals receive from school planning to parent interaction, community support, and student instruction can be

overwhelming for any leader (Nicholas, 2018). Additionally, the educator shortage in the United States is very problematic because of the many challenges facing the education system today (Newberry & Allsop, 2017). Principals' well-being is influenced by the level of daily pressure they experience from staff, students, and parents (Harmsen et al., 2018). Burnout theory has further demonstrated that these individuals and organizations do experience extreme fatigue and mental exhaustion (Maslach, 2003). While several authors have researched teacher stress, no studies were found within the context of Christian principals in Newton County, Georgia middle schools. This was the gap found in the literature. Therefore, this study examined Christian middle school principals from both public and private institutions and their levels of anxiety, stress, and burnout prevention. This study investigated the secular and the biblical role that self-care and coping mechanisms (or lack thereof) play in preventing or mitigating burnout. Biblical individuals were studied to gather additional coping strategies that may be used by middle school academic leaders. The problem of this qualitative study was the prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine what the selected academic leaders believe is the mitigation and prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. For this study, Christian academic leaders were defined as certified principals who hold a bachelor's level degree or above, contribute to the academic environment within 6th through 8th grade public and private schools, and have experience in education. As people of faith, it is understood that a relationship with Jesus changes how life is lived, including a stress response. Faith must play a significant role in managing stress. The understanding is based on scripture, personal experience,

and an understanding of what the Bible tells us about trusting God in all situations. Evidence is seen in scripture that various individuals addressed what was likely a stressful situation by praying, trusting God, and maintaining key relationships with other believers. In light of this precedence of the relationship between faith and our response to stress, this was a key and critical consideration in this study (Ben-Hador et al., 2020). Also, for the purposes of this study, burnout was generally defined as the state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Self-care was defined as the process of taking care of oneself with behaviors that promote health (Santana & Fouad, 2017). As previously stated, the theory guiding this study was Maslach's (1997) burnout theory, which defined a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion via a 22-symptom inventory pertaining to occupational burnout. In addition to the theory, there is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which includes three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2021). Both the theory and the inventory tool were important to this study because it related to the stress and burnout associated with poor job performance, health problems, and other issues (Zysberg et al., 2017).

Research Questions

RQ1. What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the leading causes of anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders?

RQ2. What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective means of preventing anxiety and stress leading to burnout?

RQ3. What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective coping strategies useful in minimizing the effects of anxiety and stresses that lead to professional and personal burnout?

Research Design and Methodology

Merriam (2009) explained that research design and methodology detail how a sample will be selected, how data will be collected and analyzed, and how trustworthiness will be maintained. As the problem, purpose, and research questions were previously discussed, this section will focus on design and methodology. In qualitative research, the focus is on process, meaning, and understanding, and the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009).

The qualitative phenomenological study seeks to understand the essence and underlying structure of the phenomenon, which makes the method applicable to this research (Merriam, 2009). The qualitative approach is based upon the philosophy of empiricism and follows an unstructured, flexible, and open approach to inquiry that aims to describe and then measure beliefs with in-depth understanding and small samples, as well as explore perceptions and feelings instead of facts and figures (Kumar, 2011). In this research, the researcher sought to find the essence of what the participants believed to be the necessary means to prevent anxiety, stress, and burnout among Christian middle school principals.

German philosopher Edmund Husserl developed the phenomenological design, which is one of several types of qualitative research that studies the lived experiences of humans (Husserl & Hill, 2019; Rowlett, 2006). Phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies a human experience of a phenomenon as described by study participants (Husserl & Hill, 2019). In phenomenological research, a small number of participants are studied to develop patterns and relationships of individual and shared meaning (Rowlett, 2006). The researcher does not include personal experiences in the understanding of participants (Creswell,

2009). Through this design, the researcher grasped the phenomena described by the participants and developed the answer to the research questions found within the dissertation.

The phenomenological design seeks to describe the nature and meaning of lived experiences (Rowlett, 2006). Creswell (2009) described the approach as a method in which the researcher brackets personal experiences to make certain that only the participants' experiences are revealed in the study. The procedure involves studying a small number of participants while searching for patterns and understanding behavior through in-depth interviews (Rowlett, 2006). Making sure the participants' lived experiences are accurately recorded during the interview sessions is very important (Rowlett, 2006). In qualitative research, the interviews are not a predetermined survey, but rather a conversation between participants and the researcher (Rowlett, 2006).

Qualitative research uses its gathered data to create theoretical ideas (Creswell, 2013). It focuses on the researchers' prior knowledge and interpretation of the findings without bringing into play prejudices and perspectives derived from gender, age, or the researcher's own life experiences (Creswell, 2013). Davies (2007) indicated that choosing between qualitative or quantitative research does not mean that one method is better than the other. However, for this research, the phenomenological qualitative design was reviewed, discussed, and utilized since it best fit the research purpose and questions (Rowlett, 2006; Creswell, 2015).

The qualitative phenomenology study was selected for several reasons (Creswell, 2009; Rowlett, 2006; Maxwell, 1996). The first reason was to understand the meaning of the actions the participants displayed (Creswell, 2009). Next, the researcher sought to understand the context within the participants' acts and the influence that this context had on their actions (Creswell, 2009). Third, there was an intent to identify unanticipated phenomena and influences and

generate new theories (Creswell, 2009). Fourth, the researcher worked to understand the process by which events and actions take place (Creswell, 2009). Lastly, there was a plan to develop causal explanations (Creswell, 2009; Rowlett, 2006; Maxwell, 1996).

The qualitative approach uses words rather than numbers and open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions (Creswell, 2009). This study utilized a qualitative approach and collected data through observation (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is a method for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). This was applied by the researcher and used to complete the research. For example, principals were interviewed and observed in the academic setting.

During the research process of the chosen phenomenological qualitative research design, the first step was to identify an appropriate small sample (Davies, 2007). There are many advantages of such a small group. The size of the sample is easier to manage than a large survey sample of 50 or more. Further, using this approach will allow for few, if any, statistical demands on the researcher (Davies, 2007). The researcher anticipated that it was beneficial to conduct face-to-face encounters during interviews to observe participants in the academic setting. The task of preparing detailed surveys or questionnaires and plotting the results was not required in the qualitative research design (Davies, 2007).

This researcher found that one advantage to this research design was that the research process seemed more personable. The interviewees could choose to talk at length with the researcher. Feelings and experiences could be explored (Davies, 2007). The interviewee could direct the flow of the conversation versus the research being influenced by previous background (Davies, 2007). Also, the researcher observed what the subject does, giving increased trustworthiness to the data-gathering process (Davies, 2007). For this researcher, it seemed as

though qualitative research was the best selected form of research for this phenomenological study.

Setting

The setting for this study was in Newton County, Georgia, where there are six public middle schools and three private middle schools (Public School Review, 2023; Private School Review, 2023). The public middle schools are Newton County Steam Academy (student population of 927) (Public School Review, 2023), Veterans Memorial Middle School (student population of 698) (Public School Review, 2023), Cousins Middle School (student population of 787) (Public School Review, 2023), Liberty Middle School (student population of 998) (Public School Review, 2023), Clements Middle School (student population of 862) (Public School Review, 2023), and Indian Creek Middle School (student population of 911) (Public School Review, 2023). The Newton County middle schools provide an educational program and environment that is responsive to the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development of students in grades six through eight (Public School Review, 2023). The focus is to bridge the gap between elementary and high school (Public School Review, 2023). The school system has a published total of 18,785 students from which the middle school focus will be obtained (Public School Review, 2023). Each middle school has a principal and at least one assistant principal (Public School Review, 2023).

The Newton County private middle schools are Alpha Omega Preparatory Academy (student population of 245) (Private School Review, 2023), Covington Academy (student population of 234) (Private School Review, 2023), and Peachtree Academy Covington (student population of 610) (Private School Review, 2023). These settings were chosen because a variety of administrators were needed to draw accurate conclusions.

Participants

Out of the nine schools eligible to participate, seven schools were selected. Most of the schools had at least one head of school, a principal, and/or an assistant principal who were approached to participate. Creswell (2013) recommends ranges between five and twenty-five interviews for a phenomenological study. Seven participants were able to answer the research questions and shed light on the phenomenon understudied. The odd number provided an opportunity to triangulate the data. Non-probability purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013) was used, as select individuals had some common characteristics, such as being a Christian principal in a Newton County Georgia public or private middle school. Time constraints, monetary restrictions, and lack of adequate sampling were considered. The individuals were interviewed and observed in their leadership roles as they reported on the phenomenon being studied. When selecting the participants, the researcher did not choose administrators where there was an existing relationship as a way of eliminating bias. The following was included in the selection of candidates for the study: individuals that are actively employed or retired (within less than five years), those who possess a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education and are Georgia state certified, Christian individuals, persons over the age of 18, and administrators serving in public or private middle schools in Newton County, Georgia. In order to ensure the participants met the criteria, both an introductory letter (See Appendix C) and an informational sheet (See Appendix B) were emailed. To eliminate additional bias and to obtain a diversity of participants, the greatest number of eligible individuals was selected.

Role of the Researcher

According to Merriam (2009), the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in qualitative research. The human instrument has biases that are important to

identify and monitor throughout the qualitative study (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2013) stated that individuals develop the meaning of lived experiences and seek to understand the world they work in and live in to report different themes developed in the findings. Biases were monitored by being aware during the process, given that the researcher has been in public and private education for more than 30 years. This researcher has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a minor in middle school social studies from the University of Harris-Stowe State, as well as a master's degree in education administration (grades kindergarten through 12th) from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Certification in the state of Georgia has been acquired in each degree area. From this background, the researcher was familiar with the middle school setting, the leadership role of the principal and vice principal, private and public-school arenas, and the Newton County, Georgia location.

For this phenomenological study, personal experience did not interfere with the conclusions. Leading questions were avoided, and a panel of experts checked questions for bias. Interviews were transcribed and recorded word-for-word, and participants reviewed the transcripts. The researcher has not been employed as a full-time educator in the school system that was selected for the study. There was no direct relationship with the middle school principals selected to participate and a resume was available to view academic experiences.

To identify the data in a pure form, the researcher bracketed out personal assumptions (Patton, 2015). This means the researcher suspended presuppositions, biases, assumptions, or previous experiences to describe the essence of the specific phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Multiple people were used to check the data, participants were provided with a transcript to review the results, alternative explanations were checked, and the findings were reviewed with

peers. The gathered information represented the participants' perspectives and not the researchers.

Ethical Considerations

To conduct the highest standard and ethical study, this researcher followed several principles to guide the research design and practice. Careful consideration was given to the process of developing the dissertation chapters and preparing to do the research. First, the research participants were not subjected to harm in any way. Respect for the dignity of the research participants was prioritized. This included respecting the participants right to change their mind, to decide that the research does not match their interests, and to withdraw without penalty. Lastly, full consent through email as advised by the IRB was obtained from the participants before the study began (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2013).

The protection of the privacy of the participants was ensured. A sufficient level of confidentiality of the research data was established. This included not using the participants actual names, or the name of the identifiable middle school. The anonymity of individuals and organizations participating was ensured. Participants and schools were described as pseudonyms and labeled as participant 1 through 7. Only the researcher was able to link the individual participant to the information provided, and the identifying information was not disclosed (Patton, 2015). The storing of the data was in locked cabinets and accessible only by the researcher.

All research objectives were clearly stated, and no deception or exaggeration was used. If there was a source of funding or affiliation, they would have been declared. All research communication was done with honesty and transparency (Patton, 2015).

The voluntary participation of respondents was used, and participants could have withdrawn from the study at any time. The researcher took time to request the proper authority for permission to use the school site for the study (See Appendix F). The time conducting the study did not interfere with the daily activities and learning activities in the school setting (Patton, 2015).

The researcher made sure that offensive, discriminatory, or unacceptable behavior and language was avoided in the introductory letter, screening email questionnaire, and interview. According to Merriam (2009), to avoid inappropriate behavior, overly personal questions, aggressive or abusive behavior such as shouting or personal insults should not be tolerated. Objective individuals reviewed the interview questions beforehand. During the process, the researcher maintained a high level of objectivity in discussions as well as during data analysis. Before the research was conducted, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University was consulted and an application was submitted and approved. The seven to 16 willing administrative participants were found by sending out an introductory and informational email to gain participation by using the IRB template. Every principal and vice principal discussed their experience, which took a minimum of 20 minutes to complete. Some questions were adapted from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Leiter, 2021). Interviews took place preferably on-site or via conferencing software. These were a few of the several steps that were implemented as the researcher conducted the study to ensure certain ethical measures were maintained.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Qualitative data is a collection of pieces of information found within an environment (Merriam, 2009). The data is expressed through words via interviews and consists of direct

quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Merriam, 2009). This researcher developed interview questions by reviewing the MBI and by consulting experts in the field. The panel made suggestions and the interview questions were modified accordingly. The data was audio recorded for analysis and notes were taken throughout the interview process.

Collection Methods

Upon collecting the data, this researcher had already determined to use phenomenological qualitative information to discover answers to the research questions. The collection of information was primarily through interviews and observations. During the procedure the interview responses were recorded on a Philips audio recorder and the researcher took quick notes. This was so that the responses could be transcribed in Chapter 4. Observations of the school environment and the leadership role were made before, during and after the interview. The participants guided the researcher throughout the school building and provided private personal office space for the interview. Data collection was about asking, watching, and reviewing (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). This researcher determined what information was included by considering the problem and purpose of the study, as well as the sample selected. Once the data was collected the recording and notes were kept in a secured closet and locked in a safe box to maintain confidentiality.

In some studies, interviewing is the only source of data (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Interviews are used to find out information that cannot be observed, such as thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Patton, 2015). Interviewing is necessary when behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them cannot be observed. It is also necessary when an event occurred

in the past (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 2009). The researcher used interviews throughout the data collection process.

Interviews were semi-structured. This means they included a mix of more- and less-structured interview questions (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). There was some specific data required from all respondents, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and education. The structured portion of the interview consisted of the wording of questions that were predetermined and resembled a conversation to make it informal. The informal portion was used when the researcher did not know enough about the phenomenon to ask adequate relevant questions. For the most part, the qualitative research utilized a more open-ended and less structured format (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Before completion, participants received a thank-you letter for their service and cooperation.

Instruments and Protocols

There are three types of interviews: structured/standardized, semi-structured, and unstructured/informal (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009). For this research study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This means questions were flexible, some specific data was required from all participants, the interview was guided by a list of questions with no predetermined wording or order, and guidelines included a mix of more- and less-structured interview questions (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Merriam (2009) described six types of interview questions as follows: experience and behavior questions, opinion, and value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background or demographic questions. Merriam recommended that the questions be open-ended, for example: “Tell me about a time when..., give me an example of..., tell me more about that..., and what was it like for you when...” (p. 96).

This researcher asked the participants to discuss a time when they felt stressed on the job and requested an example of the situation. Then the researcher requested the participant to elaborate on the answer, as well as answer what it was like when the stressful situation took place. Why questions, leading questions, and yes or no questions were avoided. There was more than just interviewing in the process of gathering data; other material was generated through observations.

The researcher followed the 10 rules to interviewing according to Davies (2007): Present self to the greatest attainable standard, in an impartial fashion; identify self to the interviewees; acknowledge openly the similarities and differences from the target sample; have an accepting position; acknowledge the interviewee as the expert; allow the conversation to run a natural course; try to make the interview as comfortable as possible; contribute to the encounter with a smile or nod; participate if the responder seems to be growing weary; prepare for an encounter of emotions if it becomes necessary; and make sure the interview process has a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end.

The researcher has a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in educational administration. It was important to identify the researchers' achievements and the purpose of the study to eliminate bias and to show participants reliability. The participants were respected as experts, especially since they have both a wealth of knowledge and an abundance of experience. It was mentioned that the administrators who choose to participate were Georgia certified, at least 18 years old, worked in Newton County, Georgia, and had been in the profession for at least three years. To make the interviewee feel comfortable and allow the process to flow, the interviewer was sure to provide positive expressions. The leaders' availability and time was of

large concern, and the beginning, middle, and end of the interview was identifiable by questions stated as first, next, and last in numerical order.

The study used criterion sampling, in which participants met predefined criteria (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Some of the criteria included being over the age of 18, being vice principal/principal or head of school, being a Christian, having some experience in education, being Georgia certified, and working at a middle school in Newton County, Georgia. The most prominent criterion was the participants' experience with the phenomenon under study. The researcher looked for participants who had shared an experience but varied in characteristics and their individual experiences (Maxwell, 1996). There are many methods for collecting data, but for this study, unstructured or semi-structured interviews were used. The subjects' responses came from open responses, in-depth interviews, noted conversations, observations, and different presented documents including letters, diaries, and memoranda. The suggested sample size was between seven to 16 individuals, with a minimum of seven. Practical issues limited the sample size in this qualitative research study. If the sample size was too large it could lead to a negative consequence of overgeneralizing the findings to the larger population, and it would be difficult to identify patterns and themes in the data.

Procedures

Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009). To obtain participants, three methods of recruitment were used. First, a phone call from the researcher was made to each school to gain email addresses. Next, a letter requesting participation was sent to each school (See Appendix C). Third, a campus visit was made by the researcher as a follow-up to the previous communication. After the participant was selected, the data collection process during the interview began.

This researcher engaged in a conversation focused on questions related to the research study (See Appendix E). It was a person-to-person encounter in which the researcher gained information from the participant. The information gathered was used in the data collection and analysis portion of the process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data and process used to answer research questions (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009). Data analysis was based on discussions and reflections of direct perceptions and experiences of the researched phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). The strategy was approached without prior assumptions. Data analysis was primarily inductive and comparative (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 2009).

Analysis Methods

The experienced qualitative researcher begins data analysis immediately after the first interview (Maxwell, 1996). Merriam (2009) produced suggestions for analyzing data as it is being collected. First, this researcher must make decisions that narrow the study and those concerning the type of study to be accomplished (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The development of analytic questions is the next step in the process. Data collection sessions are then planned according to what was found in previous observations, and the researcher makes as many observation comments as possible before, during, and after the interviews (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009). Memos about what is being learned are created, as are different ideas and themes used by participants during the interviews (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). As advised, this researcher explored several works of literature in the field of study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Some metaphors, analogies, and concepts were utilized throughout the communication with participants (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, visual and

auditory devices were used during the process as recommended by various sources (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009). The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and transcribed verbatim in Chapter 4.

Kumar (2011) stated that there are three ways to write about findings in qualitative studies. The first is developing a narrative to describe a situation, episode, event, or instance. The next step involves identifying the main themes that emerge from interview notes, participants responses, and writing about them. The last step is quantifying the main themes to understand their prevalence and significance (Kumar, 2011; Creswell, 2014). According to Kumar (2011), the narrative format should include the following steps: identify the main themes, assign codes to the main themes, classify responses under the main themes, and then integrate themes and responses into the text of the report. For coding the research, the themes were developed based on the participants responses (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Repetitive answers found in the research data made developing sample groups simpler. The qualitative data was broken down into smaller samples and then the samples were reread (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Codes were created to cover the broken-down sample groups. Highlighters were used to code the transcribed responses. From the color-coded responses, theme groups were evident (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The data was then developed into organized tables described in Chapters 4 and 5 (Kumar, 2011).

When conducting a qualitative study, it is not necessary to develop a list of questions, but it is very important to construct a framework of the issues that should be covered to achieve the purpose of the study (Kumar, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The aim is to let the respondent bring out the issues (Patton, 2015; Kumar, 2011). This was accomplished by presenting open-ended questions and listening more than providing feedback for the participants' responses.

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2009) noted several practices of exploration that a researcher should use in the investigation process. This researcher was positioned to collect participant meanings (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2009). The focus was on a single concept or phenomenon, as per Creswell's (2009) work. Additionally, personal values were brought into the study (Creswell, 2009). The context or setting of the participants was studied and validation of the accuracy of the findings was used (Kumar, 2011; Creswell, 2009). Upon data collection, interpretations of the data were made (Creswell, 2009). An agenda for change or reform was created and ideas were collaborated on with study participants (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2009). Trustworthiness or rigor of the study was maintained to the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of the study (Merriam, 2009). To ensure maximum validity of the interview questions, a panel of four reviewed and critiqued the questions to make sure there was a one-to-one correspondence between interview questions asked and underlying competency (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 1996). Enough information to effectively analyze the data was collected.

Credibility

Credibility is to ensure that the data is trustworthy, the results are reliable, and the research is valid (Creswell, 2009). To the best of my knowledge the data that was collected was handled in a reliable manner. Confidentiality was maintained as the information was gathered. The procedures in following the IRB standards were included in the process. The transcribed responses were read and reread for accuracy and compared several times to the audio recordings. The most scholarly sources were used as information was gathered in the research process.

Dependability

Creswell (2013) states that dependability refers to the stability of data over time and under different conditions. In this study, dependability is linked to the reliability of the research. The measure of the extent to which a research study could be repeated by a separate researcher and reveal the same findings is questionable. The participants, who would be different, would most likely have different responses, while some individuals might offer similar responses to what was presented in this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others (Creswell, 2014). In order to use confirmability this researcher documented the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study. Several direct quotations from the transcripts were included in the data analysis section and could be confirmed by other researchers.

Transferability

This researcher was not able to prove that the research study findings will be applicable to another study, but the evidence that it could be applicable was provided. The participants were Christian, actively employed or retired (within less than five years), those who possessed a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education and were Georgia state certified, persons over the age of 18, and administrators serving in public or private middle schools in Newton County, Georgia. Transferability was established by providing the readers with evidence that the research study's findings could be applicable to other contexts, situations, times and populations (Creswell, 2014). For this reason, each participant's interviewed responses were recorded

separately and reported individually. Some of the responses were similar and thus the emerging themes were identified.

Chapter Summary

The plan for this qualitative phenomenological research study was to examine the prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia middle schools. The purpose was to find methods to cope with the anxiety and stress placed on principals and to answer the research questions stated. The strategies and coping mechanisms used were discovered and utilized in the data analysis.

The setting was six public middle schools and three private middle schools. From the schools, a minimum of seven participants were selected. These individuals were at least 18 years of age, Georgia-state certified as a public or private middle school principal in Newton County Georgia, unknown to the researcher. The participants and the institutions were unidentified, and pseudonyms were used.

To collect data, interviews and observations were conducted, and a verbal survey was utilized to obtain pertinent information. The researcher was the primary instrument for gathering the information while assumptions and biases were suspended. The interview questions were developed following the guidelines suggested by Merriam (2009). The interviewer conducted ethical research only after IRB approval had been gained.

To analyze the adapted information gathered from the MBI, the researcher referred to the evaluation tool suggested by the author of the instrument. To describe the relevance of the interview data, the researcher looked for repetitive ideas that flowed from the participants, assigned codes to the main themes, classified the responses, and then integrated the responses into a report from the semi-structured interviews and observations. To make sense of the data,

the researcher attempted to answer the following three questions: What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the leading causes of anxiety and stress leading to burnout? What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective means of preventing anxiety and stress leading to burnout? What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective coping strategies useful in minimizing the effects of anxiety and stress that lead to professional and personal burnout? By answering the questions, the purpose of the study was established.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter consists of an analysis of the researched data. It contains a brief description of the participants, described as Participants One through Seven, to protect their privacy. Data was collected from one-on-one interviews in which each participant responded to the questions. The information was presented in narrative form in the order in which the questions were asked. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine what the selected academic leaders believe is the mitigation and prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. The chapter is divided into four sections which include the following: Compilation Protocol and Measures, Demographic and Sample Data, Data Analysis and Findings, and Evaluation of the Research Design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

The study was initiated after receiving approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board. Purposeful sampling was conducted, in which participants were chosen who were able to contribute to the purpose of the research (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). The research participants were all assistant principals, principals, or heads of schools who were actively employed within a school or retired (within less than five years), Christians, at least 18 years of age, possessing a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education, state-certified in Georgia, and in a public or private middle school for grades six through eight in Newton County, Georgia.

First, 19 individuals were contacted by an invitation email and information sheet created under the direction of the IRB. After a week, a follow-up email was sent with an approval letter from Newton County School System. Initially, three participants stated they would love to

participate, so the researcher began scheduling time for the doctoral research interview. The individuals who did not respond were mailed a copy of the invitation email in the hopes that some additional participants would respond. Finally, phone calls were made to leaders to gain the minimum number of contributors. Out of the nine schools, 19 contacts were made requesting participation; however, only seven participants volunteered and were able to answer the research questions and shed light on the phenomenon under study. This small number prevented overgeneralization of the results and allowed accurate analysis of the data into themes.

The interviews were one-on-one, in a private location, and audio recorded on a Philips Voice Tracer Audio Recorder. The first three questions gathered background information to contribute to the interview questions that followed. The audio recording was transcribed into a printed format and the handwritten notes were read several times for any missing details.

Demographic and Sample Data

Demographic and sample data was collected from the participants' responses to questions 1, 2, and 3 (Appendix E). Since the participant group was small, some of the demographic details would indicate and identify the individual. As a result, the data was gathered into a whole group (see Table 1) and pseudonyms such as Participant One through Seven were used to maintain privacy and protect confidentiality.

Table 1
Participants' Modified Demographic Data

Demographic Category	Data
Gender	Male: 3 Female: 4
Faith	Christian: 7
Age	Over 18 years: 7
Title of Position	Assistant Principal: 5 Principal/CEO: 2
School Location	Newton County, Georgia: 7
Number of Years Employed in Middle School Administration	0-5 years Assistant Principal: 5 7 years Principals: 2

The participants consisted of three males and four females who were all over the age of 18, Christian, and certified in the state of Georgia. They were all willing to participate, knowing the study was geared toward individuals who were of the Christian faith. The title they all possessed was assistant principal or principal. Also, the total experience was between zero and five years as a middle school assistant principal and greater than seven years as a principal in Newton County, Georgia.

The participants reported their main roles in their schools (Table 2). The roles varied between the individuals. All participants had several main roles to master as an assistant principal or principal.

Table 2
Participants' Main Roles in Their Schools

Participants	Main Roles
Participant One	Testing coordinator Assist principal Lesson plans Teacher evaluations Inventory Maintain safety Assist teacher needs
Participant Two	Curriculum and instructional Scheduling Discipline Professional learning Athletic director
Participant Three	Student affairs Monitoring student behavior Health teacher Athletic director
Participant Four	CEO Educator of staff Educator of students
Participant Five	Testing Discipline
Participant Six	Supervisor Leader of all
Participant Seven	Discipline Instruction

Some of the common roles of the participants were testing coordinator, student discipline, and supervision. The individuals seemed passionate about discussing student discipline as it related to maintaining school safety. Some seemed stressed with too many duties and described the need for additional assistant principals to share some of the many roles.

The participants reported events that are highly stressful at work (Table 3). These varied among participants with several of them referring back to the duties of their main roles discussed in Table 2. During the interview, the questions about what events or situations could lead to stress and what interactions cause stress made most participants open up and describe the stressful work environment.

Table 3
Participants' Stressful Work Events

Participants	Stressful Work Events
Participant One	Student safety Testing Student discipline Parent interactions
Participant Two	Student contraband Parent concerns Bullying Teacher reprimands
Participant Three	None experienced Time management Teachers' expectations Student expectations
Participant Four	Parent interactions Student expectations
Participant Five	Parent interactions Constant deadlines Student altercations
Participant Six	Parent involvement School safety
Participant Seven	Student altercations Parent interactions

Both students and parents were described several times in the discussion of stressful work experiences. The participants shared how interactions with parents can be difficult and stressful interfering with the workday. Likewise, student safety was one of the top priorities in the role of the leader. From the Table 3, additional stressful work events may be viewed.

The participants reported their stress levels at work (Table 4). They were to rate the amount of self-reported stress felt during the workday on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress.

Table 4
Stress Levels of Participants

Participants	Stress Level at Work	Description
Participant One	6-7	Sometimes a 10
Participant Two	6-7	Fluctuates
Participant Three	1	Sometimes a 9
Participant Four	5	Moderate
Participant Five	5	Not stressed out
Participant Six	7	Varies
Participant Seven	7	Sometimes a 10

The participants' responses varied. Participants one, two, six, and seven, all shared how stress fluctuates from day to day, sometimes maxing out at a level of a nine or ten. Participants four and five admitted handling stress well either due to an increased amount of experience in the profession or a great amount of support from the staff.

The participants shared coping mechanisms and strategies to lower stress levels (Table 5). These were in response to Appendix E, question 8 which states, "What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels?" The answers varied among the participants.

Table 5
Coping Strategies to Reduce Stress

Participants	Coping Strategies
Participant One	Turn lights off Get quiet Do not disturb sign for a minute Drink water Read Play game word puzzles Sit in rocking chair on porch
Participant Two	Sleeping and resting Self-care (medical appointments) Massages Supportive people Traveling Prioritize Do your best Remember your Why
Participant Three	Time management Plan ahead Do the best you can Be realistic
Participant Four	Read magazines Escape to someone else's world Watch soap operas Exercise Being outdoors
Participant Five	Playing video games Spending time with family
Participant Six	Spending time with family Golfing Outdoor fishing
Participant Seven	Going on walks Prayer/Meditation Spending time with loved ones

As viewed on Table 5 the responses varied among the participants. There was a wide range of methods to mitigate the stress felt from being a Christian middle school principal. These are discussed further in the conclusions found in Chapter Five.

Data Analysis and Findings

The data was analyzed, and themes became relevant as the interview responses were read line-by-line several times. The information was transcribed verbatim from the audio recording. Coding of each line was used to summarize, compare, and interpret the gathered information from each participant (Creswell, 2014). The process of coding was to label and organize the qualitative data into themes based on the relationships between them (Kumar, 2011). Labels or words were assigned to the phrases that represented important recurring themes in each response (Kumar, 2011). The qualitative data was broken down into smaller samples and then the samples were reread (Kumar, 2011). The data was placed in color coded groups based on the common responses from participants (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). The theme categories were developed from the data collected and emerged from the commonality of the responses (Kumar, 2011). The major areas identified were the causes of stress, the prevention of stress leading to burnout, and coping strategies for stress. Each participant shared based on their own lived experiences, so the information was analyzed separately. First, the individual responses were displayed verbatim for each interview question. Next, the themes that emerged from the data analysis and findings were discussed. As the responses were reviewed, questions 1 through 3 were get-to-know-you questions, while questions 4 and 5 asked participants to self-report their levels of stress based on an anecdotal rating system along with the timing of this stress. Questions 6 through 7 related to RQ1, question 9 related to RQ2, while question 10 asked for additional clarity connected to what participants believe, anecdotally, to be effective means of minimizing the effects of anxiety and stress. Question 8 was designed to address RQ3.

Participant Interviews

Interview with Participant One

The interview with Participant One (P1) took place on September 22, 2023, in the privacy of the principal's office. When asked for an introduction and description of the profession, answers seemed to flow freely and cautiously. P1 responded eagerly to the 10 questions as follows:

I.1 Please introduce yourself to me.

Hi my name is...and I am the assistant principal at...I have been in education for 25 years. I started as a sub and then I was a para. Then I became a teacher and an instructional coach, and now an assistant principal.

I.2 Describe your profession.

My job is, it says, describe your profession. I assist. I assist...I assist him with running the school building, maintaining safety, ensuring that students get a high quality of education, mantra of lesson plans, I do walk throughs and teacher evaluations. I assist with discipline, keeping safety in the building. I assist the teachers with whatever they need. I maintain an inventory. I am also the testing coordinator, so I oversee all testing, local and state tests mandated in the building for K-8. I'm the middle school assistant principal but I am the K-8 testing coordinator.

I.3 How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County, Georgia?

Middle school administration since 2019, so about four years.

I.4 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?

Every day is probably around six or seven, but there are two to three days a week where it's probably 10. It is a high stress job. It just depends on the day. Like yesterday was a very busy day and sometimes there's a lot coming at you. Just got to prioritize, you know, but it is a really high stress job.

I.5 Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?

We have stressful events. Highly stressful, I guess it is subjective. Highly stressful to me would be something that has to do with student safety. I would say I have had maybe one or two a year. A student may have made a threat. There is a lot of concern for students,

family, and stakeholders, and investigation. Maybe in my four years, I may have had three events where I have had a safety concern or threat. To me, not negative stress, but I can get highly stressed because I am introverted, and public speaking and presenting is a part of my job. So, that can cause little stress for me personally.

I.6 As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?

Yes testing, during that it is very highly stressful. I am working very late to prepare for the next day. So many guidelines. There is a lot of preparation beforehand. A lot of monitoring during and even afterward. There is a lot of paperwork to prepare it to be submitted, especially when we want that data and especially when it is a state-mandated test. So that is extremely stressful, and it starts about, well I have one event in January with the access testing. The milestone is the biggest. Because that is the 3rd through 8th. What's different here is we have all levels. Some schools have just elementary 3-5. I have 3-5. Some have just middle 6-8. I have 6-8, and I have EOC high school for 8th. I have state-mandated at all levels. It is highly stressful from March till May every year with the testing.

I.7 As you think about your workday, which interactions cause you the most amount of stress?

It could be, mainly, some kind of student discipline. It's very time consuming. There's a lot of paperwork, interviewing, and contacting parents. One event could take up to an hour or two hours or multiple days. Especially if it is bullying, or a major event, some minor events like redirection. Sometimes I have parents that support me and sometimes you have parents who do not. I always pride myself on respectful partnerships. I just try to—I talk to them as if this were my child.

I.8 What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.

So, if I am feeling like completely overwhelmed at work...I took leadership, my leadership style is an introvert. It doesn't mean I can't interact with people, it just means that how I recharge my batteries is to get quiet. So, I may just turn off my lights, close my door, put a do not disturb sign on the door, for a couple of minutes. Keep my lights off, drink some water for five or 10 minutes. Just to regroup, being quiet for a second. As far as at home I like to read, I like to play game puzzles, crossword puzzles, critical thinking types, those that engage my brain. Sit out on the front porch in a rocking chair and I live in the country, so. But the bugs and the heat I don't go out when it's really hot. I would have loved to sit on my porch today.

I.9 What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to manage stress?

I would just say recognize your stressors and take a break, if necessary. Reach out for assistance if you ever feel like it is becoming unmanageable. There is always support. You don't want to stress the teachers. You don't reach out to the teachers, you don't want to stress them. You can reach out to another assistant principal. Form a good relationship with others in the district. I have friends I can call on and say I can't believe this happened to me. You know, right... Every day, no two days are alike, something will always come up, so know who the people you can call and ask questions or vent to really quickly. Did you get a mentor unofficially? Principals are mentors ...was my mentor because she had been here. I went through the next program that served as a prep program and I did one with Griffin Regional Educational Service Agency to see if I wanted it. It gave me tools for my toolbox, and I met people. Some don't have but a principal and assistant principal. You can always go to your principal.

I.10 What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

Well, it is a very highly stressed job, I can see it more and more as time goes by. You're doing it on burnout and I can see it in any profession. Our country is in a state of high stress. I love what I do. I love students. I have a helper spirit so that's where I get my joy so I know that God placed me here and whenever I get so...so I give it to God—You're going to have to help me through this.

Interview with Participant Two

The interview with Participant Two took place on September 28, 2023, in the privacy of the assistant principal's office. Each interview question was answered, with responses described below:

I.1 Please introduce yourself to me.

So, my name is ...and I have been in education for about 10 years. I am currently an assistant principal at...Middle School.

I.2 Describe your profession.

That rolls me into question two, describe your profession. So, I am the assistant principal of instruction and I handle everything from curriculum and instruction. So that goes from scheduling, instructional materials, sixth grade administrator over discipline, and I have one team of seventh grade, over professional learning as well. I am also over discipline over transportation, so if anything happens on the bus with a student, I have that responsibility as well. I am responsible for athletics. I am the athletic director as well so all sports events, scheduling referees, buses, anything under athletics falls under me as well.

I.3 How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County, Georgia?

This is my first full year...September 19th made my first calendar year. One plus.

I.4 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?

It fluctuates. For example, I have been out of the building on Tuesday and Wednesday. So, there are things I have been running into. Getting caught up this morning has been stressful. But it just depends on what is going on, so on an average I'd say about a 6 or 7. Like I said it fluctuates anytime you're in human service. If they need a lot, as a servant leader you have to give a lot. If there are low needs, you're able to do more administrative things that day.

I.5 Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?

Well, it happened last school year. There was a situation where a student had some contraband and it was maybe my first, I'd been an assistant principal for maybe a month, my principal and assistant principal were out of the building. That was probably one of the most stressful events I have experienced this far.

I.6 As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?

Because you are a parent in Newton County, I think you know what the word I want to use is... That's not how I want to word it. Their concerns are very immediate that I understand that you all send us your best, your babies, your pride and joy, and somewhat it becomes very stressful because if I am in the middle of something and a parent has an immediate concern I feel as though it is my duty to provide them with that customer service and put what I am working on at the moment to the backside. That leads me to stress a lot. We have coined the term bullying as something that is... First of all, bullying is against the law. It is detrimental to the student. Bullying is something that is consistent; if I say I don't like your purple jacket today and not say anything else to you that is not bullying. That is just me stating something to you. A lot of parents feel as though as soon as someone says something negative to my child, everyone should have the right to come to school and feel safe whether that is emotionally or physically. So when a child says someone said this to me it's not bullying if they've not had negative interaction, so a lot of my day is student peer mediations what was said, what should not be said. I think that we really need to do a better job with character ed in Newton County. Students tell the

parents what was said and then the parents call the schools and want an immediate fix. That tends to cause a highly stressful day.

I.7 As you think about your workday, which interactions cause you the most amount of stress?

Probably being an assistant principal and having to interact with teachers to reprimand and give some uncomfortable feedback. I know teachers are doing the best that they can with what they have. The climate of education is not what it used to be. So, knowing since I'm not too far removed from the classroom, it can be stressful to tell a teacher, Hey, I know you are giving me your best; however, your best is not aligning with our instructional goal right now. So, having to have that uncomfortable conversation is stressful as well.

I.8 What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.

Sleep. I believe in getting in bed by 9 o'clock Monday through Thursday, so resting is definitely one thing I do. I'm big on self-care so I keep myself well-manicured, haircut, any other appointments I might need as far as my medical is concerned, getting a massage, traveling is also and just being loved on by my villages.

I.9 What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to manage stress?

Try to prioritize as much as you can. Remember that you are doing the best you can and remember your Why. And try to find confirmation in your work. Being an educational leader is a thankless profession. Teachers get teacher appreciation week but because you are the disciplinarian and the enforcer, very often we are forgotten, and we need that same love that is given to teachers. As well, we are seen as those people who have to make those hard decisions, those difficult guidelines seem as though you're forgotten. Teachers have grades to do or parent conferences. I have to manage your grades, so I have to look in your grade books. I deal with parents all day. Also, it's something to be said as if you have a load on your back. So in my classroom, I felt like I had control. If students learn, it was up to me. Whereas you have an entire grade level or school building. We have 700 students. So curriculum and instruction, for me, falls on my back when we have district personnel or other schools come do observations that adds another layer of stress. So, when I have to have that uncomfortable conversation it's just...If you remember your Why, you can kind of navigate those negative parts and you will find those confirmations that it was a bad moment but it's for the good of our children. Is that your Why?

My Why...I have a personal belief that all children can achieve. We focus so much on proficiency, celebrate all achievement (large and small), focus on growth, reach goals, data student achievement, school improvement goal is to increase by 3%, look at our beginning learners. Celebrate all milestones, all students. I don't live in Newton County. The streets talk you heard about...people fail to realize it is a community issue. The

things children are learning they are learning at home. Get parents to volunteer. If you come in, you have not heard anything, this is a safe place to learn, a safe place to be. There are areas of growth, this is a middle school with adolescents. Do they fight, they argue, they curse? Yes, that's aggressive behavior learned from home and media. My Why is celebrating all student achievements.

I.10 What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

Stress looks differently in every individual. Just because someone looks as though they are put together or have the answers or are completely levelheaded does not mean a wildfire isn't going on inside. There needs to be a greater level of support for administrators—a greater policy specifically for an additional assistant principal at every middle school. It would make the job that much easier if there was one for every grade level. I understand funding class sizes having two; I don't know how many you have interviewed but you may have been talking to someone who was literally about to fall apart, so I know it is a rewarding profession but it's thankless. We prepare doctors, lawyers, presidents, this, that, the other...there needs to be greater attention for building principals and assistant principals.

Interview with Participant Three

This interview took place on October 2, 2023, in a quiet classroom located in the rear building of the school. The following responses were recorded:

I.1 Please introduce yourself to me.

My name is...I am the assistant principal at... I take care of student affairs, making sure students are where they are supposed to be when they are supposed to be there, in charge of technology. I am also the high school football coach athletic director. We are a small, private school at... Academy. Many of us wear multiple hats. I also teach a couple of health classes as well.

I.2 Describe your profession.

Basically at ...Academy we try to teach a Christian-based program where we put Christ first in everything. We do a family perspective...hired a custodian who stated this is like a family atmosphere. That's our goal—family atmosphere of learning for our students.

I.3 How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County, Georgia?

This is my first year as an administrator at this school. I have been an athletic director in a previous location.

I.4 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?

It varies from day to day. There are days when it is a 1 and days when it is a 9.

I.5 Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?

No, I've been very fortunate this year. We've had some issues as any school would, with coworkers and student body who have worked well with me thus far, knock on wood.

I.6 As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?

Well, the biggest thing is time management. There are days when I time manage very well and days when I time manage poorly. Being an administrator, a lot of it is putting out fires and being able to manage them as well on top of that.

I.7 As you think about your workday, which interactions cause you the most amount of stress?

I guess having to do, I don't really know...making sure I am doing the expectations of my teachers and expectations of students. Living up to those.

I.8 What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.

Like I said earlier, time management is the key. Being realistic, you're not going to get everything done, cookie cutter effort, go with the flow, and do the best you can.

I.9 What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to manage stress?

Plan ahead as much as possible but be open minded that your plan may not go as planned.

I.10 What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

For me, keep in mind the administrator role is new for me as well. And I would like to see your results, it might help me go forward. As well, there are no exact answers to everything. Treat every kid and teacher fairly. No two situations are alike, and you have to be realistic about those situations. Take everything one day at a time.

Interview with Participant Four

This interview took place on October 5, 2023, in a quiet, private office located in the school. The responses were recorded as follows:

I.1 Please introduce yourself to me.

Good afternoon...I am...and I serve as the Chief Executive Officer of...Academy Private School, which is a pre-k all the way through 12th grade private school.

I.2 Describe your profession.

So, my profession is both as an educator of not only our staff members, but also our students and overall operations of the school, and in our profession especially as a CEO. We also look at the business aspect of operations and make sure that we are financially balanced and able to really achieve all the success that we need to based on tuition revenue and fundraising.

I.3 How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County,

Georgia?

So, in Newton County it has been since 2006. That we opened here and specifically in Newton. So, Rockdale we had several years there as well, but we were expanding and put our middle and high over here. Expanding we still have an elementary in the Conyers campus, but we have bussing services between the two locations.

I.4 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?

Probably five, moderate. Most of the things I feel as though I process well and with experience you gain confidence with decision-making skills. And so, I have been in education for 32 years so that really helps in working with families, making sure to build that partnership and hold staff accountable for also building relationships, and that reduces problems for us.

I.5 Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?

We do from time to time—that would be if a student is not performing at their highest level then we are searching for ways to support them and often times that means that we are reaching to outside vendors. It could be anybody from a therapist for social emotional support or it could be an academic evaluation that is needed. And unfortunately those resources are very lengthy to go through so that frustration of not being able to help a student in a quicker fashion is frustrating and I would

probably say that is my top frustration—serving children at the highest level, sometimes outside support services are really important.

I.6 As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?

I think when there is not parent trust and support, parents may be disconnected from school policies and book information and things such as that. For example, we have a high school student who is very tardy, so to work with that family is not a problem. It's the frustration of being paid to do a job and to teach children how to follow rules and procedures. The struggle of working with parents who do not follow rules and procedures is frustrating, stressful and frustrating. So, that is probably what I think of as stressful and what comes to mind.

I.7 As you think about your workday, which interactions cause you the most amount of stress?

Typically, just relate to the parents, not following directions and doing the things they need to. Sometimes the students who are pretty well-behaved, teachers go over rules and procedures and the teachers are good at holding students accountable. And you find at middle and high school they rotate classes and if you have one person in the classroom that turns in papers whenever they want that breaks down the system of education. So, keeping everyone on the same level of expectations is really important so they get consistent messages. Friday is the due date to turn it in doesn't mean Monday, or dog ate the homework. We want to make sure they are fully prepared for college, everyone being on the same page does that.

I.8 What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.

Okay, sometimes they are really simple, like relaxing, reading a *People* magazine. And actually, like sometimes, someone else's world is a nice little escape. Years ago, I might have watched an episode of *Young and the Restless*, something that detaches you. Well of course exercise, being outdoors is definitely my big thing, especially with women. People don't talk about it but women are at risk of having low Vitamin D levels. So, it can create a multitude of other issues so no matter how much good nutrition you get, Vitamin D makes everything process well so if you are not getting enough Vitamin D naturally then your body won't process food. Like I love to eat good, but it didn't matter because I have low Vitamin D levels, it can lead to thyroid conditions, things like that. And many of us in administration both men and women being indoors so often is not healthy for us. Sometimes I'll even have conversations with staff while walking and talking. I always have a change of clothes and tennis shoes with me. I really enjoy doing that and making it more interactive. It also makes for a more relaxing environment for interacting with staff members.

I.9 What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to manage stress?

I would recommend giving as much training for social and emotional health and well-being and even on things such as sex education. Some of the things we know children are faced with, especially motivation techniques and especially in boys and certain demographics. Lack of completion and don't turn it in, its really a frontal cortex issue. They're not eating breakfast. They're not—if they were a car they would be going nowhere because they just don't have the proper things in place to be successful. Some also tend to be gamers who are not getting proper sleep.

I.10 What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

I think I would encourage people to be as informed as possible about their students and have fair expectations about their students. People make assumptions about things like if their parents were better, like if they were married, if there were two people in the home—sometimes it is easy to say that but not have enough information about the family operations. So even give the situation the benefit of the doubt. So, there could be a lot more going on at home than you really see. Sometimes I find it is really good to listen to a family before those assumptions are made. And then I would also just really encourage an administrator to build a team and that takes a lot of work. It's like a marriage, right? Sometimes you interact more with them than your own spouse but encourage them to grow themselves. Because one teacher can make your whole year...unfortunately, in private we just change the teacher, but not in public—you're not afforded that luxury. But a simple band aid on it doesn't work, but putting a good mentor with that person is a great solution.

Interview with Participant Five

This interview took place on October 6, 2023, in a quiet office located in the center building of the school. The following responses were recorded:

I.1 Please introduce yourself to me.

My name is ...and I am the assistant principal of instruction at ...Middle School.

I.2 Describe your profession.

Again, I am the assistant principal of instruction. I have multiple things that I am responsible for such as testing, discipline, and Multi Teer Support System.

I.3 How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County, Georgia?

This is my first year.

I.4 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?

Maybe 5. Not too stressed out but not not stressed out.

I.5 Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?

Yes, one event. There was an event where a student attacked another student. And that made me, I think that affected me on a personal level, um, because the student did get hurt. He is fine now. The altercation was very violent, and I never see stuff like that on a regular basis. That kind of affected me a little bit.

I.6 As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?

Um, dealing with multiple parents, especially some are irate, the constant deadlines that we have to get stuff turned in and then with me being a new AP there are still things I still have to learn. So, when I run into any of those where I don't know the process or procedure or the steps it makes me feel stress.

I.7 As you think about your workday, which interactions cause you the most amount of stress?

Again, it is the interactions with the parents. Like when you were waiting for a two-minute conversation that I allotted for turned into a twenty-minute conversation. Because she felt like her child never got into trouble and that I didn't listen to her child about why he did what he did. I had to explain multiple times about how the child's behavior did not meet the student code of conduct and disrupts the class and I had to keep reiterating that.

I.8 What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.

Well, I am a gamer so I play video games, that's my number one stress reliever. So, everyone who knows me knows that Friday after work till Sunday night that's my time to play my game. I also have a baby and I spend time with my family. Gaming is my number one de-stressor.

I.9 What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to manage stress?

Well, my principal who literally just said this to me yesterday, it is okay to make mistakes. I told him that I don't like messing up and making mistakes, because that adds to my stress. He said it is okay 'cause as you are learning you learn from the mistakes. It's okay to do something and you go back and correct it later. Use it as a learning experience. So, that is what I would say. It's okay to make mistakes because you can go back and learn from them. It's not the end of the world.

I.10 What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

I know a lot of people. When I was a teacher, I wondered why my principal or AP would send an email or ask a question and they wouldn't get back to me in a timely fashion. Like why I can't get a response back from this woman and now I know why. Because it is very easy to get inundated with all the stuff you have to do. So, make sure that you prioritize correctly and appropriately and still make time for yourself to eat lunch at some point and make sure you don't spend too much time on one thing. That is what I would say.

Interview with Participant Six

This interview took place on October 17, 2023, in an office located off from the main office in the front of the school building. It was quite busy in the waiting area, but the interview office was quiet and private. No disruptions took place during the interview. The responses were as follows:

I.1 Please introduce yourself to me.

My name is...I am the principal at the...

I.2 Describe your profession.

I have been in education for over 20 years and as a principal in Newton County for about seven years. I am the conductor of the entire orchestra. I supervise the assistant principals, the staff which includes teachers, custodians, Parent Teacher Board, and much more.

I.3 How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County, Georgia?

About seven years now.

I.4 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?

Around a seven, but it varies from day to day.

I.5 Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?

Yes, too many to count. School safety has been the main issue. Intruder alerts, fire drills and such, which we do on a regular basis.

I.6 As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?

Getting parents to be involved in their child's education and students to follow the school code of conduct. Having a parental contract has made it difficult when you have to explain why a child must leave school.

I.7 As you think about your workday, which interactions cause you the most amount of stress?

Interactions with parents is my greatest concern, but there are times staff/teachers get unfocused on the priority, which is to teach our children. The children are our first priority.

I.8 What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.

Spend time with family, fellowship with friends, with friends. Golfing outdoor fishing, but I rarely have time for this.

I.9 What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to manage stress?

Just do your best to stay focused on why the school is there. It is for the children. Keep priorities in order.

I.10 What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

This is a stressful job, but if it is your calling then you can know it and do your best each day.

Interview with Participant Seven

This interview took place on October 18, 2023, in a quiet, private office located in the school. The participant seemed a bit rushed as the answers seemed short and to the point. The following responses were recorded as follows:

I.1 Please introduce yourself to me.

I am... assistant principal at...

I.2 Describe your profession.

I am in charge of instruction and discipline for 6th and 7th graders.

I.3 How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County, Georgia?

This is my second year.

I.4 On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?

About a 7, sometimes a 10, it just depends on the challenges of the day.

I.5 Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?

Yes, we had a fight that was out of control. The resource officer had to get involved. It was stressful. The whole day was upside down it seems. It was difficult to get everyone back on focus.

I.6 As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?

Dealing with angry students. Students who are challenged by outside situations are difficult to reach and to talk reason to them.

I.7 As you think about your workday, which interactions cause you the most amount of stress?

Interacting with parents and students who have been in a fight.

I.8 What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.

I exercise like going on walks, pray, meditation, church, and spend time with loved ones.

I.9 What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to manage stress?

Be sure you are ready to be in administration. It takes a lot of time from your personal life. It is well worth it if you are ready for it.

I.10 What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

No, that is about it. Just take time for yourself, like self-care.

Themes

From the participants responses, several themes were identified from the coding process (Kumar, 2011). For coding the research, the themes were developed based on the responses to the interview questions. Repetitive answers to the questions made developing sample groups simpler (Kumar, 2011). The qualitative data was broken down into smaller samples and then the samples were reread. Highlighters were used to code the transcribed responses (Kumar, 2011). From the color-coded repetitive responses, theme groups were evident. The responses pointed to specific themes (Merriam, 2009). The data was then developed into organized tables described in Chapters 4 and 5. By viewing the data, themes emerged from the participants' personal experiences and statements. These were related to the causes of stress, prevention of stress, and coping strategies for stress. Some of the themes that came from the answers were: parental interactions, student discipline, safety issues, staff conflicts, job expectations, spiritual strategies, and practical strategies. The information is connected and described below.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. *What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the leading causes of anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?*

Themes were developed from the research data of the participants' responses. It focuses on the causes of anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. Based on the responses, the themes included parents, teachers, students, time management, and safety. The causes and frequency information are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6

RQ1

Causes	Responses
Parents	7
Teachers	2
Students	6
Time Management	3
Safety	3

RQ2. *What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective means of preventing anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?*

Themes were developed from research data and participants responses. It focuses on preventing anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. Based on the participant responses, some of the themes included parent support, teacher and student expectations, time management, peer advice, and Christian prayer. That information is presented in Table 7 below as prevention methods and the frequency of responses.

Table 7*RQ2*

Prevention Methods	Responses
Parent Support	7
Expectations	2
Time Management	5
Peer Advice	3
Prayer	2

RQ3. What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective coping strategies useful in minimizing the effects of anxiety and stress that lead to professional and personal burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?

Themes were developed from the information provided by the participants as they shared their lived experiences during the interviews. Various coping strategies were identified and emerged from the responses by the participants. These are identified in Table 8 below. The frequency of the responses is also identified in the information presented below. Each research question and theme will be discussed in the Research Conclusion section of Chapter Five.

Table 8*RQ3*

Coping Strategies	Responses
Prayer	2
Quiet Time	1
Eat/Drink	2
Read	2
Do Best	2
Sleep/Rest	1
Time Mgmt.	2
Self-Care	2
Outdoors	4
Exercise	5
Games/TV	2
Puzzles	2
Traveling	1
Support People	4

Evaluation of the Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine what the selected academic leaders believed was the mitigation and prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. The study design was appropriate because the research was based on interviews. The research questions were discussed based on the participants' responses from their lived experiences. In Chapter Three, the research design and methodology were described in detail as the qualitative research focus was on process, meaning, and understanding, with the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). The qualitative approach was also based upon the philosophy of empiricism and followed an unstructured and flexible approach to inquiry. This was aimed at describing the phenomenon studied using small samples and explored perceptions and feelings rather than facts and figures (Kumar, 2011).

This researcher followed the recommendations and guidelines set by the Liberty Institutional Review Board throughout the introduction of the study and during data collection. The researcher spent from six to 19 minutes with each participant. Interviewees could choose to elaborate or not talk in length with the researcher while feelings and experiences were expressed (Davies, 2007). The interview and observations were documented verbatim and were checked for accuracy (Creswell, 2009). This researcher followed the research design and methodology clearly discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with an overview, protocol, measures, and continued by providing several tables to include demographics and sample data collected. Next, each participant's

interview was presented verbatim to demonstrate detailed information. The Christian faith was discussed during some interviews but was not the highlight of the conversation for most of the participants. Perhaps, this was due to the secular location of the interviews. This was discussed further in Chapter Five. The themes from the participants' answers were discussed as they were relevant. Finally, an evaluation of the research design was presented, referring to Chapter Three as the foundation for the process. In Chapter Five, conclusions, implications, applications, limitations, and further research are presented.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This study examined what Newton County middle school administrators believe are the means of preventing anxiety, stress, and burnout among Christian public and private middle school principals, vice principals, and heads of schools. The seven participants shared knowledge based on their personal experiences. This information was discussed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five includes the restatement of the research purpose and questions. The research conclusions, implications, applications, limitations, and further research are also presented within this chapter.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine what the selected academic leaders believe is the mitigation and prevention of anxiety, stress, and burnout in Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia. For this study, Christian academic leaders were defined as certified principals who hold a bachelor's level degree or above, contribute to the academic environment within 6th through 8th grade public and private schools, and have experience in education. Christians who operate in a personal relationship with Jesus use biblical examples and faith to manage stress. Believers manage stress through prayer, reading the Bible, and fellowshiping with others. This established the important need to include faith and our stress responses as part of this study (Ben-Hador et al., 2020). Also, for the purposes of this study, burnout was generally defined as the state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Winefield & Pignata, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Self-care was defined as the process of taking care of oneself with behaviors that promote health (Santana & Fouad, 2017). As previously stated, the theory guiding

this study was Maslach's (1997) Burnout Theory, which defined a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion via a 22-symptom inventory pertaining to occupational burnout. In addition to the theory, there is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which includes three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2021). Both the theory and the inventory tool were important to this study because it helped to identify an instrument that highlights the stress and burnout associated with poor job performance, health problems, and other issues (Zysberg et al., 2017). While that instrument was not used in this study, it provided a guiding framework to help identify a relationship between job responsibilities and stress.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. *What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the leading causes of anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?*

RQ2. *What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective means of preventing anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County, Georgia?*

RQ3. *What do Christian public and private middle school principals in Newton County, Georgia perceive are the most effective coping strategies useful in minimizing the effects of anxiety and stress that lead to professional and personal burnout among Christian public and private school leaders in Newton County Georgia?*

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This section addresses the answers to the research questions, the main themes that come from the participants responses, the implications, and the applications. The themes were identified and recorded based on the frequency of the responses found during the data analysis. Seven participants shared their lived experiences as a Christian public or private middle school leader in Newton County Public Schools. The interviewees were given the freedom to include or

exclude the element of faith in their responses, so no faith-based interview questions were included. All participants were aware and notified of what they were participating in from the introductory letter (Appendix C) and information sheet (Appendix B) before agreeing to be interviewed. As indicated below in the implications, some chose to include their faith as a way of addressing stress management or prevention and some chose to exclude it from their answers. The secular setting of the interviews may have impacted the lack of spiritual answers. The participants responses were transcribed verbatim and displayed in Chapter Four. The data that has been analyzed was used to respond to each research question in this section.

Research Question One Answer: What are the causes of stress?

Themes: Parental Interactions, Student Discipline, Safety Issues, Staff Conflicts

The first grouping of themes that emerged from the participants' responses included those issues that were self-reported as external sources of stress. These sources can be summarized to include varied interactions with parents, means of discipline with students, and conflicts with others. Since most of the data emphasized issues with the parents, this emerged as one of the themes. The way in which this was evident was based on comments related to lack of support, long phone calls, distrust, and lengthy hours of interaction between parents and administrators. The second theme was student discipline. This included the task of dealing with contraband, bullying, threatening behavior, compliance with code of conduct, and fights. Both parental interaction and student discipline lead to added stress on principals. The third theme discovered was school safety. This included administrators having intruder alert drills and fire drills. The final theme that emerged addressed issues related to staff and teacher conflicts, as well as handling low job performance. In summary, the major causes of stress for Christian public and

private middle school principals reflects external sources of engagement that appear to be stressful or reflect inputs that some find to be increasing their own stress levels.

Research Question Two Answer: What are some prevention methods?

Themes: Parent Interaction, Student Discipline, School Safety, Job Expectations

The second group of themes that emerged from the participant responses related to ways in which stress could be prevented or mitigated. These included better communication strategies, greater attention given to addressing discipline issues, and clearer understanding of expectations. Some of the participants indicated that promoting manageable communication with parents would prevent stress; this included more emails, audio messages, and memos as methods for increased positive parental interactions. To address the next theme of student discipline, it was suggested that there be an additional principal added. Most participants thought that an administrator for each grade level would greatly decrease some of the discipline issues. The third theme of school safety was noticeably a job shared by the principal and the assistant principals in the building. Making sure the teachers, students, and staff are aware of the safety procedures was one suggestion to reduce anxiety and stress. The final theme that emerged was a desire to address student and teacher expectations by the administrators. By being clear on expectations and maintaining open communication with the school body, some conflicts and low job performance issues could be resolved. It was also shared that using adequate time management is essential to the performance of the leaders. Throughout the interviews, leaders described the importance of time management and planning with an open mind, being aware that things might not go as planned. These suggested interventions might prevent or lower the stress that administrators encounter. In summary, Christian public and private middle school principals prevent stress by

addressing increased positive parent communication, managing student discipline with additional staffing, increased school safety and awareness, and addressing clear job expectations.

Research Question Three Answer: What are coping strategies?

Themes: Practical Strategies, Relationship Networks

Two primary themes emerged for this last question, including strategies for self-care and supportive relationships. Taking care of oneself included spending time outside and getting quiet rest time. Getting alone in the quietness of the office space, turning off the lights, playing music, placing a do not disturb sign on the door, and drinking water were suggested methods to cope with stress at work. One participant stated that it is important to take one day at a time. Activities to cope included gaming, puzzles, crossword puzzles, magazines, and television. Additional self-care was discussed by the participants and included things like maintaining medical appointments, haircuts, massages, proper diets, and exercise. Another strategy that was mentioned referred to spending time with family and supportive friends. Social interactions seemed to be a positive influence on coping with stress. Additionally, activities like prayer, getting alone time with God, and church fellowship seemed to be the most common spiritual methods to cope with stress. This researcher was surprised by the lack of spiritual practices to mitigate stress mentioned by the Christian leaders. There seemed to be a disconnection between daily work and spiritual practices such as the disciplines, an abiding rest with God, or clear sense that this was a calling from God. The secular setting may have had an influence on the responses since most public school administrators understand there is a separation between active faith-based practices and their role in this particular setting. In summary, Christian public and private middle school principals cope with stress in various ways. Some practical methods include physical activity, spending time with loved ones, outdoor activities, managing self-care, and

participating in enjoyable activities. Other practices include prayer, getting alone time, and being with others at church.

Implication One: Several Causes Leading to Stress

Principals are faced with several causes of stress that lead to burnout (Preceel, 2022). As a result, fewer teachers are aspiring to become principals and a greater number of academic leaders are retiring early (Preceel, 2022). This researcher found that academic leaders do indeed experience several causes of stress from the work environment as described in the themes (RQ1 Table 6). The themes that emerged were not surprising since the research stated stress, and its related causes, for educators is a momentous problem in America (Francis et al., 2017). One hundred percent of participants stated that parents were the leading cause of stress, and 85% believed students were a leading cause of stress. This theme was also not shocking, since the pressure principals receive can be overwhelming for any leader (Hade, 2018; Harmsen et al., 2018). Forty-two percent of participants stated time management and school safety as a cause of stress. Twenty-eight percent stated teachers as a cause of stress. In conclusion, the information gathered from the participants indicates that Christian middle school principals, assistant principals, and heads of schools in Newton County, Georgia experience several causes of stress leading to burnout (Heffernan, 2020).

Implication Two: Effective Methods to Prevent Stress

Stress on leaders may be alleviated by addressing some of the various causes (Olpin & Bracken, 2014). One hundred percent of participants believed that if parents were supportive and communication was clear, non-combative, and consistent stress would be preventable. The finding supports research by Fowler (2018), where principals need to be supported to do what they actually do best. Seventy-one percent identified that by alleviating student problems and

safety issues and advocating for proper time management, stress could be prevented. This means being proactive in disciplining students regarding fighting, bullying, and behavior that does not follow the Student Code of Conduct. Hiring additional administrators, would be beneficial. This seems to be difficult due to the educator shortage in the United States (Newberry & Allsop, 2017). To prevent safety issues, drills should be practiced regularly. To manage time wisely, planning while remaining flexible is beneficial. Forty-two percent of participants believed that gaining advice from peers is an effective way to prevent stress. By interacting with peers, helpful strategies may be discovered. Twenty eight percent of participants stated that meeting students', parents', and teacher expectations, as well as prayer, were preventive methods. Meeting expectations may be considered stressful when they are not realistic. A small number referred to prayer or meditation as a preventive method, but they seemed very confident that it prevents stress. As Christian leaders there was a greater need to connect daily work with spiritual practices. As observed by this researcher, there was a lack of connection between practices of faith and daily career work by the Christian public and private leaders in Newton County Georgia. This may be due to the secular setting location of the interviews. By expanding the research, changing the setting, and separating the participants into smaller groups, more faith-based prevention methods may be discovered. There were additional effective methods discussed in the verbatim transcribed responses and also in Table 7. In conclusion, there are several strategies to prevent anxiety and stress leading to burnout among Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County, Georgia.

Implication Three: Coping Mechanisms Lower Stress

Phillips (2022) indicated that burnout, which is sometimes induced by stress, was preventable and that there are steps one can take to avoid burnout. Research has shown various

coping strategies that may be used to avoid burnout (Colbert, 1999; Meyer, 2016). Table 8 reflects the coping mechanisms that were discovered in the research. Seventy-one percent of surveyed educational leaders believed exercise was a key to dealing with stress. This means that exercise should be included in a routine to release tension and stress. Exercise was already proven to be a method to reduce stress by Tschierske (2023). Fifty-seven percent of the participants believed that outdoor activities and spending time with supportive people were coping mechanisms that lower stress. Some of the outdoor activities may include fishing or sitting in a rocking chair on the porch. Supportive individuals may include family, coworkers, peers, and friends that listen or allow one to vent feelings. Twenty-eight percent of the participants believed prayer and meditation, eating and drinking, reading, doing one's best, time management, self-care, games and television, and puzzles were valuable methods in minimizing stress. It is interesting that although individuals identified in the Bible emphasize the need for praying, fasting, and getting alone with God, only two participants included this in their coping methods for handling stress. Some of these strategies, especially self-care, were already suggested as coping methods by authors researched in this dissertation (Olpin et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2016). In conclusion, by utilizing the effective coping strategies presented throughout this research, the effects of stress, anxiety, and burnout may be minimized for Christian middle school principals, assistant principals, and head of schools in Newton County, Georgia.

Research Limitations

This study was limited due to the relatively small sample size and the possibility of bias on the part of the researcher. Due to the limited number of participants in this study, it is not possible to make accurate generalizations. Future research should increase the sample size and

include a greater variety of principals, vice principals, and heads of schools. In conclusion, it is also possible that the researcher's previous biases based on experiences while in education contributed to the results of this study.

Further Research

To further this research study, it would be beneficial to enlarge the sample size selection process. In this phenomenological study, a larger number of participants would have yielded more information that could have enhanced the solutions to the research questions. By modifying the demographics to include the following—teachers as leaders, larger school systems located in Georgia, and elementary administrators—more coping strategies may be discovered. Dividing the population into smaller subgroups may also be beneficial in locating more specific remedies for stress prevention. Separating the private sector from the public sector, inexperienced administrators from experienced administrators, and male subjects from female subjects might positively affect the data. Also, by separating public from private school domains, it might provide more faith filled responses for coping with work related stressors. Clarifying and modifying the introductory letter, informational sheet and the interview questions would more closely address Christian or spiritual practices related to coping with stress and preventing burnout. Making an overt connection between Christian leadership and spirituality would increase faith-based responses. More research geared towards the long-term effects of the stress of being an administrator would also be beneficial to this study. Discoveries such as this may improve the educational shortage. Since parents seemed to cause a great deal of stress on principals, studying what is the greatest concern of parents that may trigger negative interactions with the school environment may be a productive study.

Several of these suggestions are connected to the findings from this study. The finding of including elementary administrators and high school administrators would prevent isolation of ideas and provide a larger scope of participants. Also, the finding that there were few suggestions that referred to faith from the participants means the study should be replicated by narrowing the groups into public versus private and Christian versus non-Christian participants. The lack of spiritual responses may also demonstrate the lack of Biblical knowledge regarding stress management in the Bible as indicated in the literature review. By changing the setting of the interviews, the Christian leaders might provide additional responses that include spiritual practices to mitigate stress from work. These suggestions would certainly affect the outcome of the data gathered from the study.

The study may be connected to the topic of mental health in the field of education (Arroll, & Kendrick, 2018). It may also be connected to anxiety experienced by several individuals (Lopez & Rey, 2017). Branching out in these areas might enlarge the research and add to the knowledge gained from the study.

Perhaps using a case study design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals may yield in depth information (Creswell, 2014). Another type of research design that may be beneficial is descriptive. It takes a systematic approach to obtain information to describe a phenomenon, situation, or population. Specifically, it helps to answer the what, when, where, and how questions regarding the research problem rather than the why (Merriam, 2009; Kumar, 2011; Creswell, 2014). By discovering the why behind the causes of stress, prevention might be possible. The research potential is limitless as it applies to the prevention of stress, anxiety, and burnout in Christian middle school principals, assistant principals, and heads of schools in Newton County, Georgia. By both increasing the

population and narrowing the subgroups, more knowledge could be gained that would benefit the academic setting.

Summary

Stress and burnout among America's academic leaders are a serious problem in society today. The goal of this study was to examine Christian public and private middle school principals' anxiety, stress, and burnout prevention. This study investigated the self-care and coping mechanisms used or not used by middle school principals. The researcher concluded that Christian public and private middle school principals encounter stress and receive minimal job-related support. Administrators need assistance and deserve accolades for the selfless work they do throughout the school community. Through coping strategies, Christian public and private middle school leaders avoid anxiety and stress that leads to burnout. It is this researcher's aim to raise awareness of this need and to be an element of change by sharing the knowledge gained.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval

Date: 8-24-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY23-24-125

Title: Burnout Prevention in Christian Public and Private Middle School Leaders: A Qualitative Case Study
 Creation Date: 7-26-2023 End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Rhonda Purchase

Review Board: Research Ethics

Office Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial

Review Type Limited

Decision **Exempt - Limited IRB**

Key Study Contacts

Member Mary Lowe

Role Co-Principal Investigator

Contact [REDACTED]

Member Rhonda Purchase

Role Principal Investigator

Contact [REDACTED]

Member Rhonda Purchase

Role Primary Contact

Contact [REDACTED]

Initial Submission

APPENDIX B

Information Sheet

Title of the Project: Burnout Prevention in Christian Public and Private Middle School Leaders:
A Qualitative Case Study

Principal Investigator: Rhonda Grider Purchase, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a Christian principal, vice principal or head of school who is actively employed or retired (within less than five years), possess a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education and be state certified in Georgia, at least 18 years of age, and in a public or private middle school for grades 6th through 8th in Newton County Georgia. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to examine what principals, vice principals, and heads of schools believe are the means of preventing anxiety, stress and burnout among Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County Georgia.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a standardized audio-recorded open-ended interview and observation (20 minutes).

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the knowledge that will be shared in this research dissertation that may prevent burnout through coping strategies.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Electronic data will be stored on 2 flash drives. The electronic and hardcopy data will be stored in a locked security box in a personal business closet. After three years, papers will be shredded, and electronic data will be deleted. Any additional items holding the information will be manually destroyed and discarded.
- Recordings will be stored in a locked security box in a personal business closet for three years and then erased. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, responses collected will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Rhonda Grider Purchase. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Mary Lowe, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

APPENDIX C

Introductory Letter to Participants

Date

Leaders Name
School Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Email

Dear Participant,

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate in Christian leadership degree. The purpose of my research is to examine what principals, vice principals, and heads of schools believe are the means of preventing anxiety, stress and burnout among Christian public and private middle school leaders in Newton County Georgia. I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be a Christian principal, vice principal or head of school who is actively employed or retired (within less than five years), possess a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education and be state certified in Georgia, at least 18 years of age, and in a public or private middle school for grades 6th through 8th in Newton County Georgia. Participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one audio-recorded in person interview. It should take approximately 20 minutes to complete the procedure listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] to schedule a time for an interview.

Thank you very much, I look forward to working with you on this research. Have a wonderful day!

Sincerely,
Rhonda Grider Purchase
Ed.D. Candidate
Liberty University
[REDACTED]

APPENDIX D

Thank You Letter

Date

Leaders Name

School Name

Street Address

City, State, Zip Code

Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this dissertation research regarding the prevention of burnout in Christian middle school leaders in Newton County Georgia. This research is a major help in completing my dissertation. Outside of the dissertation process, I truly believe that this research can have a huge impact on education.

Should you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to email me at

████████████████████.

Thank you. I am excited to see what the leaders have said regarding coping strategies and prevention methods of burnout.

Have a wonderful day!

Sincerely,

Rhonda Grider Purchase

Ed.D. Candidate

Liberty University

APPENDIX E

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me.
2. Describe your profession.
3. How long have you been employed in middle school administration in Newton County Georgia?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very low stress and 10 being very high stress, how would you rate the amount of stress you feel during your workday?
5. Have you experienced highly stressful events at work? If so, did that happen this year, or how many years ago?
6. As you think about your workday, what are some events or situations that could lead to stress?
7. As you think about your workday, which interactions are the most challenging regarding stress?
8. What are some things you do, some coping mechanisms, or some strategies you use at work or at home to lower your stress levels? Please give details.
9. What advice would you give to a new middle school administrator on how to handle stress?
10. What final thoughts would you like to add to this interview?

APPENDIX F**Email from Dr. Janes, Newton County Approval**

**NEWTON COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM
2109 NEWTON DRIVE, N.E.
P.O. BOX 1469
COVINGTON, GEORGIA 30015**

BENJAMIN ROUNDTREE, Ed.S.

PHONE

Interim Superintendent

770-787-1330

September 19, 2023

Ms. Rhonda Purchase
P.O. Box 80251
Conyers, GA 30013

Ms. Purchase,

Your request to conduct research for the study *Burnout Prevention in Christian Public and Private Middle School Leaders: A Qualitative Study* in Newton County Schools has been approved.

I wish you the best in your academic pursuits.

Sincerely,

Dr. Lynn Janes
Dr. Lynn Janes
Director of Assessment, Accountability, Research and Evaluation