

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY ON STUDENT LEARNING:
A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TEACHERS'
LIVED EXPERIENCES AS THEY SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY

by

Jennifer Hope Crews

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Gail Collins, EdD, Committee Chair

Tony Ryff, PhD, Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. The theories guiding this study are Bandura's social cognitive theory and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory as they relate to an individual's ability to change their behavior based on their environment and the importance of motivation throughout the learning process. Throughout this transcendental phenomenological study, teachers' lived experiences were explored in accredited private and public schools. Data were collected from 12 middle and high school teachers, with at least 3 years of experience, through interviews, focus groups, and letter prompts. After all data were collected, five themes emerged from the data which included recognition and identification, classroom strategies, building relationships, learning environment, and preparation. Included in the five themes were 13 subthemes: common triggers, signs of anxiety, identification, affirmation, removal, accommodations, communication, disposition, classroom struggle, atmosphere, training, life experiences, and resources. The themes and subthemes were placed in a visual representation to show how the themes interconnect. Finally, the study's results were shared to reflect what emerged from the data as well as the limitations and recommendations for additional research.

Keywords: anxiety, teacher preparation, academic performance, technology use, social media

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Dedication

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:22–23 (ESV)

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without His faithfulness and new mercies every morning, this dissertation would not exist.

To my mom, who always encourages me to do my best and continue to learn. Thank you for always believing in me and giving me your love and support.

To the memory of my dad, who taught me the value of hard work, encouraged me to pursue my educational aspirations, and taught me that nothing can stop you from achieving your dreams. Without your love, support, and encouragement, I would not be the person I am today.

To my brother, Cameron, for always being there for me throughout the years and believing in me.

To my husband, Brad, for his love, patience, and support throughout this process. Thank you for supporting this aspiration and encouraging me along the way.

To my two precious girls, Savannah and Sydney, may you strive to do your best in every endeavor, pursue your ambitions, never quit, and always put God first. I love you to the moon and back.

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Thank you to my participants who were willing to share their lived experiences in the classroom with me. You provided so much insight and knowledge to my study, and I am forever grateful for the time you spent out of your busy schedules. Your students are blessed to have you as their teacher.

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List of Abbreviations

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Educational Plan for Disabilities (504)

Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Sub-Question (SQ)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In recent years, anxiety has increased in individuals for various reasons, affecting their ability to perform academically (Deaton et al., 2022; England et al., 2019; Hogberg et al., 2020; Shih & Lin, 2017; Yan et al., 2017). Since students will experience stress and anxiety at some point in their educational career, it is essential for teachers to provide students with strategies to help them cope with this anxiety without letting it take possession of their life (Ekwonye et al., 2020; Frazier et al., 2019). When students experience anxiety in the classroom, teachers are forced to deal with it while helping their students achieve their best academically (Love et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative for educators to study anxiety and the effects it has on students to help them achieve academic success. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. By understanding the historical, social, and theoretical contexts, individuals can comprehend how student anxiety has developed throughout the years, impacting student learning, and establishing teachers' need to mitigate anxiety in the classroom.

Background

Anxiety has become more prevalent in adolescents over the past few years for various reasons (Deaton et al., 2022; Hogberg et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2019). Some contributing factors to anxiety include increased use of technology, social media, and lack of sleep (Drapeau, 2022; Elhai et al., 2018; Gajdics & Jagodics, 2022; Yan et al., 2017). When students experience high anxiety, they cannot perform their best academically (England et al., 2019). Furthermore, anxiety creates fear in individuals, affecting their well-being and academic performance (Shih & Lin, 2017). Throughout an individual's life, anxiety can debilitate them, which causes a negative

effect on individuals in the workplace (O'Donnell et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2017). As a result of exploring teachers' experiences in the classroom, individuals can glean information that could combat anxiety by examining effective strategies to help individuals cope with anxiety.

Historical Context

Men and women have experienced anxiety throughout history (Tone, 2005). Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, individuals experienced "nervous illness," which can now be defined as anxiety (Freeman & Freeman, 2012). While individuals were unaware of what they were experiencing, they had nervous feelings, which can be attributed to anxiety. Beginning in the late 19th century and moving into the 20th century, physicians discovered different treatments to bring about relief when individuals experienced anxiety (Tone, 2005). According to Freeman and Freeman (2012), anxiety became more prevalent in the 20th century. In 1960, individuals began receiving medication to treat anxiety (Horwitz, 2013). Anxiety became further defined and described throughout the 1980s by psychiatrists and poets (Horwitz, 2013). Furthermore in 2018, approximately 22.1% of children experienced a mental or emotional disorder (Deaton et al., 2022).

While anxiety has existed throughout history, there has been a rise in anxiety in recent years due to technology use, internet use, and social media use (Keles et al., 2019). An increase in problematic internet use leads to student anxiety, affecting an individual's mental health and well-being (Gavurova et al., 2022). In a world immersed in smartphones and technology, students have constant access to the internet and social media, which leads to increased anxiety and a lack of sleep (Bettman et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2019; Woods & Scott, 2016). Therefore, students must limit the amount of time they spend on their smartphones, technology, and social media to get a restful night's sleep without interruptions (Bettman et al., 2020; Woods & Scott,

2016). When students experience interruptions in their sleep patterns, they are more likely to experience anxious thoughts or anxiety the following day, which affects their ability to perform their best academically (Alfano et al., 2009; Cox & Olanunji, 2015; Drapeau, 2022; Iwadare et al., 2015). Therefore, teachers must become more aware of the effects of social media, technology use, lack of sleep, stress, and anxiety on their student's academic performance and well-being (Woods & Scott, 2016; Zeeni et al., 2018). Without this knowledge, students will suffer from anxiety and underperform academically (Gajdics & Jagodics, 2022; Zeng et al., 2022).

More recently, the effects of COVID-19 have also impacted anxiety in individuals, especially in the field of education (Gavurova et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Anxiety increased three-fold throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2022). Anytime fear is present, anxiety can creep in. During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals experienced fear for various reasons as well as increased anxiety (Lee et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2022). However, many students experienced the effect of COVID-19 due to being unable to attend school in person, which created anxiety for some students (Gavurova et al., 2022). Students also missed socializing and interacting with their friends, which created additional anxiety when they could return to in-person learning (Gavurova et al., 2022). Furthermore, some students experienced an educational gap, creating additional fear when striving to achieve their best academically.

Social Context

Anxiety is not limited to affecting individuals in an academic setting but affects individuals in many areas. When anxiety takes over an individual's life, it can debilitate them, affecting them socially, emotionally, and cognitively (Archbell & Coplan, 2022; Shih & Lin,

2017; Yan et al., 2017). Individuals who suffer from social anxiety are unable to communicate effectively with their friends, which often leads to isolation and loneliness (Archbell & Coplan, 2022; Molinari et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2022). Furthermore, anxiety can create a debilitating effect on an individual's life, prohibiting them from their careers and the workplace (O'Donnell et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2017). Many employers have implemented wellness programs to ensure their employees have access to information related to stress and anxiety. Employers recognize the need for individuals to be able to combat stress and anxiety and desire to mitigate anxiety in the workplace as much as possible (Vignoli et al., 2017). Once anxiety overcomes an individual, they cannot complete the tasks before them, which affects students in schools, individuals in the workplace, and their mental health (Shih & Lin, 2017; Vignoli et al., 2017). Therefore, individuals must seek to understand how anxiety impacts individuals and how to mitigate that anxiety. By examining teachers' lived experiences in mitigating anxiety in the classroom, individuals can adapt these strategies and practices in other arenas to help individuals cope with anxiety.

Theoretical Context

Due to the easy access smartphones provide, individuals develop habits regarding viewing their social media accounts, searching the internet, responding to notifications and messages, and lack of sleep. By responding every time they hear a notification, individuals develop a behavior of checking their cell phones constantly, which demonstrates the behaviorism learning theory (Schunk, 2020). Smartphones provide easy access for individuals to stay connected to their friends and family. Therefore, they develop habits of consistently checking their phones for updates, notifications, and messages, which can lead to anxiety in some individuals (Zeng et al., 2022). Individuals also develop habits regarding feeling the need to

respond every time they receive a message, whether on social media or via text messages, regardless of the time they receive it (Elhai et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2022). These habits lead to learned behaviors affecting their sleep, well-being, academic performance, and anxiety levels (Lepp et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2022).

According to humanistic theories and Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory, sleep is a vital physiological need. The fulfillment of basic needs is necessary before individuals achieve higher levels of attainment, such as belonging and self-esteem (Schunk, 2020). Therefore, it is critical for individuals to get an adequate amount of sleep to feel safe, have a sense of belonging, and have positive self-esteem. However, individuals experiencing a lack of sleep are unable to experience this sense of belonging due to unnecessary anxiety.

In relation to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, motivation plays a crucial role in a student's learning process, which is directly affected by the environment surrounding them. Individuals who suffer from anxiety due to a lack of sleep, technology use, social media use, or academic influences will lack the motivation necessary to perform academically due to the environmental influences surrounding them. Furthermore, students who experience anxious thoughts in the classroom are often disengaged and unable to focus, which affects their academic performance (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018).

According to Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, there is a relationship between the environment and an individual's behavior. In a classroom setting, teachers determine their classroom atmosphere and the responses they provide, which influences a student's perception of the class and learning environment (G. Chen et al., 2020; Kurdi & Archambault, 2018; Neidiany et al., 2018; Nyborg et al., 2022). Depending on the teacher's response, students can become engaged or disengaged in the learning process (G. Chen et al., 2020; Poysa et al., 2019). While

there is research regarding the effects of a teacher's response and classroom environment, there is a gap in research regarding the experiences of teachers and specific strategies used to mitigate high anxiety, which impacts student learning. Additionally, researchers have explored parental responses to dealing with student anxiety; however, further research is needed regarding teacher experiences when responding to and supporting students with high anxiety (Love et al., 2020). Without further research to determine the best responses and strategies to mitigate anxiety, teachers and educators will be inadequately prepared to assuage anxiety to increase student learning.

Problem Statement

The problem examined in this study is that anxiety in adolescents has skyrocketed over the past several years, and teachers are not adequately prepared to provide the support needed for students who experience anxiety, which impacts students learning when it presents itself in the classroom (Keles et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022). In the past 25 years, there has been a 70% increase in anxiety and depression in children and adolescents (Keles et al., 2019). Based on this percentage, there is a strong possibility that teachers will have students in their classrooms suffering from anxiety and depression. Therefore, exploring the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while they support adolescents with high anxiety is necessary. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the preparation and experiences of teachers with specific strategies to mitigate the anxiety that impacts student learning. Although researchers have examined the parental responses, additional research is needed to explore teachers' lived experiences as they respond to students with high anxiety (Love et al., 2020).

Throughout their educational experience, adolescents will encounter many challenges, including anxiety, which is an additional hurdle for students to cope with. In addition, students'

learning, academic achievements, and social interactions are negatively affected when they suffer from anxiety or depression (Keles et al., 2019). While some students have learned to cope with anxiety and can overcome it, others cannot reach their full potential when dealing with it (Shih & Lin, 2017). While there are many causes of anxiety in students, academic stressors, social interaction, lack of sleep, technology use, and social media are some contributing factors that lead to anxiety in individuals (Drapeau, 2022; Gajdics & Jagodics, 2022; Yan et al., 2017). Furthermore, students' academic performance, school attendance, and well-being can be directly impacted when they suffer from high anxiety (England et al., 2019; Shih & Lin, 2017). Therefore, researching and understanding the causes of student anxiety increases the potential for teachers to mitigate anxiety in the classroom.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. According to previous studies, academic influences, social interactions, lack of sleep, technology use, as well as social media influence student anxiety (Elhai et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2017). Due to the easy access smartphones provide, individuals develop habits regarding viewing their social media accounts, searching the internet, responding to notifications and messages, and lack of sleep (Alfano et al., 2009; Gajdics & Jagodics, 2022; Lepp et al., 2014; Woods & Scott, 2016). When experiencing a lack of sleep and anxiety, students cannot focus on their academic studies and experience unnecessary stress on their bodies, directly affecting their well-being (Drapeau, 2022; Woods & Scott, 2016). Therefore, the anxiety students face outside of the classroom experience often filtrates into the classroom, which leads to teachers trying to mitigate this anxiety. In this study, student anxiety is generally defined as feelings of uneasiness that impact

academic performance (Shih & Lin, 2017; Zeng et al., 2022). The theoretical framework consisted of Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory as well as Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, the environment and a student's motivation play a vital role in a student's ability to manage their anxiety. Furthermore, Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory stresses the relationship between the environment and an individual's behavior as well as the importance of self-efficacy.

Significance of the Study

At some point in their educational career, students will experience anxiety in the classroom. Consequently, teachers must be prepared to mitigate this anxiety when it arises so that student learning can continue to occur. Therefore, individuals must understand the theoretical, empirical, and practical significance regarding the impact of anxiety on students' academic performance and well-being.

Theoretical Significance

According to Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, an individual's behavior and environment are directly related. Furthermore, Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory provides a framework for student's motivation and ability to manage their anxiety. Motivation plays a crucial role in the learning process, which is directly impacted by the environment (Englund et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers who provide a safe environment for their students can help them manage their anxiety so learning can occur (G. Chen et al., 2020). Teachers can also help students reach their full potential by encouraging positive self-efficacy and motivating them to believe in themselves (Bersh, 2021). By overcoming an individual's emotions through self-efficacy, they can lower their anxiety and stress (Bersh, 2021). Thus, teachers who create a healthy environment motivate students to learn and encourage positive behavior (G. Chen et al.,

2020). As teachers implement strategies to mitigate student anxiety in the classroom, a positive learning environment is created that is conducive to learning.

Empirical Significance

The empirical research reveals that anxiety in students negatively impacts their well-being and academic performance (Shih & Lin, 2017; Yan et al., 2017). Thus, an individual's learning, academic achievement, and social interactions are directly impacted when students suffer from anxiety (Bauer et al., 2020; Hood et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2019). Additionally, students suffer from anxiety for various reasons in the classroom setting, including test anxiety, social interactions, and academic performance. Oftentimes, students desire to perform well academically to meet the approval of parents and teachers (Hood et al., 2021; McIntyre et al., 2018). According to Kurdi and Archambault (2018), students who do not feel safe in their environment may experience potentially escalating anxiety levels. While cultivating student-teacher relationships may help relieve anxiety (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018; Otterpohl et al., 2019), teachers must also develop additional strategies to mitigate student anxiety.

Practical Significance

In this study, experienced middle and high school teachers in accredited private and public schools were interviewed to determine the best classroom strategies to mitigate student anxiety. While this study was conducted using teachers in a single state, the goal was to provide information that can be transferable across states and applied by teachers in every classroom. By exploring teachers' lived experiences, this study contributed valuable data for teachers to utilize in the classroom. Though anxiety can create a debilitating fear in students and affect them academically (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018), teachers can implement strategies within the classroom to mitigate this anxiety.

Research Questions

Anxiety has increased in individuals in recent years (Deaton et al., 2022; Keles et al., 2019). When students experience anxiety in the classroom, it affects them socially, emotionally, academically, and cognitively (Bauer et al., 2020; Hood et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2019). Therefore, anxiety hampers students from reaching their full potential (Shih & Lin, 2017). According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, a student's autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence their motivation, which directly impacts a student's learning. Furthermore, Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy. Despite this increase in anxiety, teachers have been driven to support students with anxiety when it manifests in the classroom.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers who support students with anxiety in the classroom?

Sub-Question One

What strategies do teachers use to help students with anxiety develop autonomy in the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

How have teachers been trained or equipped to help students with anxiety increase their competence?

Sub-Question Three

What strategies have teachers found to be most effective in helping students with anxiety develop relatedness?

Sub-Question Four

What strategies can teachers use to promote self-efficacy in students with anxiety?

Definitions

The following terms are pertinent to the study.

1. *Academic performance* – an individuals' ability to accomplish the tasks set before them educationally (Lepp et al., 2014).
2. *Anxiety* – an emotion of uneasiness as it relates to an individual's world (Shih & Lin, 2017).
3. *Excessive phone use* – more than 4 hours in a 24-hour day (Yan et al., 2017).
4. *Inappropriate phone use* – excessive use of smartphones that leads to negative behavior and use without purpose (Elhai et al., 2018).
5. *Self-Determination Theory* – provides a framework for the relationship between an individual's motivation and its impact on their ability to manage anxiety (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
6. *Social Cognitive Theory* – provides a framework for the relationship between an individual's self-efficacy, emotions like anxiety, and behavior (Bandura, 2001).

Summary

Throughout recent years, anxiety has become more prevalent in school-age children. Anxiety directly impacts students' ability to focus on their academic studies, which creates additional stress and affects their well-being (Putwain et al., 2021; Woods & Scott, 2016). Therefore, teachers are forced to deal with anxiety in their classrooms when it arises. The problem is anxiety in adolescents, which impacts student learning, has skyrocketed over the past several years, and teachers are not adequately prepared to support students when they experience

anxiety in the classroom. Since anxiety affects students' academic performance (Deaton et al., 2022; Shih & Lin, 2017), teachers who create a positive environment have the potential to mitigate this anxiety, which could help students perform better academically (Neidiany et al., 2018). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. By exploring teacher experiences with mitigating student anxiety in the classroom, this study provides data to help future teachers and educators develop strategies that effectively lower student anxiety, directly impacting their academic performance.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore teachers' lived experiences while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. This chapter presents a review of the current literature related to the topic of study. First, Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory relevant to the relationship between student learning and emotions are discussed, followed by a synthesis of recent literature about factors that influence student anxiety and its impact on learning. Then, literature to illustrate how teachers can support student learning despite anxiety is reviewed. Finally, the need for the current study is addressed by identifying a gap in the literature regarding the preparation and experiences of teachers with specific strategies to mitigate the anxiety that impacts student learning.

Theoretical Framework

To explore and understand the relationship between student learning and their emotions, Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory served as a framework for this research. Bandura (2001) wrote that personal, behavioral, and environmental circumstances are intertwined. While Bandura (2001) focused on the related circumstances of learning, Ryan and Deci (2000) focused on the learner. Ryan and Deci (2000) held that motivation plays a crucial role in the learning process. By examining these theories, people can understand the relevance of an individual's ability to change their behavior based on their environment and the importance of motivation throughout the learning process (Bandura, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These theories underscore the importance of safe environments to

produce an atmosphere conducive to effective learning that encourages greater self-efficacy and motivation.

Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory provides a framework for the relationship between an individual's self-efficacy, emotions like anxiety, and behavior. In a time when the psycho-dynamic theory and behaviorism were on the rise, humans believed that behavior was directly related to the unconscious instincts in an individual or environmental stimuli, which demonstrates a one-way correlation (Bandura et al., 2003). However, Bandura (2001) sought to show the relationship between how the environment affects an individual's behavior and how individuals control their behaviors and emotions. Moreover, after careful analysis and adapting his social learning theory, Bandura (2001), the primary theorist, developed the social cognitive theory in 1986 to show how behaviors are directly impacted by the environment as well as cognitive abilities, which are multidirectional and interrelated. Therefore, an individual's surroundings, as well as their perception of themselves, determine their behavior.

According to the social cognitive theory, Bandura believed there is an interplay relationship between personal circumstances, environmental circumstances, and behavioral circumstances, demonstrating "triadic reciprocal causation" (Bandura et al., 2003; Wang & Lin, 2021). Bandura (2001) also showed how an individual's self-efficacy, observations, and reinforcements influence their behaviors. Furthermore, an individual's self-efficacy can motivate them to overcome their emotions, reducing their anxiety and stress (Bersh, 2021). However, for behaviors to change, individuals must have clear expectations, self-efficacy, reinforcements, and learn from observations.

By creating an atmosphere conducive to learning, teachers can help students manage their anxiety so effective learning can occur (G. Chen et al., 2020). While there are many causes of anxiety in students, teachers can help students reach their full potential throughout the learning process by encouraging them to develop positive self-efficacy, motivating them to believe in themselves, and creating a safe environment (Bersh, 2021). Students with anxiety often have low self-efficacy, which directly impacts their ability to learn and socialize with others. When individuals are in a hostile environment or negative emotions overtake a student's thought process, they cannot focus and learn (Wang & Lin, 2021). Thus, teachers who create a healthy environment encourage students to learn, provide motivation, and reinforce positive behaviors (G. Chen et al., 2020). By providing student feedback, teachers could instill tools for individuals to utilize when experiencing anxiety within the classroom.

Self-Determination Theory

At the beginning of their research, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2019) developed a theory based solely on intrinsic motivation. However, after further research, Ryan and Deci (2019), the primary theorists, developed the self-determination theory in 1985, which included intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and personal growth and wellbeing. Their self-determination theory provides a framework for the relationship between an individual's motivation and its impact on their ability to manage anxiety. According to the self-determination theory, motivation plays a vital role in a student's approach to learning, which is directly impacted by the environment (Englund et al., 2022). Therefore, an individual is either motivated to learn by the environment or is apathetic toward learning.

Furthermore, Ryan and Deci (2000) believed that individuals have simple emotional needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which influence motivation. Individuals

who experience autonomy are internally motivated because they understand they can determine what they do (Englund et al., 2022), while competent individuals understand why they do things and believe they can do them (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition, individuals who experience relatedness have a sense of belonging (Englund et al., 2022). For growth and development to occur, individuals must be self-determined, feel they can complete the task at hand, and have a sense of belonging.

For students with anxiety to reach their full potential, they must have autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When students struggle with anxiety, they often lack one or more of these basic emotional needs, directly impacting their motivation to learn (Englund et al., 2022). Anxiety can cripple students during the learning process by making them feel as though they do not belong socially or physically and that they cannot accomplish the task at hand (Englund et al., 2019). Furthermore, learning environments can directly impact student learning and motivation by crippling their autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Englund et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers must find ways to create an atmosphere that helps students feel as though they belong as well as feel competent in the subject matter (Englund et al., 2022). Without motivation, students are unwilling to participate in the learning process, directly impacting their growth and development.

Related Literature

Adolescents will face many challenges throughout their academic careers, including social anxiety, test anxiety, as well as general anxiety (Englund et al., 2019). According to the related literature, there are many causes of student anxiety, including academic influences, social interactions, lack of sleep, technology use, as well as social media (Elhai et al., 2018; Yan et al.,

2017). Researching and understanding the causes of student anxiety increases the potential for teachers to mitigate anxiety in the classroom.

Student Anxiety

Student anxiety has become more prevalent in school-age students. Often, students worry about different aspects of their lives; however, this worry can lead to anxiety if it becomes overwhelming for an individual (Bauer et al., 2020; Hood et al., 2021). In addition, around 20% of adolescents will encounter anxiety in some way (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019). However, Khesht-Masjedi et al. (2019) and Molinari et al. (2020) concluded that female students suffer from higher anxiety than males. Furthermore, in the past 25 years, there has been a 70% increase in anxiety and depression in children and adolescents (Keles et al., 2019). Based on this percentage, there is a strong possibility that teachers will have students in their classrooms suffering from anxiety and depression.

When students worry or suffer from anxiety or depression, it adversely affects their learning, academic achievements, and social interactions (Bauer et al., 2020; Hood et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2019). Some students have learned to use coping strategies to overcome their anxiety, but other individuals are hindered from reaching their full potential due to their anxiety (Shih & Lin, 2017). In addition, students who experience anxiety lack academic buoyancy and cannot recover from adversity and setbacks (Martin & Marsh, 2020). While there are many causes of anxiety in students, academic influences, social interaction, lack of sleep, technology use, and social media are some contributing factors to anxiety in individuals (Yan et al., 2017). Therefore, students struggle with anxiety for various reasons and are faced with the potential to cope with it.

Academic Stressors

In a classroom setting, many academic stressors contribute to anxiety. According to Ragusa et al. (2023), “academic stress and anxiety can be defined as a relationship between the student and the demands of the academic environment, which is perceived by the former as threatening and endangers their well-being” (p. 2). Middle and high school students face many academic stressors, including grades, homework, and tests (Wuthrich et al., 2020). Along with general anxiety, students also suffer from social anxiety as well as test anxiety in the classroom (England et al., 2019). Students often worry about different aspects of the classroom, which can also lead to anxiety (Bauer et al., 2020; Wuthrich et al., 2020). Some students struggle with collaborating in groups, while other students struggle with giving a presentation in front of the class. When students struggle to communicate effectively and experience social discomfort, anxiety can occur when teachers ask them to collaborate with other individuals in the class or if they have to give an oral presentation (England et al., 2019). Students who experience this anxiety can often become paralyzed by it, especially since education changed during COVID-19 and students were not able to collaborate with their peers in person or present in front of their peers.

To check for understanding of the content, teachers often call on students randomly in class, which can also lead to student anxiety in the classroom, especially if they do not understand the concept being taught (Hood et al., 2021). Unexpected questions can highlight and draw attention to the fact that students may not fully understand the concept being taught, which can lead to embarrassment and anxiety for a student. In addition, students who procrastinate and do not complete their work on time can suffer from anxiety due to getting behind (Ragusa et al., 2023). Moreover, failure to keep up in class can trigger anxiety in students due to a fear of not

getting all the material necessary to do well in a course (McIntyre et al., 2018) as well as completing all the required work (Ekwoye et al., 2020). Although there are many reasons students may struggle with anxiety, there are several key academic factors that may contribute to this anxiety including fear of failing, test anxiety, procrastination, and the classroom environment.

Fear of Failing. Academic performance can create anxiety in students who desire to perform well in a class, especially on tests (England et al., 2019; McIntyre et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2017). Furthermore, students desire to perform well academically to meet their own expectations as well as gain the approval of their teachers and parents (Hood et al., 2021; McIntyre et al., 2018). When students cannot attain the goals they set for themselves, they can suffer from fear of failure, and fear of failure directly impacts their self-efficacy because they become hesitant about their abilities (Caraway et al., 2003). However, Zarrin et al. (2020) found that while male and female students suffer from fear of failure, female students often suffer more. Moreover, when students have low responsibility and suffer from fear of failure, it often leads to procrastination due to wanting to avoid work and not fail (Choi, 2021; Zarrin et al., 2020). Additionally, students who suffer from fear of failure become disengaged in the classroom due to a lack of motivation (Caraway et al., 2003). While fear of failing may cause anxiety in students, taking assessments may also lead to additional stress for students.

Test Anxiety. Throughout a student's academic career, they will encounter many tests. Students often become anxious when a test arises whether it is a regular or standardized test. Some students channel this anxiety to motivate them to study harder and strive to excel on the test, while this anxiety hinders others (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019). Regardless of the test, excessive anxiety while taking a test may lead to poor test performance or even failure (McLeod

& Boyes, 2021). In addition, students can experience test anxiety when taking an assessment due to a fear of failing (McIntyre et al., 2018; Otterpohl et al., 2019). Students with lower self-efficacy tend to have higher test anxiety since they believe they cannot accomplish the learning task (Krispenz et al., 2019). Test anxiety often correlates with procrastination due to negative thoughts of self-efficacy (Krispenz et al., 2019). To avoid feeling anxious about taking a test, students may dodge studying for the test by procrastinating, which will only cause additional stress due to not being adequately prepared.

Procrastination. Procrastination can also cause anxiety in students due to the stress it triggers, which leads to additional issues. “Symptoms of academic procrastination include poor sleep, high levels of stress, delayed work due to lack of time, improper completion of homework, confusion, self-blame, feelings of guilt and inadequacy, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression” (Zarrin et al., 2020, p. 35). According to their study, Ragusa et al. (2023) found a positive correlation between procrastination and a student’s academic anxiety and stress. In addition, procrastination leads to students submitting late assignments and waiting until the last moment to study for assessments, which results in anxiety and a decline in their academic performance (Zarrin et al., 2020). When students wait until the last minute to complete an assignment or study for a test, anxiety can arise.

Additionally, procrastination can bring about additional stress and anxiety, ultimately affecting their school performance (Eisenbeck et al., 2019; Goroshit & Hen, 2021; Ragusa et al., 2023; Zarrin et al., 2020). Several studies have found that procrastination negatively impacts students’ academic success (Zarrin et al., 2020). By procrastinating, students wait until the last moment to complete a task for class, which causes unnecessary stress (Ragusa et al., 2023). When students procrastinate, it leads to lower academic performance, poor work quality, and a

lack of knowledge (Eisenbeck et al., 2019; Goroshit & Hen, 2021; Ragusa et al., 2023).

Therefore, the further students get behind in their schoolwork, the more stressed they become, ultimately leading to more anxiety.

Procrastination is also a sign of avoidance due to a fear of failing (Choi, 2021; Zarrin et al., 2020). Therefore, students will procrastinate to avoid completing a task they feel is not feasible to accomplish, directly impacting their self-esteem. In addition, around 37% of individuals who procrastinate fear failing an assignment or are conscientious about their grades (Zarrin et al., 2020). Furthermore, Zarrin et al. (2020) found that males tend to procrastinate more than females. Regardless of the reason for procrastination, it will cause additional stress on the individuals who chose to procrastinate, ultimately affecting their academics.

Classroom Environment. For students to succeed academically, they must be engaged in the classroom. However, students who suffer from anxiety often struggle to get the proper amount of sleep each night and find it difficult to focus and engage in classroom activities, which ultimately impacts their academic performance (Ng et al., 2022). Therefore, students need a classroom environment full of engaging activities to capture their full attention.

While teachers expect that appropriate social and academically engaging interactions occur, they are sometimes unaware of inappropriate social interactions and, therefore, unable to respond immediately when they happen (Burleigh & Wilson, 2021). Burleigh and Wilson (2021) noted that there are times when students demonstrate minor antagonistic conduct towards other students that go unnoticed by teachers due to the deviousness of it. In addition, these authors also found that students who experience negative social interactions in a classroom environment suffer from a lack of sleep as well as low self-esteem. Moreover, when students feel unsafe in a classroom environment, they often experience some form of anxiety, especially when they

experience an unkind or callous environment (Burleigh & Wilson, 2021; Englund et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers should strive to create a positive environment that encourages positive social interactions among peers.

When teachers have an unstructured environment in the classroom, it can lead to confusion among students, ultimately leading to anxiety (Englund et al., 2022). Students need clear directions and expectations to be successful in the classroom (Korinek, 2021). Otherwise, students become confused and unsure of how to proceed in uncertain situations (Englund et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers can create a positive environment where students are engaged, excited to come to class, and feel safe (Burleigh & Wilson, 2021; Englund et al., 2022), or they can create an unfriendly and cold environment where students feel ignored and are unengaged (Englund et al., 2022). Creating a classroom with clear expectations will make students feel safe and not suffer from the unnecessary stress that chaos causes.

Social Interactions

As students transition to middle and high school, their social interactions move from parent directed to peer directed. Therefore, peer relationships and social interactions become more important. In addition, this transitional period is a time of relational uncertainty, which leads to additional social concerns in students and challenges their ability to cope in social interactions (Ronchi et al., 2020). According to Molinari et al. (2020), students who can find positive friendships experience less anxiety and rejection, while students with negative friendships experience more anxiety and fear of rejection. Ronchi et al. (2020) found:

Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have shown that children who are more worried about social situations experience a higher level of distress in social encounters

and are more likely to experience a wide range of negative social outcomes, including low peer acceptance, peer rejection, victimization, and poor friendship quality. (p. 479)

Moreover, social interactions can cause chronic stress among individuals, eventually leading to anxiety (Saavedra-Rodríguez & Feig, 2013). In addition, there is an increase in social anxiety for teenagers due to the priority of peer relationships (Chiu et al., 2021). When students cannot form peer relationships or form negative relationships, it causes additional stress for them, leading to anxiety as well as avoidance.

Individuals who experience social anxiety avoid social interactions due to the fear of being viewed negatively or being rejected (Baltaci, 2019; Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2021; Ronchi et al., 2020; Voncken et al., 2006). By avoiding social interactions, individuals can prevent or decrease the amount of stress it causes (Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2021). Therefore, social anxiety has a negative impact on social interactions (Chiu et al., 2021; Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2021). In addition, students who suffer from social anxiety experience stress related to speaking in front of people, communicating with individuals, and even meeting new individuals (Baltaci, 2019). Moreover, students avoid working in groups or do not play an active role in group work but rather take a more passive approach and just listen (Higham & Demkowicz, 2021). When individuals experience negative social interactions, individuals distance themselves from friends and peers to avoid anxious feelings and moments of panic (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019).

Many times, when individuals struggle to socialize with others, their interactions are viewed as awkward and uncomfortable (Higham & Demkowicz, 2021). Moreover, students who suffer from social anxiety often conduct themselves in ways that prevent them from establishing encouraging peer rapport (Chiu et al., 2021; Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2021). Therefore, students often communicate and socialize through online resources rather than in-person (Baltaci, 2019).

However, a lack of social interactions and fear of rejection leads to loneliness, which results in high anxiety in students (McIntyre et al., 2018; Molinari et al., 2020).

According to Bandura's (2001) social learning theory, adolescents need to interact socially to build their social skills as well as their capability to adapt in social interactions (Garcia & O'Neil, 2021). Furthermore, students often rely on social support to limit the amount of stress they experience (Frazier et al., 2019). Therefore, by connecting with their peers, students can limit the amount of stress they experience as well as develop their psychosocial abilities.

Fear of Rejection. Adolescents want to be accepted by their peers and often depend on peer relationships for support and acceptance. When they do not feel accepted or feel rejected by their peers, it can be very stressful and lead to increased anxiety (Garcia & O'Neil, 2021; Molinari et al., 2020). If students have been rejected by peers previously, their fear of rejection increases, which leads to heightened anxiety (Chiu et al., 2021; Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2021; Sato et al., 2020). Once individuals have been rejected several times in peer relationships, they tend to be more sensitive to rejection, which can lead to them sensing rejection even when it is not occurring (Sato et al., 2020). This sense of rejection can lead individuals to avoid social interactions to prevent rejection and protect them from feelings of anxiety (Molinari et al., 2020; Ronchi et al., 2020). When students avoid social interactions, it prohibits them from forming peer relationships and friendships.

For teenagers, social interactions and friendships are essential. Without sustained friendships, individuals will become lonely and withdraw from social interactions (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019; Molinari et al., 2020; Sato et al., 2020). Therefore, social interactions become stressful for individuals, leading to social anxiety and interfering with their social

performance (Ronchi et al., 2020; Sato et al., 2020). “Moreover, research also has revealed that the link between heightened social anxiety and poor social success is mediated by more anxious children’s tendency to adopt avoidance strategies in distressing social situations” (Ronchi et al., 2020, p. 479). In addition, students who suffer from social anxiety fear the observations of other individuals (Y. Chen et al., 2020). When students worry about what other individuals think of them, they become more critical of themselves. Self-criticism can become a coping tactic and may lead to individuals acting in a way to meet the approval of others due to their overwhelming fear of being rejected and their desire to fit in (Sato et al., 2020). Experimental evidence has shown that students who become obsessive in their self-criticism eventually desire perfectionism, which can lead them to be at risk for increased anxiety and depression (Sato et al., 2020). Since perfectionism is not attainable, students will continue criticizing themselves, leading to unhealthy behaviors, anxious thoughts, and a lack of self-assurance.

Lack of Self-Assurance. When adolescents experience a lack of self-assurance, it can hinder them from being able to communicate with their peers (Voncken et al., 2006). A lack of ability to communicate directly impacts social interactions. This lack of communication skills influences how adolescents communicate with their peer groups, which can cause stress and lead to anxiety (Garcia & O’Neil, 2021; Saavedra-Rodríguez & Feig, 2013). According to Higham and Demkowicz (2021), “the evidence suggests that individuals with social anxiety have poorer academic self-efficacy, resulting from lowered self-assurance” (p. 498). Therefore, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-criticism are critical in students overcoming social anxiety (Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2021). However, developing a student’s self-esteem is the best way to attain self-assurance and overcome social anxiety.

Lack of Sleep

Adolescents need an average of 8 hours of sleep each night (Yan et al., 2017). Students who receive less than this amount have difficulty functioning cognitively, emotionally, physically, and behaviorally (Adams et al., 2022; McMakin et al., 2019). Individuals who do not feel safe when falling asleep or are worried about a threat have difficulty falling asleep and remaining asleep throughout the night, directly affecting their overall performance (Ricketts et al., 2018). While a lack of sleep affects an individual's functioning, it can also cause an increase in anxiety.

McMakin et al. (2019) studied the effects of a lack of sleep on anxiety and found a positive correlation between treatments for anxiety in adolescents and their sleep patterns. Wuthrich et al. (2020) concluded that students who experience an excessive amount of stress struggle to achieve the necessary sleep average. Adolescents who receive anxiety treatments can get a better night's sleep. When students experience a lack of sleep, their cognitive and emotional abilities are impaired, hindering them from focusing on their academic studies (Drapeau, 2022; Woods & Scott, 2016). Thus, students must get a proper amount of sleep each night to reach their full potential both cognitively and academically (Drapeau, 2022; McMakin et al., 2019; Ricketts et al., 2018). Without proper sleep, students cannot perform in the classroom to the best of their ability.

Technology

In a world of increased technology use, students have become more dependent on their smartphones as well as other technology. Unfortunately, students only see the positive benefits of using technology rather than being aware of the dangers involved, which can lead to unseen consequences, such as poor academic performance and anxiety (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020).

According to research, 68% of adolescents own and use a smartphone, and 87% have access to some form of a computer device (Keles et al., 2019). According to the statistical analysis by Yan et al. (2017), there is a correlation between anxiety and students who utilize technology as well as social media for more than four hours a day. Individuals suffering from high anxiety have trouble communicating with others and may become more dependent on other communication methods, such as digital and online (Bettman et al., 2020; Elhai et al., 2018; Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). Through statistical analysis, Elhai et al. (2018) found a positive correlation between social anxiety and excessive smartphone use, which caused individuals to miss the opportunity to interact with others socially. Students respond faster to others through technology than in person, leading to spontaneous behaviors and negative interactions (Domoff et al., 2019). In addition, increased technology use can lead students to have unexpected behaviors and emotions (Zeeni et al., 2018). When a negative interaction occurs through technology between two students, it can affect the in-person interaction in class in the following days, which may impact the class atmosphere and student anxiety.

Smartphone Use. While smartphones can be very beneficial, they also allow individuals to stay connected, which can lead to anxiety. Individuals with increased smartphone use suffer from anxiety as well as low self-esteem; however, some individuals increase their smartphone use to avoid stressors in their life (Domoff et al., 2019; Elhai et al., 2018). Given the availability of smartphones, many students are also equipped with smartphones (Dontre, 2021).

Approximately 26% of teenagers use smartphones at least 8 hours daily (Domoff et al., 2019). Therefore, students could quickly turn to their smartphones to avoid the stress of schoolwork, which could distract them from completing their schoolwork and ultimately lead to anxiety. According to Dontre (2021), it takes approximately 30 minutes for individuals to return to their

schoolwork once they have been distracted by technology use that is not academic in nature. Once a student is distracted, it takes a while for the student to get refocused and back to the tasks at hand.

While smartphones can be beneficial, they can also become very addictive. Over the years, smartphone use has become problematic and a health concern due to its overuse and dependence (Elhai et al., 2019; Pera, 2020; Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). Since technology is readily available to students for communication purposes as well as obtaining information, it can cause anxiety when that communication method is unavailable (Elhai et al., 2019; Pera, 2020; Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). Many students feel lost without their smartphones because they feel it is part of who they are and how they are identified (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). When students become so dependent on their smartphones, they often check them frequently, both consciously and unconsciously, while at school, work, and home (Qi, 2019). If students check their smartphones in a classroom setting, they not only distract the student but can also distract other students and the teacher (Qi, 2019). These distractions ultimately impact students' academic performance (Qi, 2019; Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). Once students' academic performance is negatively affected, it can lead to anxiety.

Since smartphones are so easily accessible, students often depend on them for various reasons, including peer communication. However, students relying heavily on smartphone communication tend to distance themselves from in-person communication and social interaction (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). When students allow this social distancing to occur, they can feel isolated from the world around them, leading to anxiety (Elhai et al., 2019; Pera, 2020; Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). While smartphones hinder individuals from communicating in person, they also provide easy access to social media.

Social Media. Social media use has significantly increased over the years. While social media can be used to share information and establish relationships, it can also seclude individuals from real life (Baltaci, 2019). Furthermore, individuals use social media to communicate with others, even when they do not feel comfortable socializing in person, primarily due to the fear of missing out (Bettman et al., 2020). Due to the increase in social media use, individuals can suffer from the fear of missing out, lethargy, anxiety, and depression (Bettman et al., 2020; Dhir et al., 2018; Elhai et al., 2019; Malak et al., 2022). When students cannot check their social media or do not have access to it, they can experience a sense of loneliness (Baltaci, 2019). When students are drawn to checking their social media accounts throughout the day, it may lead to overload, stress, and exhaustion (Azizi et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2020). Additionally, students utilizing technology for social media purposes often suffer from anxiety and depression due to being disappointed with their appearance, which directly impacts their self-esteem (Garcia & O'Neil, 2021; Zeeni et al., 2018). By utilizing social media, students can easily compare themselves to others, which directly impacts their view of themselves and results in further use of social media.

Individuals who use social media excessively can become addicted to it (Ali et al., 2021; Azizi et al., 2019; Baltaci, 2019; Malak et al., 2022). However, Azizi et al. (2019) conducted a study that found that girls have a stronger addiction to social media than boys. Furthermore, according to a case study conducted by Bettman et al. (2020) and cross-sectional surveys by Dhir et al. (2018), individuals who spend too much time on social media often have increased anxiety and depression. Conversely, students who fear missing out spend more time on social media, leading to physical and mental fatigue (Dhir et al., 2018; Masood et al., 2022). Therefore, increased social media use can affect student learning in the classroom due to increased fatigue

and anxiety (Azizi et al., 2019; Malak et al., 2022). In addition, students who are addicted to the internet as well as social media network sites have lower academic performance due to a lower concentration capability in the classroom (Azizi et al., 2019). Moreover, students addicted to social networking sites have “lower Grade Point Averages, less peer connections, and lower self-esteem” (Masood et al., 2022, p. 1). Students becoming too immersed in social media become distracted from their academics.

Furthermore, Primack et al. (2017) studied the effects of the amount of social media accounts an individual has versus the amount of time spent on social media. Through this study, Primack et al. (2017) found that students experienced higher anxiety levels when managing over seven social media accounts. However, too much social interaction through social media use can lead to exhaustion as well as information overload (Shi et al., 2020). To avoid exhaustion and technology overload, students should limit the amount of time they spend on their social media accounts (Azizi et al., 2019). In addition, social media platforms can either increase or decrease anxiety depending on their use (Bettman et al., 2020; Malak et al., 2022). When students struggle to communicate in person, it affects their ability to collaborate with other students in their classroom.

When online social interaction occurs, students often lack the social skills to interact with others, leading to fears of rejection or negativity (Ali et al., 2021; Y. Chen et al., 2020). Students who are anxious and fear social rejection in person often resort to submerging themselves in communication through social networking sites to avoid in-person communication and to avoid feeling anxious (Y. Chen et al., 2020). Students often use their social media accounts to communicate with their peers, rather than in person. However, younger individuals’ use of social media can also hinder social development skills (Keles et al., 2019). In addition, students who

lack happiness with social interactions and suffer from higher social anxiety tend to rely on social networking for communication, leading to addiction (Baltaci, 2019; Y. Chen et al., 2020). By communicating online, individuals depend on that form of communication and miss opportunities to communicate in person.

Impacts of Student Anxiety

While student anxiety has many causes, the impact can vary for everyone. Thus, anxiety can impact students positively or negatively (Shih & Lin, 2017). Mild to mediocre anxiety can help to motivate students (England et al., 2019). Therefore, sometimes anxiety can be beneficial, especially if it helps students focus and motivates them to perform their best. At the same time, a student's well-being and academic performance are affected when they suffer amplified distress (Wuthrich et al., 2020). Correspondingly, high anxiety negatively impacts students academically as well as physically (Shih & Lin, 2017). "Literatures have shown that performance in school was found to be affected by many symptoms of anxiety and depression, such as difficulties in concentration, lack of interest and motivation, preoccupations, fatigability, and poor attendance" (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019, p. 799). When students suffer from high anxiety, it can directly impact their academic performance, school attendance, and their well-being (England et al., 2019; Shih & Lin, 2017).

Academic Performance

In the field of education, students will experience stress at some point during their academic careers. Academic stress occurs when the required amount of academic work exceeds the students' capacity to be flexible (Ekwoyee et al., 2020; Frazier et al., 2019). While stress can benefit some students, it can lead to anxiety in other individuals (Rai & Desy, 2022; Shih & Lin, 2017). Furthermore, too much stress can hinder academic performance (Rai & Desy, 2022).

According to Choi (2021), academic stress and anxiety can lead to “poor academic performance, academic procrastination, and course incompleteness” (p. 2108). Moreover, anxiety can increase or reduce performance depending on the student’s anxiety levels (England et al., 2019; Shih & Lin, 2017). In addition, students who experience less stress can perform better academically (Rai & Desy, 2022). Additionally, anxiety can cause students to have lower concentration, lower scores, and lower self-esteem.

Lower Concentration. Students with high anxiety often become distracted in class and are focused on their fears, while students with lower levels of anxiety can focus on the lessons. Anxiety also hinders students academically when it leads to students being unable to concentrate, having difficulty presenting to the class, and feeling overwhelmed while taking tests (Jones et al., 2019). While student anxiety is concerning on its own, it becomes even more disturbing when it causes students to be unable to focus, leads to lower motivation, and eventually causes students to fail academically (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019). Anxiety often generates fear in students, which affects their well-being and academic performance (Shih & Lin, 2017). Thus, students who are unable to concentrate may experience lower academic scores due to the inability to focus.

Lower Scores. When students have high anxiety levels, it negatively impacts their ability to perform on a test or in the classroom (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). Increased anxiety can also lead students to avoid studying for a test to try to cope with the anxiety, resulting in decreased academic performance (Adams et al., 2022; McLeod & Boyes, 2021). While some students may try to avoid studying for a test when they experience anxiety, other students excessively study for a test which causes them to worry and ultimately distracts them while they are taking the test (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). Furthermore, students who experience high anxiety perform lower

academically (England et al., 2019; Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019), while increased test anxiety leads to lower academic achievement (Adams et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2019; McIntyre et al., 2018; Otterpohl et al., 2019). However, teachers who create a safe environment and mitigate anxiety have the potential to help students increase their academic performance and boost a student's self-esteem.

Lower Self-Esteem. Students with lower self-esteem perform lower academically (Moyano et al., 2020). While students with lower self-esteem struggle immensely when they fail, students with higher self-esteem can recuperate from a lower score (Zarrin et al., 2020). According to Moyano et al. (2020), "self-esteem is related to academic performance in such a way that it is linked with school success or failure" (p. 2). However, procrastination has a negative effect on a student's self-esteem since it inadvertently leads to lower academic performance due to the interruptions it causes (Tus, 2020). These negative setbacks can lead students to experience a rise in their anxiety. When students with lower self-esteem fail, they experience total defeat, which can become debilitating to them since they perceive that no action or avoidance will keep them from failing again (Zarrin et al., 2020). On the other hand, focusing too much on a passing grade can overly boost self-esteem and place the student at a standstill, leading to lower academic performance in the future (Tus, 2020). In addition, students with anxiety also struggle with academic self-efficacy due to a fear of performing poorly (Fila & Eatough, 2018). Therefore, self-esteem directly impacts a student's academic performance and anxiety levels.

School Attendance

Academics can cause additional stress in students due to classroom environments, social interactions, and academic performance. Stress can also cause students to try to avoid school,

which adversely affects their attendance in school (Finning et al., 2020). Consequently, this stress can lead to additional stress due to missing schoolwork and having to make up work, leading to anxiety, absenteeism, and school reluctance.

Absenteeism. When students struggle with anxiety, they usually battle with attending school for various reasons (Finning et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019). Anxiety causes students to avoid school settings, which in turn leads to poor attendance (Jones et al., 2019). Furthermore, students who suffer from anxiety are absent from school more, which affects their academics as well as increases their anxiety (Finning et al., 2019; Lawrence et al., 2019). When students miss schoolwork, they are required to complete the work missed as well as any additional work assigned when they return, which can increase their stress and anxiety levels. In addition, students with extenuating health concerns can experience anxiety due to missing too much school due to illness (Finning et al., 2019). Students attend school for an average of 8 hours a day, meaning that an adequate amount of their day is spent there. Therefore, it is essential to understand the causes of anxiety in students (Jones et al., 2019). Students who miss too many days due to anxiety can eventually become reluctant to attend school due to the pattern that has been set.

School Reluctance. Attending school and class participation causes anxiety for some individuals, while a fear of being called on or working in group activities discourages students from coming to school on regular school days (England et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019). Many times, students fear how peers and teachers will evaluate them or how they will perform on an assessment, which causes them to be reluctant to attend school (Finning et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019). When students struggle with interacting socially, they can be viewed adversely by their peers, which can cause them to be anxious about interacting with others in a classroom setting or

avoiding these opportunities (Jones et al., 2019). In addition, a student's academic performance is negatively affected when they do not regularly attend school (Jones et al., 2019) as students who regularly attend school are more likely to achieve academic success (Lawrence et al., 2019). Resilience plays a crucial role in students having a good standing with school attendance due to overcoming obstacles and adverse situations (Finning et al., 2020); therefore, students must build up their resilience to overcome school reluctance.

Student Well-Being

Anxiety directly impacts an individual's well-being (Ekwonye et al., 2020). Many times, anxiety affects the sleep patterns of individuals and can lead to insomnia and sleep disturbances (Garcia & O'Neil, 2021; Manzar et al., 2021; Werneck et al., 2021). In addition, students who cannot sleep due to anxiety can develop unhealthy behaviors and eating habits (Shih & Lin, 2017; Werneck et al., 2021). Therefore, students with anxiety can suffer from physical complications, unhealthy eating habits, and loss of sleep.

Physical Complications. Furthermore, students who spend too much time in front of a screen often lose track of time, which causes them to develop unhealthy eating habits (Werneck et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2017; Zeeni et al., 2018). These unhealthy eating habits directly impact their self-esteem and stress levels. However, students who lack self-esteem can become anxious regarding their appearance. Moreover, students who suffer from anxiety are less likely to participate in physical activity (Keles et al., 2019). In contrast, students who participate in physical activity experience fewer anxiety symptoms (Kandola & Stubbs, 2020). Kandola and Stubbs (2020) noted that increased anxiety levels may eventually cause individuals to develop cardiovascular disease and lead to early death. Therefore, students who experience high anxiety can experience physical complications as well.

Insomnia. Students who struggle with anxiety often struggle with falling asleep and remaining asleep (Garcia & O’Neil, 2021; Manzar et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2022; Werneck et al., 2021). When students with anxiety or depression experience a lack of sleep, it often leads to student fatigue and poor sleep quality (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019; Wuthrich et al., 2020). In addition, if students do not get a good night’s sleep due to anxiety, it can lead to sleepiness in the classroom, which causes students to miss valuable material (Manzar et al., 2021). However, addressing the lack of sleep adolescents receive can improve their mental health, which can lessen the effects of anxiety (Drapeau, 2022).

Around 15% of teenagers get the recommended 8 hours of sleep or more, leading to 85% of teenagers not receiving the minimum recommended hours of sleep (Garcia & O’Neil, 2021). Therefore, many students have an academic disadvantage due to this lack of sleep directly impacting their cognitive ability (Drapeau, 2022). When students get an insufficient amount of sleep each night, they cannot understand the material being presented in class, which can lead to struggling on assessments and a lack of engagement in the classroom (Ng et al., 2022). In addition, students struggle with recalling information while taking assessments when they cannot sleep, which can cause additional anxiety (Manzar et al., 2021). Without the proper amount of sleep, students are unable to function at their best, which can lead to unnecessary anxiety.

Responses to Student Anxiety

Anxiety can increase if students feel unsafe in their environments (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018). Therefore, teachers and parents must form student relationships to mitigate their anxiety (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018; Otterpohl et al., 2019). Students who establish positive relationships with their teachers are more engaged in learning and experience less anxiety (G. Chen et al., 2020). Furthermore, student–teacher relationships can motivate students to perform

well, increasing or decreasing anxiety (G. Chen et al., 2020; England et al., 2019). However, students who feel unsafe in a classroom experience an increase in anxiety and become disengaged (G. Chen et al., 2020; Kurdi & Archambault, 2018). Thus, positive responses and relationships between students, parents, and teachers play a vital role in student anxiety.

Peer Response and Involvement

Students with a solid social network who supports them can overcome obstacles that try to hinder them. According to Lei et al. (2022), “Social support refers to the stable psychological and material resources provided by an individual’s interpersonal social network for coping with stress” (p. 888). When students have a strong peer support group, they achieve higher academically as well as have a stronger sense of belonging (Korinek, 2021; Mishra, 2020). In their study, Wuthrich et al. (2020) found that middle and high school students experience greater anxiety levels due to lower peer connections than elementary school students. Students who have a positive relationship with their peers have positive self-efficacy, while students who have a negative relationship with their peers become stressed (Lei et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). In addition, students experience higher resilience when they are connected and have peer support (Wuthrich et al., 2020). Likewise, when students struggle academically, a solid social support network is beneficial since it provides the support needed to manage their academic struggles as well as perform better academically (Lei et al., 2022). Furthermore, students who have high quality friendships and relationships tend to live a healthier life mentally and can combat social anxiety from the onset (Chiu et al., 2021). In contrast, Chiu et al. (2021) also noted that students with lower quality friendships struggle with lower self-esteem and depressive thoughts. Therefore, students need to have quality friendships to support them as they grow.

Parental Response and Involvement

Many parents want their students to do well and succeed in school. However, this leads some parents to hover over their children and causes unnecessary academic stress (Love et al., 2020; Otterpohl et al., 2019). Rather than providing the answers, parents should look for opportunities to solve learning problems together in a fun and interactive way (Lei et al., 2022). Furthermore, parents that provide too much support can hinder their students from developing their independence, leading to anxiety in the future (Love et al., 2020). Therefore, students benefit from having independence when learning how to study and learn rather than parents completing their work for them.

Moreover, students who receive parental support are intrinsically motivated to learn due to personal satisfaction rather than extrinsic rewards (Mishra, 2020). When students are intrinsically motivated, they have greater cognitive abilities compared to students who are extrinsically motivated by rewards (Moyano et al., 2020). In addition, students demonstrate more robust academic performance and have a higher self-concept when they experience positive and consistent parental support at home (Tus, 2020). Thus, parental support plays a crucial role in a student's life.

In a classroom setting, students will benefit from completing tasks in class rather than taking them home to complete with parents. When students struggle with anxiety due to low self-esteem, a positive response and word of encouragement from a parent can impact a student's well-being (Neidiany et al., 2018; Otterpohl et al., 2019). Thus, parental encouragement of student independence is crucial for establishing ways to handle academic stressors. According to Mishra (2020), a student's family is a great social support for them. While parents should not complete a student's work for them, they can provide a healthy balance by asking students about

their homework and monitoring their progress (Lei et al., 2022). Parents must also help students develop strong social skills by encouraging students to interact with peers as well as teachers (Neidiany et al., 2018). In addition, parents can also ask students about their day and help them navigate the difficulties they face at school daily (Lei et al., 2022). Without the ability to socialize, students cannot communicate effectively with their peers and teachers, leading to behavioral problems and academic breakdowns (Neidiany et al., 2018). By establishing positive relationships with their students, parents can provide another level of social support to help them achieve academic success.

Teacher Response

Teachers can make a student's day better or worse through their actions and words. Therefore, positive daily communication and teacher affirmation can create a safe atmosphere, encourage learning, and lead to student engagement and academic success (Mishra, 2020; Nyborg et al., 2022). However, negative teacher interactions directly impact a student's self-efficacy in a negative manner (Yu et al., 2022). In addition, students who develop a positive relationship with their teachers can interact with them outside of the learning environment, encouraging them to seek additional help and feedback on assignments (Mishra, 2020). Teachers are influential individuals in a student's life. Therefore, they not only strive to teach students academically, but they also have the opportunity to teach students life skills. By teaching life skills, teachers can also teach students how to manage adverse situations (Lei et al., 2022). Furthermore, teachers can help students achieve academic buoyancy to overcome academic hindrances (Martin & Marsh, 2020). To combat negative thinking and attitudes, teachers can help students develop positive thinking skills toward their situation, boosting their confidence and decreasing their anxiety (Lei et al., 2022). Individuals who think positively of themselves

and their environments have a more optimistic outlook on life, which leads to lower stress and anxiety.

As students become comfortable in a learning environment, they are more apt to participate in the learning process as well as classroom discussions. Furthermore, for participation to occur, students must feel safe and encouraged to contribute to the discussion (Nyborg et al., 2022). Based on the teacher's response, students are either engaged in the learning process or become disengaged (G. Chen et al., 2020; Englund et al., 2022; Poysa et al., 2019). In addition, teachers' interactions with students influence their perception of the class and learning environment (G. Chen et al., 2020; Kurdi & Archambault, 2018; Neidiany et al., 2018; Nyborg et al., 2022). Therefore, students who develop relationships with their teachers are more likely to achieve higher academically (Korinek, 2021; Mishra, 2020; Neidiany et al., 2018). Since students have the potential to have multiple teachers throughout the school day, their engagement can fluctuate based on their engagement as well as teacher interaction (Poysa et al., 2019). Thus, teachers who positively interact with students can mitigate their anxiety and inspire learning by recognizing their behaviors, creating a safe environment, and providing words of affirmation.

Recognizing Behaviors. Since teachers spend many hours with their students each week, they can often recognize when students are struggling (Korinek, 2021). Although it is easy for teachers to recognize and respond to external behaviors (Burleigh & Wilson, 2021; Higham & Demkowicz, 2021; Korinek, 2021; McLeod & Boyes, 2021), due to anxiety being internal, it is much harder for teachers to identify student anxiety (Higham & Demkowicz, 2021). Students who are experiencing anxiety suffer from internal complications, which can deceive teachers into

thinking students are doing well (Korinek, 2021; McLeod & Boyes, 2021). Therefore, teachers must be cognizant of students and what they observe.

In addition, teachers must be attentive to their students' progress and grades. By taking steps to monitor student progress, teachers can be proactive in their approach to helping students who are struggling (Lei et al., 2022). When students begin to struggle academically, it can lead to additional stress and anxiety for that student.

Creating a Safe Environment. Teachers must do everything they can to create a safe environment for students to learn. In addition, student–teacher relationships directly impact a student's sense of safety in the classroom (Molinari et al., 2020). Positive student–teacher relationships make students feel safer, while negative student–teacher relationships make students feel uncomfortable. Therefore, it is vital for school environments to promote positive peer-to-peer relationships and peer-to-teacher relationships to endorse resiliency, which will help students achieve higher academically (Finning et al., 2020). Teachers should also encourage students to seek positive peer relationships that are uplifting and encouraging to foster healthy relationships (Finning et al., 2020). By establishing positive student–teacher relationships as well as peer relationships, students will feel safer in their school environment.

When students do not feel safe, they cannot learn effectively (Korinek, 2021; McLeod & Boyes, 2021). In addition, teachers must have clear expectations so students understand what is expected of them and understand the consequences if those expectations are not met (Korinek, 2021). Students can focus and perform better academically when they understand what is expected of them (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). Therefore, teachers must have clear rules and expectations with consequences if those rules are not followed (Korinek, 2021). Without clear expectations, students struggle with boundaries and what are acceptable behaviors.

Engagement and Academic Buoyancy. When students are engaged, learning can occur (Korinek, 2021). However, students who are disengaged due to anxious emotions may be unable to concentrate, which affects their academic performance (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018). Through proximity and a positive student–teacher relationship, students can feel safe, motivated, and engaged in the classroom, ultimately leading to higher academic performance (Molinari et al., 2020). In addition, motivation and engagement are driven by students who set goals for themselves, are ambitious due to self-efficacy, and desire to do well (Caraway et al., 2003). When students are engaged in the learning process, they are motivated to learn the concepts being taught and develop academic buoyancy.

Academic buoyancy helps students overcome adverse situations (Lei et al., 2022; Wuthrich et al., 2020). In addition, students who struggle with anxiety have lower academic buoyancy, while students with high academic buoyancy have less anxiety (Martin & Marsh, 2020). Students with higher academic buoyancy seem to enjoy school more, participate in class more, and have higher self-esteem (Wuthrich et al., 2020). Furthermore, when students are taught how to deal with academic adversity and develop academic buoyancy, they can overcome adverse situations, which leads to fewer academically adverse situations in their lives (Martin & Marsh, 2020). Since academic buoyancy is vital in the learning process, it is critical for this to be instilled in students to build resilience.

Affirmation. Students need to hear affirmation from their teachers. When teachers provide students with more positive interaction and affirmation than negative correction, students respond positively and become more productive in the classroom (Korinek, 2021). Furthermore, teachers can provide more opportunities to experience success in their classes by offering more chances for students to practice a particular concept to receive positive feedback (Lei et al.,

2022). By encouraging students to have a positive mentality about their ability to achieve a concept successfully, teachers can inspire students to have a positive self-concept, which leads to better academic performance (Tus, 2020). Students who are inspired and encouraged to have positive self-efficacy believe they can achieve their goals.

Additionally, incentives are also effective for students by rewarding them when they succeed in a classroom setting (Lei et al., 2022). Teachers can also inspire self-efficacy in students by encouraging a student to achieve academic success (Lei et al., 2022). Student self-efficacy is crucial to the learning environment since positive self-efficacy leads to students believing in themselves and overcoming obstacles. In contrast, negative self-efficacy causes students to believe they cannot achieve their goals (Tus, 2020). Therefore, self-efficacy plays a crucial role in students overcoming setbacks (Lei et al., 2022).

Summary

Adolescent anxiety has recently increased, impacting student learning (Keles et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2017). According to the reviewed literature, several factors impact student anxiety, including academics, social interactions, lack of sleep, technology use, and social media (Bauer et al., 2020; Hood et al., 2021; Primack et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2017). Additionally, researchers have observed that adolescents have developed habits of checking their technology and social media throughout the night, which directly affects their sleep (Bettman et al., 2020). Due to a lack of sleep, adolescents may suffer from increased anxiety and be unable to concentrate on their academics (McMakin et al., 2019). Furthermore, researchers have examined the impacts of student anxiety on their well-being, academic performance, and school attendance (England et al., 2019). Using the social cognitive theory and the self-determination theory to explain the

relationships between student learning and their emotions, the reviewed literature discussed the impact of anxiety on their academic performance and well-being.

A gap in the literature exists regarding the experiences and preparation of teachers with specific strategies to mitigate high anxiety that impacts student learning. Although researchers have examined the parental responses, additional research is needed to explore teachers' experiences as they respond to students with high anxiety (Love et al., 2020). By examining the factors influencing student anxiety and its impact, teachers can determine the best responses and strategies to mitigate anxiety to increase student learning.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

While there are many methods for researchers to utilize when conducting a qualitative study, a transcendental phenomenology study captures the lived experiences of individuals (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. In this study student anxiety was generally defined as feelings of uneasiness that impact academic performance (Shih & Lin, 2017; Zeng et al., 2022). By focusing on the lived experiences of others, a researcher can see the phenomenon from a fresh new perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This chapter incorporates the data collection methods that were used to demonstrate the lived experiences of individuals through interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts. Once the data were gathered, I found the common themes and presented them in my study. The study focused on the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers related to student anxiety in the classroom.

Research Design

Through his philosophical study, Husserl developed transcendental phenomenology, which seeks to express individual experiences through qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl emphasized intentionality, intuition, *epoché*, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, individuals experience phenomena differently due to their intentionality, intuition, and lived experiences. A transcendental phenomenological study was utilized for this study since it describes how a particular phenomenon affects individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Method

A qualitative research study examines a specific phenomenon and why it occurs. The phenomenon studied was student anxiety and how it affects student learning. To examine the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers as they support students with high anxiety, a qualitative study was conducted. Throughout this qualitative study, I conducted interviews with teachers to collect data and find commonalities in the data set (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To finding commonalities among teachers who have taught adolescents with high anxiety in the classroom, I gathered data from individuals by interviewing them about how student anxiety in the classroom has affected them. Furthermore, I aimed to ensure different perspectives were presented throughout the study and to accurately report those findings to represent multiple realities regarding teachers' lived experiences while interacting with and supporting adolescents with high anxiety.

Research Design

A phenomenological study was conducted since it describes how a particular phenomenon affects individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individuals experience phenomena from different perspectives but cannot separate their individual experiences from actual reality. "Intentionality refers to the consciousness, to the internal feeling of being conscious of something" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). While reality takes place in the world, the feeling of this reality may not continue to take place in an individual (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, individuals can experience phenomena in the world around them; however, they may not continue to remember the feeling they experienced when the phenomena took place. Husserl believed that "every intentionality is comprised of a noema and noesis" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 29). Therefore, noema and noesis correlate with one another. "The 'perceived as such' is the noema; the 'perfect

self-evidence' is the noesis" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 30). Individuals will perceive phenomena in the world differently due to the different experiences they have had throughout their lifetime.

Intuition also plays a crucial role in transcendental phenomenology. Individuals have their own born intuition regarding phenomena that they experience. "Thus, intuition is the beginning place in deriving knowledge of human experience, free of everyday sense impressions and the natural attitude" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32). Without intuition, individuals would not have prior knowledge regarding an experience. Therefore, intuition impacts how individuals view and experience the world around them. Throughout this study, the goal was to focus on the teachers' lived experiences regarding their understanding and knowledge of students with high anxiety.

Research Approach

For a study to truly focus on the lived experiences of others, the researcher must have *epoché* and abstain from biased opinions (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout this transcendental phenomenological study, I set aside personal experiences and focused on the experiences of others. However, each researcher brings their values and viewpoints to a study. Thus, these viewpoints will affect the study regardless of how cautious a researcher is. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), every researcher has beliefs and ideals that can influence the study, but qualitative researchers reveal their beliefs and values throughout the study. As a researcher, it is crucial to conduct a study that includes as little bias as possible. Therefore, as the researcher, I set aside my preconceived judgment and experiences, which were recorded in a reflexive journal (Appendix K). By setting aside my pre-conceived judgment and experiences, I was able to look at the phenomenon from a new perspective. As noted by Moustakas (1994), I was able to conduct a study that was not influenced by my perspective but through the lens of others. In addition, the study must have transcendental phenomenology reduction, which presents the

information and phenomenon from a fresh new perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation also plays a part in the fundamental nature of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, transcendental phenomenology reduction and imaginative variation must coexist to exemplify the real meaning of the phenomenon being studied.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers who support students with anxiety in the classroom?

Sub-Question One

What strategies do teachers use to help students with anxiety develop autonomy in the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

How have teachers been trained or equipped to help students with anxiety increase their competence?

Sub-Question Three

What strategies have teachers found to be most effective in helping students with anxiety develop relatedness?

Sub-Question Four

What strategies can teachers use to promote self-efficacy in students with anxiety?

Setting and Participants

To explore adolescents with high anxiety as well as teachers' lived experiences, this study was conducted in a central Atlantic state with certified teachers in public schools at the middle and high school levels. Participants in this study were certified teachers in various

content areas with a minimum of 3 years of experience who have encountered student anxiety in their classrooms. By collecting data from certified middle and high school teachers, this study depicts teachers' experiences with students with high anxiety.

Setting

Interviews, focus groups, and participant letter prompts were conducted with certified teachers in public schools in a central Atlantic state at the middle and high school levels to explore teachers' lived experiences while interacting with and supporting adolescents with high anxiety. Over the past several years, student anxiety has been rising nationwide (Deaton et al., 2022; Keles et al., 2019). After personally experiencing the rise of student anxiety in a private school in a central Atlantic state, I believe that to understand student anxiety better, it was essential to study teachers' lived experiences throughout this state, including rural and urban schools. While some students have learned to deal with their anxiety through coping strategies, others continue to struggle, directly impacting their academic performance (Shih & Lin, 2017). By including certified teachers from public schools across a central Atlantic state, the study was not limited to an individual school or school district but instead focused on teachers' lived experiences across a broader area. In addition, this study provided data regarding teacher preparations and experiences across content areas.

When I collected the data, it was essential to draw from various areas to limit biases and further expand the present study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It was also essential to conduct the study in a setting where I, as the researcher, did not have any power over the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, this study was conducted using a variety of public schools to limit bias opportunities.

Participants

The participants included certified middle and high school teachers in public schools in a central Atlantic state with a minimum of 3 years of experience who have encountered student anxiety in their classrooms. I sought to have 12 to 15 individuals participate in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although I sought to recruit middle and high school teachers in public and accredited private schools, none of the individuals who agreed to participate were currently teaching in an accredited private school. However, four participants had previously taught at accredited private schools prior to teaching at a public school. Individuals participating in this study came from various backgrounds, ages, and gender to provide a broader scope of lived experiences. By interviewing certified teachers in various content areas, I was able to gain insight into various content areas rather than focusing on a particular content area. Furthermore, using teachers with a minimum of 3 years of experience allowed more seasoned teachers to participate rather than novice teachers, which provided more opportunities for teachers to work with students with high anxiety.

The sampling types consisted of convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. Through convenience sampling, I recruited participants using social media posts as well as online communication. I used participants who volunteered to participate in the study and met the qualifications to participate. Therefore, I purposively ensured all participants were from an accredited private or public school in the central Atlantic state with at least 3 years of experience. Since I struggled to find enough participants, I conducted snowball sampling to find additional participants. In snowball sampling, the researcher uses their participants to propose other individuals to participate in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant was informed of the nature of the study and allowed to withdraw their consent at any time

throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Positionality

Individuals need to glean insights from the research of others to understand a topic better and identify opportunities to expound further (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As an educator, I wanted to understand student anxiety in the classroom and the best strategies for mitigating it. By utilizing the social constructivist framework, I expanded my knowledge on this topic by interacting with and gleaning insight from teachers who have experienced student anxiety in the classroom. After conducting interviews and focus groups, I identified the preliminary codes found throughout the data, which is consistent with the social constructivist framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, I reported the common themes found throughout the study.

Interpretive Framework

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers using the social constructivist framework interact with their participants to understand better their experiences and the place they live and work. Social constructivists also desire to discover patterns between individuals who are interviewed or establish a theory through inductive reasoning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As an educator, I am consistently and constantly analyzing situations and trying to determine if a pattern exists. I also enjoy inductive reasoning and realize that life experiences shape how individuals think and act. By gaining insight from other individuals, researchers can determine if patterns exist and interpret how individuals view the world.

Philosophical Assumptions

For individuals to better understand a research study, the researcher must provide the philosophical assumptions they hold (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By providing these assumptions, individuals can understand how and why the research was conducted and better understand the

findings from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the ontological assumption pertains to the nature of reality and how that affects the different viewpoints participants may have. Qualitative researchers need to recognize that individuals view the world differently. Therefore, I did my best to get to know my participants and understand their perspectives related to their view of the world as well as the topic being studied. As these participants partook in the qualitative study, I reported their perspectives and explored the perspectives presented while understanding that all individuals are different. Thus, as a researcher, it was crucial to report the themes found throughout the topic of study from the various perspectives presented. Throughout this study, I aimed to ensure I understood the different perspectives that were presented and accurately reported those findings to represent multiple realities regarding the topic studied.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption is another philosophical assumption that appears in a qualitative study. Qualitative researchers need to ensure their participants are as comfortable as possible throughout the study to gather accurate information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hence, I spent time getting to know my participants during each interview by asking them questions. By spending time with my participants, I could understand firsthand why they believe what they do. Furthermore, it was vital that participants feel comfortable enough to share openly and honestly to gather reliable data to be used in a study.

As part of the epistemological assumption, researchers must obtain subjective data from individuals' experiences. Therefore, researchers must be open and honest with their participants to gain their trust. By being honest, participants will feel more comfortable, which could lead to

collecting more effective data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). If a participant does not trust a researcher, they could withhold information, which could ultimately impact the study being conducted. I had to earn the participant's trust by explaining the purpose of the study as well as how their information would be kept secure and private (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once trust was gained, I was able to gather subjective data from the participants through individual interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts. By asking specific questions, participants could share from their own experiences, so I could report their experiences accurately and precisely to fulfill my epistemological position.

Axiological Assumption

According to the axiological assumption, each researcher brings their own values and viewpoints to a study. Therefore, these viewpoints will affect the study regardless of how cautious a researcher is. It is vital for individuals reading a study to understand the researcher's biases as well as their values. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in the study" (p. 21). As a researcher, it is essential to conduct a study that includes as little bias as possible.

I believe all students can learn, and teachers should be adequately trained to ensure this occurs. In my experience, students who experience anxiety in a school setting are unable to focus in the classroom, and therefore need to be shown grace when experiencing anxiety. When students are suffering from anxiety in a classroom, teachers are often unaware and therefore unable to help support them. Many teachers lack the preparation needed to be able to support students with anxiety and often do not know the signs to look for. By being aware of my values and biases, I acknowledged and reported them in the study through a reflexive journal (Appendix K). By doing this, I can be aware of how they affected my qualitative study.

Researcher's Role

To conduct a reliable study, researchers must choose a site that does not have a “vested interest” in the study’s conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a school administrator, I did not allow my colleagues to participate in this study. Consequently, I sought to gain participants from outside my institution for this study. In addition, as noted previously, I set aside my knowledge of supporting students with anxiety to leave behind all biases related to student anxiety in my reflexive journal (Appendix K). Thus, I reported the findings from my study without bias.

Procedures

To ensure the study being conducted was valid, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through Liberty University prior to collecting any data. Participants also provided consent to participate in the study and were allowed to withdraw that consent at any point during the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Permissions

Before recruiting participants for my study or collecting any data, I gained IRB approval through Liberty University, which is attached in Appendix A. To conduct data collection, researchers must ensure that their participants grant their consent to participate in the study. Thus, I obtained participant consent before collecting data.

Recruitment Plan

Throughout this study, participants were recruited through social media posts and web-based communication by posting a recruitment flyer (Appendix B). When individuals reached out via e-mail regarding their interest in participating in my study, I provided them with a recruitment letter (Appendix C), which had a link to a screening survey (Appendix D). Once individuals completed the screening survey, if they meet the participant criteria, they received an

acceptance letter (Appendix E) or a non-acceptance letter (Appendix E) if they did not meet the criteria to participate in this study. Finally, prior to conducting interviews, participants filled out a consent form (Appendix F) and returned the signed document via Adobe Sign.

Once I had a couple of participants qualify and sign a consent form to participate in my research study, I conducted a pilot study on the first two individuals. By conducting a pilot study, I ensured that the interview questions, focus group questions, and participant letter prompts provided the data necessary to answer the research questions. Additionally, a pilot study allowed the researcher the opportunity to adjust their research study to gain efficient data and ensured my data collection methods could sufficiently answer the research questions (Kim, 2011). A pilot study also allowed me to ensure the interview questions and focus group questions were clear and easily understood. Finally, the pilot study provided enough data to ensure the participant letter prompt instructions were clear so that the correct data were collected. Once the pilot study was completed, I began the data collection phase of this research study.

Data Collection Plan

When conducting this qualitative study, I collected a variety of valuable and pertinent data regarding teachers' experiences dealing with student anxiety. For this study, individual interviews were conducted to understand the participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Following the individual interviews, the participants were invited to participate in one of three focus groups to gain additional data for the study as well as provided an opportunity to ask follow-up questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, participants were asked to write a letter of advice to future teachers regarding helpful strategies to implement in the classroom for students with anxiety.

Individual Interviews

When conducting this qualitative study, I interviewed 12 participants from various public schools. Interviews took place through Microsoft Teams, an online platform. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to fill out a consent form and return the signed document via Adobe Sign. On the consent form, information was given about the study, and participants were instructed about their ability to withdraw their participation at any time throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To begin the interview, I spent some time getting to know the participants through general background questions, so they felt comfortable to be open and honest. Throughout the interview process, I sought to obtain information regarding the central research question (CRQ) and sub-questions (SQ) about how student anxiety manifests in the classroom, how teachers have been trained or equipped to support students with anxiety, and what strategies teachers have found to be most effective in helping students with anxiety. While participants answered the questions during the interview, their answers were audio-recorded to reflect an accurate transcription (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2014). After manually transcribing the interviews, a copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for their review.

Individual Interview Questions (Appendix G)

General Background of Participants

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself to include your educational background. CRQ
2. How long have you been teaching? CRQ
3. What subjects and grade levels have you taught? CRQ
4. What subject(s) and grade level(s) do you currently teach? CRQ

Student Anxiety in the Classroom

5. How do students struggle with anxiety in your classroom and what does this look like?
CRQ
6. How do you identify students who are experiencing anxiety in the classroom? SQ1
7. Are there specific signs that you look for in students who are experiencing anxiety in the classroom? SQ1
8. All students have some anxiety from time to time. How do you distinguish between typical pre-adolescent stressors and high anxiety in your classroom? SQ1
9. Describe your experience when supporting students with high anxiety. CRQ
10. What specific scenarios have caused student anxiety to manifest in the classroom? SQ1
11. Describe any challenges that you face when working with students who have high anxiety in your classroom. CRQ

Teacher Training Related to Student Anxiety

12. Describe any college classes that prepared you to identify and support students with high anxiety to develop autonomy in the classroom. SQ1
13. What professional development experiences have you had that prepared you to support students with high anxiety in your class increase their competence? SQ2
14. Do you feel the training you have received has been beneficial in supporting and increasing the competence of students with anxiety? If so, please describe the training you received. SQ2
15. What training or professional development has been most beneficial? SQ2
16. Have you received any training or professional development related to student anxiety that has not been helpful? If so, please share your experience. SQ2

Effective Strategies for Supporting Students with Anxiety

17. Describe specific strategies you have found to be effective in promoting student self-efficacy when supporting students with anxiety. SQ4
18. What strategy have you found most beneficial in promoting student self-efficacy when supporting students with anxiety? SQ4
19. What advice would you give to other teachers regarding how to support and develop relatedness with students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3
20. What do you wish you had been told regarding how to support students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3

To begin the interview, a researcher must develop rapport with their participants and ensure they feel comfortable (Moustakas, 1994). When participants feel comfortable during the interview, they are more willing to share openly. Questions 1–4 gathered general information about the participants to begin the interview. However, to understand the participants' lived experiences, the interview questions focused on teacher encounters with student anxiety in the classroom. Following the general information about the participants, Questions 5–10 focused on the participants' lived experiences regarding students with high anxiety in the classroom. These questions gathered data regarding the types of student anxiety teachers have experienced in the classroom and how this anxiety manifests in the classroom. After obtaining data about student anxiety in the classroom, Questions 11–15 gathered data regarding teacher training and professional development that deals specifically with student anxiety and how to manage it in the classroom. Additionally, Questions 16–19 gathered data regarding the effective strategies teachers have found to be the most beneficial when supporting students with anxiety in the classroom.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Once each interview was conducted, the interview was transcribed to reflect the communication that took place throughout the interview. Next, I provided a copy of the transcription to each participant and asked them to member check the transcription for accuracy. After completing all the interviews, I read through the member checked transcriptions and made memos to note evolving ideas (Moustakas, 1994). It was essential to read these transcriptions multiple times and place memos in the margins to ensure that I, as the researcher, fully understood what took place (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once I understood each interview transcription well, I classified and interpreted the statements in each transcription to delineate which statements were invariant constituents and performed horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, each comment was coded by hand and categorized into preliminary codes, eliminating any statements irrelevant to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Next, the preliminary codes were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and manually grouped according to common categories.

Focus Groups

After individual interviews, participants were invited to participate in one of three focus groups. Each focus group was conducted using Microsoft Teams and had three to four participants, with various schools representing each group, lasting approximately 45 minutes (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Focus groups provide a unique set of data since each participant has a different experience of the phenomenon being studied, yet there are common trends that each individual experienced. Therefore, a phenomenological study is an effective way to capture each participants' experience and report the common findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups also allow the opportunity for individuals to prompt further discussion

regarding the information found during the individual interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Often, individuals add to the discussion of others, which helped me collect pertinent information I may have otherwise not obtained.

Focus Group Questions (Appendix H)

1. Please share with the group a little about yourself including your educational background, what subject you teach, and what grade levels you currently teach. CRQ
2. What types of anxiety have you seen students experience in the classroom? SQ1
3. How has anxiety specifically impacted student learning and autonomy in your classrooms? SQ1
4. How do you recognize and identify specific signs of anxiety when supporting your students in the classroom? SQ1
5. In middle and high school, students will experience anxiety occasionally due to typical pre-adolescent stressors. How do you differentiate between normal adolescent stressors and high anxiety in your classroom when supporting students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ4
6. Describe any practical training you have received regarding supporting students with anxiety. SQ2
7. Describe any professional development or training you have received in your school division regarding supporting students with anxiety and increasing their competence. SQ2
8. What strategies have you found to be the most effective when supporting students with high anxiety and promoting student self-efficacy? SQ4

9. What advice would be beneficial for new teachers to receive regarding how to support and develop relatedness with students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3
10. What do you wish you had been told regarding how to support students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3
11. Are there any additional comments you would like to add regarding student anxiety in the classroom? CRQ

Focus groups are very beneficial for researchers to gather data from different individuals in a group setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To begin the focus group session, Question 1 introduced each participant so the focus group members knew with whom they were speaking. Following the introduction of each participant, Questions 2–5 gathered data regarding the student anxiety the participants observed in their classrooms and how they supported these students. By sharing their lived experiences, each participant demonstrated how their experience with the phenomenon was unique and different from the others. After conversing about their experiences with student anxiety in the classroom, Questions 6–8 gathered information about the training and professional development each participant received regarding how to support students with anxiety. Finally, participants answered Questions 9–11 to provide information about the best practices and strategies they have found to support students with anxiety in the classroom.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

Once each focus group has been conducted, I transcribed the communication that took place through the focus group session. Next, I provided a copy of their part of the transcription for the participants to review. After reading the member checked transcriptions multiple times and placing memos in the margins, I fully sought to understand what took place (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, I found the preliminary codes that arose throughout the focus groups and

performed horizontalization by clustering the findings, listing the relevant expressions, and grouping them according to common codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The codes were placed in an Excel spreadsheet and grouped according to relevant expressions and preliminary codes. Finally, I manually organized the data set.

Participant Letter Prompt

To provide data regarding student anxiety, participants were asked to write a letter with recommendations for future teachers regarding how to support students with anxiety in the classroom. Participants were asked to write a letter with a minimum of 500 words to answer the following prompt: “Please write a letter of advice to a future teacher on how to support students with anxiety in the classroom. Include any strategies you have found beneficial when supporting students with anxiety as well as any information you wish you had been given” (Appendix I). To provide sufficient time to write the letter, participants were given 2 weeks to write the letter. By collecting participant letter prompts, information was collected regarding the participants’ lived experiences relating to the phenomenon prior to interviews and focus groups.

Participant Letter Prompt Data Analysis Plan

After each participant wrote a letter to a future teacher, each sentence was coded by hand to reflect where the information falls within the study. After the initial coding, I went through the letters again and conducted horizontalization to determine if the initial codes could be placed into code categories to reduce the number of code words, resulting in the preliminary codes from the teacher’s letters. Next, the preliminary codes were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and grouped according to familiar categories.

Data Synthesis

In a qualitative study, researchers must ensure they analyze the data set to accurately reflect the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hence, researchers must accurately transcribe interviews and focus groups as well as code each sentence to reveal common codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once the data collection methods were complete, I analyzed the data through triangulation to establish the preliminary codes and secondary codes, which emerged into common themes. While the majority of coding and theme development was organized manually in an Excel spreadsheet, I further analyzed the data to ensure maximum interpretation of the data. Finally, I implemented *epoché*, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation for the data synthesis to be effective and accurate (Moustakas, 1994).

Epoché

Throughout this study, I set aside my own biases while examining the data collected through fresh eyes (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to beginning the study and throughout the study, I recorded my biases in my reflexive journal (Appendix K), so I could evaluate the data set without my prior experiences influencing it. By looking strictly at the data set and the information provided, I shared the information provided through the teachers' lived experiences related to supporting students with high anxiety. This allowed me to report my findings just as they appeared without adding personal experience (Moustakas, 1994). Whenever I completed an individual interview or focus group, I adhered the questions being asked without adding personal comments or influencing the participants. When transcribing the interviews and focus groups, I only transcribed what was said and ensured its accuracy by letting each participants review their transcript.

Phenomenological Reduction

After interviews, focus groups, and the letter prompts were transcribed and coded, I read through each of them again and reflected upon them to see if anything else emerged from the data. Once the data were coded, I organized the data collected into an Excel spreadsheet by listing the preliminary codes for each data collection method (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I reviewed the preliminary codes again and reflected upon them to see if any other codes emerged. By reflecting on the data set, I analyzed the data sets and ensured they accurately reflected the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Then, I combined the preliminary codes into secondary codes through the use of bracketing and horizontalization to further reduce the number of codes listed.

Imaginative Variation

After reflecting on the preliminary and secondary codes, the final codes emerged to reveal the themes for this study, which resulted in five themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Once the themes had been established, I provided a description for these themes to illustrate the meaning of each theme listed (Moustakas, 1994). A theme development table was created as a visual representation to demonstrate the established themes and how they interconnect (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, I concluded the data collection with theoretical propositions reflecting what emerged throughout the data (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Researchers must ensure they have established credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure their qualitative study is trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, a researcher seeks to

provide facts and truths that prove the qualitative study's trustworthiness. Without trustworthiness, the findings of the qualitative study are not sound or dependable.

Credibility

Credibility is established when the findings in a study precisely reflect the truth of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, there are many ways to establish credibility in a study, including triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking (Shenton, 2004). Throughout this study, I achieved triangulation by conducting individual interviews and focus groups with participants and having participants answer a writing prompt. By conducting individual interviews and focus groups with teachers, I collected data regarding the strategies teachers use with their students who have high anxiety in the classroom. Through this data collection, I was able to compare and contrast the individual experiences of others as well as find common themes throughout (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By evaluating the writing prompts written by participants, I understood participants' views through source triangulation, which further expanded the data collection.

Prolonged engagement is another crucial aspect of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By spending adequate time with my participants and getting to know them, I was able to understand their perspective as it relates to the phenomenon being studied. I was also able to establish trust with my participants by giving them pseudonyms for the study and keeping their participation in the study confidential (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To further provide credibility, I transcribed each interview and focus group and then provided a copy of those transcriptions to each participant involved. By asking participants to check the transcription for accuracy, I conducted a member check on the interviews and the focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Another step in conducting a member check was to ensure the transcripts accurately reflected the participants' views on the topic (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

For transferability to occur, a study must be able to be applied in similar situations and settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the study can be transferred to other situations and settings, I included a detailed description of the participants and their settings, which included accredited private and public K–12 schools (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While pseudonyms were used to describe the participants, enough detail was given so individuals could repeat this study with teachers in a K–12 educational setting. I also kept an audit trail (Appendix J), which includes a dated list of the major steps taken throughout the study. Furthermore, given the detailed description of this study conducted in a central Atlantic state, further studies could be conducted in other states. Without a detailed description of the phenomenon being studied, individuals cannot understand the study and its importance (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

Dependability in a study is necessary to show that a study can be reproduced given all the information provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the study was accurately detailed to ensure individuals understand the data collection and analysis process (Shenton, 2004). Interview questions, focus group questions, and writing prompts are provided in the study, so individuals fully understand what questions were given. Additionally, the literature supports the procedures used throughout the study. By conducting an inquiry audit, I found qualified individuals who were familiar with qualitative research and student anxiety to read through the study to ensure my findings accurately reflected the data collected (Shenton, 2004). After their review, I conducted a peer debrief with these qualified individuals and ensured the findings were accurate

and demonstrated the participants' views rather than my own biases. Without providing detailed and accurate information, the study would lack dependability for other individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, it was vital to ensure the study description was detailed and included pertinent information to replicate the study.

Confirmability

To ensure the study demonstrated the actual findings of the study, my own experiences and biases were delineated and removed from the study (Patton, 2014). In addition, the study's results were data-driven rather than including personal bias (Shenton, 2004). By performing the triangulation process through interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts, I achieved confirmability for the study. Throughout the study, I kept notes and memos about the data collection procedure, including initial and final coding. To ensure bias was removed, I transcribed the interviews and focus group sessions accurately and coded only the verbiage provided by the participants during these sessions. Additionally, I set aside my own experiences by only reporting the information and data found throughout the study. Furthermore, I kept a reflexive journal (Appendix K) to keep track of my thoughts and insights throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After each data collection method, I expressed my thoughts in my reflexive journal to communicate what revelations developed throughout the study. The reflexive journal also provided insight into any biases that were reflected throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the study, I gained IRB approval. By gaining IRB approval, I was able to conduct the study and ensure I was ethical in my procedures. Next, I recruited participants for this study by posting a recruitment flyer through social media as well as other online platforms.

While conducting the study, participants were informed of the reason for the study so they could make an informed decision regarding whether to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Furthermore, participants signed a consent form before taking part in the study. Once individuals were chosen to participate, I provided them with pseudonyms to protect their identities. I also kept the data safe for 5 years to protect and secure the information. Therefore, I protected the data electronically by storing them on a computer that was password protected. Additionally, I also tried to put aside all bias and ensured they accurately presented participants' information rather than manipulating them to side with the study. For a researcher to conduct an ethical study, they must do their best to present the data as accurately as possible.

Summary

When conducting a transcendental phenomenological study, I focused on the lived experiences of certified middle and high school teachers in public schools rather than my own experiences. Thus, I recruited 12 participants by posting a recruitment flyer on social media and web-based communication, and the participants filled out a screening survey to ensure they met the qualifications to participate in the study. Once participants qualified to participate in the study, they were asked to fill out a consent form prior to participating in the data collection methods. I then collected data from participants by conducting interviews and focus groups and requesting letters from participants. Throughout the data collection process, I built trust with my participants to ensure I obtained accurate data. I also established credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the study to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study. After collecting the data, I analyzed the data set by establishing preliminary codes and common categories in an Excel spreadsheet. Once all of the data were collected, I synthesized the data set by using *epoché*, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative

variation. Next, I found the common themes and presented the findings from the study. Finally, I presented the findings from a fresh, new perspective.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. To obtain the necessary data, 12 middle and high school teachers participated in this study and shared their lived experiences. Throughout this chapter, the results of the study are described, and an explanation is given for the themes and subthemes found throughout the data. In addition, responses are provided in accordance with the research questions found in Chapters One and Three. This chapter includes an introduction and summary of the participants, the results of the study including themes and subthemes derived from the data, answers to the research questions, as well as a chapter summary.

Participants

Twelve middle and high school teachers who taught in public schools across a central Atlantic state participated in this study. Seven of the participants taught at the middle school level, while five of the participants taught at the high school level. The participants taught in various content areas including English, health, mathematics, physical education, social studies, and special education and consisted of eight females and four males. Participants taught at public schools in rural, suburban, or urban areas. In addition, four participants had experience teaching at private schools prior to transferring into public schools. Throughout this chapter, participant quotes will be depicted verbatim as they were presented throughout the data collection to include grammatical errors in speech and writing in an effort to truly portray their voices. To protect the participants' identity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned. The participants' pseudonyms and their demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Overview*

Pseudonym	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Content Area	Grade Level
Abigail	3	Bachelor's	English	9, 11
Courtney	4	Master's	Mathematics	10–12
Dana	16	Master's	Mathematics	9–12
Daniel	15	Bachelor's	Health and Physical Education	8
Dylan	7	Master's	Social Studies	7
Jamie	24	Education Specialist	Mathematics	7–8
Kelly	13	Master's	Special Education	6–8
Kelsey	5.5	Bachelor's	Special Education	6–7
Marc	13	Master's	Health and Physical Education	9–12
Molly	5	Bachelor's	Mathematics	6–8
Nicole	17	Master's	English	11–12
Zephaniah	3	Bachelor's	Health and Physical Education	6–8

Abigail

Abigail teaches English to high school students at a rural public school and has been teaching for 3 years. Since she was little, Abigail wanted to become a teacher. Abigail earned her

bachelor's degree in English with teacher licensure. While student teaching, Abigail taught eighth-grade students and thoroughly enjoyed it. Out of a desire to teach the same students the following year, Abigail moved to the high school. She currently teaches English to 11th grade students. Abigail has a bubbly, lively, and fun personality. She has a passion for her students to succeed. Abigail and her husband have a fervent desire to make an impact on kids not only locally but across the globe. Throughout the interview, Abigail echoed how building relationships is important. She stated, "If you don't build relationships, you don't have class management. And honestly, teaching a class where you have relationships with kids is so much more fun." Abigail believes it is vital to greet her students at the door each day to encourage her students and places an emphasis on it every day.

Courtney

Courtney teaches high school mathematics at a suburban public school and has been teaching for 4 years. She currently teaches geometry to students on a block schedule to include the advanced and regular levels. Before beginning her teaching career, Courtney earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in mathematics as well as teaching. During her first year of teaching, she had to divide her time between two suburban public schools, which was quite a challenge, especially during the season of COVID-19. Courtney desires to build relationships with her students to show them she cares and to build trust with them. In her interview, she stated that students need to know "you're a real person that cares." Courtney has a calm, fun, and joyful personality.

Dana

Dana teaches mathematics at the high school level and is currently teaching Algebra I and college algebra at a suburban public school. She is also in charge of the student council at her

school and helps organize events throughout the school year such as Homecoming. In addition, Dana taught middle and high school mathematics at a private school in a northeastern state for 10 years prior to transferring to her current public school. She has been teaching for 16 years and has a bachelor's and master's degree and holds a mathematics certificate. Dana is newly engaged to her fiancé, who is also in the education field, and has a dog that is like her child. She desires to become a mother and raise a family soon. In the interview and focus group, Dana was passionate about building relationships with her students and stated, "Relationships are a huge thing for me and my classroom." Furthermore, she strives to attend as many extracurricular activities as she can to show her support for her students. Dana has a gentle, cordial spirit and is affable.

Daniel

Daniel teaches physical education and health at the middle school level at a suburban public school and has been teaching for 15 years. Throughout his teaching career, he has taught at the high school and middle school levels and has taught in both rural and suburban public schools. In addition, he currently serves on an advisory committee at a local college for their student teacher program. Daniel has an associate degree as well as a bachelor's degree in kinesiology. Out of a desire to coach football, he naturally progressed into teaching health and physical education. Daniel and his wife have two children and live in a rural area. When Daniel is not teaching, he is coaching, serving in the community, and catering barbeque events. Daniel has a gregarious personality to which students and athletes are naturally drawn. He likes to describe himself as "loud and boisterous." Throughout the interview, Daniel expressed a strong passion for helping students feel comfortable in his class so they can achieve their best.

Dylan

Dylan teaches social studies to middle school students and serves as a lead teacher at a suburban public school. As a public school educator, Dylan has taught at the high school and middle school levels for 7 years. He has a bachelor's degree in social science and a master's degree in online learning and educational technology. Dylan believes he had a calling to go into the education field because of his desire to teach. He and his wife live in a suburban area and enjoy serving in the community. Dylan is also the proud father of three precious little girls. Throughout the interview, Dylan referred to wanting to help students who had things happening at home and outside of school. He desires to be a safe place for these students to escape to. The most important aspect of teaching for Dylan is getting to know his students and building relationships with them. In the interview, he stated, "I have to get to know my students and build my relationships with them." Dylan has a calming and tranquil presence that pervades through his classroom to his students.

Jamie

Jamie teaches middle school mathematics in a suburban public school and serves as a math specialist. She has taught at the elementary and middle school level as well as served in private and public schools for 24 years. As a child, she remembers wanting to become a teacher. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education, a master's degree in education, and an educational specialist degree. Jamie is a proud mother of two children, one of whom is currently in college and the other who is an elementary teacher. She has a strong desire to see students succeed in their math abilities and enjoys teaching children math. Jamie desires to build relationships with her students and get to know them early in the school year, so they feel comfortable talking with her.

Kelly

Kelly teaches special education to middle school students in sixth through eighth grade and has taught for 13 years. She has taught in private and public schools and is currently teaching at a rural public school. When first starting college, Kelly desired to be a radiologist and worked for a time in that profession. After having children, Kelly stayed at home to raise them. As her children got older, Kelly volunteered and became involved in her children's school, so she decided to go back to college and get her degree in education. Kelly has a bachelor's degree in multidisciplinary studies and continued her education with a Master of Arts in teaching. Kelly has four children. Two children are in college while the other two followed their mother's footsteps and became teachers. Kelly has a strong desire to see her students succeed and will do whatever she can to help her students as well as support the teachers in the classroom. She has a sweet and kind personality which is easy for students to connect with. In the interview, Kelly described herself as a person who is "able to be the more nurturing, kinder, safer place" for her students. Kelly aspires for her students to feel comfortable in her room and often has students eat lunch with her just to talk.

Kelsey

Kelsey teaches special education to sixth- and seventh-grade students at a rural public school. In addition, Kelsey has also taught special education to kindergarten and first-grade students in a suburban public school. She has been teaching for 5.5 years and has a bachelor's degree in special education and elementary education with a minor in psychology. Kelsey is married to her husband, who is a youth pastor. They are actively involved in their community and desire to make an impact on as many children as possible. When co-teaching in classrooms, Kelsey yearns to help other teachers reach their students by providing the support needed for her

students. By providing additional support in math and English, Kelsey can provide confidence in those subject areas for her students. In her interview, she describes middle school as “such a fun age.” Kelsey has a friendly, caring, and warm personality and loves to engage in conversations with her students on a personal level to get to know them.

Marc

Marc teaches high school health and physical education in an urban public school and has taught for 13 years. In addition, he has taught health and physical education at a private accredited school as well as a rural public school. Marc has a bachelor’s degree in economics and a master’s degree in education with a concentration in sports management. In college, Marc was a Division I athlete and went on to play football in the professional arena. His strong passion for athletics led him into the educational field, where he has also coached varsity level football. Marc is a very energetic, social, and exciting individual. Students are naturally drawn to him due to his fun demeanor. In his interview, Marc consistently spoke about trying “to make everybody as comfortable as I can in my classroom.” Marc has a jovial and boisterous personality that emanates from him to his students.

Molly

Molly teaches mathematics to middle school students in sixth through eighth grade at a suburban public school and has taught for 5 years. In addition, she teaches mathematics to students in an online environment. Molly has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education with a focus concentration in math. She also graduated with a middle school math endorsement and obtained her Algebra I certification. She and her newlywed husband live in a rural area and have two dogs that are like their children. They enjoy taking short trips and traveling together whenever the opportunity arises. Due to her love for children, Molly was driven to become an

educator. She has a strong passion for helping students understand mathematics, since students often struggle in this subject. In the interview, she described wanting her students to “feel known and seen and heard.” Molly has a sweet, kind, and compassionate personality that is felt by her students in every interaction.

Nicole

Nicole teaches high school English at a rural public school and is a peer mediation sponsor as well as a YOVASO (Youth of Virginia Speak Out) sponsor. Additionally, Nicole coaches volleyball in the fall and soccer in the spring. Over the last 17 years, Nicole has taught a variety of subjects at the middle and high school level at rural public schools including sixth- and seventh-grade science, seventh- and eighth-grade English, seventh-grade history, eighth-grade civics, and 11th-grade American literature, and 12th-grade British literature. She has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education with a minor in history and a master’s degree in English education. Nicole is also currently enrolled in an administration cohort, which is set to finish this summer. She is the proud mother of four children, which includes teenage triplets and a soon-to-be sixteen-year-old. In her interview, Nicole explained, “I try to be involved as much as I can at school with the kids.” She is passionate about pouring into the community in which she was raised. Nicole has a calm and relaxing presence that makes students feel comfortable talking to her.

Zephaniah

Zephaniah teaches middle school students in sixth through eighth grade and has taught for 3 years. He currently teaches physical education and health to males and females at a rural public school. Zephaniah holds a bachelor’s degree in kinesiology. However, he started his degree in sports management and then switched to education due to his desire to have a positive

impact on kids. Zephaniah and his wife are both teachers and are involved in public school education. They also enjoy leading youth mission camps during the summer months when they are not teaching. Zephaniah has a kind and compassionate personality. He desires to be “a very good influence on students’ lives.” Zephaniah tries to make sure he listens to his students and lets them know that he’s on their team.

Results

A qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was conducted to understand the lived experiences of participants regarding a particular phenomenon from different perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since teachers interact with students daily, they can provide insight into best practices, strategies, and teacher preparation regarding how to support students with anxiety in the classroom. According to the literature, there is a gap regarding the preparation and experiences of teachers with specific strategies to mitigate the anxiety that impacts student learning. According to Love et al. (2020), researchers have examined parental responses to students with high anxiety; however, additional research is needed to explore teachers’ experiences. By examining and understanding the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers, I found commonalities among the teachers regarding preparation and supporting students with anxiety in the classroom. With a focus on the lived experiences and preparation of teachers and the strategies used to support student anxiety, the central research question and sub-questions will include responses based on the data collected.

Theme Development

Throughout this study, data were obtained through individual interviews, focus group interviews, as well as participant letter prompts. There were five major themes with two to three subthemes under each theme. The first major theme is recognition and identification with its

associated subthemes of common triggers, signs of anxiety, and identification. Participants stressed the importance of being able to recognize and identify students with anxiety in the classroom so they could provide the support necessary to help develop autonomy, self-efficacy, and relatedness as well as increase competence. Individuals who experience autonomy are internally motivated because they understand they can determine what they do (Englund et al., 2022), while competent individuals understand why they do things and believe they can do them (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition, individuals who experience relatedness have a sense of belonging (Englund et al., 2022). Furthermore, individuals who experience self-efficacy believe they can achieve goals or accomplish the tasks set for them (Bersh, 2021). The other major themes are discussed in the following paragraph.

The second major theme is classroom strategies with its correlating subthemes of affirmation, removal, and accommodations. Throughout the interviews, focus groups, and participant letters, participants acknowledged and recognized that students with anxiety often lack confidence, need additional support in the classroom, and need removal from the situation so they can refocus. Building relationships is the third major theme that emerged from the data and included subthemes of communication and disposition. All participants agreed that building relationships with students is an important part of understanding students with anxiety. The fourth major theme is learning environment with its associated subthemes of classroom struggle and atmosphere. Participants conceded there are times when struggles in the classroom occur when handling students with anxiety. However, participants agreed that the learning environment is important in promoting self-efficacy and providing a sense of belonging, so students feel safe to advocate for themselves. The final major theme is preparation with its associated subthemes of training, life experiences, and resources. Participants asserted they received limited to no training

or college classes geared toward students with anxiety. However, they recognized they have learned valuable lessons from their classroom experience. Table 2 provides the key words and phrases from which the major themes and subthemes emerged. Throughout this chapter, the major themes and subthemes are discussed in detail and the responses to the research questions and sub-questions are provided.

Table 2

Theme Development

Key Words/Phrases	Subthemes
Major Theme 1: Recognition and Identification	
fear of failure, fear of mistakes, fear of the unknown, social media, outside factors	Common Triggers
avoidance, behaviors, biting nails, body language, coping mechanism, difference in demeanor, fidgeting, give up, physical reaction, shut down, withdrawal	Signs of Anxiety
IEPs, 504s, patterns, understanding the problem	Identification
Major Theme 2: Classroom Strategies	
encouragement, giving praise, motivation, rewarding, reassurance, validation	Affirmation
getting water, putting head down, sitting in hallway, taking a break, taking a walk	Removal
additional time, alternate choice, breaking the assignment down, inclusion, options	Accommodations
Major Theme 3: Building Relationships	
communication, getting to know students, listening, time	Communication
approachable, be genuine, honesty, trust	Disposition

Key Words/Phrases	Subthemes
Major Theme 4: Learning Environment	
academic hindrance, class size, individual differences, lack of participation	Classroom Struggle
comfortability, consistency, don't draw attention, don't force, safe space, self-advocacy	Atmosphere
Major Theme 5: Preparation	
lack of training, professional development, growth mindset	Training
classroom experience, collaboration, personal experience	Life Experiences
additional resources, life counselor, guidance counselor, quiet room, seek additional help	Resources

Recognition and Identification

Recognition and identification of student anxiety is imperative to the learning process. When teachers can recognize and identify this anxiety, it is possible to prevent it from continuing to escalate. Participants conveyed many signs to look for in a classroom setting regarding common triggers, signs of anxiety, and identification of anxiety. Since all teachers will interact with students with anxiety in the classroom, it is vital to understand what anxiety looks like in a variety of environments.

Common Triggers. Students who suffer from anxiety are often triggered by something that has taken place or out of fear. In her interview when referring to student anxiety, Nicole stated, "They worry about just about everything under the sun." Abigail acknowledged in her interview, "I think a lot of kids just get stressed about everything." Participants mentioned many triggers for students including fear of failure, fear of making mistakes, and fear of the unknown. In the focus group as well as his individual interview, Daniel referenced that kids are worried

about making mistakes and scared to fail. He commented, “The reason they’re scared to fail is because they haven’t failed before, and somebody helped them get through it.” Jamie further expounded upon this fear of failure by adding that schools should “have a class on social skills, because they don’t know how to fail.” Due to the academic atmosphere during COVID-19, students were given instant feedback when completing assignments so that learning could continue to take place at a steady pace. Dana and Courtney acknowledged that students got used to this instant feedback and now constantly ask if their answers are correct because they are worried about getting bad grades. In her interview, Courtney commented,

I do think like genuinely that when we were like teaching during COVID, it’s we were trying our best to give them like practices that gave them automatic feedback because we weren’t there to like teach and guide and explain.

In their interviews, Courtney and Molly acknowledged that they see students desiring an A and wanting to be perfect, while Dylan sees anxiety amp up during assessment time due to wanting to perform well. While some students have a fear of getting bad grades in the class as well as on assessments, some students do not want to answer questions out of a fear of being wrong in front of their peers. Daniel mentioned in his interview that students do not want to answer questions in class out of a fear of being wrong. Since Dana teaches seniors in high school, she commented during the focus group on her students being worried about what will happen after graduation, while recognizing in her interview that students worry about failing.

Over the years, social media has created anxiety in students due to posts by other students. In her interview and focus group, Jamie referenced students’ use of social media every day before school begins. In her participant letter prompt she stated, “Children today have been on their phones, ipads, or whatever social media they use. They can already come into school

upset.” Additionally, Jamie, Dana, and Dylan referenced students worrying about things that happen on social media and how that affects them at school. While social media can cause anxiety to arise in students, Courtney, Jamie, Kelly, Kelsey, and Abigail referenced peer pressure or social anxiety being a trigger for anxiety in the classroom. In their interviews or focus groups, the participants commented on students being affected by friends or something that happened in a previous class. According to Molly, “It was teenage middle school drama, you know, that could cause that anxiety or friends or social scenarios. So, it wasn’t always about school. A lot of it was that social element.” In addition, Jamie referenced students holding onto something that happened socially throughout the day or even carrying into the next school day.

While many things can trigger anxiety during school, there are also outside factors that affect student learning. Outside factors were the most recognized triggers for anxiety within the classroom. Ten of the participants spoke about outside factors in either their interview or focus group. In their interviews, Dana and Courtney referenced pressure that parents place on their students to do well and get good grades. However, Abigail, Dylan, Kelly, and Zephaniah referred to the home life that some students must endure, which teachers are often unaware of. According to Dylan, “You never know what’s happening at home. Sometimes they bring that in. I’ve had students show some anxiety and some nerves about whether they really want to go home this day or not.” In addition, Kelly described the emotional trauma that she has seen her students face due to their family history or being in the foster care system.

Signs of Anxiety. Throughout each interview and focus group, participants discussed the different signs of anxiety they see in their students when they are feeling anxious. One major sign of anxiety is avoidance. Participants found students will try to avoid coming to school if there is a test or quiz, which creates an absenteeism problem. However, several participants also

recognized students will not pay attention, escape to the bathroom, listen to music, or shut down. In addition, fidgeting, biting nails, displaying behavior or a physical reaction, as well as a difference in demeanor were all signs of anxiety that participants have recognized in the classroom. In the focus group, Molly commented on one of her students with anxiety, “he needs to kind of be holding something or he has putty he’s playing with.” Furthermore, Dylan disclosed, “You’ll have kids that immediately have a look of panic on their face and it’s very clear that they’re worried about something, scared about something.” Courtney recognizes students with anxiety when they are unsettled, while Molly has seen students getting really frustrated. Daniel and Marc recognize it when students do not talk to other individuals or are passive in nature.

Participants identified students’ body language and shutting down in the classroom as the primary signs of students suffering from high anxiety in the classroom. They referenced body language and shut down 27 times. In his interview, Dylan described the body language by saying, “It’s like making themselves smaller while the problem gets bigger around them that that’s it seems counterintuitive.”

However, participants also mentioned behavior and a difference in demeanor. In the focus group, Courtney stated,

I can literally watch a child or like hear a child switch from like just their tone of like, I’m happy, I’m calm, I’m okay, and then they switch to just like either it can either be like a stressed-out tone or just like an angry tone.

As she stands at her doorway and greets students, Abigail recognizes a difference in demeanor when a student does not greet her back. In addition, Dana recognizes it when “their work ethic will change, and I know that that’s not like them.” Marc notices it when his students are passive

or just quiet. In her participant letter prompt, Courtney explained, “The burst of anger that was directed at you, the ugly tone that was used towards you, the frustration, is a result of anxiety.” Participants recognized that a difference in demeanor is not directly related to them but is a way for the student with anxiety to cope.

Identification. Identification plays a crucial role in awareness of student anxiety. Participants acknowledged that an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Educational Plan for Disabilities (504) is extremely useful and helpful in recognizing students with high anxiety in the classroom. Daniel, Jamie, Kelsey, Marc, Molly, and Zephaniah expressed how helpful it is when students are identified as having anxiety through legal paperwork, such as IEPs and 504s, because it provides background knowledge that is useful for teachers. In addition, participants noticed patterns in student behaviors when dealing with anxiety. Students suffering from anxiety often demonstrate the same types of behaviors each time. Therefore, the participants were able to recognize patterns and repetition in behaviors within the classroom. In her letter, Molly mentioned how teachers “start to learn patterns of what can trigger that anxiety, or what can help that student while they are experiencing anxiety.” Additionally, Kelsey referenced, “Whereas for another kid, seeing the repeated pattern of behavior is really going to be where I’m going to notice it.” Courtney acknowledged in her interview that teachers must “understand that most of the time there’s something else behind that defiance.” Jamie, Courtney, and Kelsey commented on the need to understand the root of the problem when dealing with student anxiety in an effort to deescalate the situation before it gets out of control. Participants saw the importance of identifying anxiety in students in an effort to best help them.

Classroom Strategies

Each day, teachers implement a variety of strategies to keep students engaged throughout the class time. In addition, strategies are an important way to help students with anxiety remain focused on learning as well as to deescalate their anxiety. Participants agree that teachers should use affirmation to encourage, motivate, and praise students in an effort to promote self-efficacy and autonomy. However, there are times when students must be removed from the situation or teachers need to seek additional help. Regardless, classroom strategies provide practical ways to help teachers eliminate anxiety in the classroom and promote autonomy, self-efficacy, and relatedness.

Affirmation. Encouraging a student can go a long way in the life of a student. In their interview, letter, or focus group, seven participants mentioned the importance of encouragement to help internally motivate students and conceded it can be seen in a variety of ways. In her interview, Abigail stated, “You just encourage a kid. It goes like 10 miles and just like showing kids that they are able to do something, and they can succeed.” She further added in the focus group interview, “I think major encouragement. I think building up that confidence.” Abigail acknowledged that encouraging students on assignments helped increase their competence and promote autonomy and self-efficacy because they believed they could accomplish the task at hand. Although she recognized that putting stickers on tests and quizzes were “silly” at the high school level, Dana still enjoys placing stickers on students’ tests and quizzes as her way of praising her students’ efforts and promoting self-efficacy.

While working with students, Kelly has seen the impact encouragement can have on a student regarding internally motivating them and promoting self-efficacy to complete an assignment in the classroom. In the focus group, Kelly referred to encouraging a student as a way

to “just building a little confidence and getting, like, get the ball rolling some.” Kelsey provided advice to a future teacher in her letter to “support and encourage your students, and to make them feel heard.” While dealing with his middle school students, Daniel recognized, “Normal middle school anxiety can be helped with a lot of encouraging reinforcement feedback.” By providing positive feedback for his students, Daniel found it provided internal motivation for his students and helped them believe they were capable of doing well. Jamie further added that extra reassurance and providing a pat on the back can go a long way for a student. In her interview, Nicole asserted the need to “encourage them to not give up and keep pushing forward.” Zephaniah referenced encouraging students who were hesitant to present a project in front of the class and increasing their competence when the students successfully presented and realized they were capable of doing it. Participants recognized encouragement can help push students forward by internally motivating them, building their confidence, and providing reassurance for whatever task is hindering them.

Participants recognized beneficial strategies to use in the classroom to promote self-efficacy also include giving praise, motivation, rewards, reassurance, and validation. In her focus group, Dana asserted, “They’re looking for somebody to give them that reassurance.” Nicole agreed, “They need to know somebody’s got them and somebody’s in their corner.” In his interview, Dylan referenced increasing competence in his students by reassuring them while they are taking a test, so they believe in themselves and stop doubting their ability. Courtney and Nicole recognized that students often need validation on their assignments, which helps them believe they are capable of completing the task and internally motivates them to finish the assignment. However, Nicole also acknowledged understanding there is a balance in giving

reassurance on doing work correctly, since this can become a hindrance to students completing their assignments.

Removal. When students with anxiety are feeling overwhelmed in the classroom, participants established that removal from the situation can help students refocus and understand they are in control. Courtney explained, “Some students just need to take a step away from the classroom for a second whereas other students need to verbally process their emotions and anxiety.” Abigail, Courtney, Dylan, Molly, and Zephaniah commented on allowing students to go out into the hallway to take a break and then talking with them before they reenter the classroom just to ensure they are okay. Participants agreed that allowing students with anxiety to take a break provided students with the ability to determine what they could do and internally motivated them because it provided a break so they could refocus and begin working when they returned. In his interview, Zephaniah acknowledged that “allowing space, it removes them from what they’re experiencing the anxiety from.” Furthermore, Molly provided insight in the focus group by stating, “Because in the long run, 5 minutes outside the classroom might be the most beneficial thing versus sitting in my classroom for the whole 40 minutes and not getting anything out of it.” Abigail, Courtney, Jamie, Kelly, and Molly have found allowing their students to take a walk around the school helps remove students from the thing that is causing them the anxiety and helps them to gain a new perspective. Participants also mentioned students getting a drink of water or visiting the restroom as other ways to help students with anxiety regroup and feel in control of the situation. By allowing students to take a break from the situation, participants experienced students who were internally motivated to return to the classroom and work on the assignments rather than sitting at their desk in shut down mode.

Accommodations. Participants recognized that providing alternate choices for students who are feeling overwhelmed is beneficial. When students are struggling to participate in his class, Daniel gives them choices of activities to complete to promote autonomy and lets them participate in an alternate activity during the class time. Kelsey acknowledged that offering students choices “provides them a sense of control and choice,” which is beneficial when they are suffering from anxiety and feel out of control because it provides a sense of autonomy. Molly asserted, “The best thing that I’ve seen is giving students options. By giving students choices, it helps them feel more in control of their anxiety.” In his letter, Dylan commented, “Along with clear expectations students should also have clear options to help with anxiety.” When students with anxiety have choices and options, participants found students feel like they are in control of something and determine the outcome of what they do.

Along with providing choices for students with anxiety, participants mentioned breaking down assignments as a beneficial way to help students not feel overwhelmed and provide internal motivation to complete the smaller assignments along the way. Abigail, Jamie, and Kelly have found that breaking down large assignments is beneficial for their students in developing autonomy, since it provides motivation each time a section is completed. In addition, Abigail acknowledged, “Breaking it into chunks when you notice they are beginning to feel overwhelmed will go a long way and will help to build that confidence back up.” Kelly also found that many times, students just need additional support understanding the directions and getting started on an assignment, so breaking it down into smaller, understandable parts is helpful.

To ensure that students with anxiety feel like part of the class and do not become loners, participants mentioned placing students in groups so they have a sense of belonging. Marc tries

to make sure everybody is included. When he places his students in groups, he gets the strong students to help get the student with anxiety involved in the group discussions as a way of developing relatedness. Dana also places students with anxiety in groups with strong students so they can help ask the questions if the student with anxiety is unable to. Furthermore, Dana strives to get students to interact within her classroom and develop relatedness by placing them in groups where they have to work together. In addition, Daniel strives to “make them feel part of class in some kind of different way.” Daniel and Dylan promote a sense of belonging in their classrooms by encouraging students to get to know each other and work with another individual in the classroom who they may not know as well.

Building Relationships

All participants recognized and acknowledged the importance of building relationships with their students. Without relationships, participants agreed they would be unable to notice and recognize differences in their students as well as patterns of behavior. However, participants also agreed it takes hard work and a concerted effort to reach their students. Each participant does their best to build rapport with their students and provide them with a sense of belonging, but they also realize it is impossible to reach every student.

Communication. Communication plays a vital role in building relationships with students. Throughout the individual interviews, focus groups, and letters, participants asserted that communicating with students is needed and mentioned it 39 times. By communicating with students, participants can evaluate the needs of their students and promote self-efficacy by allowing them to let them know what they need. In the focus group, Kelsey disclosed, “Communication is a huge portion of it. Like you have got to communicate with the child and the child has got to feel comfortable communicating with you.” Due to their role in the classroom,

Kelsey and Kelly acknowledged they have an advantage of talking with their students in small groups which is extremely helpful and beneficial and allows for more frequent check-ins with their students, which gives them a sense of belonging and promotes self-efficacy. Kelly also added that looking at weekly journals and “reading some of their just thoughts is another way you can see.” In addition, Dylan has the unique ability to communicate through messages with his students in his classroom through the use of Chromebooks, which promotes self-efficacy and allows him the opportunity to follow up in person. He added, “Students message me about what they are struggling with and I follow up in person so they don’t hide behind a computer screen.” Both Dylan and Jamie use notecards as a way for students to communicate with them if they struggle communicating in person. Seven participants found pulling students into the hallway and having a private conversation with them was beneficial in an effort to figure out what was going on and to promote self-efficacy. By communicating in private conversations, students with anxiety were able to advocate for themselves and share what their needs were. In his interview, Zephaniah mentioned that he places an importance on asking students questions as a way of supporting them. In the focus group, Molly echoed the importance of asking questions to students with anxiety by stating, “I think asking questions is key and knowing the different ways that their anxiety can come out.” Nicole agreed that “talking to them, letting them know I care” helps students open up to her and provides a sense of belonging.

Through communication, participants agreed that getting to know students is the best way to understand and support them. In her interview, Dana stated, “I take a lot of time to get to know my students.” Jamie affirmed in her interview and the focus group that she gets to know her students within the first month of school. In his letter, Dylan asserted, “The most impactful strategy I can suggest is getting to know your students.” He further expounded upon this

comment by adding, “Find out what interests they have, what makes them happy, what makes them upset, what calms them down.” Additionally, Dana follows up midway through the school year and allows her students to reflect on the questionnaire they provided for her at the beginning of the school year. Kelsey found that getting to know her students included “the intentionality of having conversations with them and make them feel like human beings at this age.” Abigail, Dana, Kelsey, Jamie, and Marc acknowledged the importance of supporting students outside of academics by getting to know their interests and supporting them in extracurricular activities. In her letter, Abigail gave great advice to a future teacher: “The sooner you get to know your students, the easier it will be to identify the students who have anxiety.” References of getting to know students occurred 43 times during interviews, focus groups, and letters.

To open up communication opportunities, participants found they must listen to their students. Nine participants referenced listening in their interviews, focus groups, or letters. In his letter, Zephaniah advised, “Be slow to speak and quick to listen.” Molly, Nicole, and Zephaniah acknowledged students’ desire to be listened to and heard. In her interview, Dana asserted, “Kids will try harder because you stopped and listened to them and heard them.” Jamie acknowledged the significance of keeping “a non-threatening listening ear” in her letter. Nicole disclosed an important part of listening to a student is being present and mentioned removing herself from being behind her desk, so her students knew they had her full attention. In her interview, Molly stated, “I’ll try to get down on eye level with the student and just know like you know instead of hovering over them just kind of get down at eye level.” Nicole also desires to be empathetic and an active listener.

In addition to communication, getting to know students, and listening, Abigail, Daniel, Kelly, and Nicole agreed that it takes time to build relationships. Nicole conceded that when

communicating and getting to know students, you have to “take it slow.” Likewise, Daniel recognized that “you form a relationship that’s built over time,” while Kelly agreed you must take time to develop relationships. In addition, Kelly found that giving them time and attention helps students not feel alone.

Disposition. Before a relationship can be built, 11 of the participants mentioned the necessity of being approachable for their students. In their interview, Marc and Dana stressed the importance of making sure their “door’s always open.” Marc further stated, “You can e-mail, you can text me, you can stop in and I’ll stop everything for you.” In her letter, Jamie explained, “They should be made to feel that they could come to you and discuss any problem.” During the focus groups, Abigail disclosed, “I always try to make sure that students know they can talk to me if they want.” In his interview, Zephaniah asserted that teachers need to “let [the students] know you’re on their team and you believe in them.” He further expounded that when students feel you believe in them, it provides them with a confidence and a belief in themselves that increases their competence. Courtney acknowledged the importance of being kind in her letter, while Nicole stressed the importance of understanding and being there to help her students during her interview.

In addition to being approachable, participants also mentioned that honesty, trust, and being genuine help build relationships. Abigail and Kelsey recognized in their interviews that honest conversations with students help them get to know their students and understand what anxiety they are facing. In his letter, Daniel asserted, “Open, honest communication and creating an environment with all involved feel comfortable enough to come advocate for themselves.” In her interview, Nicole recognized that students are “not going to trust automatically. So, in an essence, you need to prove yourself first and that can take time.” Daniel referenced the need to

build rapport and establish relationships that build trust with students. Kelly and Kelsey both agreed it is necessary to create a bond of mutual trust and respect with their students. In the focus group, Dana further expounded, “If you’re not real with them, then they’re never gonna trust you.” Marc echoed, “You got to be real with the kids. You got to be real with the kids.” During the focus group, Daniel focused on having real conversations with students. Furthermore, in their letters, Abigail disclosed the need to “ask them how their day was and genuinely want to hear their response,” while Dylan expressed the need to “be genuine with your students and model the behaviors you want them to exhibit.” The participants agreed that a teacher’s disposition greatly impacts building relationships with their students and provides them with a sense of belonging in the classroom because they know they are safe from judgment.

Learning Environment

The learning environment plays an important role in the learning process of a student with anxiety. Throughout the data collection, participants commented on the struggles they face in the classroom when dealing with students with anxiety as well as the importance of maintaining a safe learning environment. Participants placed an importance on ensuring students feel safe and comfortable, so they can advocate for themselves.

Classroom Struggle. When students are suffering from anxiety, participants found they cannot focus within the learning environment. In the focus group, Molly recognized, “For the individual student, it affects their learning because if they aren’t paying attention because they’re focused on something else or they have that anxiety, they can’t focus on the topic and then it sometimes snowballs.” Courtney expounded upon that by saying, “The anxiety of like, one student leads to the student being unfocused, which then really affects the whole room.” Nicole and Zephaniah agreed that it causes a distraction in the class. Furthermore, Nicole recognized

that “if they’re anxious, if their mind is elsewhere, they’re not going to learn.” In addition, several participants mentioned the difficulty of reaching all students, including students with anxiety, when they have large class sizes. Dylan also expressed concern of not being able to get to the student struggling with anxiety because of trying to maintain everything else going on in the classroom. In addition, students with anxiety often do not want to participate in the classroom due to drawing attention to themselves and will sometimes forget their material on purpose. In his interview, Daniel acknowledged that “they think everyone’s looking at them or they don’t want to participate really or have any kind of involvement in the game because they think all eyes are on them.” Furthermore, Zephaniah recalled a student forgetting their material so they didn’t have to participate in class.

All participants agreed that every individual is different, so how they handled one student with anxiety could be completely different from the next student with anxiety. In the focus group, Daniel commented, “Every kid’s different. I don’t teach every kid the same or I don’t interact with every kid the same way.” Dylan acknowledged that “different students react in different ways. So, what works for one student doesn’t work for another.” Kelsey stressed the importance of trying to learn how different students respond when they are feeling overwhelmed. In her interview, Molly stated, “It all triggers different per student and even the same student could, you know, something can cause anxiety one day and not the other.” Participants agreed that it is important to use discernment when working with students with anxiety because they all have different needs.

Atmosphere. Participants recognized the need for students with anxiety to feel comfortable within their classroom. In his interview, Marc repeatedly stated, “I try to make everybody as comfortable as I can in my classroom.” Daniel disclosed the need for “creating an

environment to where those students and all students feel comfortable coming up to me advocating for themselves when they don't feel comfortable." When students feel comfortable in their classroom, Dana stated, "Then that anxiety is going to disappear because they feel confident and comfortable with coming to you when they struggle." Participants agreed when students feel comfortable in the classroom it promotes self-efficacy because students feel safe to advocate for themselves.

Along with students feeling comfortable in the classroom, participants acknowledged that consistency is also beneficial. In their letters, Dylan asserted, "Clear and consistent expectations can help prevent anxiety in the classroom," while Abigail said, "Be consistent and kind." In addition, Marc stated, "Try to be the same person every day." Kelsey further expounded that inconsistencies in responses can cause students additional anxiety. However, in an effort not to increase a student's anxiety, Courtney, Dylan, and Marc recognized that they should not draw attention to students with anxiety. In his interview, Marc stated, "What I don't do is single them out." Likewise, Dylan and Courtney mentioned that they do not approach students in front of their peers because it increases their anxiety. Furthermore, Dylan, Marc, Nicole, and Zephaniah agreed students with anxiety should not be forced to talk to the teacher. Nicole stated, "Don't push, let them come to you." Participants realized that students will come and talk when they are ready.

Participants recognized that students must feel safe in the classroom. Eleven participants recognized their classrooms as a safe space for their students to come to. In their interviews, Dana, Jamie, Kelly, and Nicole commented on students with anxiety who come to their rooms during their free periods when they needed a break or someone to talk to. Kelly also allows students to come to her room during lunch time to participate in a "lunch bunch." Nicole

asserted, “My room’s a safe place and that’s what I’ve always wanted it to be.” Marc lets his students know “you’re in a safe zone here. You don’t have to worry about it like no judgment.” Additionally, Zephaniah stressed the importance of providing a calming environment for students so they can learn. In the participant letter prompt, Dana disclosed, “For some students you are their only sense of consistency and a place where they feel safe and loved.” When students with anxiety feel safe, participants agreed they will open up and share what they are struggling with because it provides the opportunity for self-advocacy, which promotes self-efficacy. Dylan recognized, “But just finding ways to let students advocate for themselves starting off in a way that doesn’t bring any attention to it because that just makes it worse.” In the focus group, Abigail commented that she encourages her students to talk with her because “I can’t help you if you don’t communicate with me.” Furthermore, participants agreed that when students with anxiety share what they are struggling with in their classrooms, they are better able to adapt to the learning environment.

Preparation

Teacher preparation is vital to the success of teachers within the classroom. Professional development, collaboration, and classroom experience have shaped the way participants respond within the classroom to students with anxiety. However, there are times when teachers are unable to help students with anxiety and must seek additional resources within the school setting.

Training. All participants repeated in their interviews, focus groups, as well as letters that they had little to no college classes or professional development related to student anxiety. However, they all stated they wished they had known there would be students in their classroom with anxiety prior to going into the classroom. In their interviews, Abigail commented, “I wish it had been part of the class,” while Marc stated, “You got to have a whole unit on that in terms of

talking about kids that have some anxiety.” Kelsey agreed by saying, “I wish that I had been told more about what anxiety is. I wish I had more knowledge of just anxiety in general.”

Furthermore, Molly emphasized that “we don’t learn everything that can happen in a classroom, in a textbook or through a course.” While participants agreed they had a lack of training in college for helping students with anxiety, six participants mentioned receiving professional development related to mental health but nothing specifically related to dealing with students with anxiety. Kelly, Molly, and Nicole mentioned seeking professional development on their own to better understand student anxiety; however, it was not through their school systems. Courtney recalled having some professional development during COVID-19 since everyone was trying to adapt to the new way of learning. In the focus group, Abigail stated, “I definitely have seen professional development for like mental health for teachers, but not necessarily like professional development for students.” In addition, Nicole commented on her school system now implementing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) training for the teachers, while Dana disclosed that her school system just started implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Regarding future training, eight participants had a growth mindset. Dana asserted, “I wish I’d still get training on it.” Abigail and Zephaniah commented in the focus group that this study has helped them be able to further identify anxiety in students, while Daniel and Dana acknowledged this study helped them realize the importance of student teachers needing to be trained in this area. In addition, Daniel commented in the focus group that teachers need to be “like always willing to learn.” Nicole realized that student anxiety is not going anywhere and conceded, “It’s always that learning curve of figuring out how do I keep every student safe just

reminding ourselves that it changes every year.” Participants asserted the need for continual training in this area.

Life Experiences. Throughout the interviews, focus groups, and letters, 10 participants mentioned collaboration as an important way to help support students with high anxiety. In the focus group, Daniel stated, “Communication amongst whoever’s involved in that child or that student’s life is huge.” Molly, Kelly, and Kelsey acknowledged the importance of learning and gleaning knowledge from other teachers in their co-taught classrooms as they interact with and support students with anxiety. In the focus group, Kelly asserted, “As a co-teacher, I get to spend every day in other people’s classrooms and I watch them and I, you know, there are things I pick up. Just being able to observe another teacher.” When struggling with students with anxiety in the classroom, Abigail, Courtney, Dana, Jamie, Kelsey, Molly, and Zephaniah recognized the importance of collaborating with the other teachers who have the same student with anxiety to see if there is a strategy that works for them. In the focus group, Kelsey further expounded on this idea, commenting, “A lot of times it helps to talk to the other teachers and see how they’re acting in other classes to see if it’s like specific to me or specific to the kids that they’re in like math class with.” Dylan recommended for a future teacher to “partner up with an experienced teacher, who still has passion for what they do, and let them help you.” In addition, Daniel stressed the importance of reaching out to parents for advice since they know their children the best.

While collaboration is important, all 12 participants recognized and acknowledged that their knowledge about dealing with students with anxiety came from their experience in the classroom. In his interview, Daniel stated, “It was a kind of trial or learn by fire.” However, in the focus group, Daniel added, “I think it’s important too though, that you take your experience,

whether it's the first time or the fifth time, and use that as your PLC [Personal Learning Community]." Kelly agreed, "That's just experience, you know, that's just experience and you know self-reflection too. the best teacher is life." Courtney, Daniel, Kelly, and Molly commented on learning from their mistakes when dealing with students with anxiety. Jamie conceded, "The longer you teach the more adept you will be at handling conflicts in the classroom as well as anxiety." In his interview, Marc added, "I've learned by dealing with it in the classroom and figuring it out." Molly disclosed in her interview, "I learned the most just by experiencing it and learning what not to do and then also changing it and figuring it out day by day." Dylan, Kelly, and Nicole also acknowledged that life experiences have played a role in shaping how they deal with students with anxiety. Each participant agreed that life experiences were the most beneficial training for them.

Resources. When participants were unable to meet the needs of students with anxiety in the classroom, they had to reach out for additional help. Eight participants mentioned the resources available at their schools. Abigail and Daniel commented on their schools offering a day treatment where students can go and receive counseling if they are unable to function in the classroom. However, Dylan's school has a private group of counselors come in to support their teachers. Courtney and Dana have life counselors, who deal with the social, emotional, and mental health of a student, in addition to school counselors at their school, who have been beneficial in discovering additional information on how to best support their students with anxiety. Daniel, Kelly, and Kelsey have a student support room at their schools, which is a quiet room for students with anxiety to go to when they are feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope in the classroom. In her letter, Kelsey stated, "Remember that you are not alone. Schools are built with resources to help students beyond the classroom." Abigail acknowledged, "I'm a teacher

and I try to help kids with whatever they need, but sometimes I'm not equipped for that.”

Courtney, Dylan, and Nicole agreed that it is okay to not know what to do in certain situations when dealing with students with anxiety, but there are individuals who can help. According to Dylan, “It’s being okay with knowing who you cannot help and making sure you get them to who can help them.” Participants recognized that there are times when they must seek additional help for the benefit of the student with anxiety.

Research Question Responses

Throughout the data collection process, data were collected from middle and high school teachers who shared their lived experiences. The collected data were meaningful and provided an understanding of the preparation teachers had and the strategies they implemented. The participants shared similar opportunities regarding their experiences and preparation. After analyzing the data, five themes and 13 subthemes emerged to help provide answers for the research questions.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers who support students with anxiety in the classroom?

Throughout the data collection, all participants acknowledged the need for recognition and identification of students with anxiety. By recognizing and identifying students with anxiety, participants could determine common triggers, signs of anxiety, as well as identification of anxiety. Participants stressed the importance of understanding the common triggers for students with anxiety as well as what signs to look for in students. The common triggers for students with anxiety that participants found in their experience included fear of failure, fear of mistakes, fear of the unknown, social media, and outside factors. In addition, participants acknowledged the

signs for anxiety included but were not limited to avoidance, behaviors, biting nails, body language, coping mechanisms, a difference in demeanor, fidgeting, a physical reaction, shutting down, and withdrawal. Furthermore, participants agreed there are times when students with anxiety have been identified through an IEP or 504 plan. However, they also recognized that students with anxiety often demonstrate patterns in their behaviors when they are struggling which helps teachers identify their anxiety. Without recognizing and identifying the common triggers and signs of anxiety, participants would be unable to implement the strategies necessary to help the students develop autonomy, competence, relatedness, and promote self-efficacy.

Sub-Question One

What strategies do teachers use to help students with anxiety develop autonomy in the classroom?

Participants found that providing options for students with anxiety helps them develop autonomy in the classroom. By providing students with options, the teachers give them control over the situation because they determine what they will do. When students are struggling with anxiety, participants allow them to remove themselves from the situation by taking a lap around the school, sitting in the hallway, taking a quick break, or putting their heads down. By removing themselves from the situation, students with anxiety can gain a new perspective, which allows them to focus on learning and it may internally motivate them to complete the task. Without this removal, participants agreed learning would not take place anyway because the student would be focused solely on whatever was causing them anxiety at the moment. Therefore, through their experience, participants have found it is better for the student to miss a little bit of instruction rather than an entire period. Several participants recognized that when students with anxiety are not able to focus, it causes a distraction for themselves and can also distract others from learning

depending on their reaction to the anxiety. Furthermore, it can create a snowball effect in the learning process from one day to the next.

Several participants commented on allowing students a choice in assignments. Particularly in physical education, participants found it was helpful to allow students with anxiety the opportunity to choose between two things because it provided them some control over the situation and allowed them to determine what they need to do to help them succeed in the task at hand. In addition, participants mentioned breaking down an assignment into smaller chunks so students with anxiety can focus on smaller sections rather than the whole assignment. By breaking down the assignments, students could feel the accomplishment of finishing a section at a time rather than being overwhelmed with a daunting task. When assignments are broken down into smaller parts, students are internally motivated to complete the assignment because they feel successful after completing each section. For students to develop autonomy in the classroom, they must take part in the learning process and feel like they have options.

Sub-Question Two

How have teachers been trained or equipped to help students with anxiety increase their competence?

All participants agreed they did not receive college classes specifically related to supporting students with anxiety in the classroom. After recalling the classes that they were required to take at the collegiate level at varying levels, participants could not recall any classes that were geared toward student anxiety. However, participants specifically mentioned they wished they had known they would have students with anxiety in the classroom when they first began teaching. In addition, only six participants recalled having professional development related to mental illness, but it was not specific to anxiety. Three of these six participants recalled

having training on behaviors that was helpful for supporting students with anxiety, but they had to sign up for the training independently because it was not offered through their school division. Only two participants have recently seen their school systems implement PBIS and Adverse Childhood Experience training for new teachers. Furthermore, participants agreed it would be helpful for new teachers to receive this training and to have additional training related to supporting students with anxiety, since student anxiety continues to be problematic in the classroom.

While participants had limited to no training regarding supporting students with anxiety in the classroom, they have learned through their classroom experiences as well as collaboration with other teachers. The participants found collaboration with teachers was helpful when supporting students with anxiety because it provided greater insight into what students were struggling with. By collaborating with other teachers, participants could determine the most helpful and effective strategies when dealing with students with anxiety to successfully learn in the classroom. However, participants also noted that they learned by implementing strategies and then self-reflecting when it was not successful or had an adverse effect. Through their lived experiences within the classroom, participants have gained a greater understanding of supporting students with anxiety and helping their students increase their competence. The more experience they gain, the more strategies and ideas they have for helping the next student struggling with anxiety.

Sub-Question Three

What strategies have teachers found to be most effective in helping students with anxiety develop relatedness?

Participants all agreed regarding the importance of building relationships with students with anxiety. One strategy that emerged through the data was communication. To help students with anxiety develop relatedness, participants realized the importance of getting to know their students. By acknowledging and recognizing what their students liked and disliked, participants could communicate with their students on a deeper level. In addition, several participants mentioned spending time outside of the classroom with their students, whether it was attending an extracurricular activity, allowing students with anxiety to eat in their room during lunch, or having an open door for students with anxiety when they needed a break. By spending time with these students, participants could listen to them share what they were struggling with.

While communication was a key factor for participants, another strategy that emerged from the data was teacher disposition. Participants recognized the importance of being approachable for students with anxiety. When teachers are approachable, students with anxiety feel more comfortable expressing themselves and opening up to the teachers, which benefits the learning process. In addition, participants disclosed it is vital for teachers to be genuine and honest with their students in an effort to build trust. Trust is vital for students with anxiety so they can advocate for themselves when they are struggling. Therefore, participants agreed that teachers must have a disposition that is approachable, genuine, honest, and trustworthy over time.

Although student–teacher relationships are important, it is also vital for students with anxiety to develop relatedness with other students in the classroom. Participants strived to include students with anxiety in classroom activities by allowing other students to help them when needed. Some participants placed students in groups and encouraged the stronger students to help the students with anxiety get acclimated into the group, so they had a sense of belonging.

Other participants strive to include students with anxiety in some aspect of their class, which may look different from the other students. Regardless, teachers must include students with anxiety within the classroom as much as possible to ensure that these students develop a sense of belonging or relatedness.

Sub-Question Four

What strategies can teachers use to promote self-efficacy in students with anxiety?

When students are struggling with anxiety, participants recognized the value of giving affirmation. By encouraging students, giving praise, rewarding students, providing reassurance, and giving validation, students with anxiety believed they could accomplish the tasks set before them. Several participants mentioned students seeking constant validation because they were afraid of being wrong. When participants provided validation, the student would continue their work. In addition, participants acknowledged that encouraging students helped build confidence in the students and help them accomplish the task or at least get them moving in the right direction. Several participants have found that students with anxiety often lack confidence and so building that confidence can help promote their self-efficacy.

While providing affirmation is vital to promoting self-efficacy, participants have found the atmosphere of the learning environment is important as well. When students feel comfortable in the learning environment, participants recognized they are more willing to advocate for themselves. However, the learning environment must also be a safe space for students with anxiety. By creating a safe space, participants found students with anxiety were more at ease and able to actively engage in the learning process. Several participants mentioned teachers should not draw attention to students with anxiety because it just increases their level of anxiety, which

hinders the learning process. Therefore, students who feel safe and comfortable in the learning environment can focus on engaging in the learning process.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, participant information was explained, the results were shared, and the research questions answered. Data were collected through individual interviews, focus groups, and letter prompts using triangulation. After data collection, participant statements were categorized into preliminary and secondary codes and analyzed. Thirteen subthemes emerged while analyzing the data, which included common triggers, signs of anxiety, identification, affirmation, removal, accommodations, communication, disposition, classroom struggle, atmosphere, training, life experiences, and resources. The 13 subthemes fell into five themes: recognition and identification, classroom strategies, building relationships, learning environment, and preparation. The collected data are a true representation of the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting students with anxiety in the classroom.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was conducted to gain unique perspectives regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By conducting individual interviews and focus groups as well as collecting participant letters, I gathered and then analyzed the data through horizontalization to discover themes and subthemes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). After data analysis, five themes and 13 subthemes emerged from the data. This chapter includes a summary of the findings, interpretations of the findings, implications for policy and practice, and theoretical and empirical implications. Finally, the chapter concludes with limitations and delimitations as well as recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Throughout this section, the research findings of this study are discussed through the lens of the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting students with anxiety. A summary of the findings is presented along with the five themes and 13 subthemes. Interpretations of the research findings, the empirical literature, and the theoretical framework are presented. Following the interpretations, theoretical and empirical implications are given followed by implications for policy and practice. To conclude this section, the limitations and delimitations are discussed, as well as the recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Throughout this study, data were collected from 12 middle and high school teachers through individual interviews, focus groups, and participant letter prompts. After data collection and analysis, five themes and 13 associated subthemes emerged. Through the remainder of this section, the themes and subthemes will be discussed.

The major theme of recognition and identification consisted of the following subthemes: common triggers, signs of anxiety, and identification. All 12 participants acknowledged the importance of being able to recognize and identify students experiencing anxiety within the classroom for learning to take place. By recognizing and identifying the common triggers and signs of anxiety, teachers were able to provide the support necessary to help their students develop autonomy, relatedness, and self-efficacy, and increase their competency. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be able to recognize common triggers and signs of anxiety.

Classroom strategies were another major theme that emerged throughout the data and included subthemes of affirmation, removal, and accommodations. Participants recognized the value of affirmation such as encouragement, giving praise, motivation, reassurance, and validation that helped students to develop autonomy and promote self-efficacy. By providing affirmation, teachers were able to build confidence in their students and push them forward in their assignments. In addition, participants acknowledged that when students were able to remove themselves from the situation causing them anxiety, they were able to refocus and continue in the learning process rather than being hindered by anxiety through the entire class period. Finally, participants found giving students additional time, alternate choices and options, and breaking down assignments were effective strategies to use in the classroom for students with anxiety.

The third major theme that emerged in the data was building relationships with its associated subthemes of communication and disposition. All participants stressed the importance of building relationships with students in an effort to get to know them so that they could recognize changes in student behavior or demeanor regarding anxiety. To build relationships, the participants recognized that communication plays a vital role through listening to their students and spending time with their students. However, participants also acknowledged that for students to feel comfortable communicating with them, teachers must have a disposition that is approachable, genuine, honest, and trustworthy.

Learning environment was another major theme found in the data; it included subthemes of classroom struggle and atmosphere. Participants acknowledged the struggles they face within the classroom which include class size, individual differences, lack of participation, as well as academic hindrances. However, participants also recognized the value of the atmosphere of the learning environment. When students felt safe and comfortable in the classroom, they were more apt to participate, communicate their needs, and advocate for themselves. In addition, participants conceded that students with anxiety crave consistency in the classroom, and it was important not to draw attention to students with anxiety or to force them to participate.

Finally, preparation was a major theme with its associated subthemes of training, life experiences, and resources. Participants agreed they did not receive any college classes related to students with anxiety. Furthermore, participants received little to no training regarding dealing with students with anxiety. All participants asserted they learned to support students with anxiety through classroom experiences, collaboration with other teachers, and life experiences. In addition, participants found value in seeking additional help through life counselors or guidance counselors when they were unequipped to deal with students with anxiety in their classrooms.

Interpretation of Findings

Since anxiety has become more prevalent in adolescents over the past couple of years (Deaton et al., 2022; Keles et al., 2019), it is necessary for teachers to have an understanding of student anxiety and the effects anxiety may have on students. Without understanding the effects anxiety has on students, their academics, and their well-being, teachers will be unable to adequately support them in the classroom to ensure learning occurs. After analyzing the research findings of this study, it was apparent that to effectively support students with anxiety, teachers must have an awareness and education about student anxiety, build relationships and promote relatedness with their students, and implement effective classroom strategies that develop autonomy and self-efficacy as well as increase competence.

Awareness and Education

According to the research, anxiety has increased over the past couple of years for a variety of reasons (Deaton et al., 2022; Hogberg et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2019). To effectively support students with anxiety in the classroom, teachers must be aware of the causes of anxiety, the signs of anxiety; they must also have training regarding how to support students with anxiety. Without proper training, teachers do not have the necessary tools to effectively support students with anxiety. This study revealed that teachers do not receive education related to student anxiety in their college classes. In the education field, it is necessary to incorporate more education related to student anxiety within college classes, so teachers have some knowledge and preparation before stepping into their first classroom. For teachers to be prepared to support students with anxiety, it would be beneficial for teachers to know anxiety existed in students prior to going into the classroom. In her interview, Kelsey stated, “I wish I had been told more about what anxiety is. I wish I had more knowledge of just anxiety in general.” Additionally, the

gap in the literature supports the idea that teachers lack preparation and training to support students with anxiety. After conducting this research, I found that regardless of the degree level held by participants, they did not receive training while taking courses in college.

While college preparation would be beneficial, it is also vital for school systems to provide adequate professional development related to student anxiety. According to Shih and Lin (2017), anxiety affects a student's well-being and academic performance. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to have an awareness of student anxiety and how it directly impacts student academic performance in the classroom. Unfortunately, there is minimal professional development related to student anxiety that is available for teachers within their school districts. While some teachers seek professional development for student anxiety on their own, very few teachers receive professional development within their school system. To have appropriate tools and classroom strategies, teachers should be required to attend training and professional development regarding student anxiety on an ongoing basis. Since the sources of anxiety and the most effective responses vary widely, teachers should always be willing to learn and participate in trainings grounded in research and best practice. Nicole emphasized that student anxiety will always exist, so "it's always that learning curve of figuring out how do I keep every student safe just reminding ourselves that it changes every year." By having an increased awareness, teachers are more prepared to support students with anxiety in their classroom daily. Additionally, teachers could benefit from having student anxiety training as part of their recertification process. As I conducted this research, it became clear that school systems must provide professional development opportunities regarding student anxiety so that teachers can remain up to date on the best classroom strategies.

After conducting this research, it was evident that the most beneficial and practical training participants received was through real life experiences. Due to the lack of preparation, teachers learn what to do and what not to do through their experience in their classroom each day. Daniel concluded, “It was a kind of trial or learn by fire.” Often, teachers learn from the mistakes they made in their previous interactions with students with anxiety. However, if teachers are introduced to, or at least aware of, student anxiety prior to teaching in the classroom, these mistakes may potentially be avoided, resulting in better student support. While their own experiences are beneficial to them, collaboration with other teachers should also be emphasized. Since student anxiety can impact their academic performance, school attendance, and well-being (England et al., 2019; Shih & Lin, 2017), teachers must receive adequate training to combat the effects of anxiety on students to help them develop autonomy and relatedness, promote self-efficacy, and increase competence.

Relationships

Student–teacher relationships play a vital role in supporting students with anxiety in the classroom. To mitigate anxiety, teachers must form relationships with their students (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018; Otterpohl et al., 2019). Additionally, knowing students can help teachers recognize signs of anxiety as well as changes in behavior. When teachers develop a relationship with their students, the students are more likely to open up to them and feel comfortable communicating their needs to their teachers. In addition, building relationships with students by having open communication with them is an effective strategy within the classroom. As student–teacher relationships are cultivated, teachers can relieve anxiety in students by creating a safe and trusting environment where students feel comfortable (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018; Otterpohl et al., 2019). Positive relationships between teachers and students can be cultivated in

a variety of ways. During his interview, Zephaniah stressed the importance of letting students know that “you’re on their team and you believe in them.” When teachers assure students, it helps to build student confidence, strengthen their sense of self-efficacy, and help them believe they can accomplish academic tasks. When students develop a relationship with their teachers, they are more likely to achieve higher levels academically (Korinek, 2021; Mishra, 2020; Neidiany et al., 2018). Positive student–teacher relationships help to mitigate student anxiety and increase academic achievement.

To build relationships, teachers must be approachable so that students with anxiety feel comfortable speaking with them. When students are met with an unkind or callous environment, they feel unsafe, which results in anxiety forming within the student (Burleigh & Wilson, 2021; Englund et al., 2022). In the focus group, Kelly referenced being in classes where students felt uncomfortable, which resulted in them experiencing anxiety. Additionally, Courtney recognized from her own experiences the value of teachers’ kindness to help students with anxiety. While teachers cannot necessarily control the way students feel, they can influence the environment and culture of their classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to have an approachable disposition when dealing with students with anxiety.

By building relationships, teachers can provide a sense of belonging and safety in their classroom. When students feel safe in the classroom, they are more engaged and able to focus on academic content due to having less anxiety (G. Chen et al., 2020). Dana recognized that when students feel comfortable and safe in the classroom, “then that anxiety is going to disappear because they feel confident and comfortable with coming to you when they struggle.” When students feel comfortable in the classroom, it promotes self-efficacy because students feel safe to

advocate for themselves. Therefore, teachers must strive to create an atmosphere where students feel safe and comfortable to advocate for themselves for effective learning to take place.

For students with anxiety, relationships are important not only with their teachers but also with their classmates. When students are unable to communicate effectively, they can experience anxiety due to social discomfort, which affects their ability to collaborate with other students in the classroom (England et al., 2019). Teachers can place students with anxiety in groups with stronger students to help them become more engaged in the collaboration process. All students should feel included in the classroom to develop a sense of belonging. As I conducted this research, it became evident that when students feel accepted in the classroom by their teacher as well as their peers, they are more motivated to participate and advocate for themselves.

Effective Classroom Strategies

While there is a gap in the literature related to effective classroom strategies while supporting students with anxiety, the participants in this study were able to describe their experiences related to these classroom strategies. One effective classroom strategy for teachers to implement when students are experiencing anxiety in the classroom is to remove them from the situation. Teachers must recognize the need for students with anxiety to have the opportunity to remove themselves from the situation causing them anxiety. When students become overwhelmed in the classroom, an effective classroom strategy is for students to get water, sit in the hallway, go to the restroom, or take a walk. Regardless of the type of removal that is chosen, students are more apt to refocus once they return to the classroom. Anxiety can lead to students being unable to concentrate and feeling overwhelmed (Jones et al., 2019). Without removal from the situation, students may become debilitated, which hinders the learning process from taking place. In the focus group, Molly affirmed this idea by concluding, “Because in the long run, 5

minutes outside the classroom might be the most beneficial thing versus sitting in my classroom for the whole 40 minutes and not getting anything out of it.” Removal from the situation is an effective classroom strategy as it provides an opportunity for students to refocus and regain concentration, which allows learning to continue to take place and not be hindered.

Giving affirmation to students is another beneficial and effective classroom strategy for teachers to utilize. Anxiety can lead to the inability to focus and lower motivation, which eventually affects a student’s academics (Khesht-Masjedi et al., 2019). Teachers should place an emphasis on providing encouragement, giving praise, validation, and reassurance to students with anxiety. Affirmation is a powerful tool for teachers to implement since it affects student motivation. Abigail acknowledged, “You just encourage a kid. It goes like 10 miles and just showing kids that they are able to do something, and they can succeed.” Therefore, providing encouraging words and affirmation can help provide an internal belief in students to accomplish the academic task at hand. Positive daily communication and teacher affirmation can create a safe atmosphere, encourage learning, and lead to greater student engagement and academic success (Mishra, 2020; Nyborg et al., 2022). In the current study, I also found that teachers must provide encouragement as well as affirmation for students with anxiety to be motivated to accomplish classroom tasks and perform well academically.

Providing students with alternate choices or additional options is another classroom strategy that the participants in this study found to be effective in motivating students with anxiety to do well. When students are given a choice or option in their learning process, they feel in control of the situation, which helps alleviate their anxiety. In the focus group, Molly agreed, “The best thing that I’ve seen is giving students options. By giving students choices, it helps them feel more in control of their anxiety.” Therefore, teachers may want to provide alternate

choices or options in their class when students are experiencing anxiety to help them feel in control of their situation.

In addition, breaking down assignments into smaller chunks is a highly effective classroom strategy in motivating students to complete an assignment because the student can experience success and receive feedback after each task is completed. By offering more chances for students to receive positive feedback, students had more opportunities to experience success with their teachers (Lei et al., 2022). When larger assignments are broken down, students can experience success in smaller intervals that may provide motivation each time a section is completed which can help students develop autonomy. Abigail asserted, “Breaking it into chunks when you notice they are beginning to feel overwhelmed, will go a long way and will help to build that confidence back up.” Consequently, teachers may want to change the way they assign and implement classroom activities, so students with anxiety can experience success at different levels throughout the assignment and become more internally motivated to complete the entire assignment, rather than feeling completely overwhelmed.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The research findings of this study have theoretical implications. This study supports and extends the theoretical framework of Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory, which states an individual’s behavior and their environment are directly related. Participants in this study reaffirmed the importance of creating a learning environment where students feel safe and comfortable to help eliminate anxiety in students. In addition, this study reinforces and extends Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, which provides a framework for a student’s motivation and the ability to manage their anxiety. Participants found affirmative actions were an effective classroom strategy in providing motivation for students. They also found that

encouraging and reassuring students built their confidence, and students' belief in themselves directly impacted their anxiety.

While the research findings of this study have theoretical implications, they also have empirical implications. This study supports previous research that anxiety negatively impacts the academic performance of students (Shih & Lin, 2017; Yan et al., 2017). According to the participants, students who suffer from anxiety will demonstrate a pattern of absenteeism to avoid an assessment or schoolwork. Furthermore, previous research supports the idea that an individual's learning and academic achievement are directly impacted when students suffer from anxiety (Bauer et al., 2020; Hood et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2019). This study confirms previous research regarding the learning environment and student learning. By providing a safe learning environment, teachers help students deal with their anxiety so learning can take place (G. Chen et al., 2020). Participants in this study agreed that students must feel safe to advocate for themselves for effective learning to take place.

As noted in the interpretation of findings section above, there is a gap in the empirical literature regarding the preparation and experiences of teachers with specific strategies to mitigate the anxiety that impacts student learning. Throughout this research, participants confirmed their lack of preparation regarding student anxiety in the classroom. However, they recognized and acknowledged they have gained great insight through their experiences in the classroom but would love to have additional training related to supporting students with anxiety. Throughout this study, participants provided a variety of classroom strategies they found to be effective for developing student autonomy, promoting self-efficacy and relatedness, and increasing student competence.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Students with anxiety should have the opportunity to learn within the classroom.

Therefore, educators must strive to ensure this learning can occur by implementing policies and procedures that support students with anxiety. Throughout this section, implications for policies and practices will be discussed in an effort to support effective learning for students with anxiety.

Implications for Policy

Throughout the past couple of years, anxiety has increased especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2022). While some of the causes of anxiety remain the same, other causes of anxiety change throughout time. Therefore, it may be beneficial for teachers to receive updated training through their school division each year in preparation for supporting students with anxiety in their classrooms. By providing ongoing training, teachers will be able to remain current on the causes of student anxiety as well as best classroom practices to mitigate anxiety in the classroom.

While professional development is beneficial for teachers to receive, new teachers must also be equipped to handle students with anxiety in the classroom. In addition, it is necessary for new teachers to learn how to identify students with anxiety and how to implement classroom strategies to combat student anxiety. By implementing courses within college programs that provide knowledge of student anxiety, new teachers may be better equipped to handle students with anxiety in their classrooms. Teacher training programs should strive to ensure teachers are well prepared to handle various situations within the classroom. However, there is a gap in the training regarding effective classroom strategies to mitigate anxiety. Therefore, colleges may want to implement coursework that informs teachers about student anxiety and teaches

classroom strategies that are effective in developing autonomy and relatedness, promoting self-efficacy, and increasing competency.

Implications for Practice

The first implication for practice includes teachers doing their best to build relationships with their students, creating a safe environment, as well as providing affirmation for their students with anxiety. Participants found that students suffering from anxiety often struggle from a lack of confidence. Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide words of encouragement, affirmation, and validation to students with anxiety in an effort to build their confidence and lessen their anxiety. In addition, teachers should give praise as well as reward students to promote autonomy and ensure that their students are internally motivated to succeed in the classroom.

Another implication for practice is for teachers to implement effective classroom strategies. Therefore, teachers should establish procedures for students to follow when they are experiencing anxiety in the classroom, especially related to removal from the situation. Teachers must determine if they will allow students with anxiety to get water, sit in the hallway, take a walk, or put their heads down when they need to be removed from the situation. By establishing routines and procedures, students with anxiety can understand the expectations without a fear of getting in trouble. Without clear and consistent procedures, there is a fear of the unknown which could increase their anxiety rather than mitigate it.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations of the study include a lack of diversity in the school environment. There were few urban school teachers, since most participants in this study taught at suburban or rural public schools. While four participants had prior private school experience, no participants were

currently teaching at a private school. In addition, the study was limited to only middle and high school teachers. Elementary teachers could provide additional knowledge related to student anxiety. Another limitation of the study is the focus in only one state. Since states have varying requirements and trainings, participants from other states may have experienced other trainings and professional development opportunities and would be equipped differently to handle students with anxiety in the classroom. Additional participants would provide supplementary knowledge related to student anxiety.

The study was delimited by only using middle and high school teachers in a central Atlantic state. Participants were required to have a minimum of 3 years of experience as well as currently teach middle or high school students at an accredited private or public school. Teachers with less than 3 years of experience would not likely have as much knowledge to draw from regarding supporting students with anxiety. Therefore, by providing qualifications, participants had continuity regarding their experience as well as requirements to participate.

Recommendations for Future Research

After looking at the study findings, there are several recommendations for future research. Since this study focused on the experiences of middle and high school teachers in a central Atlantic state, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar study in another state to compare the study findings and gain additional insight into supporting students with anxiety. In addition, further research should be conducted on elementary teachers and their lived experiences while supporting students with anxiety. A qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, similar to this study, focused on the lived experiences of elementary teachers who support students with anxiety could provide additional insight into best practices and strategies for all ages.

Since participants acknowledged a lack of training and preparation regarding supporting students with anxiety in the classroom, a case study or phenomenological study could be conducted with teachers in multiple grades on the effectiveness of teacher preparation courses that colleges provide related to student anxiety. In addition, a phenomenological study could be conducted with teachers regarding the implementation of teacher training and professional development to support students with anxiety. Further research into understanding effective classroom strategies would provide additional insight in the future, since participants discussed having to learn through classroom experience which classroom strategies mitigate anxiety.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety. By examining the literature and research findings, it was evident that there is a strong need for awareness and education related to students with anxiety. Teachers would benefit from taking college classes or receiving professional development related to student anxiety so that they could better support students in the classroom by implementing effective classroom strategies to develop autonomy and relatedness, promote self-efficacy, and increase competence. In addition, building relationships is vital to helping students with anxiety excel socially, emotionally, and academically as it provides opportunities for students to advocate for themselves. Furthermore, there are classroom strategies to mitigate student anxiety in the classroom, which teachers should be trained in and prepared to implement effectively. Therefore, the results of this study indicated the need for additional teacher training regarding students with anxiety and the implementation of effective classroom strategies that help mitigate student anxiety by developing autonomy and relatedness, promoting self-efficacy, and increasing competence.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 22, 2023

Jennifer Crews
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1742 Examining the Impact of Anxiety on Student Learning: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teachers' Lived Experiences as They Support Students with Anxiety

Dear Jennifer Crews, Gail Collins,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Examining the Impact of Anxiety on Student Learning: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teachers' Lived Experiences as they Support Students with Anxiety

Qualifications for Participation:

- Certified teacher in Virginia at a public or accredited private school
- At least 3 years of teaching experience
- Currently teaching middle or high school
- Have worked with students who have or are experiencing anxiety

The purpose of this research study is to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety.

Participants will be asked to participate in:

- Interview (no more than 1 hour and will be audio recorded)
- Focus Group (no more than 1 hour and will be audio and video recorded)
- Letter Prompt (a minimum of 500 words and approximately 30 minutes)



Complete this
Screening Survey
to Participate!



Jennifer Crews, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Jennifer Crews at [REDACTED] for more information

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study. As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand a phenomenon. The purpose of my research is to explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years or older and a certified middle or high school teacher in a public or accredited private school [REDACTED] with a minimum of three years of experience. Participants will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded in-person interview or online interview through Microsoft Teams, take part in a video-recorded focus group through Microsoft Teams, and write a letter prompt. It should take approximately 30 – 45 minutes to complete each interview and focus group as well as approximately 30 minutes to write a letter to a future teacher. Participants will also be asked to member check their interview transcript as well as their part in the focus group transcript to ensure accuracy, which will take approximately 15 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please complete the screening survey. If you meet my participant criteria, I will email you a consent document, which contains additional information about my research. In this same email, I will schedule an interview with you. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Crews
Doctoral Candidate
[REDACTED]

Appendix D: Screening Survey



Screening Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Please answer the following questions. Once your response is received, I will be in contact with you regarding the details for the study.



[Switch account](#)



 Not shared

* Indicates required question

I am a certified teacher in Virginia, currently teaching middle or high school students in a public or accredited private school. *

Yes

No

I have been teaching for at least three years. *

Yes

No

I have worked with students who have or are experiencing anxiety. *

Yes

No

What e-mail address would you like to use throughout this study? *

Your answer _____

Submit

Clear form

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Appendix E: Acceptance / Non-Acceptance Letter

Hello,

Congratulations! You have met the qualifications and have been selected to participate in my study regarding middle and high school teachers' lived experiences while supporting students with high anxiety. Throughout this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview and a focus group and write a letter of advice to a future teacher. Please sign the consent form using Adobe Sign that will be emailed to you and return it to me within five days. The consent form must be signed prior to participating in the interview, focus group, or letter prompt. Please let me know which of the following date and times you have available to complete your interview.

- (Date and Time 1)
- (Date and Time 2)
- (Date and Time 3)

Please let me know if you cannot interview on one of these dates or times, and we will work together to schedule a date and time that is convenient for you. I look forward to hearing from you. Again, thank you for your time and your willingness to participate.

Jennifer Crews
Doctoral Candidate

Hello,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. After receiving your answers to the screening survey, you did not meet the qualifications to participate in this study. However, I truly appreciate your time and willingness to participate.

Jennifer Crews
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix F: Consent Form

Title of the Project: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY ON STUDENT LEARNING: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES AS THEY SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Crews, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years or older and a certified middle or high school teacher in a public or accredited private school in Virginia with a minimum of three years of experience. You must also have worked with students that are experiencing, or have experienced, anxiety. 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 explore the lived experiences of middle and high school teachers while supporting adolescents with high anxiety.

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 an in-person interview or an online interview, conducted via Microsoft Teams. The interview will take no more than 1 hour and will be audio-recorded.
2. Review the individual interview transcript to ensure accuracy, which will take no more than 15 minutes.
3. Participate in an online focus group via Microsoft Teams. The focus group will take no more than 1 hour and will be audio- and video-recorded.
4. Review your part of the focus group interview transcript to ensure accuracy, which will take no more than 15 minutes.
5. Write a letter prompt with a minimum of 500 words that will take approximately 30 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. However, you may benefit from taking part in a collaborative conversation with other middle or high school teachers during the focus group as they discuss supporting adolescents with high anxiety.

Benefits to society include providing information on how teachers can support students with high anxiety.

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.

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Approved on 6-22-2023

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.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked cabinet. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for five years until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee 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/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer Crews. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gail Collins, 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.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

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Approved on 6-22-2023

Appendix G: Individual Interview Questions

General Background of Participants

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself to include your educational background. CRQ
2. How long have you been teaching? CRQ
3. What subjects and grade levels have you taught? CRQ
4. What subject(s) and grade level(s) do you currently teach? CRQ

Student Anxiety in the Classroom

5. How do students struggle with anxiety in your classroom and what does this look like? CRQ
6. How do you identify students who are experiencing anxiety in the classroom? SQ1
7. Are there specific signs that you look for in students who are experiencing anxiety in the classroom? SQ1
8. All students have some anxiety from time to time. How do you distinguish between typical pre-adolescent stressors and high anxiety in your classroom? SQ1
9. Describe your experience when supporting students with high anxiety. CRQ
10. What specific scenarios have caused student anxiety to manifest in the classroom? SQ1
11. Describe any challenges that you face when working with students who have high anxiety in your classroom. CRQ

Teacher Training Related to Student Anxiety

12. Describe any college classes that prepared you to identify and support students with high anxiety to develop autonomy in the classroom. SQ1
13. What professional development experiences have you had that prepared you to support students with high anxiety in your class increase their competence? SQ2
14. Do you feel the training you have received has been beneficial in supporting and increasing the competence of students with anxiety? If so, please describe the training you received. SQ2
15. What training or professional development has been most beneficial? SQ2
16. Have you received any training or professional development related to student anxiety that has not been helpful? If so, please share your experience. SQ2

Effective Strategies for Supporting Students with Anxiety

17. Describe specific strategies you have found to be effective in promoting student self-efficacy when supporting students with anxiety. SQ4
18. What strategy have you found most beneficial in promoting student self-efficacy when supporting students with anxiety? SQ4
19. What advice would you give to other teachers regarding how to support and develop relatedness with students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3
20. What do you wish you had been told regarding how to support students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3

Appendix H: Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Please share with the group a little about yourself including your educational background, what subject you teach, and what grade levels you currently teach. CRQ
2. What types of anxiety have you seen students experience in the classroom? SQ1
3. How has anxiety specifically impacted student learning and autonomy in your classrooms? SQ1
4. How do you recognize and identify specific signs of anxiety when supporting your students in the classroom? SQ1
5. In middle and high school, students will experience anxiety occasionally due to typical pre-adolescent stressors. How do you differentiate between normal adolescent stressors and high anxiety in your classroom when supporting students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ4
6. Describe any practical training you have received regarding supporting students with anxiety. SQ2
7. Describe any professional development or training you have received in your school division regarding supporting students with anxiety and increasing their competence. SQ2
8. What strategies have you found to be the most effective when supporting students with high anxiety and promoting student self-efficacy? SQ4
9. What advice would be beneficial for new teachers to receive regarding how to support and develop relatedness with students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3
10. What do you wish you had been told regarding how to support students with anxiety in the classroom? SQ3
11. Are there any additional comments you would like to add regarding student anxiety in the classroom? CRQ

Appendix I: Participant Letter Prompt

Participants were asked to write a letter with a minimum of 500 words to answer the following prompt: “Please write a letter of advice to a future teacher on how to support students with anxiety in the classroom. Include any strategies you have found beneficial when supporting students with anxiety as well as any information you wish you had been given.”

Appendix J: Audit Trail

Date	Event
6-22-2023	IRB Approval
6-26-2023	Recruitment of Participants through Social Media
7-1-2023	Sent acceptance e-mail and consent forms to two participants
7-20-2023	Scheduled participant interview but participant did not attend the interview
8-1-2023	Continued to post recruitment flyer on social media
9-30-2023	Sent six individual e-mails to potential participants
10-5-2023	Received signed consent forms from two participants and began scheduling interviews
10-11-2023	Completed first individual interview with participant
10-20-2023	Completed second individual interview with participant
10-26-2023	Completed third individual interview with participant
11-2-2023	Completed fourth individual interview with participant
11-8-2023	Sent three individual e-mails to potential participants
11-14-2023	Sent two individual e-mails to potential participants
12-14-2023	Sent three individual e-mails to potential participants
12-15-2023	Completed fifth individual interview with participant
1-30-2024	Completed sixth individual interview with participant
2-12-2024	Completed seventh individual interview with participant
2-13-2024	Completed eighth individual interview with participant
2-22-2024	Completed ninth individual interview with participant
2-26-2024	Completed 10th individual interview with participant
2-29-2024	Completed first focus group
3-1-2024	Completed 11th individual interview with participant
3-3-2024	Completed 12th individual interview with participant
3-5-2024	Completed second focus group
3-6-2024	Completed third focus group
	After each interview and focus group, I transcribed them and sent them to participants to check for accuracy. No changes had to be made to any interview or focus group transcription.
	Participants sent me their letters based on the participant letter prompt I sent them. I sent reminder e-mails to participants that had not sent their letters.
	I placed the raw data into an Excel spreadsheet and began coding it by hand. Preliminary codes were given to each statement. After reading through the data set several times and conducting bracketing and horizontalization, secondary codes were given to each statement.
	I grouped the codes and final codes emerged to reveal the themes for this study. Five major themes emerged from the data collected.
	After looking at the codes and themes, I began looking at what themes and codes answer the research questions.

Appendix K: Reflexive Journal

Date	Journal Entry
3/13/23	In my experience, students who experience anxiety in a school setting are unable to focus in the classroom and therefore need to be shown grace when experiencing anxiety. When students are suffering from anxiety in a classroom, teachers are often unaware and therefore unable to help support them. Many teachers lack the preparation needed to be able to support students with anxiety and often do not know the signs to look for.
10/11/23	Today, I interviewed my first participant, Zephaniah. I was nervous to conduct my first interview since I hadn't conducted one yet. After speaking with him, I was encouraged by the impact he has on his students. It was great to hear how he sends a friend with a student when they are struggling with anxiety.
10/20/23	Today, I interviewed my second participant, Daniel, who is a seasoned teacher. He provided so much insight into giving alternative choices for his students to relieve their anxiety. It was encouraging to hear the impact he has in the community. Daniel had a completely different personality than Zephaniah. I am grateful for dynamic and diverse teachers.
10/26/23	Today, I interviewed my third participant, Dylan. He has a unique ability to message with his students through the use of Chromebooks. By having this messaging capability, Dylan's students can communicate with him without other students knowing. I am encouraged by the different perspectives my participants are bringing to this study.
11/2/23	Today, I interviewed my fourth participant, Jamie. She is a veteran teacher who taught at a private school prior to going into public education. I have known Jamie for a long time, so it was great to re-connect with her in this capacity. Throughout the interview, I could see the passion Jamie has for her students and the desire she has for her students with anxiety to be successful. It was evident that she deeply cares for her students.
12/15/23	Today, I interviewed my fifth participant, Kelly, who is a special education teacher. Kelly also taught at a private school prior to going into public education. She consistently drew from her experience at the private school as well as the public school. Kelly believes her diverse experience helped shape her to be the teacher she is today. She has such a sweet personality and cares for each of her students individually. Throughout the interview, Kelly emphasized the need for taking breaks when dealing with students with anxiety.
1/30/24	Today, I interviewed my sixth participant, Molly. She has such a gentle spirit, which I believe would help students open up to her. Molly teaches math to middle school students, so it was great to connect with another math teacher through this study. She placed an emphasis on having to learn by experience when dealing with students with anxiety.
1/31/24	As I have gone through and transcribed the interviews, it is very interesting to see the lack of training teachers receive regarding students with anxiety. Although it supports my research, I must be careful to continue to ask the questions in my interviews to ensure I do not hinder or sway the data collection process.

2/12/24	Today, I interviewed my seventh participant, Abigail, who was a former student of mine. It was so great to re-connect and discuss what she has been up to since graduation. What a joy it is for me to be able to see one of my students having such an impact on the world. Abigail really emphasized breaking assignments up so students do not feel overwhelmed. I am grateful for the different perspectives my participants are providing for my study.
2/13/24	Today, I interviewed my eighth participant, Dana. Throughout the interview, Dana placed a strong emphasis on building relationships with students. She spoke of her time in the private school as well as public school. Dana's passion for her students is obvious when speaking with her. She is a huge advocate of praising students and providing encouragement for them. It was such a blessing to interview Dana and have her insight and expertise for my study.
2/22/24	Today, I interviewed my ninth participant, Kelsey, who is a special education teacher. She provided so much insight into this study because she has the opportunity to co-teach in her public school. Since she has such a small group of students, she is able to really pick up on the signs of anxiety for her students and deescalate them as soon as she recognizes them. I am blessed to have her unique expertise as part of my study.
2/26/24	Today, I interviewed my 10th participant, Courtney. She placed an emphasis on wishing she knew more about student anxiety and what was available after her class. She really demonstrated a growth mindset.
2/27/24	Today, I had to reschedule my interview with Marc because he had a situation arise at his school and was unable to make the interview. I also had my 12th participant schedule her interview.
2/29/24	Today, I held my first focus group session. It was so encouraging to see how the participants interacted with each other and shared their expertise with the group. They were able to contribute to each other's statements.
3/1/24	Today, I interviewed my 11th participant, Marc. He has such an outgoing personality. He is very relational and places an emphasis on being real with the students. Marc drew from his experience at a private school as well as his current public school.
3/3/24	Today, I interviewed my 12th participant, Nicole. She has such a sweet personality and really brings a lot to my study. Nicole has taught a variety of grade levels and also helps her school with peer remediation. After conducting all of my interviews, I am so blessed to have such a diverse set of teachers to add insight into my study.
3/5/24	Today, I held my second focus group session. The participants did so well interacting with each other and sharing their experience in the classroom while helping students with anxiety.
3/6/24	Today, I held my third and final focus group session. The participants really communicated with one another, and they had great conversations on each question. It was so encouraging to see teachers interact in this forum.
3/10/24	After transcribing all of my data, I placed the statements into an Excel spreadsheet and coded them with preliminary codes.
3/12/24	Today, I went through the data again and coded the statements with secondary codes. It was good to take a break from looking at the data yesterday, so I could see it through fresh eyes today.

3/13/24	Today, I placed all my secondary codes into an Excel document and color coded the secondary codes that were connected to each other to obtain final codes and themes. It is so exciting to see all the data collection come together. As a math major, it was so encouraging to go through this process and see my data take shape.
3/14/24	Today, I spent time looking through my codes, themes, and research questions to ensure they were accurate. I then categorized my codes and themes by research question. While there is some overlap in answering the research questions, my data provided considerable information for my study.