

2023

## How Elementary School Principals Manage their Workload

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Cynthia Ann McCabe

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University

2023

Abstract

How Elementary School Principals Balance their Workload

by

Cynthia Ann McCabe

MEd, University of Maryland, College Park, 1999

BS, Towson State University, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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## Abstract

Elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system may face challenges when balancing their workload. This problem is significant as an elementary school principal's workload could contribute to ineffective leadership. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how these principals balance their workload and obtain their perceptions of the administrative support required to meet the daily challenges of their job. The conceptual framework is Gronn's distributed leadership model which is based on the purposeful sharing and disseminating of leadership responsibilities. The research questions explored how elementary school principals describe the challenges they have in balancing their workload and their perceptions about the support needed to meet their job responsibilities. A basic qualitative research design was used. Ten suburban, Mid-Atlantic elementary school principals were interviewed using a semistructured interview framework. First and second phase coding was used to analyze the data to determine themes. Themes identified from the data included: (a) elementary school principals use similar strategies to manage their workload, and (b) elementary school principals need support in order to spend their time pursuing instructional leadership and developing authentic relationships. This research may lead to positive social change by improving the working conditions of elementary school principals and their overall ability to lead in order to promote a positive school climate and support the improvement of student achievement.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The job of an elementary school principal has become a stressful and complex job in the 21st century (Levin & Bradley, 2019). The social and political aspects of the position can lead to a struggle to balance the demands of parents, guardians, students, teachers, and district staff (Levin & Bradley, 2019). School principals can experience pressure to fulfill all the expectations of their job, often with little or no guidance from a supervisor (Aas et al., 2020; Brandmo et al., 2021; Mahfouz, 2020).

The role of the elementary school principal has expanded over time. What once was primarily a managerial role consisting of budget preparation and management, student discipline, and building operations, has transformed into an expanded leadership role (Acton, 2021; Connolly et al., 2018; Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021). Since the increase in national attention on public school effectiveness, there has been much research into the various and important roles of the school principal including: principal as instructional leader, principal as change agent, principal as culture builder, principal as equity liaison, principal as coach, principal as special education leader, and principal as business manager (Belenkuyu et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2019; DuFour, 2016; Oplatka, 2017; Pollock et al., 2019; VanVooren, 2018). Any administrator would find it difficult to adequately fulfill all these roles concurrently and competently (Oplatka, 2017; Pollock et al., 2019). Therefore, the school principal's role and the tasks associated with it can be overwhelming (Belenkuyu et al., 2020; Tabancali & Su, 2021; VanVooren, 2018).

Since 2012, researchers have begun to explore the nature of the demands placed on school principals at all levels (Chan et al., 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017). The

demands began to increase with the passage of national school reform legislation like No Child Left Behind (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2105; Chan et al., 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017). This legislation held school systems accountable for the first time to increase the academic achievement of all students. In turn, school principals were directed to ensure that effective teaching and high levels of student learning were occurring in their schools (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Mahfouz et al., 2018; Mitani, 2018). However, while the expectations for efficacious instructional leadership increased, none of the school principals' other roles and responsibilities were eliminated. There is agreement among many educators that the role of the principal has intensified over time and that the current role of the school principal is formidable (Pollock et al., 2019; Sebastian et al., 2018).

The problem that was explored in this study is the challenges faced by elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system when balancing their workload. The knowledge gained by exploring this problem may lead to positive social change by providing district administrators, such as assistant superintendents and directors, with the information they need to provide elementary school principals with professional development and resources to help them cope with the volume of their workload. The findings from this study could guide elementary school principals in strategies that support more effective school leadership. My study may also be used to advocate for legislation, resources, and policies that support the success of the elementary school principal. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the background of the study,

the problem, nature, and purpose of the study, along with the conceptual framework, research questions, assumptions, scope, limitations, and significance of the study.

### **Background**

Before the national educational reform movement that began in the early 21st century, the job of the school principal consisted mainly of managerial duties (Acton, 2021; Connolly et al., 2018; Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021). However, with the passage of the NCLB Act (2002), an update to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that applied to all K-12 public schools in the United States, federal legislation began to require school systems to focus on student performance, levying penalties for poor student achievement. In 2015, ESEA was reauthorized with the signing of the ESSA. This new legislation not only continued the legacy of accountability for raising student achievement globally, but also for closing achievement gaps in student subgroups (ESSA, 2015). The legislation necessitated that the school principal focus on the implementation of school reform practices that lead to increased academic achievement (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Mahfouz et al., 2018; Mitani, 2018). Some researchers questioned whether school principals possessed the skillset required to handle these new responsibilities (Acton, 2021; Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021; Mahfouz et al., 2018). The researchers suggested that school systems invest in professional development for school principals on the effective management of student learning (Acton, 2021; Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021; Mahfouz et al., 2018).

These new job responsibilities did not replace those prior to the accountability movement. In fact, the role of the school principal did not change, it expanded (Connolly

et al., 2018; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Daniels et al., 2019). School principals were still responsible for managing their school, including supervising teachers, and handling budgets. The increased responsibilities resulted in an increased workload and lowered a sense of self-efficacy among school principals (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). Researchers have found that school principals experienced their role as overwhelming and their leadership identity fragile as they tried to meet the expectations of different stakeholder groups (Rodriguez et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Parents, students, teachers, and school district leaders all pressured school principals to meet their differing demands. Parents and students expected visibility and involvement in school-related activities which took time away from the school principal for the completion of administrative and instructional leadership tasks (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Teachers insisted on instructional engagement and feedback, professional development, and support with student discipline (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). These pressures took time away from school principals completing administrative tasks and being engaged in school events. Finally, school district leadership required evidence from school principals of technical management and compliance toward accountability systems (Connolly et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). This expectation took time away from what school principals could use to complete administrative tasks, engage in instructional leadership, and be visible within the school and community. Meeting these mounting demands became increasingly difficult for school principals (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Research further concluded that the expansion of the school principals' job responsibilities not only caused stress, but negatively affected role clarity and professional identity (Aas et al., 2020; Brandmo et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2019). School principals tried to manage this situation in different ways. Some school principals handled multiple demands by taking on specific roles that aligned with their personalities and their school culture (Belenkuyu, 2020). Many school principals viewed themselves primarily as pedagogical leaders, not implementers of national reform with its emphasis on accountability, leading to a cognitive dissonance when they were asked to engage in accountability-related responsibilities (Connolly et al., 2018; Maufouz et al., 2018). Many of school principals' long-held pedagogical values and beliefs often conflicted with the school district leaders' ideas of their roles related to compliance and accountability under reform efforts (Connolly et al., 2018; Crow et al., 2017; Shaked, 2018). Over time, school principals have become equivocal about their professional identity and role (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Robertson, 2017).

The national reform movement and the research that proceeded it revealed that school principals play a critical role, both directly and indirectly, in students' academic success (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Tan, 2018). They are second only to teachers in their influence on student outcomes (Wu et al., 2019). Further, school principals are the primary change agents in schools and carry the vision for student learning through their support of high academic expectations, professional development, and ongoing support of teachers (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). In fact, Datnow and Park



(2018) stated that school principals must make student achievement their most urgent priority, focusing their time on how to ensure high levels of learning for all students.

Since school principals are responsible for the improvement of student learning, and reform efforts aim to focus school principals' energy on accountability for student learning, one would assume that school principals would spend a majority of their time on instructional leadership. However, the research does not support this assumption. Rather it has been found that while school principals aspire to spend their time improving teacher effectiveness and student learning, their time is often spent elsewhere (Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017; Sebastian et al., 2018; VanVooren, 2018). School principals tend to spend more of their time on administrative responsibilities, like managing special education requirements, finances, and student affairs (Sebastian et al., 2018; VanVooren, 2018). To address time management challenges, Goldring et al. (2019) conducted research on a program created solely for the purpose of increasing school principals' time on instructional issues. Their study used a school administrator management (SAM) program focused on school principals setting daily instructional time goals, using a calendar application that tracked their time on instructional activities, receiving daily coaching that would analyze their use of time and strategize about better use, and establishing a system whereby other staff handled administrative tasks that occurred during the day (Goldring et al., 2019). The results of Goldring's study suggested that school principals were able to exhibit some changes in their behavior, increasing the time spent on instructional activities, when they were forced to pay intentional attention to the way they used their time.

While the educational community understands that school principals struggle to spend adequate time on leadership activities rather than on management and administration, there are questions that remain unanswered. One of these questions focuses upon the school principal's workload. My study was needed to better understand the challenges school principals face in trying to manage a heavy workload. Most other studies on this topic focus on the roles and responsibilities of the job, the stress associated with the job, and how school principals manage their workload. This research explored the ways in which school principals balance their workload and the challenges they face doing so. School principals have some discretion to determine what job responsibilities they will do and when, what job responsibilities they will ignore, and what responsibilities they may assign to others. It is unknown, however, how school principals make these decisions. This information is significant to improving the profession and could foster more effective school principals. As such, this study was needed because without an improvement in school principals' ability to manage multiple roles, school principals may continue to struggle in the job.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that was explored in this basic qualitative study was the challenges faced by elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system when balancing their workload. At the research site, principals reported being overwhelmed with the expanding responsibilities of their job. Their concerns regarding workload mirror the focus of much current educational research (see Levin & Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017; Wang et al., 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Research also has highlighted the expanding role of the school principal (Connolly et al., 2018; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Mahfouz et al., 2018).

What was once a primarily managerial job has transformed into one that includes responsibilities to improve teaching and learning and implement national reform (Chan et al., 2019; Connolly et al., 2018; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Mahfouz et al., 2018; Oplatka, 2017). Studies have found that the role of the school principal has intensified over time and that the current role of school principal is formidable, causing increased stress for many school principals (Pollock et al., 2019; Sebastian et al., 2018). There are also current studies analyzing school principals' use of their time, which concluded that school principals spend a majority of their time on managerial, administrative, and organizational responsibilities rather than on responsibilities that are meant to improve student learning (Blossing & Liljenberg, 2017; Huang et al., 2020; Sebastian et al., 2018; VanVooren, 2018). Little is currently known on how school principals deal with the disparate demands for their time and attention. Previous research has not revealed what happens to all the other roles and responsibilities that school principals struggle to fulfill.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges faced by 10 elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system when balancing their workload and their perceptions of the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job. The school principal is crucial to the success of any school (Babo & Postma, 2017; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Tan, 2018). They also play a critical role, both directly and indirectly, in students' academic success (Babo &

Postma, 2017; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Tan, 2018). They are second only to teachers in their influence on student outcomes (Wu et al., 2019).

However, the school principal's job responsibilities are so broad that many are struggling to balance the increased workload while providing attention to all aspects of the job (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). There is agreement among many school administrators that the current role of the school principal is intense and overwhelming, which can contribute to ineffective school leadership and even flight from the profession (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). This situation is problematic, as school principals act as the primary change agents in their schools, working to improve student learning (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). It was imperative to analyze how school principals manage their workload and what could be done to assist principals in managing their role in order to ensure a more successful school. If nothing is done to support principals, their effectiveness may suffer.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

Research Question 1: How do elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system balance their workload?

Research Question 2: What are the elementary school principals' perceptions of the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Gronn's (2002) conceptual framework of distributed leadership was used to inform this study. Although tenets of distributed leadership have been highlighted in

scholarly research since the 1950s, it emerged in educational research with more substance as the role of the principal has become more complex at the turn of the millenium (Gronn, 2000). Distributed leadership provides a way of managing leadership roles and responsibilities that are too burdensome for one person (Badarocco, 2001; Heller & Firestone, 1995). Distributed leadership is not just a devolution of leadership to others. (Harris, 2005). It is the purposeful sharing and disseminating of leadership responsibilities (Gronn, 2000). Gronn (2002) created a framework to explain how distributed leadership occurs. The three components in the framework are spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practice. Spontaneous collaboration occurs when employees with different knowledge and skills join to complete a particular project and then disband. Intuitive working relations occur when two or more employees develop a close working relationship over time where “leadership is manifest in the shared role space encompassed by their relationship” (p. 430). Finally, institutionalized practice happens when teams are formalized to facilitate regular collaboration on the performance of particular functions.

Gronn (2008, 2009, 2010) also established that distributed leadership is most beneficial when balanced among individual, group, and situational styles of leadership. This type of leadership has been studied mostly within the field of education to describe some principals’ response to the demands of their role (Bolden, 2011). A more thorough explanation of distributed leadership is provided in Chapter 2.

Gronn’s distributed leadership formed the foundation of this study by providing an approach to school leadership in which leadership responsibility and authority is

shared. Through this qualitative study and research questions, I analyzed whether the study participants view school leadership through this collective lens. Analysis was also provided regarding whether the components of distributed leadership are among the supports elementary school principals perceived as potentially helpful or necessary to better balance their workload.

### **Nature of the Study**

A basic qualitative study was used to explore how elementary school principals balance their workload. Qualitative research seeks to understand the nature of reality, welcoming its complexity and context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Basic, qualitative research makes use of interpretive methods to understand individuals, groups of people, and phenomena (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), studying them in their natural environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Qualitative researchers view people as experts of their own lived experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Forty-four elementary school principals who are employed or were employed at the local site were invited to participate in this study. The site was a suburban, public school district in the Mid-Atlantic region. The participants had varying levels of experience as elementary school principals.

An interview protocol with relevant questions was developed for this study. By conducting semistructured interviews with each principal, data was collected in the form of their responses. Probing and clarifying questions were asked of each elementary school principal to gain a better understanding of how they balance their workload and their perceptions concerning needed supports. The interviews were

conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams. Utilizing Teams allowed for efficient audio recording and the automatic generation of a transcript of each conversation. Conducting the interviews virtually also increased the willingness of principals to participate, as many currently prefer virtual meetings to in-person meetings. Finally, first and second round inductive coding was used to analyze the interviews and to create themes, categories, and patterns.

### **Definitions**

*Distributed leadership:* Distributed leadership is a leadership model that focuses on shared responsibility across leadership and staff (Daniels et al., 2019).

*Elementary school:* Elementary school refers to the early grades of public schooling before secondary school begins (Jones et al., 2017). For the purposes of this study, elementary school encompasses pre-kindergarten through fifth grade.

*Instructional leadership:* Instructional leadership includes a wide range of professional activities that focus on improving teaching and student learning (Shaked, 2018).

*Management/Administrative responsibilities:* The terms management responsibilities and administrative responsibilities refer to non-instructional responsibilities that include but are not limited to building management, school district meetings, employee supervision and discipline, student supervision and discipline, correspondence, finance, office work, and external stakeholder management (Goldring et al., 2019).

*Professional role:* The term professional role means a job that practicing professionals are required by the school district to fulfill (Aas et al., 2020).

*Stakeholder:* A stakeholder is an individual who has a vested interest in the success of the school, like a student, parent, or teacher (Hauseman et al., 2017).

*Workload:* The term workload means the amount of work assigned to or expected from a worker in a specified time period (Inegbedion et al., 2020).

### **Assumptions**

An assumption for this study was that the elementary school principals interviewed understood the scope of their job responsibilities. It was also assumed that study participants could articulate their knowledge and perceptions effectively. Finally, it was assumed that each principal would respond in an honest and accurate manner to the research questions asked during the interview. Study participants' honesty in their responses was crucial to the credibility of this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of a study describes the depth to which the researcher will explore the topic and sets parameters (Eze, 2018). The delimitations are the characteristics that narrow the scope and provide boundaries for the investigation (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The scope of this study was that of 10 elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system and their perceptions regarding how they balance their workload and the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job. Excluded from participation in this study were assistant



principals and principals other than those in the targeted school district. The focus of this study was chosen because it represents a gap in the literature, in that little is known about how elementary school principals balance their workload. While the findings are specific to my study, the conclusions may help to inform other school principals and district leaders on how to better support their principals as they struggle to balance their workload.

The conceptual framework which served as a foundation for this basic qualitative study was distributed leadership. I chose this framework because it has been a recognized model in the field of education leadership for decades that addresses principal workload (Daniels et al., 2019). During this study, I analyzed whether principals are using distributed leadership to balance their workload. Other conceptual frameworks related to this study but not investigated were the concepts of workload and workload intensification, as well as time management styles. The concepts of workload and workload intensification were rejected because they lacked a focus on strategies to address my research problem. The concept of time management styles was rejected because it lacked the depth of use in an educational setting. The findings of this study may be applicable to other contexts, situations, and populations. I set out to provide a thick description of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to make transferability possible by the reader.

### **Limitations**

Research limitations are a factor in every study and are important to acknowledge, as they can weaken the study's findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In

this study, current elementary school principals from one suburban, Mid-Atlantic district were represented, which was a limitation to the transferability of the findings to all elementary principals in the region or in the United States. The sample was a limitation on generalizability, as only 10 current elementary school principals were interviewed. This small sample size may make it difficult to extrapolate the study findings to a larger population. Furthermore, as a former elementary school principal and principal supervisor, my own personal biases were considered, especially my view of the role of school principal and any affinity for the strategies that were used to balance my workload. To guard against this potential limitation, reflexivity was practiced by taking field notes and analytic memos in a journal utilized during the collection and analysis of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The field notes and memos provided an opportunity to document ongoing ideas, confront my biases, and acknowledge my sensemaking of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Significance**

In my study, I explored the challenges faced by elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system when balancing their workload. I also explored their perceptions of the administrative supports needed to meet the daily challenges of their job. This study is significant because it is critical to understand how elementary school principals manage their daily workload to sustain a positive school climate, meet the needs of all stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, and parents), and provide the instructional leadership necessary in the 21st century (see Mahfouz, 2018; Mitani,

2018; Oplatka, 2017). These elements represent crucial elements to help ensure that elementary school principals effectively lead their schools.

The results from this study may benefit the participating school district's senior administrators by increasing their understanding of how elementary school principals are struggling to balance their workload and what administrative support they may require to meet the daily challenges of their job. This research may also inform state departments of education about what elementary principals need in order to be successful, and in turn, seek support for the necessary funding and training to improve principals' role effectiveness. The findings of this study may also provide impetus for school districts to revise the manner in which principals are evaluated by prioritizing of the most crucial professional roles and practices, holding principals accountable for them, while placing less emphasis on other responsibilities. This research may also lead to positive social change by improving the working conditions of elementary principals and their overall ability to lead, in order to promote a positive school climate and support the improvement of student achievement.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the topic of my study was introduced which is the increased workload of elementary school principals necessitated by expanding job responsibilities. The problem that was explored in this study was the challenges faced by elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system when balancing their workload. The research question that guided this study was associated with how elementary school principals balance their workload and their perceptions about the

administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job. The reasoning for choosing distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002) as the conceptual framework that grounded my study was provided. Also described were the assumptions, scope, delimitations, and significance of this research.

In Chapter 2, a literature review is provided in order to place this research problem within the context of the scholarly research. An explanation of how the literature review was conducted including search terms and sources of data is also provided. This literature review concentrates on the role and responsibilities of school principals and includes the following topics: conceptual framework, role complexity, the overwhelming nature of the role, the expanding role of the school principal, the school principal's role in student learning, and how school principals manage their time.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was explored in this basic qualitative study was the challenges faced by elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system when balancing their workload and their perceptions of the supports needed to meet the daily challenges of their job. A literature review provides an overview of the previously published research on a topic and analyzes the relationship and connections among different works. It also identifies gaps in the literature and topics that need further research. This literature review situates this study of school principals' workload within relevant research. Further, it compares viewpoints on principals' workload and identifies areas of consensus and dissent.

Current research echoes the heavy workload and role complexity of the school principal's job but often fails to explain how principals balance those responsibilities and demands (Brando et al., 2021; Levin & Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017a; Tabancali & Su, 2021, Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2020). In a study for the National Association of Secondary Principals and Learning Policy Institute, Levin and Bradley (2019) concluded that school principals may face role confusion due to different and varying expectations that come from parents, teachers, and district administrators.

In a literature review, the reader's knowledge base is built in regard to the context of the research topic (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Therefore, this review begins with an explanation of the strategy used to conduct the literature search. This review also includes a discussion of Gronn's (2002) model of distributed leadership as the conceptual framework. A review of the key concepts and variables regarding school principal

workload are also provided, including the concept of role complexity as well as research about the overwhelming nature and expansion of the role due to the accountability movement. Further, the review will include research regarding the school principal's role in student learning and conclude with information about how school principals use their time.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

In order to find research associated with my topic, a systematic and comprehensive search of the relevant scholarly literature was executed. The Walden University online library was used to search databases including EBSCO, ERIC, SAGE. In addition, Google Scholar was searched. The search box was used to enter keywords and phrases that related to the workload, role, and responsibilities of elementary school principals, as well as distributed leadership. The criteria for selection of a source included articles published between 2017 and 2021 and were peer reviewed. The key phrases used to search for supporting articles included: *role of principal*, *principal responsibilities*, *principal job description*, *principal workload*, *principal accountability*, *priorities of principals*, *how principals manage their role*, *principal time management*, *principals* and *role complexity*, and *distributed leadership in schools*.

To find additional sources, search terms were combined for an advanced search, for instance, *school principal* or *school leader* or *administrator* were combined with *responsibilities*. Another combination that resulted in additional sources was *school principal* or *school leader*, or *administrator* combined with *workload*. Specific periodicals more aligned to my topic were found and searched, including *Educational*

*Management Administration & Leadership, Journal of Educational Administration, and Management in Education.*

The scholarly literature selected included educational and leadership books, peer-reviewed articles, and articles referenced in studies published within the last 5 years. An exception was made to the 5-year standard for seminal works relating to the conceptual framework of distributed leadership. In addition, research from outside the United States was included because those countries share the educational policy shifts associated with accountability-related school reform with the United States (see Hartley, 2010). Ample current research was found for all key concept areas to support my topic.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges elementary school principals have with balancing their workload and their perceptions of the administrative support needed to meet the daily challenges of their job. In 2000, Gronn developed a framework for leadership called distributed leadership, which is the purposeful sharing and disseminating of leadership responsibilities. This framework was developed in response to the work intensification of leaders within organizations (Gronn, 2000). In 2002, Gronn modified his conceptual framework to make it more specific, which expanded the unit of analysis of leadership from the individual to the group and outlined three types of collaborative action: spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practice. Spontaneous collaboration occurs when employees with different knowledge and skills join to complete a particular project and then disband. Intuitive working relations occur when two or more employees develop a close working

relationship over time where “leadership is manifest in the shared role space encompassed by their relationship” (p. 430). Finally, institutionalized practice happens when teams are formalized to facilitate regular collaboration on the performance of particular functions (Gronn, 2002).

These three forms of distributed leadership show sequential phases in the process of the institutionalization of concertive action (Gronn, 2002). The individuals or agents who make up each group act collectively and cooperatively. Gronn (2002) termed this way of group functioning as “conjoint agency” (p. 431). When conjoint agency is present, “agents synchronize their actions by having regard to their own plans, those of their peers, and their sense of unit membership” (p. 431). Moreover, conjoint agency includes two components; the first is the experience of synergy. Synergy occurs when members of a group bring out one another’s latent capabilities in order to accomplish something larger than what could have been accomplished individually (Gronn, 2002).

The second component of conjoint agency is reciprocal influence, which is the accumulated influence of individuals on one another in successive cycles (Gronn, 2002). In essence, distributed leadership benefits from the power of relationships, shared influence, and capitalizing on group members’ professional strengths. This model also connects with the realities of actual work practices in schools today (Gronn, 2002).

Gronn’s (2002) framework was based on the research of organizational theorists in the 1990s that drew attention to the need for distributed leadership, as the model did not require an individual who could independently perform all critical leadership responsibilities. This model of leadership has been studied most within the field of



education to describe some school principals' responses to the demands of their role (Bolden, 2011; Leithwood, 2006; Spillane 2006). The model has also been used to increase the leadership abilities of teachers (Bolden, 2011; Leithwood, 2006; Spillane 2006).

Since Gronn's initial research, other scholars, including Leithwood (2006), MacBeath (2004), and Spillane (2006), have conducted studies on distributed leadership in schools and developed their own conceptual frameworks of the model. Research by Leithwood et al. (2006; 2007) reveals that certain patterns of distributing leadership have more of a positive impact on organizational development and change than do others. Leithwood et al.'s (2006) distributed leadership framework constituted a continuum around planned leadership, and included planful alignment, spontaneous alignment, spontaneous misalignment, and anarchic misalignment. Leithwood et al. (2006; 2007) concluded that planned forms of distributed leadership were more effective than unplanned forms.

MacBeath (2004) developed six models of distributed leadership, representing a developmental sequence of implementation, from a formalized approach to one that is a normal part of organizational culture. The models of distribution include formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic, and cultural (MacBeath, 2004). According to MacBeath (2004), in higher functioning organizations, distributed leadership was a natural way in which to operate.

Spillane (2006) concluded that leadership is not fixed, but fluid and that the social context is integral to leadership activity. Spillane's framework of distribution included

collaborated distribution, collective distribution, and coordinated distribution. This framework, like the others, shows the variation and extent to which distributed leadership is institutionalized.

The effects of the distributed leadership model have also been discussed in the literature. When implemented, the model's intended effect of alleviating a school principal's heavy workload was shown to be efficacious (Leithwood et al., 2009). However, its effect on student achievement has not been firmly established (Leithwood et al., 2009).

In summary, Gronn's (2002) distributed leadership framework formed the foundation of this basic qualitative study by providing an approach to school leadership in which leadership responsibility and leadership authority are shared. This conceptual framework benefited my study by providing a way to view leadership as a collective effort and exploring whether the participants view leadership similarly. This framework also provided a prospective solution to the problem of school principal workload and allowed the exploration of whether the components of distributed leadership were among the supports school principals perceived as potentially helpful.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables**

#### **Role Complexity in the School Principalship**

Current research revealed that school principals can struggle to understand their role due to the complexity of the job (Aas et al., 2020; Brandmo et al., 2021). This confusion may result in difficulty for them to manage their roles and responsibilities (Aas et al., 2020; Brandmo et al., 2021). One reason for the confusion could be the complexity

of the job and the number of roles they are expected to fulfill. In one study, school principals from six countries reported being expected to fulfill a complex and multi-faceted job with at least seven different roles (Chan et al., 2019). These roles and responsibilities were divided into seven common areas: (a) exhibiting good morals, (b) professional skill, (c) professional knowledge, (d) administrative approach, (e) administrative tasks, (f) staff management, and (g) student management (Chan et al., 2019). Without help from supervisors to prioritize these areas, school principals struggled to make that determination on their own (Chan et al., 2019).

Another factor that contributes to role confusion is that some educational organizations are ambiguous about their main purpose (Tabancali & Su, 2021). As the responsibilities assigned to the public school have expanded to include mental health, medical care, free meals, before/afterschool care, and social justice issues, educators' understanding of the public schools' purpose has weakened. Shaked (2018) stated there are differences in opinion regarding the primary purpose of the public school system, hence the myriad of diverse school mission and vision statements.

The three main functions of public schooling are qualification, socialization, and individuation (Shaked, 2018). Qualification consists of the academics necessary to prepare students for college and careers (Shaked, 2018). Socialization entails the teaching of values and students getting along in a diverse society (Shaked, 2018). And individuation teaches students to keep their unique identities and withstand cultural and political pressures (Shaked, 2018). Some school principals prioritize qualification or academics, but others prioritize non-academic priorities like students' wellbeing, values,

and social skills (Shaked, 2018). Therefore, future school principals, still functioning as teachers, conceptualize their upcoming role based on their own limited work experiences (Truong, 2019). These conceptualizations are usually misaligned with the reality of the role, and principal preparation programs rarely give an accurate view of the job (Truong, 2019). In fact, assistant principals have reported feeling unprepared for the role of school administrator and have had trouble fulfilling the disparate demands of the job (Mitchell, 2017).

According to Brandmo et al. (2021), role complexity and ambiguity, along with poor preparation, allow room for school principals to develop and keep their own expectations of the job, which can conflict with the expectations of their supervisors. State and district administrators can view school principals as professionals hired to implement their bureaucratic decisions, leaving less time for school principals' own leadership priorities and preferences (Rodriguez et al., 2021). In one example, school principals listed leadership and emotional literacy as the top two skills needed for the job as they understood it, rating pedagogy and management much lower (Schneider & Yitzhak-Monsonego, 2020). This placed school principals' views of the job at odds with those of district administrators pushing compliance with district initiatives (Schneider & Yitzhak-Monsonego, 2020). Without school principals and school district administrators working together toward common goals, staff and student focus suffers under conflicting initiatives.

Furthermore, school principals are told to lead but are rarely given the autonomy to do so in the way they believe is best (Heffernan, 2018). Therefore, they can experience

role conflict by having to fulfill formal duties and responsibilities that are a part of bureaucratic expectations and informal responsibilities demanded by staff and parents because of social relationships (Tabanali & Su, 2021). Also, school principals may be unclear about the expectations to fulfill in the face of time constraints and conflicting desires (Tabanali & Su, 2021). Brandmo et al. (2021) reported that school principals regularly feel tension over the need to establish positive and trusting relationships with school staff while being expected to make controversial decisions that can be unpopular with staff (Brandmo et al., 2021). Research shows that, ultimately, school principals determine their role per the situation in which they find themselves (Tabanali & Su, 2021). Over time and with experiences in different schools, their identity and how they manage their complex role change (Robertson, 2017). Every school needs effective leadership and school districts should provide clarity about what it takes to be an effective school principal (Wylie, 2020). The clarity should consist of more than competencies and indicators, but also include which indicators school principals should prioritize (Wylie, 2020).

### **Overwhelming Nature of the Role of School Principal**

Levin and Bradley (2019) found excessive turnover in public school principalship due to the overwhelming nature of the role and principals' inability to keep a healthy work-life balance. In a national study, approximately 35% of current school principals were in their current position for less than two years, and only 11% of school principals stayed in the job for ten years or more (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Other researchers found that school principals report high levels of exhaustion and stress due to the demanding

nature of their professional role (Mahfouz, 2020; Wylie, 2020). Factors noted as stressful include the essence of the work itself, the time demands, and managing relationships (Mahfouz, 2020). Some school principals reported that it was not just the heavy workload that led to stress and exhaustion but the emotional nature of the work (Niesche et al., 2021). Responsibilities that can make the work emotional for school principals include: mediating disagreements between teachers and parents, dealing with parents who are angry about a decision the principal made, and handling student discipline issues. Also, balancing competing stakeholder interests and keeping those stakeholders satisfied was also a source of stress (Niesche et al., 2021). In some instances, continued stress over time caused by the job and long working hours led to major depressive disorder (Nitta et al., 2019, Oplatka, 2017a). In addition, heavy workload and role ambiguity were associated with higher levels of depression (Nitta et al., 2019). In Niesche et al.'s (2021) study, some school principals reported deteriorating health and well-being due to their increased workload.

One of the top reasons reported for school principals leaving the principalship is insufficient time to complete all the necessary tasks and responsibilities (Levin & Bradley, 2019). School principals have described difficulty balancing school-based responsibilities with district-based responsibilities monitored by supervisors (Wieczorek & Maynard, 2018). In addition to this struggle is the challenge of balancing their professional lives with their personal lives (Wieczorek & Maynard, 2018). The school principal's role is not finished when the bell rings and students go home (Wieczorek & Maynard, 2018); often their job cannot be completed within the workday (Jones, 2017;

Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017b). The job has been described as “all-consuming” during the workday and into the evenings and weekends (Mahfouz, 2020). School principals have reported an underlying expectation from stakeholders, requiring them to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Niesche et al., 2021). Being effective in their role involves sacrifices in the school principal’s home and personal life (Jones, 2017). For example, Oplatka’s (2017a) research revealed that the principal’s heavy workload might lead to work-family conflict, a negative attitude toward the job, and a sense of losing control.

Furthermore, research has shown that a great number of varied tasks make up the role of the school principal (Oplatka, 2017b). Some of the tasks are perceived as particularly burdensome to school principals. These duties consist of work-related errands, human resources-related issues, and formal daily procedures they view as unnecessary but are mandated by the bureaucracy of the district (Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2020). Other school principals named the determinants of their workload as sudden and unplanned events, administrative work, the numerous stakeholder groups outside the school, the inner drive for success, and personnel management (Oplatka, 2017b).

Work overload is generally caused by broadening the school principal’s responsibilities (Oplatka, 2017b). For example, one of the more recent expectations placed on school principals by district supervisors is developing relationships with parents and the community at large. However, the emotional and interpersonal demands of managing these external relationships can be overwhelming (Hauseman et al., 2017). Consequentially, the time it takes to form and nurture these relationships extends the

workday (Hauseman et al., 2017). In addition, many communities expect school principals to be visible and engaged outside the school building; school principals struggle to meet that expectation while still taking the time necessary to form relationships with students and staff (Wieczorek & Maynard, 2018).

School principals often create and use strategies to cope with the overwhelming nature of the job. Some strategies are emotional, while others focus on time management. One study showed that school principals justify their working reality by elevating the importance of the profession to a calling, keeping many motivated to continue working under immense pressure and poor conditions (Swen, 2020). Others focus on participating in hobbies and setting aside time to be with friends and family (Mahfouz, 2020). In another study, school principals prioritized their tasks and responsibilities and distributed some tasks to other school staff (Oplatka, 2017b). Within the prioritization of responsibilities, some school principals waived certain tasks completely if they did not assign significant value to them and did not jeopardize their job security (Oplatka, 2017b).

Given the consequences of heavy workloads, Oplatka (2017a) provided suggestions for school districts. The practical suggestions included school districts increasing middle management positions, such as assistant principals, to free up more time for the school principal to focus on leadership. Additionally, the researcher suggested that school districts prepare future school principals for the heavy workload by providing professional development for assistant principals (Oplatka, 2017a). Other suggestions included encouraging school principal supervisors at the school district level



to support school principals by showing empathy and providing guidance in coping with the demands of the job. In addition, Niesche et al. (2021) suggested that school districts work to reduce any unnecessary workload they are demanding of school principals.

### **Expanding Role of the School Principal: The Accountability Movement**

Ganon-Shilon and Schecter (2019) stated that the role of the school principal has expanded over time. Hallinger and Kovacevic (2021) described the role as expanding from the administration of the school in the 1960s and 1970s to the responsibility for student achievement results in more recent years. Legislation, including NCLB (2002) and the ESSA (2015), have held school principals accountable for student achievement levels in the aggregate population as well as student subgroups. Acton (2021) noted that principals might not have been adequately prepared for this transition and the new responsibilities and competencies added to their role as the result of political reform. Thus, some school principals have experienced significant pressure under these national reform efforts (Acton, 2021; Mitani, 2018) and recognized that they are ultimately responsible for results (Maguire & Braun, 2019).

Connolly et al. (2018) added that increasing public awareness school performance led to new challenges from parents and their community at large. School principals were forced to take on the risks and responsibilities of public scrutiny and often faced litigation tied to formal accountability (Connolly et al., 2018). As schools struggled to meet rigorous academic standards, parents gained leverage to prove in court that their child's school had failed to provide an appropriate education. Another risk of the high-stakes accountability movement was the possibility of school principals losing their jobs if

student outcomes did not meet the mark (Maguire & Braun, 2019; Mitani, 2018). This fear of losing their jobs due to low student performance kept many principals from fully utilizing distributed leadership, as they felt a need to keep the authority and control to themselves because they alone suffered the consequences of poor leadership decisions (Maguire & Braun, 2019).

Due to policies related to the accountability movement, the current role of the school principal includes more managerial and technicist responsibilities (Connolly et al., 2018). Connolly et al.'s (2018) study concluded that district offices desire principals to be strategic business managers while dealing with the normal administration of the school, including new school safety standards and increasing student mental health issues. School systems have taken a "mercantilist" (Cruz et al., 2021, p. 49) approach to the principalship, with principals completing an abundance of paperwork to prove their school was meeting specified standards. A more centrist approach to public schooling, whereby the school district retains authority, increased the number of management tasks necessary to ensure that district goals were met (Cruz et al., 2021). A centrist approach can also decrease the opportunity for school principals to exert authentic leadership over their schools (Cruz et al., 2021).

Before the accountability movement, school principals often enjoyed a high level of autonomy in leading their schools; they were given professional discretion by the school district (Connolly et al., 2018). According to Connolly et al. (2018), principals transitioned from this state of being pedagogical "professionals within an education context to being organizational professionals within an accountability system" (p. 621).

Today, school district administrators seem to often value technical skill over moral purpose in their school principals (Connolly et al., 2018). Although technical proficiency is important to reform implementation, skillful leadership is also important (Cruz et al., 2019). As school principals became leaders of school reform, they were required to influence those around them to pursue new goals (Cruz et al., 2019; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). School principals were forced to make sense of new practices, communicate that understanding to others, and motivate staff to make the necessary changes (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). In Ganon-Shilon and Schechter's (2019) study, school principals shared that some of their priorities during reform implementation included caring for teachers' needs, retaining as much leadership discretion as possible, and adjusting to the new reality. To ease their own burden, school principals interpreted and adapted reform policy in alignment with their own belief systems and their school circumstances (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). They understood that their staff expected them to be moral leaders, even during reform implementation, and without integrity, they would not be able to influence or lead their staff (Cruz et al., 2019). Because reform necessitated that teachers change established practices, school principals struggled to balance the demands of reform with their responsibility to ensure a positive and trusting school climate for staff (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). In another study, Maguire and Braun (2019) found that principals in this situation became policy narrators, and their teachers, policy actors. They learned to tell a compelling story to explain the new policies and galvanize their staff toward the goal of higher student achievement

(Maguire & Braun, 2019). Narration themes included branding ideas, persuading staff and other stakeholders, arguing with staff, and parenting staff (Maguire & Braun, 2019).

Other studies have concluded that political reform changed the professional role and identity of school principals, as well as their daily practices (Connolly et al., 2018; Cruz et al., 2021). School principals have stated that their professional identity helped define their role and gave meaning to their work (Crow, et., 2017). In many instances, their long-held pedagogical values, emotions, and beliefs conflicted with or differed significantly from the expectations of others in the reform environment (Crow et al., 2017). For example, in a study conducted by Mahfouz et al. (2018), the researchers concluded that many school principals did not view themselves as reform implementers and, therefore, resented the activities associated with that part of the role. In essence, school principals were left questioning the moral value of their newly defined role and associated responsibilities and whether they wished to continue in the job (Crow et al., 2017).

### **The School Principal's Role in Student Learning**

Research has shown that the school principal's leadership significantly affects student performance (Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020; Ozdemir, 2019). In one quantitative study, Dhuey and Smith (2017) concluded that elementary school principals had a large impact on students' math and reading test scores. Because it is known that school principals can affect student outcomes, they are expected to take responsibility for ensuring student learning (Mette et al., 2017) by providing instructional leadership to their teachers (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). Wu and Gao (2019) found that not

only was instructional leadership one of the most significant factors for explaining levels of student achievement, but it was the only factor positively associated with student achievement. Also, Mestry (2017) concluded that in order to positively influence both teacher and learner performance, it is imperative for school principals to prioritize their role as instructional leaders and share best teaching practices with teachers.

Instructional leadership requires a focus on teaching and learning (Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017) and includes many school principal behaviors and competencies. Some of the behaviors shown to be efficacious include the creation of a shared vision of school improvement and setting rigorous student achievement goals (Mette et al., 2017; Rey & Bastons, 2017). Others focus on creating data monitoring systems (Mette et al., 2017). Still, other instructional leadership behaviors shown to be effective include the school principal providing specific feedback to teachers regarding their instruction through regular walk-throughs and classroom visits (Mette et al., 2017). In addition, creating a professional learning environment in which teachers collaborate and deprivatize their practice was shown to be effective in improving student learning (Ozdemir, 2019).

While instructional leadership is crucial, principals have reported that they spend limited time improving teacher effectiveness (Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017). Instead, they spend more time on management issues (Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017). In one study, when given a choice, school principals chose to spend time honing their skills in the area of administration instead of instructional leadership (Mestry, 2017). Those who chose to focus on developing themselves in instructional leadership skills shared they had difficulty finding time to implement the practices learned (Mestry, 2017). For example,

Tan (2018) revealed that school principals who spent time on daily activities such as reacting to teachers' problems and helping them solve issues had less energy to focus on leadership priorities. Also, Leithwood and Sun (2018) explained that the admonishment of principals to spend the majority of their time on instructional leadership was not only difficult but perhaps unrealistic.

In response to concerns of this nature, Goldring et al. (2019) conducted research on a program created solely for the purpose of increasing school principals' time on instructional issues. The school administrator management (SAM) program focused on principals (a) setting daily instructional time goals, (b) using a calendar application that tracked their time on instructional activities, (c) receiving daily coaching that would analyze their use of time and strategize about better use, and (d) establishing a system whereby other staff handled administrative tasks that occurred during the day (Goldring et al., 2019). The results suggested that school principals exhibited some changes in their behavior, increasing the time spent on instructional activities when they were forced to pay intentional attention to the way they used their time (Goldring et al., 2019). While some researchers concluded that instructional leadership on the part of the school principal was the key to student achievement, others disagreed and pointed toward other important competencies (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Babo & Postma, 2017; Hesbol, 2019). School principals need a wide range of skills, practices, and attitudes to improve student learning (Babo & Postma, 2017). Allensworth and Hart (2018) concluded that the school principal's most important responsibility is to create the conditions necessary for

teaching and learning, including creating a positive school climate and prioritizing school safety (Allensworth & Hart, 2018).

Research has shown that a critical characteristic of high-performing schools is how they function organizationally (Hesbol, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood & Sun, 2018; Sebastian et al., 2018). For example, Hesbol (2019) explained that school principals must understand how to work within regular organizational ambiguity and disorder. Hesbol further added that school principals need to spend time persuading their staff to be highly effective at their jobs. Leibowitz and Porter (2019) revealed that the positive effects of school principals spending time on instructional leadership might be overestimated in the literature and misguided. In fact, the researchers concluded that other leadership behaviors that are not considered instructional leadership behaviors were indistinguishable from instructional leadership behaviors on student achievement. Other leadership behaviors included building internal and external relationships, organizational management, and administration. Essentially, school principals should engage in these activities as well as instructional leadership to improve student learning (Leibowitz & Porter, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020; Sebastian et al., 2018). Leithwood and Sun (2018) expanded on this list of crucial school principal activities that impact student learning by adding the ability of the principal to establish a supportive organizational culture and sustain effective organizational routines.

According to Babo and Postma (2017), for principals to positively influence student learning, they need pre-service training and continued professional development. School principals should also know that they are expected to be the instructional leader

and then be provided with support for that role (Mestry, 2017). In one study, school principals refused to identify instructional leadership as one of their responsibilities, instead insisting it was the job of the assistant principal or the department heads in their school (Mestry, 2017). Arguably, if school districts made clear at the outset that instructional leadership was a crucial part of the school principal's job responsibilities, principals would be less likely to avoid this part of the role. School principals must also be supported with strategies to handle the workload so that there is time for instructional leadership. Researchers have suggested that school leadership be distributed for it to have a positive impact on student learning (Leibowitz & Porter, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020). However, Mestry (2017) warned that school principals should be careful not to abdicate their role in driving effective teaching and learning to others. Instead, school principals should distribute some of their administrative responsibilities (Mestry, 2017). This conclusion was supported by Tan (2018), who concluded that disadvantaged students' learning benefitted from a school principal who took on the role of an instructional leader instead of distributing that responsibility among others.

In summary, the research has shown that school principals have an impact on student performance (Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020; Ozdemir, 2019). However, there is disagreement among the research community regarding which school principal behaviors impact learning. Some argue for traditional instructional leadership behaviors such as providing frequent feedback to teachers and using student achievement data to make instructional decisions (Mette et al., 2017), while other researchers suggested that administrative leadership behaviors such as setting routines and



developing a supportive school culture are equally important for impacting student achievement (Leibowitz & Porter, 2019; Leithwood & Sun, 2018).

### **How School Principals Use Their Time**

In recent years, school principals have reported experiencing a heavy workload, with too many work demands to fit into a typical workday (VanVooren, 2018).

Therefore, many school principals work long days to complete a broad array of tasks and responsibilities (Sebastian et al., 2018). Sebastian et al.'s (2018) study revealed that the school principal's average workweek consisted of more than 50 hours. Bezzina et al.'s (2018) observed that school principals worked between 27% and 175% more than their contractually required 36 hours per week.

Another result of a heavy workload is that school principals must decide how to divide their time to address necessary school functions. In a study for the United States Department of Education, Hoyer and Sparks (2017) found that school principals spent the largest amount of time (31%) on administrative tasks that included handling personnel issues, completing reports, implementing regulations, and budgeting for the school. The second largest portion of their time (26%) was spent on instructional tasks that included preparing and reviewing lessons, conducting classroom observations, and coaching teachers (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017). The third largest portion of the school principals' time (23%) was spent on student interactions that included disciplining students and providing them with academic counsel (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017). The least amount of time (13%) was devoted to interacting with parents and completing miscellaneous tasks (7%; Hoyer & Sparks, 2017).

Additional researchers supported Hoyer and Sparks' (2017) finding that school principals spend most of their time on administrative or management tasks (Bezzina et al., 2018; Blossing & Liljenberg, 2017; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2020; Huang et al., 2020). In Bezzina et al.'s (2018) study, school principals spent over 17 hours per week on administrative tasks, including writing and responding to emails, preparing reports, and answering telephone calls. Hansen and Larusdottir (2020) reported that the school principals' administrative tasks consisted of keeping a weekly calendar, working on the school budget, writing and answering correspondence, and writing memos to staff. In Blossing and Liljenberg's (2017) study, they concluded that school principals' administrative tasks were more organizational in nature and included scheduling teacher meetings, organizing workgroups and teams, and planning meeting processes. Additionally, Huang et al. (2020) found that principals used most of their time on administrative tasks like planning, budgeting, scheduling meetings, maintaining the physical building, and sharing information with their staff.

VanVooren's (2018) findings were inconsistent with the finding that school principals spend most of their time on administrative and management responsibilities. VanVooren's study concluded that school principals spend most of their time dealing with special education issues, addressing student behavior issues, and attending meetings. In addition, the mandates that have accompanied special education policy were seen by school principals as particularly time-consuming to implement and viewed as a high priority to their district leaders (VanVooren, 2018). There were also differences in the research findings regarding how school principals use most of their time after the top

category of administrative responsibilities (Bezzina et al., 2018; Blossing & Liljenberg, 2017; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2020; Huang et al., 2020). Specifically, Hansen and Larusdottir (2020) concluded that after administrative tasks, school principals spent most of their time on personnel issues, including counseling, conferencing, and evaluating. However, Bezzina et al. (2018) found that school principals' second largest time consumer was school improvement activities, including the management of teaching and learning. Hoyer and Sparks (2017) established that school principals' second largest time consumer was preparing and reviewing lesson plans, conducting classroom observations, and mentoring teachers. Hansen and Larusdottir and Hoyer and Sparks' findings supported that communicating with parents and the larger community was an activity on which school principals spent little time. However, Blossing and Liljenberg (2017) concluded that school principals did not prioritize spending time ensuring student achievement and other expected reform results. In summary, these findings revealed that apart from making administrative responsibilities their priority, school principals did not share the same work orientation in relation to their job responsibilities.

School principals' daily work patterns have also been the focus of recent research. Sebastian et al. (2018) established that school principals spread their attention across a broad array of tasks, including approximately five different leadership functions per day. However, findings are mixed regarding the amount of time spent on each activity. For example, Sebastian et al. concluded that tasks were not brief, taking approximately 30 minutes or more each, and Bezzina et al. (2018) found that most activities were planned.

In contrast, Huang et al. (2020) found that the school principals' tasks were brief, fragmented, and mostly unplanned.

Sebastian et al. (2018) also noted patterns in the time of day for different activities. For example, school principals focused on building operations mainly before school, instructional leadership and student issues during school hours, and parent communication both before and after school hours (Sebastian et al., 2018). Further, research revealed that, despite the task, most of the school principals' time was spent working with teachers and teacher leaders within their school rather than working alone (Bezzina et al., 2018). These work patterns show differences in how school principals approach the demands of their job.

Furthermore, school principals have reported feeling pressured by district leaders to spend their time on instructional initiatives (Huang et al., 2020; Sebastian et al., 2018). Others have reported possessing an internal desire to spend more time on instructional initiatives but feel thwarted by the many other essential components of their job (Bezzina et al., 2018; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2020; Sebastian et al., 2018). For example, in Sebastian et al.'s (2018) study, school principals expressed concern about being told to focus on instructional leadership by district leaders without being given any strategies to manage the rest of their workload. Some of the research focused on the importance of school principals developing stronger organizational and time management skills to handle their heavy workload. Huang et al. (2020) suggested that school principals should develop more expertise in the area of distributed leadership. As such, tasks will be shared or delegated across staff to avoid burnout (Huang et al., 2020). However, Sebastian et al.

(2018) concluded that distributed leadership has only complicated the already challenging work of school principals by adding complexity to the concepts of authority and responsibility.

School principals have also been encouraged to use technology such as email to increase their efficiency, especially in the area of communication (Pollock & Hauseman, 2019). However, while email has allowed school principals more flexibility in when and from where they communicate, email has also contributed to longer workdays and blurred the boundaries between work and home (Pollock & Hauseman, 2019). In addition, VanVooren (2018) concluded that a uniform solution is futile, as not all schools share the same demands and not all school principals possess the same time management skills. Still, how school principals leverage time determines their effectiveness (Huang et al., 2020).

The heavy workload of the school principal is problematic to public schools because most principals experience more demands than they have time to address (VanVooren, 2018). Therefore, school principals must make decisions regarding what they will do, what they will defer, and what they will ignore. In some cases, school principals defer or ignore the responsibilities that are most crucial to school effectiveness (Huang et al., 2020). Over time, ignoring the crucial demands like organizational development and instructional leadership can lead to ineffective schools and low student achievement.

## Summary and Conclusions

The review of the literature supported the notion that the school principal's workload is problematic. In this chapter, the conceptual framework of distributed leadership was defined and its components were explained. Distributed leadership is a much-discussed topic in recent research related to school principal workload. The major themes throughout the literature related to the school principal's role were complexity, heavy workload, expansion, accountability, instructional leadership, administration, and time use. The literature revealed that the school principal's job is complex, causing role confusion for some. The literature also highlighted that a school principal's workload is heavy and overwhelming, which can lead to stress and health issues over time. It also concluded that the school principal's job responsibilities have expanded due to the accountability movement. These responsibilities have been technical and related to ensuring the implementation of school reform. The school principal's responsibility to ensure high levels of student learning was also documented in the literature. In addition, the literature provided information regarding how school principals use their time. Administrative tasks can often take up most of a school principal's workday (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017). Noted in the literature was the fact that the school principal's workday has increased, and the line between a school principal's professional and personal life has been blurred (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Maufouz, 2020; Sebastian et al., 2018; VanVooren, 2018). A call for school districts to provide professional development to school principals on strategies to handle their workload was found throughout the literature (Huang, 2020; Mestry, 2017; Oplatka, 2017a). Distributed leadership was also

discussed in the literature as a possible way for school principals to better manage their workload. Some researchers encouraged its use, while others discouraged it for causing chaos in schools and because it conferred the school principal's authority in the area of teaching and learning (Mestry, 2017; Sebastian et al., 2018; Tan, 2018). It remains unknown if distributed leadership has a substantial impact on student achievement.

There exists a gap in the literature regarding how school principals effectively manage their workload, which was the focus of this study. The findings of this study will extend professional knowledge on the challenges that elementary school principals face in trying to manage their workload and suggestions for how to better support elementary school principals.

The following chapter focuses on the research method used for my study, including the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and the methodology used to collect the data. Also included in Chapter 3 are the procedures that will be used for recruitment, participation, as well as how the data will be analyzed. Finally, there is a discussion on how trustworthiness and ethical issues that could arise from my study might be addressed.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

In this basic qualitative study, the challenges faced by elementary school principals when balancing their workload was explored. Participants were elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic school system. The intent of my study was to explore the challenges these principals experience when balancing their workload and their perceptions of the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job.

Chapter 3 will include the research method for this study, including the research design and rationale. My own role as a researcher will also be discussed. A comprehensive review of the methodology used in my study will be discussed, including participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. Also included will be a plan for the analysis of the compiled data. Furthermore, a discussion of the trustworthiness of the findings will be provided. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a review of the ethical procedures followed and a summary of the chapter.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research questions that guided this study were:

Research Question 1: How do elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system balance their workload?

Research Question 2: What are the elementary school principals' perceptions of the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job?



The methodology of this research study was based on a basic qualitative design which takes a social constructivist perspective (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This approach includes conducting interviews, making observations, and analyzing archival content. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), qualitative research consists of observing, perceiving, and engaging with people as experts of their own life experiences. Data were collected by interviewing 10 current elementary school principals from a suburban public school system in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Study participants were asked questions regarding their personal and professional experiences of balancing their workload. This research builds upon the previous literature regarding principal workload and makes an original contribution to fill a gap in the literature. Current research (e.g., Brando et al., 2021; Levin & Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017a; Tabancali & Su, 2021, Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2020) reveals the heavy workload and role complexity of the principal's job but fails to explain how principals balance those responsibilities and demands. How principals manage their workload was also unknown at the research site.

The epistemological perspective of this study was interpretive in nature as the primary objective was to collect information from the participant's worldview (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In a qualitative study, the research questions are open-ended with no correct answer; however, these questions provide a framework for a descriptive process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) that can lead to an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The ontological perspective taken in this study was the acceptance of multiple realities and truths, from myself and from the participants (Ravitch & Carl,

2021). In terms of axiology, my own biases were identified and acknowledged, as well as those of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Qualitative inquiry is used to answer research questions that cannot be answered by quantitative means. Qualitative researchers view their participants as experts of their own lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Further, qualitative researchers study phenomena in their participants' natural environment, with particular interest to the meaning participants bring to the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Through this study, common themes related to the phenomenon of school principal job responsibilities were identified. The process for my semistructured interviews included asking the study participants questions, asking follow-up questions, transcribing the interviews, and coding the transcripts. Peer review was also used to help ensure trustworthiness.

### **Role of the Researcher**

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument, and as such, "shapes the data that are collected" (p. 106). As the sole researcher for this study, I created interview questions that helped to reveal an honest perspective of the study participants' experiences in managing their daily job responsibilities. By design, 10 elementary school principals were interviewed using Microsoft Teams. Teams allowed each interview to take place virtually, while audio recording each interview. Teams also produced a transcript of each interview. Further, field notes were taken to supplement the transcripts.

As the researcher conducting the interviews, I took on the role of both observer and participant. As the observer, I asked each predetermined question and listened to

participants' responses. As a participant, I asked follow-up questions that arose during the interview process and paid attention to my own biases. To practice reflexivity is to acknowledge the ways in which I influence "the questions asked, methods used, and data collected" (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 107). Field notes and analytic memos written during and after each interview in a reflexivity journal were utilized to practice reflexivity, acknowledge and record my own biases, reflect on my own analysis of the data, and keep track of any further questions that developed. Saldaña (2016) described analytic memos as a way for researchers to record how the process of inquiry is going, keep track of emerging codes, and reflect on frustrations with the data.

I conducted my study in a school district within which I am not employed. While there was some familiarity with some of the principals I could potentially interview, there was no ongoing personal or professional relationship with them which assisted in lowering the possibility of ethical issues. However, while the participants were principals, I am a superintendent in a nearby school district. This perceived power differential could have caused some discomfort on the part of potential participants. While I possessed no actual authority over the participants, the difference in levels of leadership may have caused some who were recruited to refrain from participation.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

#### ***Participant Sampling***

Purposive sampling was used to select participants by having chosen those who had a shared experience, had knowledge related to the phenomena of study, and who

resided in the same region of the United States (Ravitch, 2016). Participants were sought who had an in-depth knowledge of the elementary school principal workload. These participants were all recruited from the same suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system to ensure a shared experience. Any elementary school principal chosen from the population of interest needed to meet the selection criteria below.

### ***Participant Sample Size***

The target sample size for this study was set at 10-15 participants. In the end, 10 current elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic school district out of 34 current elementary school principals were chosen. The 10 participants represent the total number of elementary school principals who agreed to participate in this study out of those fitting the participant selection criteria. No retired elementary school principals agreed to participate.

This sample size of 10 was appropriate for a basic qualitative study that seeks to gain an understanding of the research problem and the perspectives of those people involved. In order to gain a deep understanding of elementary school principals' workload, it was important to spend time with fewer participants. This allowed time for the participants to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon of study and for me to make meaning of those descriptions.

### ***Participant Selection Criteria***

The criteria for participation in this study included 1) being a current principal or one who had retired after July 2017 in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic school district; and 2) being willing to participate in virtual face-to-face or telephone interviews. Current and

recently retired elementary school principals possess experience in managing their workload and should have felt comfortable in responding to interview questions. Assistant principals were excluded from participation in this study.

### **Instrumentation**

Semistructured interviews were used to explore the phenomenon of interest. These interviews allowed me to engage with the participants in order to understand, describe, and analyze the participants' meaning of their lived experience (Ravitch, 2016). They were asked questions related to how they balance their workload and their perceptions of the administrative support required to meet the daily challenges of their job.

The responsive interviewing technique was used when conducting the interviews. Rubin and Rubin (2012) described responsive interviewing as conversing with people who have expert knowledge of the phenomenon being studied, hearing what they say, and then asking follow-up questions needed to help answer the research question. An interview protocol instrument (see Appendix A) was employed that included 10 questions. Each interview began by providing my name, the university in which my research is associated, an introduction to my research topic and purpose, the confidentiality of their identification, as well as the amount of time the interview would require. Each participant was asked to set aside 45-60 minutes for the interview. All 10 questions were answered by each participant, providing a complete set of data to analyze. My interview protocol instrument served as a sufficient data collection instrument to answer my research questions.

## **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The following sections detail the process used to recruit participants. It also includes the way in which each elementary school principal participated in the study and how data were collected on the phenomenon of study. The process began in October of 2022 and was completed at the end of November 2022.

### ***Recruitment***

After having obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (Approval Number 09-21-22-0063304) and the director of accountability in the target school district, the recruiting of participants for this study began. The executive director of a district retired educators' association was contacted by email and telephone with no response. Therefore, the recruitment process proceeded with current elementary school principals only.

Contact information for each prospective participant who was a current elementary school principal was obtained from the school district's director of accountability. I used email to contact 34 prospective participants who were all current elementary school principals at the study site. The purpose and description of my study was shared in the body of the email, and I asked them to respond to the email if they had an interest in participating in the study. The prospective participants were also given my cell phone number in case they preferred to speak to me before responding to the email invitation.

Prospective participants who responded to my email stating their intention to be part of the study were then provided information that explained informed consent through

a follow up email. Prospective participants gave their informed consent by replying to that email within 10 days of receipt, stating, “Yes, I give my informed consent.” These 10 participants were then provided with my contact information again, including email address and cell phone number for either calling or texting. Each participant was informed through an email that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

### ***Participation***

After participants were selected, I was in regular communication by email and phone to set up a time to interview them via Microsoft Teams. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code based on the order in which their interview took place. For example, the first elementary school principal interviewed was identified as Participant 1 (P1). Each interview was conducted virtually from my home office via Microsoft Teams. Participants were interviewed virtually at a time and from a place of their convenience. Participants were directed to turn their camera off at the beginning of the interview, and Adobe Media Encoder was used to ensure audio only was recorded. Teams automatically produced a transcript for each interview, which I reviewed for accuracy. Each participant was interviewed once for approximately 30-45 minutes. After each interview, I sent the participant a copy of the interview transcript to review for accuracy along with a thank you note. Nine participants replied that their transcript was accurate. One participant did not reply. Once the transcript was received back from the participant, their active participation ended. Participants were informed that they would receive the study findings in order for member checking to be accomplished. They were also informed of the possibility of being asked to participate in a follow-up interview as

needed. Finally, instructions as to how to access the study once it has been published was provided.

### ***Data Collection***

The proper handling of data is critical to conducting an ethical research study. In order to maintain consistency, I collected data by conducting semi-structured, individual interviews using a self-created interview protocol. Data were collected through participant interviews and field notes for 4 consecutive weeks. I audio recorded each interview using Microsoft Teams, which also provided an automatic transcript of each interview. Alphanumeric codes were used for each participant to maintain confidentiality and a pseudonym was used for the name of the school district. To ensure accuracy, I reviewed each auto-generated transcript and corrected any errors in the transcription. If needed for the purpose of providing clarity, participants were contacted for follow-up interviews. Finally, I stored the data on a password-protected personal computer kept locked in my home office. In addition, a plan to address a data breach during my study was created. A copy of my research data was also kept on a flash drive. I kept paper copies of my transcripts and analytic memos. The flash drive and paper copies of the transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. After five years all electronic and paper documents related to my study will be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Microsoft Teams was used to conduct each virtual interview. Teams provided an automatic transcription of each interview that was exported into Microsoft Word. I read and revised each transcript to ensure accuracy. After the interviews and transcriptions



were complete, I began a systematic and rigorous process of analyzing the data in order to make meaning. Qualitative researchers make sense of data through the processes of coding, categorizing, and discovering themes. The data collected during the one-on-one interviews helped to answer the research questions. I also reflected on the analytic memos created after each interview.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), when researchers code, they chunk the data into manageable parts and characterize each section. Ravitch and Carl (2021) added that coding is a process of assigning meaning to data. In order to code the information from my data sources, an inductive approach was used, meaning that when coding, I stayed as close to the data as possible, using the participants' language as I moved from transcript quotes to codes. I began with first cycle coding which was the first attempt at pulling the data apart into segments in order to assign meaning to each part (Saldaña, 2016).

In this first phase of data analysis, the software program Dedoose was used to import the transcripts and organize the data. Dedoose is a web-based data management tool that allows the researcher to organize the study data and identify patterns for more efficient analysis. Dedoose allows for the coding of data within the program itself and organizes the coded data visually for easier interpretation. Descriptive codes of single words or phrases were used to describe the segments of content. Next, each content segment was revisited and concept coding conducted. Concept coding is the process of interpreting the text again, this time to give it meaning in the form of concepts or ideas (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) referred to this process as "synthesizing the collective,

not to arrive at a reduced answer but to move toward consolidated meaning” (p. 10).

After completing this process for each data source, a second round of coding was conducted using the method of axial coding. In axial coding, the researcher finds links, patterns, and similarities in the subcategories of data (Saldaña, 2016). The results of second cycle coding were represented in Excel tables to show similarities in codes among the data sources.

Finally, the data were analyzed for themes by noting the frequency of words or phrases identified in first and second round coding. Those words or phrases that most contributed to the meaning of this study and that summarize what the data says about principals and their workload were highlighted. A theme is an outcome of not only coding and categorization, but of analytic reflection about the content as a whole (Saldaña, 2016). Themes emerged regarding the principals’ perspectives and experiences in how they balance or balanced their workload helped me form conclusions. After the data were organized into themes, Microsoft Excel was used to export the data from Dedoose and apply color to the coding to further identify themes. Saturation was reached when no new ideas or themes were emerging from the data. It is important that all data collected is reported by the researcher, even when it does not align with most of the data (Saldaña, 2016). Any discrepant cases in my study were acknowledged in the data analysis. Discrepant cases are those whose data conflicted with the codes and themes that emerged.

## **Trustworthiness**

Ravitch and Carl (2021) have asserted that to prove the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, researchers must address credibility, transferability, dependability, and the confirmability of the research. Addressing these issues thoroughly assisted in establishing the rigor of this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Below is a description of the process that was used to establish each element of trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

In qualitative research, credibility refers to the accuracy with which the researcher interprets and reflects the participants' perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Researchers can establish credibility using strategies such as transcript validation and peer review. Transcript validation was used by providing study participants the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview and make any revisions necessary to establish accuracy. This took place within 48 hours of each interview transcription. I also used a peer review process by enlisting a colleague who recently completed a qualitative doctoral study in the field of education, who helped to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. The reviewer accomplished this by reviewing my data, codes, and themes to find any issues with credibility. Corrections to my data interpretation were made based on this feedback. As a researcher, I also practiced reflexivity by keeping a journal in order to continually examine my own biases to ensure that my personal feelings and subjectiveness were not impacting my interpretation of the research data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

**Transferability**

Transferability is the ability to apply the findings from a research study to the larger population (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In qualitative research, transferability is defined as the ability to compare a research study with other studies, which may then be transferable to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In order to provide readers the ability to compare my research findings with others, I provided detailed descriptions of the data, including thick descriptions of each interview. Detailed descriptors allow readers to make educated decisions regarding the transferability of study findings to another context (Houghton et al., 2013). Finally, in order to enhance transferability of the findings, I minimized personal bias through member checking and a peer review process (see Yin, 2017). In order to accomplish the peer review, I allowed an impartial colleague to review and assess my transcripts, methodology and findings. The colleague was qualified for such a role as she had just completed a doctoral program at Walden University using a qualitative approach in her education research study.

**Dependability**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a dependable research study must be accurate and consistent. It is crucial for the researcher to produce findings that would be similar to those of a fellow researcher using the same methods and data. Since qualitative methods are tailored to a specific research situation, the researcher must provide a detailed description of the methods used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) which will be provided in Chapter 4. A justification for conducting interviews as the data collection method and how it aligns to the research

questions were provided. Coding was justified as the data analysis method. Finally, an audio recording of each interview was kept in order to demonstrate the accuracy of the transcripts.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings of a study are based upon the data, instead of being shaped by the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). One way in which to remain objective when conducting a research study is to stay as close to the data as possible, and in this case, that means using the language used by the participants during the interviews while coding. Another way to remain objective is to practice reflexivity, which is the process of acknowledging one's own biases and prejudices. Any assumptions when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data were acknowledged through writing analytic memos. Reactions to the data were recorded after each interview as well as any potential biases that presented themselves during the research processes of analyzing and interpreting the data. Notes on the process for making meaning from the data were also taken. Finally, notes on the procedural aspects of the study were included.

### **Ethical Procedures**

When working with human participants in a research study, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that ethical procedures are followed. One of the most important precautions is to ensure that no harm comes to the participants or anyone associated with the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Following ethical procedures helps to ensure the physical and emotional safety of participants. It was essential to obtain permission from

the research site before contacting any prospective research participants. Written permission was obtained from the target district, along with written permission from each of the individuals who agreed to participate in this study. The study did not begin until written permission was received from Walden University's Institutional Review Board which ensures that research studies adhere to ethical principles. Next, the prospective research participants were contacted through an initial email invitation which included a disclosure of the purpose and description of my study, stating that their participation was voluntary. For those prospective participants who replied with a desire to participate in this study, informed consent to participate was provided. My telephone number was provided at this point in order to offer prospective participants the opportunity to discuss the study with me. Finally, for those who replied affirmatively to informed consent, I sent an email explaining the interview process, the confidentiality of their identity, the protection of their information, and the fact that they were able to exit the study at any time. My contact information was provided again in order to facilitate any conversations the participants wished to have.

The proper handling of data is critical to conducting an ethical research study. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured, individual interviews using a self-created interview protocol in order to maintain consistency. Each interview was audio recorded using Microsoft Teams which also provided an automatic transcript of each interview. Alphanumeric codes were used for each participant and a pseudonym was used for the school district to maintain confidentiality. To ensure accuracy, each auto-

generated transcript was reviewed and any mistakes corrected in the transcription.

Protocols for the security and destruction of data were addressed earlier in this chapter.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 consists of a comprehensive review of the methodology used for my research study. This chapter begins with an explanation of the research design and rationale, as well as my role as the sole researcher in this study. The methodology was then discussed in detail, including participant selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and a data analysis plan. Also included in this chapter was a discussion of the trustworthiness of this research. This section included the importance of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of a research study. Finally, this chapter concluded with an explanation of the ethical procedures that will be followed in the research process.

Chapter 4 focuses on the results of this study, including the setting, data collection, and data analysis. The results of this study will also be presented. Finally, the evidence to support this study's trustworthiness will be discussed.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system experience with balancing their workload and their perceptions of the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job. In this chapter, I describe the setting in which the interviews took place, how the data were collected and analyzed, as well as this study's results and their trustworthiness.

### **Setting and Demographics**

This study took place in a suburban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the county within which the school district is located has a total population of over 262,000 with over 17,000 students enrolled in approximately 35 public elementary schools. Ten current elementary principals consented to participate in this study. The participants averaged 7.2 years in the job of elementary school principal. Further, five of the study participants identified as male and five identified as female. All participants had earned master's degrees in education with one participant having earned a Doctorate in Education.

### **Data Collection**

After receiving approval of my proposal from my committee, as well as permission to collect data from Walden University's IRB, I recruited from a pool of 34 current elementary school principals and an unknown number of retired elementary school principals from a local retired educators association. Written informed consent was obtained from each of 10 participants who agreed to participate in this study via



email. All 10 participants were currently employed as an elementary school principal within the study site. No former elementary school principals responded to my request to participate in this study. Verbal informed consent was obtained at the beginning of their one-on-one interview. Participation in this study was voluntary. Ten open-ended interview questions were developed for the interviews.

A total of 10 elementary school principals were interviewed one-on-one using a semi-structured interview approach. The length of the interviews varied depending on the participants' length of responses, but no interview exceeded 33 minutes. The 10 participants answered each of the questions. Follow-up questions were used to clarify participants' responses and to gain a deeper understanding of their ideas. The interviews took place in a private location of the participants' choice to protect their confidentiality. The interviews took place over 4 consecutive weeks in November, 2022. Microsoft Teams was used to audio-record each interview, after which the digitally generated transcripts were checked for accuracy with each participant. Participants were given 48 hours to read the transcript of their interview and recommend revisions. Nine out of the 10 participants responded to this request, and out of those, none recommended changes. During the interviews, field notes were taken to record descriptions of the interviews, including the date, time, and any notable details that I did not want to forget. The field notes also included interpretations of and reflections on the participants' responses. These reflections included my own questions and ideas as I first began to make meaning of the information the participants provided.

## Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data, an inductive process was used to move from coded units to larger representations such as categories and themes. This process enabled me to answer this study's research questions. During the data preparation process, the transcripts were assigned with alphanumeric codes. Following that, they were uploaded to DeDoose. DeDoose is a web-based application used by researchers to efficiently organize and analyze study data. For example, elementary school principal one was named P1. Open coding was used for the first round of coding which described the content and allowed the data to speak for itself. No predetermined codes were used. Instead, the transcripts were analyzed line-by-line and segmented by meaning, assigning descriptive words and phrases to each section. Each of the research questions were considered when extracting information from the data and generating the codes. There were 30 codes in total, 23 codes aligned to Research Question 1 and seven codes aligned to Research Question 2. These codes helped to develop the distinct concepts in the data and the units of analysis (Saldaña, 2021). In addition, analytic memos were written to track and describe my thought processes while coding.

Next, axial coding was used to examine the data during second round coding. In axial coding the researcher generates categories by examining characteristics of the codes, exploring their shared relationship and grouping them based on their shared relationship (Saldaña, 2021). In this study, the coded transcripts were downloaded from Dedoose into Microsoft Excel, where color-coding was used to recognize patterns of similar concepts and organize common codes into 11 broader categories. During this

analysis, attention was also directed as to how the elementary school principals' perspectives aligned with the conceptual framework of distributed leadership.

Finally, through the process of first and second round coding, five broader themes began to emerge from the categories. I refined these themes and named them, ensuring that they answered the research questions and represented the totality of the elementary school principals' views and experiences. According to Saldaña (2021), themes should provide a theoretical insight into the phenomenon of study. There were no discrepant cases, so all cases were factored into this analysis.

During first round coding, words and phrases emerged from the data representing the elementary school principals' descriptions and views. During second round of coding, categories began to emerge as certain codes and significant concepts were repeated. With further engagement with the data and thematic analysis, the patterns in the categories allowed broader themes to emerge.

To analyze the data provided by the interviews, two-cycle coding was used. During the first-cycle coding, using open coding, patterns emerged in the participants responses. Thirty codes were used to describe the data; 23 codes aligned to Research Question 1, and seven codes aligned to Research Question 2. Table 1 provides an example of the codes that emerged, along with supporting quotations from the interviews.

**Table 1***Codes and Data Examples Related to Research Questions*

Codes	Data examples
High/Heavy Workload as a description (RQ1)	<p>“I would describe my workload as overwhelming. I work about 65-70 hours a week.”</p> <p>“It’s, it’s...intense. You know, it’s just I feel like it’s never ending.”</p> <p>“I honestly never catch up. Ever.”</p> <p>“Um, observations...and teachers’ SLOs were due and their professional development plans were due and just checking over those and giving them feedback. Plus, all the paperwork that, you know. Hence, I was here last Friday until 5:30.”</p>
Delegating tasks/sharing workload as a strategy for managing workload (RQ1)	<p>“A lot of the instructional leadership, um, unfortunately, it’s fallen to my specialists.”</p> <p>“So, I do try to delegate most of the actual behavior referrals to my assistant principal. That is one of his duties. We’ll talk through those and support him.”</p> <p>“Coverages, you know, sub coverages.”</p> <p>“So, my one AP has a special ed background. So I delegate the IEPs to her even though I keep abreast of it and I usually go in there when they’re gonna [sic] be hot and heavy.”</p>
Student mental health concerns (RQ1)	<p>“Students are first. Usually, we’re looking for safety...with regards to...an emotional breakdown as one of our biggest concerns.”</p> <p>“A kid in crisis trumps all of that.”</p> <p>“Definitely anything that has to do with the students really does come #1.”</p> <p>“Student health and safety...I would say ultimately...are the things that rise to the top.”</p>
Mental health professionals as needed supports (RQ2)	<p>“I’m in need of a full-time school psychologist and a second school counselor...to help when we have the crises that come up and occupy half of the day.”</p> <p>“We did use one of my Community Schools new positions that I was granted ...for a behavior coach, um, which will be able to both respond to crises but also help coach teachers and other ways to be preventative or more effective the the child that might be having troubles. So once that hits, I’m hopeful to see a, uh, you know, like a free up of some there.”</p> <p>“Personnel for students with social-emotional needs.”</p>

In the second-round coding, axial coding, the initial codes from the coded transcript were condensed into categories that conceptualized the elementary school principals' perspectives on managing their workload. I then gathered similar codes into categories. From the 11 categories, five themes emerged. Table 2 presents the codes and categories that informed the themes emerging from the data.

**Table 2***Codes, Categories, and Themes*

Research Question	Codes	Categories	Themes
RQ1	High/heavy workload Heavier in Title I schools Interruptions Difficulty developing competence in all responsibilities Rising student mental health crises	Unrealistic workload w/ too many responsibilities Workload somewhat proportional to student need	The heavy nature of the principal's workload
	Arrive to school early/stay late Work at home in evening Surround myself with good people Delegate tasks Share workload Prioritizing responsibilities Planning in advance Checklists/to do lists Use of technology to plan/organize	Strategic use of time Organization Distributive leadership	Principals use similar strategies to manage workload
RQ2	Being visible Building a positive culture Instruction Instructional meetings Being available to teachers Would like to be in classrooms informally Would like to focus on human side of job Would like to get to know students/staff	Desire more time for instructional leadership Desire more time to develop genuine relationships	Principals need supports in order to focus more time in two professional areas
	Mental health workers School counselors Social workers Therapists Assistant principals Testing coordinators	More mental health staff More administrative staff	Principals need an increase in staffing
	Fewer meetings at district office Fewer reports for state and district	Fewer demands from local district office Fewer demands from state department of education	Principals need fewer demands from local and state education departments

## Results

This basic qualitative research study focused on two research questions that were answered through an analysis of data obtained by interviewing 10 current elementary school principals from a suburban, Mid-Atlantic school district. The research questions centered around how the elementary school principals balanced their workload and the administrative supports they required to balance the daily challenges of their job. Each of the 10 elementary school principals provided valuable insights into the research questions.

### **Research Question 1: How do elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system balance their workload?**

Two themes emerged that support the findings for research question one. The first theme reveals that the elementary school principal's workload was heavy, establishing a need for a set of strategies to manage the workload. The second theme describes the strategies elementary school principals use to manage their workload.

#### ***Theme 1: The Principal's Workload is Heavy and Challenging to Manage***

A common theme throughout the interview data was that the participants characterized their workload as heavy. Some of the language used by the participants to describe this heavy workload was overwhelming, intense, never ending, non-stop, time-consuming, vast, not defined by boundaries, and high. This theme represents the fact that elementary school principals may struggle to manage their workload, therefore; requiring strategies in order to manage it effectively. Participant five (P5) stated, "I honestly never catch up. Ever." The participants reported working an average of 61 hours per week. The

fewest reported hours worked per week was 55 hours, and 72 hours was the highest number reported. The participants expressed having too many responsibilities which causes particular challenges including meeting demands from stakeholders and dealing with interruptions.

**Meeting Demands from Stakeholders.** All participants expressed that the elementary school principal's role consists of an array of responsibilities with pressures from different stakeholders. P4 said, "...you might have a well laid plan and then you have five absences that you can't cover, or you have a child in crisis, or you have a family that needs you right away. So...it's just a challenge to make sure you're meeting the needs of everybody." P6 stated, "...it's so vast, meaning students, teachers, parents, grandparents, community partnerships, Board of Education. Um, it's endless...where the information comes in from and needs to be provided back to." P6 went on to say, "So, when I have up to seven teachers on a grade level, you're one of 17 waiting in line. And so how do we meet the needs..."

The elementary school principals in this study expressed particular concern and frustration over the demands placed on their time by students in behavioral crisis. They described the severity of student mental health issues that manifest regularly and that they must manage. P3 stated, "A major, major, major amount of my time is spent with student management and crisis intervention...Even in a really good school...1% of the population can take up 99% of your time and therefore everything is on the back burner." P3 explained that after a student mental health crisis, she needs to spend time, "debriefing with teachers and keeping them in a calm place." P7 shared that "...me and my assistant



principal have largely, you know, we're taking on the lion's share of...the kids in crisis kind of stuff." He went on to say that a student in crisis "trumps everything else" and "the volume and the severity of it" has made it difficult to balance the demands of his workload.

**Dealing with Interruptions.** Because of the urgent nature of stakeholder needs, the participants reported regular interruptions to their work schedule in order to address the demands. P3 stated, "Finishing a task to completion when trying to do your work, you can be interrupted by numerous things in all different directions. And then you have to stop, prioritize, and attend to the task." P3 later added that it is sometimes difficult to remember what she was doing before the interruption took place, stating, "...and then make sure that you come back, and you don't forget something." When discussing the challenges of managing the workload, P4 explained, "...the constant interruptions which are typical at an elementary school...Candidates will say, 'describe a typical day,' and I always say, 'there isn't one'." P5 also identified interruptions during the school day as their biggest challenge, stating,

But the constant interruptions when I'm here, which is one of the reasons why I stay late... the older I get, I literally go back to something and I'm like, what was I doing? Like if I started an email and somebody came in and interrupted...and they don't mean any harm. I love, I love the first thing out of their mouth is 'are you busy?'

P7 supported this concept by stating, "I used to be able to spend a lot more time..uh, informally and formally in the classroom...and here you know those times are precious

and you try not to be interrupted while you're there." P7 further characterized these interruptions as "the unexpected," stating that "the unexpected arises, you know, continually throughout the day...there's the unexpected kids in crisis or disciplinary type stuff...that takes a lot of time." This theme conveys that the elementary school principals' workload is heavy and not easily managed, substantiating the need to understand how principals balance their workload (RQ 1).

***Theme 2: Principals Use Similar Strategies to Manage their Workload***

The participants in this study described similar strategies used to manage their daily workload. In other words, the participants described how they accomplished all the daily tasks and responsibilities associated with their job. The strategies described coalesced into three major categories: delegating or sharing leadership responsibilities, using time of day strategically, and practicing good organizational skills. A combination of these practices was used by each elementary school principal. Only two out of 10 participants expressed confidence in their ability to manage their workload, each of whom had worked in the role for 10 years or more.

**Delegating or Sharing Leadership Responsibilities.** All participants discussed delegating and sharing their job responsibilities and described it as crucial to handling their workload. P5 stated, "I surround myself with really good people." Some participants strategically chose particular responsibilities to delegate to leadership staff within the school. These staff included assistant principals, teachers in charge, reading specialists, instructional facilitators, school counselors, and school psychologists. Participants at schools receiving Title I funding reported having additional leadership positions due to

the school's poverty level and the associated complexities. P9 stated, "It ain't [sic] rocket surgery...we need to compartmentalize and delegate responsibilities. I have 13 leadership positions, including three APs in my school, and I use them."

The elementary school principals explained that the responsibilities they delegated were assigned to staff at the beginning of each school year and the elementary school principal had little involvement with the tasks after delegating them unless a complication developed. P1 explained, "...so my one AP has a special ed background. So, I designate the IEPs to her...My other AP, she takes care of transportation as well as discipline." P7 when discussing student discipline offered, "My assistant principal, she tackles most of the investigations." He added that "grade level collaborative professional development, that's all led by my specialists and organized and structured by my specialists." P3's decisions aligned with P1 and P7, as she explained, "...discipline, um, that gets delegated to my assistant principal. Or it may be coaching with a teacher on how they would be able to handle the situation on their own." P4, like P1, discussed the delegation of transportation responsibilities, stating, "I have a very strong AP...so I feel comfortable delegating to her the scheduling and, you know, issues with taking care of our buses...bus drivers and...arrival/dismissal procedures. I am hands off on that." P4 went on to concur with P7's experience by stating, "I'm a Title I school so I have additional resources. So, I really rely on my Title I teacher specialist to make sure she's keeping us in compliance." P5's experience aligned with that of the elementary school principals above, in that she delegates student discipline and transportation to her assistant principal. Finally, P10 discussed delegating the duties associated with

standardized “test coordination,” finding “sub coverages,” and the logistics surrounding “student devices.” In summary, eight participants described delegating student discipline, 5 participants delegated transportation, and four participants delegated day-to-day logistics.

Along with delegating responsibilities, the elementary school principals described sharing many of their daily job responsibilities with leaders in their school. This strategy consisted of training school leaders in an ongoing, informal fashion, in many of the elementary school principal’s responsibilities and then sharing the workload more haphazardly as the demands of the school day unfolded. P6 explained the importance of leadership staff who can make decisions independently and act in alignment with his vision, stating,

I want a building full of people who think like the principal and understand how the thing I’m asking for might impact the entire school. So that way when I open my mouth or when my APs or instructional coach opens their mouth, like, it’s consistent messaging. So that way not everything is waiting for the principal to have an answer.

P6 went on to say that he shares all of his job responsibilities with his team except for “signing his name on the budget.” P3 supported P6’s experience of trying to address the urgent tasks that evolve throughout the school day, stating, “...if you’re doing one thing, then I’m gonna [sic] do the other. For example, if she’s attending to a student that had a bus concern and she’s out there, then obviously whatever happens inside, I’m going to take care of.” P9 shared a similar strategy to P3 and P6, stating that, “Sharing that load

helps others grow.” P9 explained that “everything must be checked off (his) to-do list by the end of the day,” so many tasks get shared.

**The Strategic Use of Time of Day.** All participants emphasized their priority of being visible, available, and engaged with students and staff during the 7 and ½ hour school day. P1, P2, and P3 expressed the importance of watching out for student safety during work hours. P1 stated, “Student safety, that’s always a priority, making sure that we’re visible walking throughout the building, making sure we’re there for arrival/dismissal.” P1, P2, P3, P4, and P7 described being actively involved in addressing student mental health issues. P4 explained that her school “has a high needs population, and we have some significant mental health concerns and social-emotional needs” which manifest during school hours. And P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, and P9 shared that they spend significant time during the day supporting teachers with student learning and student behavior. P9 stated, “I visit every classroom every day, no exceptions.” And P1 explained that she is “in classrooms at least an hour a day.”

Since the participants prioritized being available for students and staff during the day, they all expressed the importance of using the time before and after school hours to complete the administrative aspects of the job, such as responding to emails and completing reports. P1 explained that, “I work late into the evening because it’s quiet.” P9 shared that he has set for himself a strict schedule of arriving to work by 6:00 a.m. before the teachers and students arrive. He referred to it as “the pre-game—that’s when things get done.” P10 uses the same strategy, explaining, “I’m the kind of person that gets here very early. I’m usually the first vehicle, maybe the second... I usually get here about

two hours before anybody else, and I'll complete tasks that are on my checklist." Others preferred to take work home and work late into the evening there. P5 stated, "I do take time to eat dinner with my husband. So, I usually, probably around 7:30 or 8:00 start going through my emails. Maybe wrap that up around 9:00 or 9:30. That's a typical time." P2 explained that he works in the evening at home, "after the kids go to bed."

**Practicing Good Organizational Skills.** Most of the participants, eight out of 10, discussed the importance of organization in managing their workload. P1, P2, and P4 described systems of mental organization through prioritizing tasks and then reprioritizing throughout the day as new tasks present themselves. P2 stated, "I try to consider...alright, try to prioritize, really. You know, what needs my attention right now...What needs my attention before I walk out the door? What could I maybe get back to...or what could wait for another day or two?"

P1, P3, P9, and P10 discussed the importance of their organizational system using check lists and post-it notes. P3 stated that she keeps herself organized through "living by post it notes and you know, just, notebooks all over, just trying to make sure that you don't forget something." P10 discussed the use of making checklists at the outset of each day and then "completing the tasks on the checklists" as early in the day as possible when it's "calm."

Finally, P7 and P8 described the use of technology to stay organized, such as email, outlook calendar. P7 explained that, "Outlook calendars are really important...and having my phone on me as like a little buzzer that keeps me timed when I'm, you know, something's coming up, so I don't forget it while I'm out and about walking around the

building.” P7 also stated, “I use a lot of writing templates, um, that I work from” when discussing the time associated with writing observations and evaluations. P8 discussed the importance of reading and clearing out his email each day so he “didn’t miss something important that comes in.” This theme directly addresses research question two by providing the kinds of strategies that principals use to manage their workload.

**Research Question 2: What are the elementary school principals’ perceptions of the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job?**

Three additional themes emerged from the data to answer research question two. Theme three discusses the responsibilities for which principals wish they could spend more time addressing. Themes four and five revealed that the elementary school principals believe there are too many responsibilities for which they are responsible. The participants identified that gaining additional staff or taking some responsibilities away from them would assist them in managing their workload.

***Theme 3: Principals Need Support in order to Spend Time on Two Professional Areas***

Although all of the participants expressed that during the school day, they are visible around the school, including in classrooms, they reported a desire to spend more time in two professional areas: instructional leadership and building authentic relationships with staff. Both of these professional responsibilities require the elementary school principal to spend significant time with staff, getting to know them professionally and personally. However, the elementary school principal’s heavy workload seems to restrict this possibility. This theme shows that even with the utilization of many strategies

to manage their workload, the elementary school principals are still unable to fulfill two important job responsibilities, substantiating the need for support.

**Instructional Leadership.** Five out of 10 elementary school principals expressed a desire to spend more time as the instructional leader in the school. P3 shared, “So, I wish that I had more opportunity to get into instruction and to be an active part of the instructional leader that I want to be.” P7 stated, “A lot of the instructional leadership, um, unfortunately, it’s fallen to my specialists.” He went on to say he wishes he could give more “instructional feedback, uh, to teachers in the classroom.” P4 expressed a similar perspective.

I have a high needs population. We have some significant mental health concerns. So I find that I’m not able to be in all of the instructional meetings that the teachers have. I have lots of specialists, which is great, and I can rely on them to keep things moving. But I miss being really involved in instruction as the instructional leader and that’s important to me. And so, I wish I had more time for that.

**Building Authentic Relationships.** Five out of the 10 participants discussed a desire to be able to value and care for their teachers in a more genuine manner. P6 stated he wanted to focus on “the relationships. I mean like genuine relationships, meaning closing the door and having an uninterrupted lunch with my ILT.” He went on to characterize his school as so busy that,

Very rarely do we even celebrate each other’s birthdays here. Like the human side of it really, really is lacking. And not because of a lack of desire, I promise you.



But it's always on the back burner. It's always when can we squeeze this in? And so, we're missing the opportunity to have more...genuine relationships.

P8 had a similar perspective, stating,

I think that face to face time with people, even though it is kind of a time sucker for me. I do wish I had more time to give to individuals because I think it's really important and I'm not, you know, not just time observing in the classroom, but time to reflect with teachers. Just that kind of interpersonal time I think is very important in terms of relationship building.

Some elementary school principals expressed a desire to build relationships with teachers and students by spending more time in classrooms in a non-evaluative role. P7 stated, "I used to be able to spend a lot more time, uh, informally in the classroom... You know those times are precious and you try not to be interrupted while you're there. Then, there's the ability to follow up informally, conversationally." P2 said, "I wish I could find more time just to be in classrooms, not in a formal observation, to sit... I do think there is a responsibility to show my face and be a part of day-to-day learning that is. Learning with...the kids instead of the formality of the role." P5 expressed a similar perspective when she said,

It fills my heart every time I just get to do walkthroughs. I'm not walking in for an observation. I just get to go in and I love, like, if it's reading time and the kids are reading. I'll sit down next to a kindergartener and say, 'Read to me.' You know, and that is my favorite...when I just get to...talk to the kids, you know, see the

teachers. I'm really just there to spend time with the kids. And everyone is so much more relaxed and it's nice to see them that way.

This theme addresses research question one by providing specific examples of the responsibilities the elementary school principals give up in order to manage their workload. Ignoring or deprioritizing certain responsibilities is a legitimate strategy used by the participants.

#### ***Theme 4: Principals Perceive a Need for Increased Professional Staffing***

A theme that developed over the course of data analysis was that most of the elementary school principals believed the main support that could help them manage their workload was an increase in professional staffing for their school. Professional staffing would include staff holding a bachelor's degree at minimum and professional certifications appropriate to their job. More trained professionals in their schools would allow the principals to delegate and share more of their workload. P4 stated, "...it boils down to, I want, I need more personnel."

**More Mental Health Staff is Needed.** Four of the principals expressed a need for more mental health professionals in order to address severe student mental health issues. P3 stated, "Since you're asking me right now, what's on my mind is a full-time school psychologist and a second school counselor." P4 explained,

We need to make it more attractive for people to want to come into education.

Um, and with that is bringing us more mental health support, more behavioral support. Because you don't go into this profession to, you know, have chairs and desks thrown at you. But that's the reality of many classrooms.

P7 explained that he was able recently to obtain a new position due to his school's poverty status and said that, "we are using it for a behavior coach, umm, which will be able to both respond to crises but also help coach teachers in other ways to, you know, be preventative or more effective with the child that might be having troubles." Finally, P10 stated, "Inclusion helpers, which are basically...personnel for students with social emotional needs."

**More Administrative Staff is Needed.** The participants expressed a need to have more school administrative staff such as assistant principals and coordinators to schedule meetings, complete reports, and manage processes. P10 stated, "I believe it's something that's being looked at, but if every school had a psych testing coordinator that strictly was there to manage all that, I believe that would be major." P5 and P8 expressed the need for an additional assistant principal. P8 desired an additional assistant principal for support with daily management responsibilities. But P5 desired another professional with which to partner regarding professional ideas and strategies. P5 stated,

Another assistant principal...that would be huge because I could say after the...meeting today, okay, I want you to really think about and research this and then let's sit down and meet. And you give me some of your ideas and we'll, you know, kind of have a brainstorming. Yeah, definitely.

Overall, seven participants discussed the need for more professional staff positions. Besides mental health personnel, participants mentioned school security personnel, additional assistant principals, instructional interventionists, testing coordinators, and inclusion support professionals. In addition, two participants expressed

a need for more physical space in their building to provide calm-down spaces for students in crisis. This theme directly answers research question two by stating the supports elementary school principals say they need in order to better manage their workload.

***Theme 5: Principals Need Fewer Demands from Local and State Education***

***Departments***

In contrast to expressing a need for extra staff positions, some of the elementary school principals stated that fewer demands and mandates from district office administrators and the state department of education would support them by decreasing their workload. The principals expressed patience and understanding about handling the demands of staff, students, and parents, as well as a desire to meet those demands. However, the elementary school principals expressed frustration about meeting the requirements of district office administrators. P6 explained that his supervisors' words and actions do not align.

They will say, 'We know how busy you are...we know how demanding your job is. Kudos to you... You tell me to take care of myself...but then you're so freaking demanding of deadlines and, and, 'where is this' and the follow-up emails. And if we don't get something in on time, we're questioned about it, and I'm like, 'Do you have a clue? Like do you have a clue what it takes to run an elementary school right now?' I just feel like I'd like to see some action.

P9 had a similar perspective when he stated, "Central office is out of touch. Leave us alone." He recounted being in "too many meetings run by the district" and the feeling of "never being in my building" to complete the work the district demanded. This theme

directly answers research question two by explaining the supports that elementary school principals feel they need in order to manage the daily challenges of their job.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is critical in qualitative research because it attests that the research findings are worthy of consideration (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are many different facets to trustworthiness in qualitative research. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), trustworthiness refers to the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of research. Below is a description of the process that was used to ensure each of these qualities in this study.

#### **Credibility**

Transcript validation was used to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcripts. Within 48 hours of each interview, participants were sent the interview transcript and asked to review it and make any needed revisions. None of the participants provided any revisions, but they did express hope that their responses were helpful to my research. This feedback validated that accuracy of the transcripts without making any changes.

Peer review was also used to ensure credibility. Two colleagues who recently completed qualitative doctoral studies in the field of education reviewed my data along with the corresponding codes, categories, and themes. During the peer review, we discussed the procedure I used to determine the codes and categories as well as the inferences made to extract themes from the data. My peer reviewers recommended inserting a table to provide participant quotations that support the codes. Triangulation of the data was not used in this study.

**Transferability**

Transferability is the ability to apply the findings from a research study to the larger population (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In order for readers to determine the level of transferability of a study's findings to other settings and contexts, it is crucial that the researcher provide ample information regarding the research setting, the participants' demographics, and thick descriptions of the participants' perspectives. I included this information along with direct quotations from participants as appropriate to explain my analysis. Because of the detailed information I provided, the findings in this study could be transferred to a similar setting or context.

**Dependability**

Dependability is important to developing a study's trustworthiness because it shows that the results are consistent and stable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A fellow researcher should be able to obtain similar results if they are using the same data and methods. In order to ensure dependability in this study, the data was described with thick detail. The research methods used were also described in great detail in Chapter 3, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Interviews were used to collect data for this study because the aim was to explore suburban, Mid-Atlantic elementary school principals' perspectives on how they balance their workload and the supports they believe would help them meet the daily challenges of their job. Speaking directly and privately with principals living this reality gave me 10 unique perspectives to consider, including nuances in the language they used to describe the challenges of their job. Through the use of two-cycle coding as the data analysis method, I was able to answer

my research questions. The data collected was extensive and coding allowed the reduction of data, as well as the identification of emerging main ideas and issues. Finally, an audio recording of each interview was kept and will be stored for five years in order to demonstrate the accuracy of the transcripts.

### **Confirmability**

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), confirmability in qualitative research refers to the ability of an outside person to corroborate the researcher's interpretation of the data. In order for this kind of corroboration to occur, the researcher must be objective and neutral throughout the research process. During this study, subjectivity was reduced by using the exact language of the participants while coding.

Another strategy that was used to remain objective in this study was to practice reflexivity, which is the process of acknowledging one's biases. Analytic memos were written while collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data to document my assumptions and grappling with the data. My reactions to the data were recorded after each interview along with my own biases and attitudes that emerged during the research processes of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. Notes on the process used for making meaning from the data were also taken. Finally, notes on the procedural aspects of the study were included.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 consists of a description of this study's setting along with relevant demographic information about the participants. A description of the process used for data collection and analysis was also included. The results of this study were presented,

which answered the research questions. In summary, the elementary school principals balanced their workload by delegating and sharing leadership responsibilities, completing paperwork during off-school hours, and being organized. They also suggested that having more professional staff and fewer demands from the state and district office would support them with the daily challenges of their job.

Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of this study's findings along with its limitations. Recommendations for further research related to this topic as well as implications for positive social change are also included. Finally, the chapter offers a conclusion to this study.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the challenges elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school system face with balancing their workload and their perceptions of the administrative supports required to meet the daily challenges of their job. It is imperative to analyze how elementary school principals balance their workload and what could be done to assist them in managing their daily responsibilities in order to ensure more successful schools. If little is done to support principals, their effectiveness may suffer.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

There are five key findings in this study: (a) the elementary school principal's workload is heavy and challenging, (b) elementary school principals use similar strategies to manage their workload, (c) elementary school principals need support in order to spend their time pursuing instructional leadership and developing authentic relationships, (d) elementary school principals perceive a need for increased mental health professionals and school administrators, and (e) elementary school principals need fewer demands from state and local education offices. The first key finding confirmed that the elementary school principal's workload is heavy and challenging. The second finding revealed that the elementary school principals use similar strategies to manage their workload. They include the strategic use of the time of day, practicing good organizational skills, and delegating or sharing their workload with others. The third key finding concluded that elementary school principals need support in order to spend their time pursuing instructional leadership and developing authentic relationships. The fourth key finding

revealed that elementary school principals perceive a need for increased staffing in the areas of mental health professionals and school administrators. The purpose of these extra staff would be to address student mental health and behavioral issues, as well as the management and administration of the school. Finally, the fifth key finding concluded that elementary school principals need fewer demands from state and local education offices, including attending mandatory meetings and preparing accountability reports.

The findings of this study confirmed and enhanced that of the professional literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Each theme and the resulting findings was interpreted in terms of participant perceptions, supporting or refuting literature, and through the lens of distributed leadership. The five themes are interpreted separately and then holistically to create a rich and thick view of analyzed data. The perceptions of 10 elementary school principals in a suburban, Mid-Atlantic public school district and current literature on principal workload can be used to interpret the findings of this study.

### **The Principal's Workload is Heavy and Challenging to Manage**

The findings revealed that all the elementary principals concurred that their workload is heavy and challenging to manage. Some of the terms used to describe their workload were “*overwhelming, never ending, non-stop, time-consuming, not defined by boundaries, and high.*” This finding confirms the research of Mahfouz (2020) and Wylie (2020) who reported high levels of principal fatigue and stress due to the demanding nature of their professional role (Mahfouz, 2020; Wylie, 2020). More specifically, principals in my study cited meeting the demands of stakeholders as a particular stressor. P4 said, “...you might have a well laid plan and then you have five absences that you

can't cover, or you have a child in crisis, or you have a family that needs you right away. So...it's just a challenge to make sure you're meeting the needs of everybody." This perception confirmed the professional literature, which stated that balancing competing stakeholder interests and keeping those stakeholders satisfied were sources of stress for principals (Niesche et al., 2021).

### **Principals Use Similar Strategies to Manage their Workload**

All of the elementary school principals in this study discussed the need to delegate and share their job responsibilities with other building staff and described the practice as crucial to handling their workload. P9 stated, "It ain't [sic] rocket surgery...we need to compartmentalize and delegate responsibilities. I have 13 leadership positions, including three APs in my school, and I use them." This finding supports research that concludes school principals prioritize their tasks and responsibilities and distribute some tasks to other school staff (Oplatka, 2017b).

All of the participants reported managing the time of day strategically in order to manage their workload. They used time during the school day to be present in classrooms, to hold meetings with school staff, and to meet the needs of students and teachers. P9 stated, "I visit every classroom every day, no exceptions." Many reported using the time before and after school to complete administrative tasks. P10 explained, "I'm the kind of person that gets here very early. I'm usually the first vehicle, maybe the second... I usually get here about 2 hours before anybody else, and I'll complete tasks that are on my checklist." P2 explained that he works in the evening at home, "after the kids go to bed." These practices confirm the professional literature which concludes that

often the principal's job cannot be completed within the workday (Jones, 2017; Mahfouz, 2020; Oplatka, 2017b; Wieczorek & Maynard, 2018). These practices also exemplify the elementary school principals' desire to balance their extended workdays with their home life. Noted in the literature was the reality that the school principal's workday has increased, and the line between a school principal's professional and personal life has been blurred (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Maufouz, 2020; Sebastian et al., 2018; VanVooren, 2018).

### **Principals Need Support in Order to Spend Time on Two Professional Areas**

This study found that elementary school principals perceive a need for support from their district administrators to spend time on instructional leadership and building authentic relationships. In reference to instructional leadership, P3 shared, "So, I wish that I had more opportunity to get into instruction and to be an active part of the instructional leader that I want to be." This finding confirmed those of recent research which concluded that while instructional leadership is crucial, principals have reported that they spend limited time improving teacher effectiveness (Mestry, 2017; Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017). Instead of instructional leadership, they report spending more time on management and administrative issues (Bezzina et al., 2018; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2020; Leithwood & Sun, 2018; Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017; Sebastian et al., 2018). In Sebastian et al.'s (2018) study, school principals expressed concern about being told to focus on instructional leadership by district leaders without being given any strategies to manage the rest of their workload.

The elementary school principals in this study also reported they required more time in order to develop authentic relationships with students and staff. Leibowitz and Porter (2019) concluded that a principal's ability to build relationships with those internal to the school was just as important as practicing effective instructional leadership for impacting student learning. P6 stated a desire to focus on "the relationships. I mean like genuine relationships, meaning closing the door and having an uninterrupted lunch with my ILT." This sentiment is confirmed by the current research which details the difficulty principals experience in taking the time necessary to form relationships with students and staff (Wieczorek & Maynard, 2018).

### **Principals Perceive a Need for Increased Professional Staffing**

The elementary school principals in this study expressed a need for more mental health professionals and assistant principals in their school. P7 expressed a need for mental health professionals who are "able to both respond to crises but also help coach teachers in other ways to, you know, be preventative or more effective with the child that might be having troubles." This perceived need confirms Connolly et al.'s (2018) study which noted the difficulty of school principals to lead when dealing with the normal administration of the school, including increasing student mental health issues.

A need for additional professional staff to assist with administrative and management responsibilities was also expressed by principals in this study. P8 desired an additional assistant principal for support with "daily tasks and responsibilities that are not necessarily strategic in nature." Oplatka (2017a) suggested that school districts increase

middle management positions, such as assistant principals, to free up more time for the school principal to focus on leadership.

### **Principals Need Fewer Demands from Local and State Education Departments**

The elementary school principals in this study reported feeling frustrated with the demands placed on them by district and state administrators. P6 stated, “You tell me to take care of myself...but then you’re so freaking demanding of deadlines and, and, ‘where is this’ and the follow-up emails.” This finding was confirmed repeatedly in the research. One cause of this frustration was revealed by Schneider and Yitzhak-Monsonego (2020) whose research concluded that principals’ leadership priorities and preferences do not always align with those of the district administrators. Therefore, some of the tasks assigned to them by district administrators are perceived as particularly burdensome to school principals. These duties consist of work-related errands, human resources-related issues, and formal daily procedures they view as unnecessary but are mandated by the bureaucracy of the district (Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2020). Cruz et al. (2021) attributes this situation to a centrist approach to public schooling, whereby the school district retains authority, increasing the number of management tasks necessary to ensure that district goals are being met (Cruz et al., 2021). A centrist approach can also decrease principal autonomy, and with it, their opportunity to exert authentic leadership within their schools (Cruz et al., 2021; Heffernan, 2018). Research by Niesche et al. (2021) revealed similar situations and suggested that school districts work to reduce any unnecessary workload they demand of school principals.

## **Distributed Leadership**

The conceptual framework providing the foundation for this study is distributed leadership, which is the purposeful sharing and disseminating of leadership responsibilities (Gronn, 2000). All elementary school principals in this study discussed delegating and sharing their job responsibilities and described it as crucial to handling their workload. P5 stated, “I surround myself with really good people.” While distributed leadership is viewed in the professional literature as a choice (Huang, 2020; Oplatka, 2017b), the elementary school principals in this study viewed distributed leadership as a necessity. Even those elementary school principals who did not relish the idea of shared authority and responsibility utilized it as a means to manage their workload.

Gronn (2002) created a framework to explain how distributed leadership occurs. The three components in the framework are spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practice. The elementary school principals in this study utilized all three components of distributed leadership in order to handle their workload.

Spontaneous collaboration occurs when employees with different knowledge and skills join to complete a particular project and then disband (Gronn, 2002). This type of distributed leadership was evident in the data when the elementary school principals described how they and their building leaders work together to handle unexpected happenings during the school day. Intuitive working relations occur when two or more employees develop a close working relationship over time where “leadership is manifest in the shared role space encompassed by their relationship” (Gronn, 2022, p. 430). This type of distributed leadership was described by the elementary school principals in this

study as the kind utilized between themselves and their assistant principal. Finally, institutionalized practice happens when teams are formalized to facilitate regular collaboration on the performance of particular functions (Gronn, 2022). This type of distributed leadership was noted when the elementary school principals described the process they used to delegate instructional leadership to their reading specialists and facilitators on a long-term basis.

I conducted this study to answer two research questions. The collected and analyzed data revealed five major themes, providing answers to the research questions. The five themes, also mentioned in this chapter, were thoroughly outlined and discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of the study include reduced generalizability, limited sample size, non-transferable interview protocol, and geographic location. Limitations can include the ability to generalize the study's results to a larger population. The participant sample size was 10 current elementary school principals from a single suburban Mid-Atlantic school system. The findings from this study may not represent the perspectives of the other elementary school principals in this school district or throughout the state. A final limitation could have been my own biases and prejudices toward this topic. In order to address the risk of bias, reflective notes were recorded in a journal throughout the research process to examine and process my own attitudes. The limitations mentioned may present opportunities for further research.



### **Recommendations**

Since one of the limitations of this study was the small sample size, it would be appropriate to repeat this study with a larger sample size. Further research in a different geographic area would also be warranted. This study took place in a suburban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region. Therefore, conducting similar research in an urban or rural area or in a different region of the United States may be beneficial.

Further, this study included only elementary school principals. Future research regarding the ways in which middle and high school principals balance their workload may be warranted. Finally, because one of the findings of this study was the intense nature of a principal's work related to students in mental health crises, research into the principal's role in dealing with students' mental health may also be warranted.

### **Implications**

In this study, I explored the challenges elementary school principals face with balancing their workload and their perceptions of the administrative support required to meet the daily challenges of their job. This study's implications for social change involve the study findings benefitting the participating school district's senior administrators. These benefits include increasing their understanding of how their elementary school principals are struggling to balance their workload and what administrative support they may require to meet the daily challenges of their job. This research may also inform state departments of education regarding the supports elementary principals need in order to be successful, and in turn, provide the necessary funding and training to improve principals' role effectiveness. This research may also lead to positive social change by improving the

working conditions of elementary principals and their overall ability to lead, in order to promote a positive school climate and support the improvement of student achievement.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges elementary school principals face with balancing their workload and their perceptions of the support needed to meet the daily challenges of their job. In order to collect data, ten elementary school principals were interviewed using a semi-structured format. To analyze the data provided by the interviews, two-cycle coding was used. During first-cycle coding, open coding was used. Axial coding was used for second-cycle coding. During data analysis, patterns emerged in the participants' responses, and eventually, five themes emerged. The first theme confirmed that the elementary school principal's workload is heavy and challenging. The second theme revealed that the principals use similar strategies to manage their workload. They include the strategic use of the time of day, practicing good organizational skills, and delegating or sharing their workload with others. The third theme concluded that elementary school principals need support in order to spend their time pursuing instructional leadership and developing authentic relationships. The fourth theme revealed that elementary school principals perceive a need for increased mental health and administrative staffing. Finally, the fifth theme concluded that elementary school principals need fewer demands from state and local education offices.

Future studies at the local level should focus on the ways in which middle and high school principals balance their workload. This study may benefit local departments of education by increasing their understanding of how their elementary school principals

are struggling to balance their workload and what administrative support they may require to meet the daily challenges of their job. This research may also inform state departments of education regarding what supports elementary principals need in order to be successful, and in turn, provide the necessary funding and training to improve principals' role effectiveness.

More broadly, this study makes a significant contribution to the professional literature regarding principals and their workload. The current literature focuses on the heavy workload and role complexity of the school principal's job but falls short of explaining how principals balance their responsibilities and demands. The themes in this study provide new information about how elementary school principals manage their workload, including specific strategies used. This study also reveals the supports that elementary school principals perceive they need in order to manage their workload. These new findings can be used by scholars and practitioners as they research the topic in an effort to understand and improve the professional experience and effectiveness of the elementary school principal.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What is your current position?
2. How long have you, or did you, work in this position?
3. How would you describe your workload as a principal?
4. About how many hours do you, or did you, work each week?
5. Describe the strategies you use or used to try to balance your workload?
6. What challenges do you, or did you, face in trying to manage your workload?
7. Which responsibilities do or did you prioritize? Why?
8. Which responsibilities do or did you delegate to others? Why?
9. On which responsibilities do or did you wish you had more time to focus? Why?
10. What supports do or did you think would be helpful to you in meeting the daily challenges of the job?