How Do Principals Leading High-Poverty Elementary Schools Describe Their Emotional Labor

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DISSERTATION COMMITTEE APPROVAL:

The following committee members certify they have read and approve this dissertation and deem it fully adequate in scope and quality as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership.

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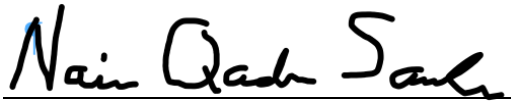

Naim Qadree Sanders — February 25, 2026

Naim Qadree Sanders — Date

Abstract

This qualitative descriptive study explored how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor. The problem addressed was that it was not known how these principals experience and navigate the emotional dimensions of school leadership. The purpose of the study was to capture authentic descriptions of how principals regulate, suppress, and express emotions while fulfilling their roles in under-resourced schools. The study was grounded in Hochschild's theory of emotional labor and supported by the frameworks of Grandey, and Maslach and Leiter on emotional regulation and burnout. One central research question guided the study: How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor? Participants included 11 principals from the Midwest, and data sources included a demographic questionnaire semi-structured interviews guided by a 20-question protocol, and researcher journal notes. Data were analyzed thematically, resulting in six key themes: navigating conflicting demands of leadership, balancing authenticity and professionalism, performing leadership through emotional display, managing emotional exhaustion, restoring self to sustain the role, and insufficient emotional support for leaders. Findings revealed that principals continuously navigate emotional tensions between institutional demands and personal values, often at the cost of well-being. The study found that emotional labor is fundamental to leadership in high-poverty schools and that systemic support is critical to sustaining principals. It adds to the literature by illuminating principals' emotional experiences and underscoring the need for organizational strategies that promote leader well-being.

Key words: Principal leadership, systemic support, emotional labor

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my wife, Debbie—my anchor, my encourager, and my greatest source of strength. You walked beside me through every late night, every sacrifice, and every moment of uncertainty. Your patience, grace, and unwavering belief in me carried me forward when the journey felt heavy. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

I also dedicate this work to my mother, Angela, whose love, wisdom, and quiet strength laid the foundation for everything I am and everything I strive to become. Your sacrifices, prayers, and steadfast support have shaped my character and sustained me through every season of life.

To my sons, Zuriel, Ethan, and Liam, and to my daughters, Symphony, Nya, Zoe, and D'mya, you are my greatest motivation and my deepest joy. Your understanding, encouragement, and pride gave me the determination to persevere, even when the demands of this journey pulled time and energy away from you. I hope this work stands as a testament to resilience, faith, and the power of finishing what you start, and that it inspires you to pursue your own dreams with courage and purpose.

God bless you all, as God has blessed me to have you in my life.

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I also wish to thank Dr. Jason Raad and Dr. Sandy Womack for their valuable insights, constructive feedback, and encouragement throughout the dissertation process. Each of you contributed meaningfully to the rigor and quality of this work, and I am deeply appreciative of your time and dedication.

Above all, I wish to honor and thank the principals leading high-poverty schools who are at the heart of this study. Your willingness to share your stories, reflections, and lived experiences gave this research its meaning and purpose. Each day, you lead with courage, compassion, and resilience while carrying immense responsibility and emotional labor on behalf of students, families, teachers, and communities. Your voices matter deeply, and this work exists because of your commitment to equity, care, and transformative leadership. It is my hope that this study both affirms your experiences and amplifies the significance of your work.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the emotional labor of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools. In high-poverty schools, i.e., schools with a student population of 75% or higher free or reduced lunch eligibility, students frequently face external hardships that hinder their ability to fully engage in their education. Many students experience food insecurity, live in unsafe neighborhoods, face traumatic experiences, and lack access to critical social and health services (Oakes et al., 2021). Principals are in crisis due to stressful work environments stemming from teacher turnover, testing requirements, environmental problems, and other factors that lead to burnout (McKay et al., 2024). Statistics show a looming shortage of people willing to take on the principal role because of the daily demands of managing heightened emotions, including their own and those of others (Blackmore, 2010; Riley et al., 2021). School leaders must manage the emotions of teachers, staff, parents, students, community members, and other stakeholders involved with their school.

There are currently no guidelines or professional standards that address the emotional labor principles that those who work in high-poverty schools may encounter in their day-to-day work. Emotional labor related to community and student poverty can add stress to principals' emotions, as some are ill-prepared to manage the emotional demands of their jobs while balancing their roles and navigating bureaucratic systems in education (Barry et al., 2019). It is easy to see that, with the work responsibilities and expectations of managing schools and the amplified emotions of others while managing their own, research on emotional labor among principals leading high-poverty schools is essential to

educational leadership (Alsakarneh et al., 2023). It can be challenging for principals to maintain the expectation of remaining calm and professional when responding to others' emotions, which can be emotionally exhausting for them in their leadership. School principals' work ultimately involves high levels of emotion among students and staff, and this has been documented in previous research (F. Wang et al., 2023). Emotions can potentially escalate and create emotional labor for principals as they lead their schools.

This qualitative descriptive study explores how elementary school principals in Midwestern United States districts articulate their experiences of emotional labor when managing schools with high poverty rates. Most professions that require frequent human interaction depend heavily on emotional labor, according to J. Huppertz et al. (2020). Furthermore, F. Yang and Jang (2022) observe that research on emotional labor has grown significantly over the past thirty years. The role of principals in high-poverty schools demands that they handle intricate emotional environments that stem from scarce resources, increased student needs, staff burnout, and community instability.

Leaders face heightened emotional demands when they must maintain their emotional equilibrium while assisting others under these conditions. It is essential to understand the emotional work that principals perform because it affects their personal health and their leadership choices, which in turn determine the school community's success and stability. Emotional labor is an essential aspect of most careers that involve regular interaction with people (A. V. Huppertz et al., 2020), and research on emotional labor has increased dramatically over the past three decades (F. Yang & Jang, 2022). This underscores the importance of employees displaying appropriate emotional responses in the organization. This study described the emotional labor of principals to increase

knowledge of emotional labor on principals. The study advanced knowledge and practice in educational leadership by providing insight into principals' emotions and emotional capabilities, which have become essential to leading a school forward (Chen & Guo, 2020; Chen & Walker, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study will deepen understanding of the work of today's principals by examining the broader picture of their experiences under current and increasingly complex conditions (Grummell et al., 2009). The researcher aimed to explore principals' emotional labor experiences, identify their coping strategies for emotional interactions, and examine the effects of these experiences on their well-being and leadership practices.

This research expanded existing knowledge on emotional labor in educational leadership by examining how principals manage emotional situations. The investigation draws on K. Yang and Jang's (2022) foundational research on leadership emotional labor to examine how these dynamics play out among principals of high-poverty elementary schools. The investigation into principals' descriptions of emotional labor uncovered vital information about the leadership emotional competencies needed and the impact on principal training programs. The study of principals' emotional labor provides policymakers and educators with necessary insights, along with guidance for leadership development programs, to support school leaders more effectively and prepare them for the emotional challenges of their positions. This study advances educational leadership by delivering solutions for emotional support and professional growth opportunities that principals in demanding school settings need.

Background of the Study

School principals working in impoverished schools in marginalized areas face distinctive challenges that require extensive emotional labor, according to Khalifa et al. (2016). As school leaders navigate administrative complexities, they must also handle external influences that affect students but remain outside their direct authority. School principals experience deep empathy for their students' challenges, but they also uphold their duty to create safe educational spaces and deliver excellent instruction. Students attending high-poverty schools typically encounter outside obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in their academic programs. Food insecurity affects numerous students who also reside in dangerous neighborhoods and deal with traumatic experiences while remaining without essential social and health services (Oakes et al., 2021). Principals experience emotional responses to their students' situations, but they need to maintain support for both academic progress and social development while managing these external hardships.

Research has yet to determine how principals at high-poverty elementary schools explain their emotional labor. Poverty impacts school leaders by adding multiple difficulties when they educate students and manage behavioral and social problems that emerge in their schools. While educational leadership practices have undergone significant changes through time, the emotional pressures on principals stay largely unrecognized. This study examined how modern school leadership demands principals develop self-awareness alongside emotional resilience and resourcefulness to handle various emotional challenges (Ackerman et al., 2023). Given the adverse out-of-school conditions that impede learning and development in high-poverty communities, many

school districts and educational institutions lack the resources to address these barriers effectively (Oakes et al., 2021). Principals operate their schools' inner workings and simultaneously control their emotional responses to student suffering. Students entering school come with their home experiences that, in high-poverty schools, commonly consist of trauma and chronic stress alongside housing instability. Principals face additional emotional difficulties because they must support students while also taking care of their own emotional health (Parrett & Budge, 2020). Principals face emotional exhaustion because their capacity to resolve out-of-school problems is limited when trying to alleviate poverty's impact on student education.

Research must investigate the impact of emotional labor on principals' leadership within high-poverty educational environments. School leaders have multiple responsibilities, including managing schools, building relationships with stakeholders, engaging with the community, and maintaining the emotional environment of their institutions (Beausaert et al., 2023; Hauseman, 2020; O'Connor, 2006; Skaalvik, 2023). Principals face emotional demands that lead to emotional labor because they must consistently manage their emotions to present a professional front in every situation. Educational leaders must manage their emotions and expressions in accordance with formal rules and unwritten standards, which require them to adjust their emotional displays to meet professional requirements (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023). Understanding how principals perform emotional labor is vital to sustaining leadership effectiveness and supporting emotional wellness for school leaders in high-poverty environments.

Emotional labor is a fundamental yet frequently overlooked component of leadership, particularly in the field of education (McKay et al., 2024). While principals

maintain emotional regulation throughout their interactions with multiple school stakeholders, their emotional work remains largely unrecognized. The unseen emotional labor essential to school leadership enables principals to create a supportive school environment and make effective decisions during stressful situations. Research demonstrates that managing emotions in professional environments requires emotional labor which affects many jobs especially those that involve regular interactions with others (Öngöre, 2020). School principals need to continuously manage their emotions alongside professional demands which frequently involves hiding feelings of stress and exhaustion to ensure the stability of their educational environments. Educational systems across the globe face growing concerns as the emotional demands of school leadership result in burnout and job dissatisfaction which drives higher turnover rates among principals (Riley et al., 2021). Lacking proper training and support while expected to manage emotional labor demonstrates why more research is required to understand principals' emotional labor experiences in high-poverty schools. Through understanding emotional labor more thoroughly, we can address deficiencies in principal training programs and develop better support systems and policies enabling principals to effectively handle their role's emotional demands.

The study of emotional labor in school leadership is particularly relevant beyond individual experiences, as it has significant implications for the broader educational system and society. Previous research has primarily examined emotional labor in customer service and healthcare settings (Esmaeilikia & Groth, 2022), yet the role of emotional labor in education, especially among school leaders, remains underexplored. As educational institutions worldwide face leadership shortages, particularly in high-

poverty schools, understanding the emotional labor of principals is crucial for developing strategies to support their well-being and effectiveness.

Emotional labor research provides insights into how leaders regulate emotions through mechanisms such as surface acting and deep acting, concepts originally introduced by Hochschild (1983) and later expanded upon in workplace studies. The shortage of leadership in educational institutions globally demands a focus on the emotional workload of school principals to formulate methods for their support system that enhances both their well-being and effectiveness. Research on emotional labor outlines how leaders manage their emotions using methods like surface acting and deep acting, which Hochschild first proposed in 1983, and later workplace research expanded. Deep acting requires changing internal emotions to match professional expectations which leads to genuine interactions (Öngöre, 2020) while surface acting demands displaying fake emotions that result in emotional exhaustion (Esmaeilikia & Groth, 2022). This study explores principal strategy usage to advance discussions about sustainable leadership practices and the professional well-being of leaders through organizational changes that reduce their emotional burdens. These results have potential applications in leadership training programs and school policies while offering guidance for systemic reforms to improve principal retention and effectiveness in high-poverty schools and other contexts.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are alphabetized and defined as they relate to this study on principals' emotional labor in high-poverty schools. Educational leadership in the 21st century presents various emotional challenges that are often overlooked. Principals must

develop self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience to navigate these demands effectively (Ackerman et al., 2023). This study explored the emotional labor of principals in high-poverty schools, examining how they manage emotions, cope with emotional demands, and sustain their leadership effectiveness in challenging environments.

Authenticity. The extent to which leaders are genuine in their emotional expressions can foster trust among staff and students when that authenticity resonates with broader institutional goals (Özan & Akın, 2024).

Deep Acting. When individuals adjust their internal emotional state to align their emotional expressions with organizational rules by transforming a negative feeling into a positive one (Alabak et al., 2020).

Emotional Dissonance. Feeling compelled to project emotions at odds with inner feelings leads to stress, fatigue, and potential burnout. Studies have shown that principals grappling with high levels of emotional dissonance often report lower well-being and diminished job satisfaction (Noreen et al., 2021).

Emotional Intelligence. It encompasses self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2022, 2023).

Emotional Labor. The intentional control of feelings to outwardly demonstrate an appropriate facial and body display to conform to an organization's expectations and goals by suppressing negative emotions and displaying only positive emotions (Hong et al., 2017; Theodosius et al., 2021).

High-Poverty Schools. Classified as high poverty due to having a student population of 75% or higher who are eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRPL), according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024),

Job Demands. Environmental work and emotional demands drain principals' energy, impair mental health, and result in burnout (Marsh et al., 2023).

Job Satisfaction. This occurs when principals can fulfill their expectations at work, have high job satisfaction, and improve performance (Sriadmitum, 2023).

Surface Acting. When individuals align their emotional expression with the organization's display rules without changing their emotional experience by faking a friendly face or disposition (Alabak et al., 2020).

Transformational Leadership. A framework through which to analyze these evolving definitions of emotional labor. Grounded in ideals, ethical standards, and the promotion of positive change within organizations, transformational leadership emphasizes the emotional and motivational aspects of leadership (Carroll, 2023; Northouse, 2018).

Anticipated Limitations

Several limitations may impact the study's findings and applicability. These limitations are factors beyond the researcher's control, including assumptions about participant honesty, potential biases, and the scope of the sample. The researcher aimed to understand how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor through semi-structured interviews. The data collected will highlight key themes relevant to school leadership, which may inform training programs and district policies. However, the following limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Participant Honesty and Bias** – It is assumed that elementary school principals may impression-manage their responses or may not be aware of how difficult the situation is because they lack a relevant comparison. Therefore, participants may withhold information or modify their responses due to social desirability bias, which leads them to present themselves in a favorable light. This limitation

affects the depth of the study's findings and may not fully capture the emotional complexities of their experiences.

- **Interview Constraints** – While interviews are a valuable method for gathering firsthand accounts, they may not fully capture the nuanced emotional labor of principals. Some emotions may be difficult to express, and participants may struggle to articulate their experiences in a structured interview. Additionally, social norms may discourage the open expression of vulnerability or emotional struggles, limiting the depth of the responses.

- **Scope of the Study** – This study focused exclusively on elementary school principals, excluding those who lead high-poverty middle or high schools. This limitation affects transferability, as findings may not be applicable to school leaders at different grade levels who face distinct emotional and administrative challenges.

- **Accuracy of Descriptions** – It is assumed that the descriptions provided by participants will accurately reflect their experiences. However, memory recall limitations, personal biases, and contextual influences may impact on how principals describe their emotional labor. To mitigate this, interviews will be recorded and observations documented to ensure the data remain as accurate and meaningful as possible.

- **Interview Format and Data Validity** – The study employed 60-minute, semi-structured interviews conducted virtually, in person, or by phone. The format may lead to additional follow-up questions that do not directly align with the research questions, potentially generating extraneous data. Any responses that do not address the study's focus will be excluded from the analysis, which may limit the data's comprehensiveness.

- **Limitations of Sampling Strategy**

    - **Qualitative Study Constraints** – As a qualitative study, findings will be based on descriptive experiences from a limited number of participants. This limits generalizability to a broader population of school principals, as the study is not designed to establish universal trends or statistical significance.

    - **Time Constraints for Interviews** – The semi-structured interview format is limited to 60 minutes per participant. This constraint may prevent deeper exploration of certain topics, as participants may require more time to fully articulate their experiences and emotions.

    - **Regional Limitations** – The study focused on principals from high-poverty schools in the Midwest region of the United States. As a result, findings may not be applicable to school leaders in other geographic areas where cultural, economic, and policy differences may influence the nature of emotional labor

The anticipated limitations impact the study's transferability and applicability in several ways. Since the study focused on elementary school principals in the Midwest, findings may not fully apply to school leaders in other regions, educational contexts, or grade levels. Additionally, the small sample size may limit generalizability despite the rich contextual insights. However, the insights gained can still deepen understanding of emotional labor in school leadership, offering valuable implications for principal training programs, policy development, and leadership support structures. By acknowledging these limitations, the study remained transparent about its constraints while highlighting the potential contributions of its findings to the field of educational leadership.

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

This qualitative descriptive study investigated how principals working in high-poverty elementary schools manage their emotional labor. This study advances the field of school leadership by examining the emotional labor principals perform and the challenges they face in these environments. Principals today face numerous emotional demands that are often unrecognized in educational leadership and therefore require self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience to handle these challenges successfully (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Scholars recognize that principalship involves complex elements that demonstrate the emotionally demanding nature of their leadership responsibilities. Research indicates that principals must handle multiple emotionally intense situations, which include school management, teacher mentorship, stakeholder interactions, community engagement outside the school, and maintaining their school's emotional atmosphere (Beausaert et al., 2016; Hauseman, 2020; O'Conner, 2006; Skaalvik, 2023).

This study demonstrated feasibility through a clear scope definition, accessible participants, and established qualitative research methods. Conducting semi-structured interviews enables researchers to investigate the emotional work of school principals in depth while collecting substantial, valuable data. The investigation maintained a precise and practical research direction by examining principals of elementary schools in high-poverty areas while exploring an under-researched aspect of leadership. The study incorporated ethical standards like participant confidentiality and informed consent to maintain research integrity. The rise of emotional challenges in school leadership, combined with concerns about principal retention and well-being, makes this research timely and relevant.

Chapter 2 offers a detailed examination of emotional labor, the difficulties principals face in high-poverty schools, and their emotional labor management tactics, including surface acting and deep acting. This chapter presents the Background of the Problem, followed by Identification of the Problem Space and Theoretical Foundation, before moving on to Review of the Literature and Problem Statement, and ending with a Chapter Summary. The second chapter explores how emotional labor has changed principals' well-being and leadership effectiveness, together with research limitations.

The research methodology is described in Chapter 3, which includes details on the study's structure and implementation. Chapter 4 presents the descriptive data and presents both the data analysis and the study findings. The final chapter provided an overview of research findings, discussed their practical and policy implications, and suggested directions for future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Chapter and Background to the Problem

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor. I added the location because that was required in the purpose statement. Educational leadership in the twenty-first century provides a variety of emotional challenges that are infrequently acknowledged or appreciated and requires that principals develop a well-rounded sense of self, trusting in one's feelings, intuition, imagination, and resourcefulness, which becomes a primary concern considering the current state of education and leadership (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Researchers acknowledge that the role of a principal is challenging, and principals encounter emotional situations in their role. Further research has indicated that principals attempt to manage emotional situations that include school management, teacher guidance, managing relationships with all stakeholders, communicating within the external community, and addressing the emotional spaces of their schools (Beausaert et al., 2016; Hauseman, 2020; O'Connor, 2006; Skaalvik, 2023). Principals' work involves a magnitude of responsibilities that can be emotional and require the principal to manage their emotions and the emotions of others effectively.

Ultimately, principals are expected to regulate their emotional displays to show outward emotions that align with school norms through emotional labor (Nguyen, Besson et al., 2022). This study intended to describe the emotional labor of principals leading high-poverty elementary schools by focusing on the experiences of principals to increase knowledge of emotional labor on principals. The emotions of principals and their

emotional capabilities have become essential aspects of leading a school forward (Chen & Guo, 2020; Chen & Walker, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Emotional labor is a vital aspect of most careers that involve regular interaction with people (J. Huppertz et al., 2020), and the study of emotional labor has increased dramatically over the past three decades, according to F. Yang and Jang (2022). Over time, research has demonstrated the impact of emotions in the workforce, thus making research on emotional labor crucial to employees. The idea of emotional labor was originally described as the intentional control of feelings to outwardly demonstrate an appropriate facial and body display to conform to an organization's expectations and goals by suppressing negative emotions and displaying only positive emotions (Hong et al., 2017; Theodosius et al., 2021). This leads to the importance of employees displaying appropriate emotional responses based on their emotions within the organization. Emotional labor involves surface acting and deep acting (Güler et al., 2023). Deep acting occurs when individuals manage to adjust their internal emotional state to create emotional expressions aligned with organizational rules by transforming a negative feeling into a positive feeling (Alabak et al., 2020). Surface acting happens when individuals align their emotional expression with the organization’s display rules without changing their emotional experience by faking a friendly face or disposition (Alabak et al., 2020).

The decrease in principals' well-being has been a concern for researchers for some time (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024). Challenges encountered by school principals impact their well-being, and many of them are complex with multiple layers (Beausaert et al., 2023; Burke et al., 2022; Collie et al., 2020). Principals are forced to manage dilemmas that

impact their work and the schools they lead. It has been well-acknowledged that principals have a difficult job, and as a result, their well-being may suffer. Since principals are highly motivated and resilient, many succeed despite their work's challenging nature and possess optimal functioning, feel good, and achieve a balanced life (Cherkowski et al., 2020).

The literature review was designed as an analysis, synthesis, and critique of research and other scholarly sources on the qualitative description and reflection of the role of principals, emotional job demands, and responses to emotional labor (surface acting and deep acting). The literature review examined how emotional labor impacts principals' well-being and leadership. Studies that are relevant to the topic explored include historical research on emotional labor, principals' roles, surface acting, and deep acting. Chapter Two includes the background of the problem, identification of the problem space, theoretical foundation, review of the literature, problem statement, and a summary of the chapter. Chapter two presents the evolution of emotional labor's impact on principals' well-being and leadership while clarifying research limitations.

The background to the problem section addresses the history of the role of the principal and their description of emotional labor as they perform their jobs and lead their schools. The theoretical foundation section examined the evolution of emotional labor and principals' use of surface acting and deep acting as responses to emotional labor for this study. In the review of the literature section, the history and current empirical research on emotional labor, surface acting, and deep acting are synthesized, including how emotional labor is described by principals leading high-poverty schools. Throughout the literature review, themes were further analyzed, merged, and synthesized.

The Review of Literature was focused on scholarly empirical research, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, dissertations and seminal work. The criteria for research included work published in 2020 or later; however, research was conducted as far back as 1983 to review seminal work on emotional labor, surface acting, and deep acting. The databases used for research were APA and Sage Journals, ProQuest, and ERIC. The following keywords were searched for *emotional labor, surface acting, deep acting, principals, school leaders, well-being, and high-poverty schools.* As the synthesis of the review of literature is developed, so did the search for keywords. This evolved to include *job satisfaction, burnout, emotional exhaustion, transformational leadership, emotional job demands, emotional labor, job performance, high-poverty schools, school leaders, principals, job satisfaction*, and *stress*. The process enabled a thorough review of historical and current empirical peer-reviewed journal articles.

Background to the Problem

Attention to the emotional labor of principals has increased in the last decade due to emerging research that demonstrates increasing job demands for principals (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024), resulting in school leaders experiencing high levels of work-related stress, burnout, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020; Riley et al., 2021; Skaalvik, 2023; Wells & Klocko, 2015) as principals have to manage many responsibilities and work under conditions that are stressful (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Elomaa et al., 2021). Research has provided evidence of principals' encounters with emotional labor and responses to emotional job demands. The work of principals is emotionally intense, and the intensity caused by the work directly affects principals' health and well-being (McKay et al., 2024). The researcher

aims to describe the emotional labor of principals leading high-poverty schools and how it affects their leadership. There is a vast body of research into emotions and leadership. Still, the research takes a diverse approach (theoretically, conceptually, and methodologically). It risks being researched in isolation, thus limiting it to a particular sub-field or area of interest (McKay et al., 2024).

Emotional labor is a vital aspect involving regular interactions (A. V. Huppertz et al., 2020). The concept of emotional labor was introduced by Hochschild (1983) when she referred to emotional labor as the purposeful control of feelings to outwardly demonstrate an appropriate facial and body display (Hochschild, 1983; Shrivastava et al., 2024). Principals may choose responses to their emotional labor based on their feelings and interactions with others. According to Hochschild (1983), the control of outwardly expressed feelings can be managed by using either surface acting, in which the outward expression is altered, or deep acting, when the actual emotion felt is altered through reappraisal or directly conjuring the appropriate feeling (Shrivastava et al., 2024). Research indicates that individuals use both surface acting and deep acting as emotional responses. Other early researchers, such as Morris and Feldman (1986), have described emotional labor as the "effort, planning, and control that is necessary to express the desired emotions of the organization during interpersonal transactions to display appropriate emotions" (p. 987).

Researchers have revealed several definitions of emotional labor, and its concept has developed over time. Emotional labor occurs in any labor when individuals must conform to organizational expectations and goals by suppressing negative emotions and displaying only positive emotions, according to Theodosius et al. (2021). Findings from

this study could contribute to the existing literature by exploring additional researchers' contributions to emotional labor. Emotional labor includes surface acting in which people do not feel the natural emotions they need to display in the workplace, resulting in individuals exhibiting fake emotions (Güler et al., 2023). Individuals displaying surface acting means that they are inclined to behave differently from their real emotions, thus enduring internal tension and experiencing more emotional effort than other emotional labor forms (Güler et al., 2023). When this occurs, the natural emotions do not align with the felt emotions, which can become challenging in the work environment. Deep acting is managing one's feelings to reduce emotional dissonance and requires self-control of behaviors to meet organizational rules (K. Yang & Jang, 2022). Research indicates that deep acting can also have a positive impact as well. Deep acting can benefit an individual's well-being by reducing the discrepancy between felt and expressed emotions (K. Yang & Jang, 2022). When individuals use deep acting, they adjust their internal emotional state to create emotional expressions aligned with the organization's display rules by transforming negative feelings into positive feelings (Alabak et al., 2020).

Successfully navigating community relationships is emotionally demanding for principals who understand the importance of creating and sustaining relationships to operate a school (McHugh, 2023). Principals are responsible for maintaining healthy relations with others, which can be emotionally draining. Dor-Haim and Oplatka (2020) state that there are health and well-being consequences for principals that result in their identities being deeply connected to their work. There is clear evidence that the work of principals impacts their health and well-being, with emotionally intensive responsibilities being a contributory factor as leadership comes at a cost to serve in the role (Heffernan &

Selwyn, 2021). The findings could potentially address the work of principals by providing descriptions of their emotional labor while serving high-poverty schools. Grissom et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of investing in the well-being of principals and concluded that effective principal's impact multiple aspects of school success. Previous research demonstrates how school leaders play a vital role in the success of schools. This research into emotions potentially misses the larger picture of principals' experiences or may not sufficiently articulate the labor and experiences of today's principals under current conditions and increasingly complex social conditions (Grummell et al., 2009). More research still needs to be conducted on how principals describe their emotional labor.

Due to the increase in job demands and responsibilities (Dadaczynski et al., 2020), occupational stress has become an unavoidable part of school leadership (Burke et al., 2022). The workloads of principals have amplified due to additional demands in the workplace. The work of principals is related to and influenced by multiple stakeholders and contexts, which produces some of their work-related challenges (Dadaczynski et al., 2020). Principals' work is influenced by their interactions with their school's internal and external stakeholders, including teachers, policymakers, staff members, parents, central office staff, and community members (Buonomo et al., 2020; Elomaa et al., 2022). Principals communicate with various individuals and groups that play a part in how they can serve in their roles. According to research, many principals' interactions with parents and guardians were particularly demanding (Levin, Scott et al., 2020). Due to these different interactions, principals may experience a variety of emotions. Leithwood et al. (2020) found that how principals perceive emotions, manage emotions, and behave in

emotionally appropriate ways can determine their effectiveness as leaders. This study will describe how principals respond to emotional labor. According to research from principals, solving dilemmas for their teachers, students, and parents was one of the most demanding parts of their work (Levin, Leung et al., 2020). This involves additional emotional demands on the part of the principal as they deal with problem-solving strategies for those they work with.

Principals struggle to make sense of the demands given to them by external stakeholders and perceive these demands as conflicting with their goals for the school (Elomaa, Eskelä-Haapanen, et al., 2022), which can strain their well-being. It is unclear if principals completely understand how emotional labor impacts their ability to lead high-poverty elementary schools due to what is expected of them. Due to the increasing demands, complexity of work, and high-pressure positions that principals have, they may feel as if they are ultimately responsible for everything in their school, which potentially compounds and creates unrealistic accountability (Spillane & Lee, 2014) and can add to harm their well-being. It is the responsibility of the principal to decide what is in the best interest of their students. They are faced with the dilemma of allocating resources appropriately while thinking of strategies they can employ to improve practice and navigate challenging situations that cause stress and impact their wellness (Ray et al., 2020). Principals must understand their emotional labor as it relates to these dilemmas. Unbeknownst to them, principals grow accustomed to increasingly elevated levels of stress and, as a result, become less capable of identifying their own physical, cognitive, and emotional overloads (Ray et al., 2020), which could have a negative impact on well-being. Previous research has indicated the absorbent amount of stress that principals

encounter while serving as leaders for their schools. Principals are pressured to make decisions rather quickly and can pay a negative price if the decisions fail and the wrong option is pursued; this creates moments when conflicting values occur with so-called stakeholders, as perspectives may differ (Hallo et al., 2020).

Emotions are important because they affect relationships, which have consequences for principals' health and well-being (McKay et al., 2024). From the research, it is clear that there are deep entanglements between principals and the community they serve, resulting in principals reportedly feeling and experiencing the various stresses of their communities (Beausaert et al., 2016), which in turn impacts the principals' health and well-being (Beausaert et al., 2016). Principals experience compassion fatigue (Lane et al., 2021) from supporting students and families through some of the most difficult moments of their lives (Lane et al., 2021) with consequences for their own health and well-being (McKay et al., 2024).

Identification of the Problem Space

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor. High-poverty schools are defined as schools where at least 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Few studies have documented successful leadership in high-poverty schools, making it difficult to understand the experiences of principals in these schools (Gordon & Hart, 2022). The findings from this study could increase the knowledge of leading high-poverty school principals, helping them better understand and describe their emotional labor. There is a need to re-envision school leadership in high-poverty schools

and understand principals' challenges (Beckett, 2021). Principals who lead high-poverty schools face unique challenges, including low academic achievement, student discipline issues, truancy, unfair public perceptions and impressions of the school, and complex relationships with students, personnel, and parents (Friedman, 1995; Silbaugh et al., 2023).

This study explores the unique challenges of leading high-poverty schools and the emotional labor principals encounter. Principals in high-poverty schools often face unexpected problems and, at times, lack the resourcefulness to solve them when faced with challenges in such settings (Carroll, 2023). This research study will explore issues unique to principals of high-poverty schools that may not be shared in non-high-poverty schools. Principals must work in multiple dimensions and rapidly changing environments while adapting and remaining composed and positive (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020). In this study, research demonstrated that this is not always an easy task. Principals leading high-poverty elementary schools will encounter students living in poverty who face homelessness, hunger, trauma, and chronic stress, which harms academic success (Parrett & Budge, 2020) and, in turn, could impact the well-being of principals and their emotions due to how principals must deal with these issues of student's living in poverty encounter. Park and Datnow (2022) examined the significance of emotions in implementing school changes and found that principals have difficulty managing both their own and others' emotions (Özan & Akın, 2024). According to Özan and Akın, (2024), there is a compelling need for additional research to address the problems high-poverty schools face, and principals can profoundly shape their schools' philosophies.

In today's society, principals have a wide range of work responsibilities (Beausaert et al., 2016; Dadaczynski et al., 2020), and this leadership role may impose exhausting and overwhelming job demands that put them at risk of exhaustion and health impairment (Skaalvik, 2023; Toyama et al., 2022). Previous research indicates that educational leaders' coping with occupational stress emphasizes social interactions, including positive relationships with staff, students, and parents, and spending personal time with family and friends (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020). According to the research, emotional labor not only impacts principals at work but also on their personal lives. Despite growing awareness of the pressure on principals, little is known about how they experience exhaustion (Toyama et al., 2022).

Principals are pulled in many directions at work as leaders. The most challenging stressors affecting their well-being include relationships with teachers and teachers' unions, as these relationships require emotional engagement when communicating in difficult situations (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020). Principals must manage parents' demands, and they are not always successful in doing so, according to Mahfouz and Richardson (2020). These encounters with parents may increase the emotional labor of school leaders. Principals are also held accountable for handling factors they have no control over but have a direct impact on them, including school context, publicity, and interacting with various stakeholders daily (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Elomaa et al., 2022). Principals' perceptions of job-related challenges vary due to internal and external factors as they arise, and they deal with issues they cannot influence or control (Elomaa et al., 2022). In this study, we will gain a deeper understanding of the role of principals as they lead high-poverty schools and navigate internal and external influences. Due to these

challenges, research is not always clear on how principals can obtain positive feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment to excel in their roles and flourish simultaneously (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024).

Principals' training remains essential to their development. According to research, principals worldwide, individually and collectively, are in crisis as they daily deal with heightened emotions from themselves and others (McKay et al., 2024). Their work is emotionally intense, and its fierce nature has direct consequences for principals' health and well-being, as well as for personal relationships (McKay et al., 2024). In some training programs, school leaders are taught to address negative thoughts and replace them with more positive, realistic ones; to use conflict-resolution techniques; to manage conflict; and to be active listeners (Kilag et al., 2023). This qualitative descriptive design will examine how principals may have been trained to perform these tasks and whether that training was practical for their leadership. Principals believed the training improved their relationships with colleagues (Kilag et al., 2023). Principal training is essential to help school leaders manage stressors (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020) as they navigate relational work demands, including serving the community and working with parents, teachers, and children (McKay et al., 2024).

Emotions are a natural part of principals' daily operations in schools, and as their work intensifies, they encounter emotionally driven situations (F. Wang et al., 2023). This study examined how principals in high-poverty schools manage the emotions they experience in their roles. Emotions are at the center of school administration (F. Wang et al., 2023), and principals must manage their emotions, stay calm, and act as model leaders for students, teachers, parents, and many others (Özan & Akın, 2024). Since they

are leaders in their schools, principals have certain expectations of them. Principals' ability to manage emotions and feelings is essential to moving a school forward (Leithwood et al., 2020; Özan & Akın, 2024). As school leaders attempt to manage emotional situations beyond their control, they may become frustrated and experience negative emotions that harm their well-being (F. Wang et al., 2023). Part of the emotional demands that principals encounter is due to time demands.

The time demands of school leaders can contribute to emotionally draining situations that are potentially detrimental to emotional health (R. Wang et al., 2023). This lack of time within principals' work responsibilities can also extend to internal and external stakeholders. School leaders are leaders in their communities; they continuously engage with multiple stakeholders, including students, families, teachers, administrative staff, district administrators, and local communities. These relationships can be a source of stress for principals (R. Wang et al., 2023). They can also be opportunities for principals to establish healthy relationships and avoid unhealthy emotional labor. Successful principals can facilitate and support mutually beneficial relationships with students, teachers, and other education stakeholders of the school community (Özan & Akın, 2024). As public figures, principals' emotions, behaviors, and actions are viewed more closely than in other professions (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020).

The research in this study uncovered the public scrutiny that principals encounter, which may contribute to their emotional labor. Constant interactions with parents, teachers, support staff, teachers' unions, and local government, along with dealing with students' emotional outbursts, contribute to principals' stressors (Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2019; J. Gill & Arnold, 2015; Skaalvik, 2020). As principals attempt to control their

emotions, they risk becoming emotionally exhausted (Skaalvik, 2023). Research indicates this emotional exhaustion is connected to emotional labor. Principals' emotions and emotional capabilities are increasingly essential to moving a school forward (Chen & Guo, 2020; Chen & Walker, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Principals have indicated that efforts to manage their emotions in their relationships with people in the school environment have led to negative outcomes, including burnout, weariness, unhappiness, stress, tension, nervousness, headaches, regret, insomnia, and restlessness (Özan & Akın, 2024). The research study gave us a deeper understanding of emotional labor and how it affects principals leading high-poverty schools in many areas.

In the dynamic landscape of education, effective leadership in schools plays a crucial role in shaping educational institutions' trajectories (Puspitadani et al., 2022). The effectiveness of principals is understood in this research through their descriptions of their emotional labor. Describing how emotional labor impacts principals leading high-poverty schools will serve the current body of research by increasing knowledge regarding principals' occupational well-being due to changing roles, working conditions, increased workloads, and lack of time to focus on pedagogical leadership (Beausaert et al., 2023; Fosco, 2022; Riley, 2020). Previous research has provided us with some knowledge of the emotions principals encounter at work, and this study will continue to build on prior research. This was done by using current research to understand the extensive demands placed on principals related to interpersonal relationships, interactions with various stakeholders, and the management of issues that school leaders cannot influence or control (Elomaa, 2023). Principals themselves need to be part of an evolving

process of learning and development if they are to meet the demands placed on them by modern schooling and the needs of teachers and students (Elomaa et al., 2022).

This study described emotional labor among principals in high-poverty schools, providing a deeper understanding of how school leaders experience it. Principals must manage numerous responsibilities across various contexts while interacting with diverse stakeholders (Elomaa et al., 2022). These conditions make their perceptions of their work responsibilities highly individual. They are influenced by various internal and external factors and contexts within multiple systems, which should be considered when training and supporting them (Elomaa et al., 2022).

Principals described their emotional labor in many ways in this research study. Fostering healthy relationships can be emotionally demanding, as principals are constantly attending to the emotional aspects of the schools they lead while managing the range of emotional responses and behaviors of themselves and others (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020; Skaalvik, 2023; F. Wang et al., 2023). A better understanding of the prevalence and effects of emotional labor strengthens the case for improving school practices to benefit both school leaders and their staff members, while also extending emotional labor theory, according to Riforgiate et al. (2022). Previous research, although insightful, does not capture the full impact of emotional labor on principals leading high-poverty elementary schools. A limited body of research explores how principals' work demands impact their emotional situations in their school environment (F. Wang et al., 2023). Although there has been increasing attention to school leaders' emotional labor in recent decades, no studies have been conducted to recapitulate and synthesize where we stand and what progress has been made on this issue (F. Wang et al., 2023). This research

study synthesized the description of emotional labor on principals leading high-poverty schools.

The importance of emotions in the work environment has become increasingly relevant and a major focus of research in recent years (Baridam & Oburu, 2020). The data gathered in this study could help principals gain knowledge that reduces or closes gaps in understanding of emotional labor among principals leading high-poverty elementary schools. In the past, research on emotional labor has been limited (Barry et al., 2019), and the literature on what individuals experience when engaged in emotional labor needs to be improved (Hong et al., 2017). Recently, research has brought a new understanding of emotional labor and its impact on individuals. For this research, the study of knowledge of emotional labor will continue to be developed.

The literature on surface and deep acting indicates that these two styles have contrasting effects on outcomes (J.-S. Kim, 2020). Principals select these two approaches as reactions to their emotional labor. For instance, surface acting is positively associated with stress and burnout, whereas deep acting is negatively associated with them (J.-S. Kim, 2020). This study will describe how principals in high-poverty schools use surface-acting and deep-acting responses in emotional situations. Surface acting is a stressor where resources are lost, resulting in job-related anxiety and serving as a threat to emotional and psychological resources (Rafiq et al., 2020). Deep acting does not create heightened job demands, which results in a negative relationship to job-related anxiety (Nauman et al., 2024), and it is also associated with improving the individual's psychological state.

Given these potentially adverse outcomes, Baker (2020) suggests that individuals practice self-care throughout the day. The effectiveness of principals' interactions is essential to their schools' success and leadership. As a strategy for managing emotional labor, principals can use surface acting or deep acting to address the emotional terrain they encounter daily, given the underlying emotions and emotional work involved (R. Wang et al., 2023). If principals are unable to manage their time, working long hours, and time pressures in fast-paced work environments, they will be unsuccessful in dealing with the emotional exhaustion they encounter, as demonstrated in research (Beausaert et al., 2016; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Skaalvik, 2023; F. Wang & Pollock, 2020). This research study provides firsthand information for leadership preparation and professional development programs that seek to address principals' performance and emotional well-being (R. Wang et al., 2023).

The study also builds off practical and professional applications from previous research. The intensity of school leaders' work negatively affects them in areas such as physical health and places them in emotionally draining situations, leading to high emotional investment (F. Wang & Pollock, 2020). The qualitative description design used in this research assisted principals, those who train them, and school districts in supporting them in managing their emotional labor.

Theoretical Foundations

This study examined how emotional labor affects principals in high-poverty elementary schools, focusing on emotional job demands, emotional intelligence, surface acting, deep acting, satisfaction, and performance (Sarraf et al., 2017). As accountability for principals increased, their leadership required them to manage emotional demands,

which became particularly challenging during periods of rapid change (Chen & Guo, 2020). As a result, the ability to manage emotions is essential to principals' performance (Chen & Guo, 2020). A factor that may influence the relationship between emotional labor and job satisfaction is emotional intelligence (Lu et al., 2021). The demands of school principals overlap with the demands encountered by leaders in other occupational environments (Marsh et al., 2023). Their jobs are becoming increasingly challenging and complex as school leaders are expected to lead their schools, manage demands, and meet the needs of various stakeholders (Marsh et al., 2023). As principals understand their emotions and practice emotional management, they can better understand their professional objectives and ultimately perform better at work (Marsh et al., 2023).

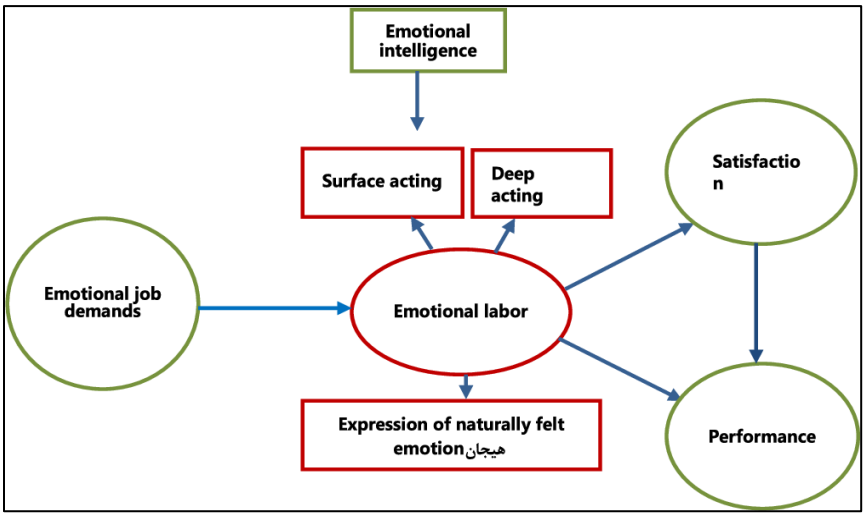
Job demands include environmental and emotional demands that drain principals' energy, impair mental health, and lead to burnout (Marsh et al., 2023). The performance of principals within their schools is of high importance both for the school and the school leader (Mohsen et al., 2024). Job satisfaction is essential for principals leading high-poverty elementary schools, according to Mohsen et al. (2024). Job satisfaction among principals occurs when they can meet their expectations at work, and a high level of job satisfaction can improve performance (Sriadmitum, 2023). According to Mohsen et al. (2024), job satisfaction is crucial to school life because when people are happy at work, they tend to be more active and enthusiastic about their responsibilities.

Understanding how emotional intelligence influences principals' emotional labor and job satisfaction may guide researchers and practitioners' efforts to improve employees' work performance and personal well-being (Lu et al., 2021). The ability to identify and understand others' emotions, as well as to regulate our own, is known as

emotional intelligence (Lu et al., 2021). Emotional intelligence will likely improve people's social interactions and affect their emotional and stress experiences at work (Yousaf et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence has been linked to leadership, management, and workplace success (Debes, 2021). School leaders' emotional intelligence is crucial in strengthening the school community and bringing together various stakeholders (Blaik-Hourani et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence enables principals to understand and manage their own emotions as well as those of others, which improves relationships, helps them resolve conflict, and helps them manage challenging situations (Blaik-Hourani et al., 2023). There is empirical evidence that emotional intelligence is significantly and negatively related to surface acting and has a significant positive impact on deep acting (T. T. Kim et al., 2012; Toprak & Savaş, 2020). Research has indicated a relationship between high emotional intelligence and principals' job performance, with significant results (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2022, 2023).

Figure 1

Imaginary Modeling of the Structural Equation



Note. The imaginary modeling of the structural equation of the carrier emotion with teaching satisfaction and success with the mediatory role of emotional labor and the moderator role of emotional intelligence.

Emotional job demands lead principals to reassess or suppress strategies for demonstrating a congenial and proactive emotion (Zheng et al., 2022). Emotional labor is a complex concept, and its dimensions commonly include surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotions (Kılıçarslan & Özsoy, 2024). When school leaders engage in surface acting, it serves as a catalyst for teachers and staff members to mirror principals' emotional labor (Kılıçarslan & Özsoy, 2024). When leaders exhibit deep acting, it encourages employees to adopt a similar approach (Kılıçarslan & Özsoy, 2024). This implies a trickle-down effect on school operations, performance, and job satisfaction (Kılıçarslan & Özsoy., 2024). Deep acting occurs when an individual reframes a situation to focus on the more positive aspects of their job (Alabak et al., 2020; Joffe et al., 2024). Surface acting involves altering emotional displays at a superficial level, according to Joffe et al. (2024). Table 1 provides definitions and examples.

Table 1

Description of Building Block for the Theoretical Foundations Section

Types of Building Blocks	Definition of the Building Blocks	Examples of the Building Blocks
Emotional Intelligence	Emotional intelligence encompasses various components, including self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and relationship management (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2022, 2023). Principals with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to regulate different types of emotions better and adapt to multifaceted social interactions with others (Silbaugh et al., 2023)	Social Awareness Self-Awareness Self-Management Relationship Management
Emotional Labor	Emotional labor is when employees have to conform to organizational expectations and goals by subduing negative emotions and displaying only positive emotions (Theodosius et al., 2021)	Emotional Exhaustion Emotional Disorder Well-Being Burnout
Surface Acting	Surface acting involves using emotional displays that are inconsistent with the emotions that are actually felt (J. Yang et al., 2021) and used by individuals to hide bad feelings or to express emotions they do not feel (Ngcobo et al., 2022)	Job Dissatisfaction Task Performance Intrinsic Job Satisfaction Extrinsic Job Satisfaction
Deep Acting	Deep acting is the adjustment of an individual's internal emotional state to create emotional expressions aligned with the organization's display rules (Alabak et al., 2020).	Moral Identification Genuine Acting Behavior Organizational Commitment Authenticity

The theoretical foundations presented in Table 2 outline a structured progression for examining emotional labor within educational leadership, with particular emphasis on principals serving in high-poverty school contexts. The table focused on three steps: Emotional Labor, Surface Acting and Deep Acting, and How Principals Leading High-Poverty Schools Describe Their Emotional Labor. These steps provide a coherent theoretical pathway that informs the study.

Table 2

Steps for the Theoretical Foundations Section

Steps	Focus on Each Step
Step 1: Emotional Labor	Leithwood et al., (2020) discovered in their research that perceiving emotions, managing emotions and acting in emotionally appropriate ways can explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.
Step 2: Surface Acting and Deep Acting.	The concept of emotional labor was first introduced by Hochschild, who described it as controlling feelings in a purposeful way to outwardly demonstrate appropriate facial and bodily expressions (Hochschild, 1983; Shrivastava et al., 2024). According to Hochschild, this can be managed through surface acting or deep acting (Hochschild, 1983; Shrivastava et al., 2024).
Step 3: How Do Principals Leading High-Poverty Schools Describe Their Emotional Labor	Research has indicated that there are increased levels of stress and work demands on school leaders, and attention has turned to examining the factors that contribute to their well-being Kutsyuruba et al. (2024).
	Research into emotions or emotional labor does not always capture the larger picture of the work of principals, in which emotions, relationships, expectations, and discourses of care and principals' own health and wellbeing are deeply interconnected McKay et al. (2024).

Review of the Literature

School principals are pivotal in shaping academic success, fostering a supportive educational climate, and cultivating leadership within their schools (Levin, Scott et al., 2020). These responsibilities, while universally challenging, are magnified in high-poverty schools where principals contend with compounded demands influenced by systemic inequities and socioeconomic adversities. This research synthesized the existing

literature to examine the unique challenges faced by principals in high-poverty schools, a historical examination of emotional labor, and the demands of high-poverty schools, highlighting the emotional and professional complexities of their roles, and identifies actionable strategies to support their leadership, as well as surface acting and deep acting. This review delved into the literature to gain a greater understanding of prior research on principals who lead high-poverty schools and to explore studies that offer a historical examination of emotional labor as it applies to school principals.

Prior Research of Principals Leading High-Poverty Schools

Research on the phenomenon of principals leading high-poverty schools provides valuable insights into the complex emotional labor these leaders perform. The emotional demands of this phenomenon are intensified by the socioeconomic challenges affecting students, families, and school communities. Several significant studies have explored these dynamics. Berkovich and Eyal (2015) and Chen et al. (2021) examined the intricate ways principals use emotional labor to navigate such challenges, while F. Wang and Pollock's (2020) work centered on principals operating in marginalized communities. Theoharis (2007) investigated leadership strategies for equity and cultural responsiveness in high-poverty schools. Collectively, their methodologies, sampling approaches, and findings reveal the vital role of emotional labor in sustaining leadership and improving outcomes within high-poverty educational settings.

Emotional Labor in Challenging Schools

Effective leadership requires emotional labor, which becomes particularly vital for principals in high-poverty areas who must handle operational tasks alongside instructional and socio-emotional responsibilities. These responsibilities require school

leaders to address systemic inequities while managing limited financial resources and providing increased socio-emotional support to both students and staff. Research shows that understanding emotional labor is crucial because it helps define how principals maintain staff morale and address trauma while fostering hope in situations where success seems hard to achieve.

Principals in difficult school settings need to manage complicated emotional environments by treating student trauma and economic difficulties while supporting stressed staff members and building positive parental and community connections. The necessity to maintain morale and foster hope becomes more intense when principals work in settings where success seems hard to achieve. Researchers have investigated how school principals handle these numerous demands and what effects this has on their overall well-being as well as their job performance and student outcomes.

Research conducted on principals who operate high-poverty schools demonstrates their use of emotional labor strategies to handle stress while building positive relationships and dealing with uncertain situations. The research by Berkovich and Eyal (2015) and Chen et al. (2021) examines the dual personal and professional burdens of emotional labor while showing its negative effects on principals' well-being and their school communities. Research by Theoharis (2007), demonstrates that principals face both challenges and benefits when managing emotional demands through cultural responsiveness and equity-oriented leadership. The combined research highlights the key role of emotional labor in high-poverty school leadership and its impact on school outcomes and principal wellness. Berkovich and Eyal (2015) conducted research on emotional labor and school leadership in challenging contexts. The study highlighted the

significance of emotional labor for principals managing high-poverty schools. Through a mixed-methods approach, the research revealed that deep acting, aligning internal emotions with leadership values, was essential for building trust and motivating stakeholders. Data from 120 Israeli principals demonstrated that while surface acting could lead to emotional exhaustion, deep acting was strongly linked to transformational leadership behaviors, enabling authentic and effective interactions within resource-constrained settings (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

D. Brown (2020) conducted research on emotional demands on principals in high-poverty schools. Brown's qualitative case study explored the heightened emotional demands on principals leading high-poverty urban schools in the United States. Through in-depth interviews with eight principals, the study revealed the pervasive emotional labor required to address frequent crises like family instability and food insecurity. Principals employed strategies such as emotional buffering and empathetic engagement to maintain optimism. However, the study also highlighted the dual nature of emotional labor: it supported school climate but often led to personal stress for leaders (Brown, 2020).

Hochschild (1983) conducted a research study on emotional labor and leadership in underprivileged schools. This longitudinal study delved into the emotional labor strategies used by 15 principals from underfunded schools across three U.S. states over two academic years. Hochschild found that deep acting helped principals connect authentically with stakeholders, build staff resilience, and manage high community expectations. Conversely, surface acting contributed to emotional fatigue and strained

relationships. The study emphasized emotional labor as a critical element of crisis management and engagement with the school community (Hochschild, 1983).

A 2021 study by Chen et al. explored emotional labor and its impact on well-being and effectiveness in difficult school settings. This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine leadership performance among 200 principals from low-resource schools in Israel and China and to examine how emotional labor played a role. Deep acting enhanced principals' well-being and performance and helped build strong relationships and sustainable school cultures. Surface-acting practices resulted in increased stress levels and diminished satisfaction among leaders. However, surface acting was linked to stress and reduced satisfaction. Resource-deprived schools depend on emotional labor as an essential strategy for principals to face challenges and sustain their job satisfaction (Chen et al., 2021).

Principals of high-poverty schools situated in marginalized communities encounter distinctive challenges that demand extensive emotional management to successfully navigate. Theoharis (2007), along with F. Wang and Pollock (2020), study the methods leaders use to handle both emotional and social challenges in their professional roles. The work of F. Wang and Pollock (2020) reveals how principals apply emotional labor techniques to manage staff burnout, student trauma, and community tensions while showing the necessity of deep acting to maintain staff morale. Theoharis (2007) examined the emotional challenges faced by social justice advocates in impoverished schools, highlighting the personal sacrifices they make and the need to develop resilience. Theoharis (2007) explore culturally responsive leadership by focusing on how emotional labor helps bridge cultural differences and build trust within diverse,

underserved communities. These studies demonstrated that emotional labor plays a vital role in establishing equitable environments and resilient school atmospheres in disadvantaged settings.

Administrators working in marginalized communities face distinct and amplified challenges when managing the intricate emotional and social aspects of their leadership roles. F. Wang and Pollock (2020) examined the work of principals in economically disadvantaged schools, emphasizing the emotional labor required to manage staff burnout, student trauma, and stakeholder tensions. Through an ethnographic study conducted over one academic year, F. Wang and Pollock (2020) captured the daily emotional experiences of five Canadian principals, highlighting the emotional toll of balancing competing demands while fostering authentic relationships. Principals mostly rely on deep acting to maintain morale and trust, even though surface acting, which they sometimes use, can cause stress and role conflicts. These leaders maintain positive school environments through emotional resilience and self-reflection while addressing significant personal and professional challenges in marginalized communities.

Theoharis investigated the experiences of seven principals from high-poverty U.S. schools who advocated for social justice through narrative inquiry and case studies. Researchers found that principals must expend significant emotional effort to manage staff and stakeholder opposition while maintaining a focus on equity and student-centered objectives. The practice of emotional labor led to personal sacrifices, including stress and feelings of isolation. The study results demonstrated that building authentic relationships and creating a shared vision for equity are essential for achieving sustainable success (Theoharis, 2007).

The research examined the use of emotional labor by 10 U.S. school principals in meeting the needs of their ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged student bodies. Research using interviews, observations, and focus group discussions confirmed that deep acting plays a vital role in establishing trust and promoting equitable resource distribution. Principals employed culturally responsive strategies to foster authentic connections, even as surface acting during conflicts sometimes led to emotional burnout. The research underscored the importance of emotional labor in promoting equity and community engagement (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Historical Examination of Emotional Labor and the School Principals

Early foundational research on emotional labor began with Hochschild's (1983) study of service employees and later expanded to educational settings, helping clarify the increasing complexities faced by school principals, according to Grandey (2000). Research on emotional labor began with surface and deep acting in customer service but eventually extended to examine the relational intensity and organizational constraints affecting school leaders (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Elomaa, 2023). This historical perspective is vital for understanding how principals in high-poverty schools interpret and manage their emotional demands today, as it uncovers the theoretical foundations, shifting methodological approaches, and prior gaps in studying leaders' stress, burnout, and coping mechanisms (Nguyen, Besson et al., 2022; Özan & Akın, 2024). The study achieves greater precision in exploring principals' descriptions and management of emotional labor by situating the dissertation in a historical context and examining established concepts alongside the new challenges principals face in under-resourced schools.

The concept of emotional labor became well known through Hochschild's seminal 1983 study, which analyzed how flight attendants, along with other service workers, controlled their feelings to meet company requirements. Hochschild's The Managed Heart presents the idea of surface acting, which involves displaying insincere emotions, and deep acting, which entails changing real emotions to satisfy external requirements. Her examination of human emotion as a marketable commodity in service industries led to later research that defined emotional labor as fundamental to several professional occupations (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2000).

The foundational research on emotional labor initially investigated the hospitality and customer service sectors, as well as other professions involving interpersonal interactions. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches helped determine how emotional regulation leads to improved customer satisfaction and organizational performance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1986). The initial studies identified the psychological and bodily strain experienced by workers who had to express emotions imposed by their organizations and examined how hiding genuine emotions to meet workplace standards impacted them (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1986). Over time, the scope of emotional labor research extended beyond traditional service industries to include a broad range of professions with significant social or relational components. In education, particularly in school leadership, emotional labor has emerged as a critical yet often overlooked dimension (Elomaa, 2023; Özan & Akın, 2024). Whereas original inquiries focused on front-line employees interacting with customers, more recent studies demonstrate that teachers and principals also engage in considerable emotional labor when meeting both institutional

demands and community expectations (Nguyen, Cheung et al., 2022). The recognition that educational leaders must navigate bureaucratic pressures, policy changes, and diverse stakeholder needs underscores the complexity of their emotional labor, moving these discussions well beyond the confines of the service sector.

As emotional labor has been examined in broader contexts, new research methods have emerged alongside this expansion. Initial research on emotional labor predominantly used interviews and surveys to evaluate perceived methods of emotional regulation, whereas current research includes longitudinal data analysis and physiological stress measurements, along with mixed-method approaches (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Riley's 2020 study demonstrated how school principals' emotional states changed throughout the academic year and linked these shifts to organizational factors and leadership outcomes. These designs reveal how continuous emotional labor affects both short-term social exchanges and long-term health outcomes, as well as professional performance.

Research that integrates emotional labor into sociological and organizational studies shows its critical role for school principals who operate in instructional leadership, management, and community-building roles (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020; Riforgiate et al., 2022). The burden faced by high-poverty schools increases due to systemic inequities and greater demands for academic and socioemotional support which results in elevated stress levels and burnout risk (Beausaert et al., 2023; Özan & Akın, 2024). The initial idea that emotional labor is specific to service jobs now shows its importance for educational leadership through the application of surface and deep acting techniques in routine operations.

Research demonstrates that principals who master emotional regulation can foster trust and positive school climates and achieve organizational success, even though this skill entails personal costs (Zvobgo et al., 2022). Understanding the dual nature of emotional labor in principalship has led to increased demand for leadership training programs and policies that address emotional leadership. As the literature evolves, it reaffirms Hochschild's foundational insight: On-the-job emotional management extends beyond simple performance tasks. Emotional labor is work that produces real effects on personal health and organizational operations, which, in turn, impact students' educational experiences.

Emotional Labor in Educational Leadership

Early studies examine how principals' relational responsibilities differ from those of other service roles. The extension of emotional labor research into educational leadership gained momentum in the early 1990s, as scholars began to recognize that school principals face distinct relational pressures compared with other service professionals. While emotional labor in traditional service roles often focuses on customer satisfaction, principals must balance the emotional needs of students, teachers, parents, and administrative stakeholders. This shift in perspective was facilitated by qualitative and quantitative inquiries that examined how principals' responsibilities extend beyond task-oriented demands to include relationship-building, conflict resolution, and the creation of supportive school cultures (Riley, 2020).

One of the earliest distinctions highlighted by researchers concerns how principals navigate myriad social interactions daily. Unlike typical service employees, who primarily respond to customers' immediate needs, principals address diverse emotional

demands arising from teachers, support staff, families, and even community organizations (Toprak & Karakus, 2020). Methodologically, early studies relied on interviews and observations, documenting the emotional strategies principals employed to foster positive learning environments while simultaneously meeting institutional goals. Findings revealed that principals often felt compelled to display calmness and empathy, regardless of their internal emotional states, underscoring the unique complexity of their emotional labor (Özan & Akın, 2024).

By the late 1990s, researchers increasingly emphasized how emotional labor contributes to principals' sense of isolation. Juggling multiple demands, from educational policies to community expectations, can create a perception that principals alone must carry the burdens of school management (Elomaa, 2023). High-poverty contexts amplify these challenges; heightened resource constraints, shifting family dynamics, and urgent student needs require principals to engage in intense emotional regulation (Beausaert et al., 2023). Qualitative accounts and case studies have demonstrated that such elevated pressures often erode principals' well-being, making them more susceptible to stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction.

As the concept of emotional labor became more entrenched in discussions of school leadership, researchers also explored the strategies principals adopt to manage these heightened demands. Many studies highlighted surface acting, in which leaders display outward emotions they do not genuinely feel, and deep acting, where they attempt to inwardly align their true emotions with organizational expectations (Nguyen, Cheung et al., 2022). Some principals reported feeling a profound sense of dissonance when forced to engage in surface acting. In contrast, others found that deep acting, though

cognitively demanding, fostered greater authenticity and trust with stakeholders (Özan & Akın, 2024). Parallel quantitative surveys linked these strategies to outcomes such as reduced morale or increased commitment, depending on how effectively the principals balanced their personal emotional resources with the job demands (Güler et al., 2023).

Throughout the 2000s, researchers called for a more explicit integration of emotional labor concepts into principal training and professional development. Evidence from observational studies, interviews, and diaries indicated that many principals learn to regulate their emotions through trial and error, with minimal institutional guidance or formal education (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020; Wallace, 2010). Scholars argued that neglecting this facet of leadership preparation overlooks a key determinant of principal longevity and efficacy, especially in high-poverty environments where the emotional stakes run high (Huang & Yin, 2024). These arguments ultimately reinforced the need for broader systemic reforms that acknowledge principals' emotional demands, offering tools and support structures to safeguard their mental and physical well-being.

Today, emotional labor remains a critical area of study in educational leadership, reflecting the complex interplay between social practice, emotional demands, and leadership effectiveness. Researchers have consistently found that principals' emotional labor directly influences teacher performance, student achievement, and overall school climate (Noreen et al., 2021; Zvobgo et al., 2022). While some principals harness emotional regulation to strengthen their relationships with stakeholders, others succumb to negative outcomes such as isolation, fatigue, and diminished professional satisfaction. These findings underscore the importance of continuing to integrate emotional labor into leadership development programs, ensuring that school principals, particularly in high-

poverty contexts, are equipped with the insights and skills to manage the emotional dimensions of their roles successfully (Hauseman, 2020; Riforgiate et al., 2022).

Evolving Definitions and Theoretical Frameworks

The initial research into emotional labor examined Hochschild's (1983) concepts of surface and deep acting, which were later broadened by studies analyzing worker emotion management to meet workplace requirements. Research literature has gradually shifted toward more complex discussions that involve broader concepts such as emotion regulation and emotion work, according to Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) and Grandey (2000). Recent studies have moved beyond the basic distinction of fake versus genuine emotions to identify a range of regulatory techniques people use, such as reappraisal, suppression, and compartmentalization (Gross, 1998). The expanded research perspective improves understanding of the diverse emotional processes school leaders experience each day.

Theoretical discussions now incorporate aspects of authenticity, emotional dissonance, and personal well-being to highlight the intricate relationship between leaders' true emotional experiences and their professional obligations (Ngcobo et al., 2022). Leaders who express their emotions genuinely inspire trust among staff and students when their authenticity aligns with institutional objectives (Özan & Akın, 2024). Leaders experience emotional dissonance when they display emotions that conflict with their actual feelings, leading to stress and burnout. Research indicates that school principals who experience significant emotional dissonance typically report reduced well-being and decreased job satisfaction (Noreen et al., 2021). The research demonstrated

how maintaining emotional regulation requires a careful balance between managing emotions and protecting psychological health.

Transformational leadership theory is an essential analytical tool for understanding the changing definitions of emotional labor. Grounded in ideals, ethical standards, and the promotion of positive change within organizations, transformational leadership emphasizes the emotional and motivational aspects of leadership (Carroll, 2023; Northouse, 2018). For principals, especially those serving high-poverty schools, daily interactions with teachers, students, and support staff often require nuanced emotion regulation strategies that extend beyond mere surface or deep acting. The capacity to inspire, demonstrate empathy, and adapt one's emotional expression in ways that meet both relational and institutional needs reflects a more sophisticated understanding of emotional labor, one that is intimately tied to the ethos of transformational leadership's empowerment and ethical responsibility (Duraku & Hoxha, 2021).

Methodologically, scholars have begun to integrate qualitative interviews, longitudinal observations, and mixed methods approaches to capture how principals embody these advanced emotional labor processes within transformational leadership contexts (Beausaert et al., 2023; Öngöre, 2020). This includes exploring how leaders engage in creative insights and empathy-driven decision-making to address the challenges inherent in high-poverty schools (Carroll, 2023). By examining emotional labor not just as a burdensome requirement but as a critical skill that intertwines with transformational leadership practices, researchers are shedding light on how leaders maintain a supportive climate for both staff and students amid resource scarcity and heightened accountability demands.

Through this evolving theoretical lens, emotional labor is recognized as an indispensable part of transformational leadership in school settings, offering a deeper understanding of how principals can respond adaptively to complex emotional demands. Researchers emphasize that while the strategic regulation of emotions can prevent emotional exhaustion and enhance school outcomes, it also risks leaders' well-being if not balanced effectively (Huang & Yin, 2024; Riforgiate et al., 2022). Consequently, new frameworks and practical guidelines are emerging to support principals in developing emotional intelligence, self-care strategies, and professional networks that enable them to remain authentic, resilient, and transformative.

High Poverty School Contexts and Heightened Emotional Demands

Schools with high poverty levels create environments that intensify emotional demands for principals due to systemic inequities and resource shortages. Research shows that principals face heightened emotional labor demands in high-poverty school settings because of systemic inequities, scarce resources, and frequent student crises (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Oakes et al., 2021). Leaders operating in these challenging settings need to manage essential educational objectives while simultaneously addressing urgent socio-emotional needs and dealing with increased stress factors such as food insecurity, community violence, and insufficient health services (Ackerman et al., 2023; Parrett & Budge, 2020). The examination of principals' emotional labor in high-poverty school contexts with increased emotional demands provided the foundation for this dissertation's primary research question. The study examines how principals manage external pressures from their schools and internal stress levels to understand their coping

mechanisms and potential risk of burnout, which helps enhance leadership training and workplace support (R. Wang et al., 2023).

Principals in high-poverty schools face unique challenges because these schools typically lack adequate financial, human, and instructional resources (Oakes et al., 2021). Limited resources increase principals' emotional burden, which requires them to balance multiple challenges, including student performance, staff training, community relations, and infrastructure obstacles (Lochmiller et al., 2024). Studies reveal that principals in high-poverty schools take on numerous roles and face greater job pressure than those in low-poverty schools, resulting in elevated stress levels and higher turnover rates (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Principals working in environments defined by trauma and basic needs shortage face overwhelming emotional demands when they attempt to address their students' social-emotional requirements (Parrett & Budge, 2020). These daily challenges underscore the necessity of more targeted preparation and support for leaders serving high-poverty school communities.

Principals Serving Marginalized and Under-Resourced Communities

Principals working in communities that are both marginalized and under-resourced encounter a multitude of factors that intensify emotional labor, including systemic racism, limited access to quality healthcare, and a lack of reliable social services (American Council on Education, 2021). Studies indicate that such adverse out-of-school conditions frequently overshadow in-school efforts to improve student outcomes, forcing principals to confront barriers such as homelessness and unsafe neighborhoods that lie outside the traditional scope of school leadership (Oakes et al., 2021). External pressures force leaders to confront various challenges, which result in heightened feelings of

isolation and stress, according to Ackerman et al. (2023). Research demonstrates that principals in demanding environments frequently lack access to necessary professional development and mentoring programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022), which hinders their ability to develop emotional resilience skills essential for managing daily crises (F. Wang et al., 2023).

Research over the last twenty years has explored how poverty-related challenges increase the emotional workload for school leaders (Dadaczynski et al., 2020; Liu & Bellibas, 2018). Early inquiries primarily addressed the organizational complexities of high-poverty education. However, more recent investigations highlight the emotional strain on principals forced to mediate conflicts, manage unstable external conditions, and foster teacher capacity in environments where resources are scarce (Torrence & Connelly, 2019; Wieczorek & Theoharis, 2015). Researchers have examined how consistently high levels of emotional labor often lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction, further explaining the elevated turnover rates among high-poverty school principals (Goldring & Taie, 2018). This historical shift in scholarly focus underscores the critical need to reimagine how leadership preparation programs equip principals with emotional management strategies, particularly in under-resourced contexts.

Sustained Emotional Labor and Principal Well-Being: Longitudinal Insights

Research from longitudinal studies demonstrates that managing intense emotions negatively affects the mental and physical well-being of school principals (R. Wang et al., 2023). The 2024 study tracked school leaders for three years and found increased emotional exhaustion levels, particularly among those in urban districts with high poverty rates. The qualitative data gathered from interviews and journals showed that recurring

conflicts with staff, ongoing community crises, and constant student trauma exposure created cumulative stress leading to the development of physical problems, including migraines and hypertension, as well as chronic fatigue over time. The research conducted by Skaalvik (2020) showed that principals who performed intense emotional labor on a near-daily basis experienced burnout symptoms more frequently and left their jobs sooner than those who worked in lower-poverty schools. The results of this longitudinal study demonstrate that emotional labor burdens have immediate impacts on principals' performance and pose risks to their long-term health and well-being.

Preparing Principals to Thrive Amid Complex Emotional Demands

The implications for leadership preparation programs are substantial. The latest research suggests that principal certification courses should integrate emotional intelligence training, conflict resolution strategies, and self-care practices (Hauseman, 2020; R. Wang et al., 2023). Aspiring principals who receive professional development that acknowledges and addresses poverty-related stressors will be better prepared for the emotional challenges of leading schools in marginalized communities (Robson et al., 2021; Steinberg & Krumer-Nevo, 2022). Promising interventions, such as mentorship programs and coaching for emotional resilience, have shown potential to foster principals’ coping skills and reduce feelings of isolation (Lochmiller et al., 2024). Ultimately, focusing on emotional labor within leadership preparation has the dual benefit of promoting principal well-being and strengthening the overall effectiveness of high-poverty schools.

Principal Emotional Labor and Implications for Leadership Preparation

Without training in emotional labor principles, those who work in high-poverty schools face increased risks of burnout, while their job satisfaction and effectiveness decrease (Li et al., 2024; Özan & Akın, 2024). The examination of Principal Emotional Labor and Its Implications for Leadership Preparation stands as a key element in understanding the development of emotional regulation skills these leaders need to address complex challenges in resource-limited environments (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; J. Huppertz et al., 2020). The dissertation investigates whether current leadership programs provide principals with explicit guidance on emotional labor strategies such as deep acting and self-care, and how their preparedness influences their responses to daily emotional demands in high-poverty contexts (Ngcobo et al., 2022; F. Wang et al., 2023).

Scholars have turned their attention to emotional labor, defined as the regulation and management of emotions, to meet expectations in school leadership studies (Özan & Akın, 2024). Principals who work in high-poverty schools commonly experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization because of their demanding roles, which align with research about service workers who need to exhibit regulated emotions (Li et al., 2024). The similarities between school leadership and service industries indicate that emotional labor is an essential concern in education, where principals must interact with diverse stakeholders and remain composed in difficult situations (J. Huppertz et al., 2020; K. Yang & Jang, 2022).

Principals face difficulties because districts typically do not provide official standards to define which emotions should be shown or hidden; therefore, principals must develop their own understanding of these rules (Deliveli & Kiral, 2020). School leaders

experience uncertainty about balancing their personal emotions with their institutions' expectations. The lack of professional development opportunities makes it more difficult for principals to manage emotional labor, as they lack formal training. Roles that demand frequent interactions with people require emotional labor, but without targeted training, professionals face increased stress levels, which can harm their well-being and lead to burnout (Öngöre, 2020; Zvobgo et al., 2022).

Studies in organizational behavior show that controlling emotions influences personal performance while also determining organizational achievement, according to Zvobgo et al. (2022). Principals who manage their emotions well can strengthen communication abilities and build better staff relationships while enhancing the overall school environment. Leadership in high-poverty contexts presents emotional demands due to increased student needs, limited resources, and community pressures that rapidly drain principals' emotional reserves (Ngcobo et al., 2022). The continuous emotional demands transform into physical exhaustion and psychological stress while reducing leaders' ability to lead empathetically, which reveals the connection between emotional work and its mental and physical impacts (Öngöre, 2020).

Research studies identify how emotion management yields positive outcomes while recognizing possible adverse effects of emotional labor. Research indicates that leaders who practice deep acting by matching their genuine emotions to workplace expectations achieve higher organizational commitment and develop better stakeholder connections (Güler et al., 2023)). Conversely, inconsistent or forced emotional displays (surface acting) often escalate stress, alienation, and turnover. Within high-poverty schools, a nuanced understanding of emotional labor can guide principals in balancing

authentic expression with the adaptive strategies necessary to maintain school stability and improve outcomes (Borah et al., 2024).

These insights point to a pressing need for more comprehensive leadership preparation programs that address the multifaceted nature of emotional labor. Aspiring leaders and those already in the field would benefit from training that explores emotion regulation, self-awareness, and the diverse factors influencing emotional dissonance (Sorrentino et al., 2022). By equipping principals with strategies to recognize and manage emotional demands through both surface and deep acting, as well as more holistic techniques such as mindfulness and self-care, educational institutions could enhance principal well-being, support leadership effectiveness, and, ultimately, bolster student success (Alsakarneh et al., 2023; Güler et al., 2023).

Implications for Leadership Preparation

Following Hochschild's groundbreaking 1983 research on emotional labor, the significance of emotional regulation in professional environments has been repeatedly emphasized by researchers. The concept of emotional labor remains underrepresented in educational leadership training, according to Özan and Akın (2024). Initial studies of emotional labor, including Ashforth and Humphrey's (1993) examination of socially desired feelings primarily, investigated service sectors, which resulted in insufficient research about the particular emotional requirements for principals. Research by Morris and Feldman (1986) and Grandey (2000) improved employee emotion management techniques for organizational success but studies show that principal training programs did not incorporate these methods and failed to teach emotion regulation or display rules (Grissom et al., 2021; Özan & Akın, 2024;). Many school leaders started their careers

without adequate preparation for handling complex emotional demands at high-poverty schools where they must navigate nuanced emotional interactions with teachers, parents, and students (D. DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The limited number of historical training programs on emotional labor is partly due to the traditional view that principals operate solely in managerial or instructional roles. Fresh research examining the well-being of principals reveals that the ability to manage emotions significantly affects effective leadership (Li et al., 2024). School leaders at high-poverty institutions often face emotional exhaustion and stress because they do not possess essential emotion regulation skills (Alsakarneh et al., 2023). The lack of institutional guidelines on appropriate emotional conduct increases confusion and amplifies emotional demands on principals, who then face an elevated risk of burnout and depersonalization (Öngöre, 2020; Shrivastava et al., 2024).

New research demonstrates the growing need for professional development programs that support principals' emotional resilience, as they face greater stress and fewer resources in high-poverty environments (J. Huppertz et al., 2020; F. Wang et al., 2023). Research shows that principals experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization when they handle administrative duties alongside substantial socio-emotional demands from students and staff, without adequate support. Research teams recommend implementing training programs that teach stress management skills, mindfulness techniques, and authentic emotional expression to improve principals' leadership efficiency and personal well-being (Alsakarneh et al., 2023; Güler et al., 2023). This dissertation explores the effects of professional development changes on

principals' emotional resilience by studying how these interventions or their absence influence how principals in high-poverty schools manage their emotional labor.

Professional development priorities shifted toward enhancing principals' emotional resilience and coping skills, as reported by Scott et al. (2020). Research in education and organizational psychology indicates that surface acting increases stress among principals required to express emotions that differ from their actual feelings (Borah et al., 2024). Educational organizations and districts have begun implementing deep acting training for leaders to lessen emotional dissonance by aligning personal emotions with required professional expressions, as shown in the research of Güler et al. (2023) and H. Wang et al. (2021). Research shows that effective management of genuine emotional expressions helps create better school environments while improving teacher and student performance (Kang & Jang, 2022; H. Kim & Leach, 2021).

Current professional development workshops are expanding to include modules on stress management and reflective practices, while also focusing on creating supportive peer networks (Riforgiate et al., 2022). Through journaling, mindfulness exercises, and structured discussion groups, principals learn to identify emotional triggers, allowing them to adjust their coping strategies (Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020). Schools in economically disadvantaged areas that face overlapping social challenges have gained significant advantages through these initiatives, as principals learn to anticipate emotional labor challenges and develop appropriate responses (Esmaeilikia & Groth, 2022). When educational leaders receive these tools, they develop the capacity to preserve their well-being and sustain job satisfaction, and they can also create an educational environment in which student achievement improves (Fosco, 2022).

Current best practices indicate that emotional intelligence (EI) and mentorship are essential elements in training principals to manage emotional labor effectively (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023). The components of emotional intelligence training, which are self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, correspond strongly with Hochschild's (1983) foundational concept of emotional display management. Both new and veteran principals benefit significantly from this training, as it enables them to identify their use of surface or deep acting techniques and to handle related stressors more effectively (Baridam & Oburu, 2020; Zapf et al., 2021).

Mentorship programs that focus on managing emotional labor have become increasingly common. The structured mentorship connection between new and experienced leaders enables safe dialogue about the emotional challenges of leadership (D. DeMatthews et al., 2021). New leaders who engage in regular check-ins develop resilience and learn effective coping techniques through cognitive reappraisal and the strategic use of social support (Gómez-Leal et al., 2021). Mentors who share their personal experiences handling emotional demands demonstrate effective practices and show how emotional intelligence supports organizational commitment and improves staff collaboration and student well-being (Levin, Scott et al., 2020).

These trends demonstrate a continuing transformation in leadership preparation, in which emotional labor now forms an essential element of the principal's duties, according to Grandey and Gabriel (2015). Traditional principal training programs neglected emotional labor, but new initiatives now prepare leaders to manage stress while staying true to themselves (F. Yang & Jang, 2022). Studies show that principals who exhibit strong emotional intelligence skills build trust more effectively, create supportive

school environments, and successfully implement policy transformations, particularly in high-poverty areas with limited resources (Güler et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2020).

Through the inclusion of emotional labor content in official training programs policymakers as well as district administrators can help prepare future school leaders to succeed in instructional leadership while maintaining their personal well-being (A. V. Huppertz et al., 2020). This strategy helps reduce employee turnover, enhance school performance, and improve teacher satisfaction and student achievement (Baridam & Oburu, 2020). The growth of empirical studies will shape best practices for emotional intelligence training and mentorship to help educational stakeholders develop leaders who navigate the complexities of emotional labor while preserving their integrity (Özan & Akın, 2024).

School leaders in under-resourced settings face continuous emotional challenges due to structural inequities combined with traumatic external conditions and internal organizational requirements. Research shows that, through historical analysis, poverty-related pressures magnify emotional labor and shape principals' mental and physical health over time (Dadaczynski et al., 2020). Research following school leaders over time indicates the need for durable support structures, including professional growth opportunities and mentoring, to maintain their health and effectiveness in their positions (Skaalvik, 2023; F. Wang et al., 2023;). Enhancing leadership training to address these challenges benefits principals and creates academic and social opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds.

Surface Acting and Deep Acting

Principals employ surface acting and deep acting as fundamental methods for managing their emotions, which constitutes a vital aspect of emotional labor (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Principals who manage high-poverty schools face the critical decision between surface acting and deep acting because these institutions present amplified challenges and limited resources (Güler et al., 2023; Özan & Akın, 2024). When individuals engage in surface acting by hiding or feigning their real expressions, they often face escalating stress and develop inauthentic relationships over time (Li et al., 2024; J. Yang et al., 2021). Unlike surface acting, principals must engage in deep acting by synchronizing their emotions with expected outward expressions, which creates authentic connections but can lead to emotional burnout in high-pressure situations (Alsakarneh et al., 2023; A. V. Huppertz et al., 2020). Research into principals' methods of managing different emotional approaches provides essential insight into their emotional workload and how it influences their leadership ability, as well as their well-being and performance in low-income schools (Borah et al., 2024; F. Wang & Pollock, 2020).

The foundational theories of emotional labor reveal that employees regularly conceal or display emotions that do not align with their true feelings to meet workplace expectations (Özan & Akın, 2024). Principals of high-poverty schools regularly face challenges controlling their emotional responses during interactions with staff members, students, and community stakeholders in their leadership roles. Scholars commonly distinguish between two primary strategies: surface acting, which focuses on external expression adjustments, and deep acting, which involves changes in internal emotional

states to conform with organizational standards (Alsakarneh et al., 2023). While these two strategies share the goal of satisfying "display rules," they differ significantly in their mechanisms and potential outcomes (Baridam & Oburu, 2020; Borah et al., 2024).

Recent empirical studies have used mixed-method designs to capture the nuances of surface and deep acting among principals. In one quantitative study, Li et al. (2024) administered the Emotional Labor Scale to 200 school administrators, assessing the frequency of both surface and deep-acting behaviors. Qualitative follow-up interviews provided context about how situational stressors, such as budget cuts and community pressures, shaped principals' decisions to engage in surface or deep acting. Their findings indicated that surface acting often led to short-term conflict avoidance and elevated stress, whereas deep acting led to more genuine interactions but risked emotional exhaustion when job demands were prolonged or intense.

There are benefits and drawbacks to each strategy. Surface acting, although sometimes effective at quickly defusing tense situations, often leads to inauthenticity and greater mental strain (J. Yang et al., 2021). Participants in A. V. Huppertz et al.'s (2020) study described feeling "drained" and "disconnected" after prolonged surface acting, highlighting how continuously masking genuine emotions can erode well-being. In contrast, deep acting involves attempting to feel the emotions one displays, such as empathy or optimism (Nguyen, Besson et al., 2022). This approach has been linked to positive outcomes such as enhanced job satisfaction and a sense of authenticity (Gabriel et al., 2020). It also requires a high degree of emotional energy. In high-poverty schools, where daily stressors are especially demanding, principals often reported finding deep

acting beneficial for relationship building but also “exhausting” when no systematic support, such as counseling or mentorship, was available (Bartels et al., 2022).

Studies have revealed an influence on principal well-being and performance. Field studies focusing on principal leadership in challenging contexts reveal that deep acting correlates with more favorable long-term consequences such as greater collaboration, trust, and teacher retention (Scott et al., 2020). Principals reported using deep acting to foster a sense of genuine support for teachers and staff, an approach that often-facilitated open communication and increased morale (Gabriel et al., 2020). Conversely, surface acting was associated with negative affective experiences, including burnout, emotional dissonance, and psychological strain (Ngcobo et al., 2022). Consequently, participants suggested that while surface acting might help avert immediate conflicts, it frequently damaged principals’ sense of authenticity over time, potentially affecting decision-making and undermining relationships with key stakeholders (J. Huppertz et al., 2020).

There are implications for high-poverty schools and support structures. Given the evidence that both strategies exert unique psychological tolls, research increasingly calls for organizational interventions that bolster principals’ capacity to manage emotional labor (Brunetto et al., 2022; Gabriel et al., 2023). Mentorship programs, emotional intelligence training, and structured peer-support groups have shown promise in helping principals recognize when to deploy surface versus deep acting effectively (Bindl et al., 2022). For instance, a longitudinal study involving 50 newly appointed principals found that participants receiving eight weeks of emotional resilience coaching were more likely to practice deep acting in ways that felt authentic and less draining (Alabak et al., 2020).

These interventions highlight a growing consensus that school districts, especially those serving high-poverty communities, must invest in professional development and policies that reduce excessive surface acting and promote healthy, adaptive approaches to deep acting (Bartels et al., 2022).

Overall, the choice to engage in surface or deep acting has critical implications for both principals' emotional well-being and the broader school climate. While deep acting generally aligns with more positive outcomes, it remains a demanding strategy that can result in emotional fatigue if not supported by organizational structures. Conversely, surface acting may provide short-term conflict avoidance but often diminishes leaders' authenticity and can precipitate burnout. Understanding and applying these strategies contextually is thus paramount for principals committed to leading effectively in high-poverty school environments (Ngcobo et al., 2022; Nguyen, Besson et al., 2022).

Summary of the Review of Literature

In reviewing the existing literature on principals leading high-poverty schools, three major themes emerge. First, research consistently highlights how poverty-related challenges such as trauma, resource shortages, and systemic inequities amplify the emotional labor required of school leaders (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Oakes et al., 2021). Principals in these settings must continually balance instructional leadership with extensive conflict resolution, community relations, and advocacy for student well-being. Second, scholarship on emotional labor has evolved from focusing on service roles to exploring how principals navigate daily emotional demands through surface acting and deep acting (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Studies show that while deep acting may foster authenticity and resilience, both strategies, if sustained without support, can lead to

burnout, compromised well-being, and higher turnover (Brown, 2020; J. Huppertz et al., 2020).

Third, the review of the literature underscores the need to integrate concepts of emotional labor into principal preparation and professional development. A growing body of work points to emotional intelligence training, mentoring, and self-care strategies as essential for sustaining principal performance, especially in marginalized communities (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023; F. Wang & Pollock, 2020). Longitudinal data further show that failing to address these emotional demands contributes to declines in mental and physical health over time (Skaalvik, 2023; H. Wang et al., 2021). Thus, future research and practice should emphasize developing systematic supports for principals in high-poverty schools, ensuring that the emotional intensity of their roles does not hinder their capacity to lead effectively and to build equitable educational environments.

Problem Statement

It is not known how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor. This study focused on principals who manage high-poverty elementary schools. The research study's target group consists of principals who direct high-poverty schools in the Midwest United States.

It is essential to examine how principals of high-poverty elementary schools articulate their emotional labor, as they operate in environments that require them to manage significant emotional regulation and conflict resolution, as well as to distribute resources amid continuous stressors. Stakeholders, including district administrators and policymakers, cannot create effective support interventions for principals without understanding their personal experiences. Understanding how principals manage

emotional labor provides insight into their ability to maintain a positive school climate despite facing daily pressures in high-poverty schools with limited resources and heightened community challenges. Studying and documenting the emotional challenges faced by principals enables educational professionals and scholars to identify effective coping mechanisms and support networks that enhance leadership performance, reduce staff turnover, and improve student outcomes in underserved areas.

Principals need to manage complex relationships with teachers, parents, students, and external stakeholders because school leadership requires intensive social interaction (Wieczorek & Theoharis, 2015). Principals are experiencing emotionally intense work at both the individual and collective levels across the principalship (McKay et al., 2024). The population for this study will consist of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest. High-poverty schools are defined as schools with a student population of 75% or more eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Hussar et al., 2020). Currently, there is a looming shortage of people willing to serve as principals in high-poverty schools, and they deal with an array of emotions, both their own and those of others (McKay et al., 2024). The work of principals is emotionally intense, with direct consequences for their health, well-being, and personal relationships (McKay et al., 2024). Principal leadership matters more in high-poverty schools because students are less likely to receive a sound primary education, and these schools have less access to high-quality resources (Oakes et al., 2021), creating challenges that the principals leading them must face. The dilemmas encountered in high-poverty schools force principals to deal with unexpected events, be resourceful, solve problems while remaining calm, and handle whatever comes their way (Carroll, 2023).

Summary

Principals lead human-service institutions, which require them to manage multiple dimensions of organizational life and complete job functions while handling personal dilemmas and social issues that accompany supporting students, teachers, families, and staff members (D. DeMatthews et al., 2021; D. E. DeMatthews et al., 2023). This summary is a synthesized overview of the key strategic points emerging from the literature on principals leading high-poverty schools and their emotional labor. The summary of Chapter 2 presented a synthesis that highlights the areas that will shape and guide the present research. The research underscores that high-poverty schools accentuate the emotional demands placed on principals (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Oakes et al., 2021). Leaders in these contexts balance pressing academic goals with significant socio-emotional needs arising from systemic inequities and limited resources (Parrett & Budge, 2020). This combination produces heightened stress and increases turnover, necessitating a more nuanced understanding of principals' day-to-day emotional labor. Emotions are essential to principals' daily operation of schools and is an invisible part of their job that often leads to exhaustion and burnout (Felt, 2003; Skaalvik, 2023). High-poverty schools can have a substantial positive impact on students' lives. However, they face complex challenges, including low student achievement, low attendance, less experienced teachers (Beckett, 2021), and a student population impacted by poverty (Ross, 2023).

In addition to leading high-poverty schools, principals must also manage relationships with all stakeholders, which is another challenge (Fosco, 2022; Tintoré et al., 2022). Studies on *transformational leadership* illustrate that effective principals frequently demonstrate empathy, resilience, and the ability to inspire other competencies

tightly interwoven with emotional labor (Carroll, 2023; Northouse, 2018). In under-resourced and high-poverty environments, managing emotional demands involves more than following display rules; it includes ethical considerations, sustaining morale, and responding to the cultural and socio-emotional complexities encountered in marginalized communities (Khalifa et al., 2016; F. Wang & Pollock, 2020). This increased accountability requires principals to handle the emotional demands and manage the emotional side of leadership, which is vital to their leadership performance, especially when principals are encountering rapid change in schools (Chen & Guo, 2020). As a response to their leadership in high-poverty schools, principals may experience emotional labor.

According to research, emotional labor involves regulating emotions in interpersonal interactions at work to accomplish organizational goals (Ashtar et al., 2021; Huang & Yin, 2024). Two emotional labor strategies often used are surface acting and deep acting (Huang & Yin, 2024). Initially conceived around *surface acting* and *deep acting* in service-sector roles (Hochschild, 1983), emotional labor has since expanded to encompass the relational, ethical, and managerial demands specific to principals (Elomaa, 2023; Grandey, 2000). The literature reveals that while deep acting promotes authenticity and can bolster trust, it also poses risks of emotional fatigue if not supported by organizational structures (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; A. V. Huppertz et al., 2020). Conversely, surface acting may lead to inauthentic interactions and burnout, highlighting the delicate balance leaders must strike in regulating emotions (Brown, 2020; Li et al., 2024). Multiple longitudinal studies reveal that sustained emotional labor in high-poverty schools can exact a steep toll on principals' mental and physical health (Skaalvik, 2023;

F. Wang et al., 2023). Symptoms of stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction have long-term consequences for leadership effectiveness and stability, underscoring the urgency to examine how principals cope with emotional demands over time (Hochschild, 1983).

A recurring theme in the literature is the inadequacy of professional development programs in addressing principals' emotional labor (D. DeMatthews et al., 2021; Özan & Akın, 2024). Emerging research advocates for specialized training in emotional regulation, mindfulness, mentorship, and self-care strategies (Güler et al., 2023; Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020). By incorporating concepts of emotional labor into formal curricula and ongoing professional development, educational leaders may enhance principals' well-being and thereby strengthen school outcomes, especially in high-poverty settings (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023).

It is not known how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor, and this study describes the emotional labor of such principals. By focusing on the problem, this research aims to contribute a deeper understanding of how principals in high-poverty schools manage their emotional labor and, in turn, inform leadership preparation and support systems that can enhance principal efficacy and well-being. The concepts of emotional labor, surface and deep acting, as well as emotional intelligence, provide a theoretical lens through which to investigate RQ 1: How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor? Emotional labor offers a broad framework for understanding the regulation and expression of emotions in professional settings, while surface and deep acting illuminate the specific strategies principals might employ to either mask their true feelings or

authentically align their emotions with organizational expectations (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Emotional intelligence, encompassing self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, further explains how principals navigate the socio-emotional complexities inherent in under-resourced environments (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023). By examining the interplay between these constructs, the researcher aimed to reveal how leaders in high-poverty schools conceptualize, articulate, and manage their emotional experiences in day-to-day leadership.

The problem statement, that it is not known how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor, arises from a growing awareness in the literature that high-poverty contexts place extraordinary emotional and relational demands on school leaders (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Oakes et al., 2021). Although existing scholarship shows that principals in these settings face increased risk of burnout, challenges with staff morale, and higher turnover rates, few studies capture the lived experiences of these leaders as they describe, interpret, and navigate their own emotional labor (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; F. Wang et al., 2023). This gap in understanding underscores the need for research that unpacks how principals themselves perceive and manage their emotional work. Clarifying their strategies and insights will not only advance academic discourse but also guide leadership preparation programs and policy interventions to sustain effective leadership in under-resourced schools.

Chapter 2 presented a review of the literature that supports the study's background, identifies the problem space, outlines the theoretical foundations, and explains how principals in high-poverty schools describe their emotional labor. Building on these insights, Chapter 3 detailed the methodology for this qualitative descriptive

study, including the rationale for selecting this approach in alignment with the study's phenomenon and research questions. The chapter described the population and sample selection procedures, data sources, methods to ensure data trustworthiness, and the processes for data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations, along with assumptions and limitations that may affect the study, will also be discussed. Finally, Chapter 3 will conclude with a summary that encapsulates the methodological design and its relevance to investigating principals' emotional labor in high-poverty school contexts.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This qualitative descriptive study was designed to explore how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor. There appears to be a gap in research on whether school administrators have rules that guide their emotions in their relationships with a variety of stakeholders in schools, how they choose to display appropriate emotions, how they experience emotional labor, and how these principals experience these encounters. The demands placed on educational leaders, stemming from the perception that they must carry all the burdens of management, make their job more complex and may result in feelings of isolation (Beausaert et al., 2023). For this study, data will be gathered to explain how principals interact with others and their experiences of emotional labor as a result of these interactions. Principals must interact with education authorities and policymakers, teachers, students, families, the community, and society, often facing problems and challenges (Tintoré et al., 2022).

This chapter describes the study's method, design, problem statement, research questions, and sample size. The landscape of educational leadership in the 21st century provides a range of emotional challenges that are rarely acknowledged or appreciated, thus requiring principals to develop a well-rounded sense of self, trusting in one's feelings, intuition, imagination, and resourcefulness, which is thought to be a primary concern considering the current state of schooling and leadership (Ackerman et al., 2023). Principals described their emotional labor in this research study, and data will be synthesized to understand the role of emotional labor among school leaders in high-poverty schools. By allowing principals, in their natural setting, to describe their

emotional labor while leading high-poverty schools, a qualitative descriptive design will be used to expand understanding by transferring findings from one context to another (Stahl & King, 2020). Hence, this study explored the emotional labor of principals who lead non-high-poverty elementary schools. The research question that will guide this qualitative research study:

RQ1: How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?

Chapter 3 discussed the methodological approach necessary to describe the emotional labor of principals leading high-poverty schools. Chapter 3 discussed the research design, target population, study sample, instruments, data sources, ethical considerations, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 3 also concluded with a summary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor. The management of emotional situations by school principals takes place under the influence of school management procedures, teacher guidance approaches, stakeholder relationships dynamics, broader school community communications, and their schools' emotional climate (Beausaert et al., 2016; Hauseman, 2020; O'Connor, 2006; Skaalvik, 2023). The study employed convenience sampling to select principals who could provide detailed, contextual insights into their experiences, as guided by its research question and problem statement. The selected principals were interviewed individually for 60 to 90 minutes. Participants recounted their emotional labor through face-to-face interviews, phone conversations, or virtual meetings within

their work settings. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed all spoken words exactly as they were produced and applied systematic coding using qualitative descriptive methods, employing iterative thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes in how participants express and understand their emotional labor. The methodology keeps the findings anchored in the principals' own expressions and meets the study's descriptive objectives by providing detailed insight into the emotional labor required to lead elementary schools in high-poverty areas.

Phenomenon and Research Questions

Educational leadership exposes principals to numerous emotional challenges that remain unrecognized yet demand that they cultivate self-awareness while managing school leadership in impoverished areas. This qualitative descriptive study investigated the way principals from high-poverty elementary schools express their emotional labor (Ackerman et al., 2023). The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor. I added the location because that is required in the purpose statement. The following research question will guide this study:

RQ1. How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?

Studies show that school leadership requires emotional intensity, which significantly affects principals' health and personal lives (McKay et al., 2024). School principals need to handle numerous emotionally demanding tasks, including school administration, teacher support, stakeholder engagement, and interaction with the overall school community (Beausaert et al., 2016; Hauseman, 2020). High-poverty school

leadership requires principals to handle extensive social interactions by mediating relationships among teachers, students, parents, and external stakeholders (Wieczorek & Theoharis, 2015). Leadership roles require an understanding of emotional labor because they demand substantial emotional management.

School leadership emotional labor entails multiple emotion regulation techniques, including surface acting and deep acting as its primary methods (Biramo & Wang, 2024). Surface acting requires individuals to change their external emotional expressions while maintaining their actual internal emotions, which often leads to emotional burnout and exhaustion, according to Gabriel et al. (2020). Deep acting involves adjusting internal emotions to match expected emotional displays, which supports authentic leadership but can lead to cognitive and emotional fatigue, according to Nguyen, Besson et al. (2022). This research examined the strategies of surface and deep acting employed by principals who face the emotional challenges of leading high-poverty schools, as these strategies affect burnout and job satisfaction (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; A. V. Huppertz et al., 2020).

This qualitative descriptive study explored how principals naturally describe their emotional labor, including how they employed surface and deep acting within their leadership roles. This research diverges from quantitative methods, which rely on fixed measurement tools, by allowing participants to describe their emotional labor experiences in their own words. The qualitative descriptive approach effectively captured principals' detailed personal experiences of emotional labor within their schools, as demonstrated by Sandelowski (2000).

Thematic analysis identified instances in which principals described behaviors indicative of surface acting (hiding true emotions and displaying prescribed emotions) and deep acting (mentally adjusting to feel required emotions authentically). Previous qualitative research supports this approach, as it has shown that narrative descriptions can identify emotional regulation patterns missed by standardized tools (Locke et al., 2020; Sandelowski, 2000). Participants used semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences of emotional labor and to explain their emotion-management techniques in interactions with teachers, students, parents, and district administrators. The analysis of responses identified themes concerning emotional regulation, emotional dissonance, coping mechanisms, and leadership challenges in high-poverty schools, while providing practical examples of surface and deep acting.

The research will focus on elementary school principals managing high-poverty schools, defined as those with 75% or more of their student population qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, according to the National Center for Education Statistics' 2024 data. Each semi-structured interview during data collection will be conducted in person, via Zoom, or by phone, with audio recordings to ensure accuracy. The inclusion criteria require that participants be principals currently leading high-poverty elementary schools in three school districts in the Midwest region of the United States.

The target population consists of principals from three school districts with varying numbers of high-poverty elementary schools:

- The first school district is the largest in its state, with 74 high-poverty elementary schools. The 74 high-poverty schools are assigned to one of six regions. Region three has nine of the highest impoverished high-poverty elementary schools.

- The second school district is the sixth largest in its state, with eight high-poverty elementary schools. The eight high-poverty schools will be asked to participate in the study.
- The third school district is the 28th largest in its state, with three high-poverty elementary schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Potential participants were invited to participate in the study utilizing a recruitment flyer. The potential participants can choose to self-select into the study based on interest, availability, and meeting inclusion criteria. The recruitment flyer was distributed to 20 schools via a convenience sample, with inclusion criteria to ensure representation from schools with varying levels of poverty intensity (76%–100% FRPL).

A research journal and audio recordings supported data collection during each interview. After the interviews, transcriptions were reviewed, and participants will have the opportunity to verify their responses for accuracy. Data analysis followed a systematic coding process, where responses were categorized based on common themes and patterns related to emotional labor.

- Open coding will be used to identify keywords, concepts, and initial themes (Locke et al., 2020).
- Selective coding will categorize emerging themes that describe emotional labor strategies and their impact on leadership experiences.
- Thematic analysis will capture patterns in how principals describe surface acting, deep acting, and the emotional toll of leading high-poverty schools.

This approach ensured that data analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences, aligning with the study's descriptive goals.

Approval from school districts and principals will be required before beginning the research. Site permission was obtained from three school districts in the Midwest, followed by approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Grand Canyon University. The IRB process included an application, approval from the dissertation

chair, letters of permission, interview protocols, and consent forms. Once approval was granted, principals were contacted via email with a description of the study, requesting voluntary participation. Participants signed informed consent forms, which will include the following key elements:

- Confidentiality: Participants' identities will remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.
- Data security: All interview recordings, transcriptions, and analysis documents were stored on a password-protected device and a secure Google Drive file.
- Data access: Only the researcher, dissertation chair, committee members, IRB representatives, and peer reviewers will have access to study data.
- Right to withdraw: Participants may choose to exit the study at any time, without any consequences.

The study followed the ethical principles outlined in The Belmont Report (Miracle, 2016) ethical principles:

1. Respect for Persons – Participants received respect as autonomous people through obtaining their informed consent before conducting any data collection.
2. Beneficence – The study protects participants from harm by preserving confidentiality and preventing psychological distress.
3. Justice – Justice requires equitable recruitment of participants to avoid disproportionate risk distribution and prevent exclusion from benefits across all demographic groups.

Participants may have experienced emotional distress when discussing their stressful or emotionally challenging life events. The study reduced risk by informing participants that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time. Confidentiality will be protected through private interview settings and the exclusion of personally identifiable information in the final analysis.

The study investigated how principals from high-poverty elementary schools articulate their emotional labor practices through surface acting and deep acting strategies

for emotion regulation. By conducting semi-structured interviews followed by thematic analysis, researchers discovered the emotional challenges faced by leaders in schools with limited resources. Research results enhanced understanding of key emotion management techniques, detailed the effects of emotional labor on well-being, and indicated a need for professional development focused on emotional resilience for leaders in low-income school settings.

Rationale for a Qualitative Methodology

This study used qualitative research methodology to explore how principals describe their emotional labor while leading high-poverty elementary schools. Qualitative research is a type of naturalistic inquiry that deals with non-numerical data (Nassaji, 2020). For this research study, elementary school principals will be interviewed. Without using numerical data, they will provide data to understand their emotional labor as leaders in high-poverty schools. Qualitative research reflects both the depth and intricacy of the historical beliefs and applied perspectives that shape a study's approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, principals described their own experiences from interviews to be included in the research.

In qualitative research, data is collected through qualitative data collection tools such as interviews, field notes, diaries, and observations and is analyzed qualitatively (Nassaji, 2020). In qualitative research, researchers use a multitude of methodological approaches that draw on a variety of analytical strategies to explore a phenomenon from a distinct vantage point, according to LaDonna et al. (2021). In this research study, semi-structured interview questions, a journal for notetaking, and audio recordings of each interview participant's responses was part of the study's data collection. Researchers can

learn a lot from other people's experiences, thus justifying using qualitative methods for this research study due to qualitative research being uniquely positioned to provide researchers with process-based, narrated, storied data that is more closely related to the human experience (Stahl & King, 2020). In qualitative research, reality is constructed, and there is the less explicit goal of trustworthiness, allowing the reader to interpret the written work and have confidence in final report (Stahl & King, 2020).

A quantitative method was not used for this study. The intent of quantitative research is to pursue objectivity by minimizing the researcher on the research process, and it does not emphasize the researcher's active role or interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With qualitative methods, the researcher's role is active engagement in the process. Quantitative research deals with numbers and all things that are measurable systematically to investigate phenomena and their relationship (Kandel, 2020). Quantitative research relies on natural science methods, which produce numerical data and hard facts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research does not depend on natural sciences and produces numerical data that can be measured with standardized instruments. This research study will not conduct any experiments to determine the research findings. Quantitative research may involve experiments, control groups, blind or double-blind studies, and measurement instruments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this qualitative research study, no experiments will be conducted, nor will there be controlled groups and instruments used for measurement. Quantitative research relies on observed or measured data to examine questions about a sample population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this qualitative study, the research will rely on the responses from interviews of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools for data gathering.

Qualitative research is needed for this study in order to capture the depth of the participant experiences. There are several empirical studies that focus on the emotional difficulties principals face, particularly in high-poverty school settings. Further, reinforcing the need for qualitative approaches to capture the depth of their experiences. Chen (2020) examined emotional labor among school leaders and found that principals routinely hide or try to adjust emotions to meet professional expectations with limited to no support. In another study, Chen et al. (2021) examined the well-being of education leaders and found consistent behaviors that were associated with various job demands and resources. Likewise, Berkovich and Eyal (2015) determined that principals engage in both surface and deep acting to align with role expectations. They further found that the process was shaped by contextual factors linked to school climate and conditions of poverty. These studies underscore that emotional labor is not a uniform experience, but rather one that is deeply influenced by personal, traditional, and organizational dynamics. Quantitative methods can be useful in identifying patterns, but they do not capture the context of these emotional experiences. A qualitative descriptive design provides a process for exploring the principals' voices while allowing the researcher to gather detailed narratives that reflect the emotional dialogs, coping approaches, and meaning-making processes unique to leaders in under-served schools.

Rationale for Research Design

A qualitative descriptive design was selected for this study as it supports data collection to explore how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor. This study contained no pre-selected variables, no manipulation of variables, and no prior commitment to a theoretical view of a target phenomenon;

therefore, it could be a descriptive study (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Qualitative descriptive research aims to describe the experiences described by research participants in easily understood language (Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005) and describe individuals, events, or conditions by studying them in nature (Houser, 2019).

Several qualitative research designs were considered for this study, but ultimately not selected because they did not align with the purpose of this research. Phenomenology was not selected because it focuses on uncovering the essence of lived experiences by relating the researcher's own assumptions to arrive at a universal meaning (Moustakas, 1994). While emotional labor is a lived experience, the goal of this study is not to extract a singular essence, but rather to present a contextualized description of how principals in high-poverty schools articulate their emotional experiences. Grounded theory was also not appropriate for this study because the focus was not on generating a new theoretical framework. Ethnography involves long-term immersion in a cultural group and was not used since the study does not seek to interpret a shared culture. Case study design was considered but not used because it extends beyond the scope of this study's focus on individual narratives across multiple sites.

In this study, principals of high-poverty elementary schools will describe their emotional labor to better understand it through their experiences. Using the qualitative descriptive design moves beyond a literal description of the data and attempts to interpret the findings without straying too far from that description (Bradshaw et al., 2017). In the descriptive design, the phenomena will only be described (Siedlecki, 2020). In the qualitative description, the phenomenon of interest is explored with research participants using a particular conceptual framework (Parse, 2001), and the research questions

address the meaning of the experience. The descriptive design explores the characteristics of a population to identify the problem within the unit, an organization, or a population by looking at variations in characteristics or practices (Siedlecki, 2020).

The population included principals of elementary schools, and the sample will be comprised of principals who lead high-poverty schools in the Midwest. In addition, the research participants are a convenience sample with knowledge and experience of the phenomenon being researched (Bradshaw et al., 2017). A qualitative descriptive research design offers the opportunity to obtain detailed descriptions of a phenomenon that others may know little about (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Thus, a qualitative descriptive design was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to provide an accurate account of participants' perspectives, directly addressing the research question with minimal interpretative complexity. This approach facilitates the collection of detailed data through open-ended interviews and allows the findings to be presented in a way that is accessible and easily understood by practitioners and policymakers, which is essential for informing leadership preparation and professional development strategies in high-poverty school contexts (H. Kim et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2000).

Population and Sample Selection

The general population for this descriptive study was school principals in the Midwest United States. The research sites were selected based on participants' willingness and the researcher's proximity to the sites. The participants were self-selected from elementary schools labeled as high-poverty according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024) definition. There are a total of 74 elementary schools; 62 of them are classified as high-poverty, with a student population of 75% or higher eligible

for free or reduced lunch (FRPL). The invite was sent only to the principals leading one of the 20 identified schools.

The target population for this study consisted of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in three Midwest school districts. Principals for this study were selected via convenience sampling and will describe their emotional labor while leading high-poverty elementary schools. For this research study, data were provided by principals of elementary schools classified as high-poverty schools, based on a student population of 75% or higher eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024). Each school district was located in a separate city in the Midwest. Table 3 provides details about the high-poverty K-5 elementary schools selected for this study.

Table 3

K-5 Elementary High Poverty Schools

School Districts	K-5 Elementary Schools	High Poverty	Identified for Study
District 1 (Schools are separated into regions)	51	51	9
	Region 1	12	0
	Region 2	9	0
	Region 3	9	9
	Region 4	7	0
	Region 5	12	0
	Region 6	2	0
District 2	16	8	8
District 3	7	3	3
Total	74	62	20

There were 74 K-12 elementary schools in Midwest school districts that are conveniently located near the researcher. Of the 74 K-12 elementary schools identified as high-poverty, 62 were based on the National Center for Education Statistics (2024). Due to District 1 restrictions for conducting research across regions, only one region was

identified for the study. District 1 has 51 K-12 high-poverty elementary schools. Each school is assigned to a region based on location within the district. Access was granted to conduct research only in Region 3. In Region 3, there are 9 high-poverty K-12 elementary schools. In District 2, there are 16 K-12 elementary schools, eight of which are identified as high-poverty schools. In District 3, there are seven K-12 elementary schools, of which, three are identified as high-poverty schools. Of the identified and available schools, there are 20 K-12 high-poverty elementary schools. Principals from high-poverty elementary schools were selected via convenience sampling and asked to describe their emotional labor as principals. Of the three districts used for site authorization, the principals who participated led schools with 75% to 100% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Study Sample and Sampling Strategy

A convenience sample with clear inclusion criteria was used for this research study. In convenience sampling, a non-probability method, participants are selected based on their availability and accessibility, while specific criteria ensure that only those with relevant experiences are included (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Sharif, 2020). For this study, the target population consisted of principals serving high-poverty elementary schools in three districts in the midwestern United States, where high poverty is defined as having at least 75% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Only principals from these elementary schools were invited to participate, ensuring that the data collected reflects their in-depth knowledge of emotional labor in their unique leadership context. Recruitment will begin

by obtaining site authorization from district and/or region leaders, followed by direct outreach to the 20 principals of the identified elementary schools (Appendix B). This method proved highly effective for qualitative research because it focused on in-depth, detailed data rather than random sampling to comprehensively study the emotional labor of school leaders (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Qualitative research will utilize a small convenience sample with specific inclusion criteria to achieve a deep understanding rather than wide coverage (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Palinkas et al., 2015). This research identified principals from high-poverty elementary schools in Midwest United States by considering their availability and their firsthand experiences with emotional labor to include only those who fulfill determined criteria, specifically, those principals having led or currently leading high-poverty schools. A sample size of 10 to 15 participants was anticipated, as this range is expected to yield rich, detailed insights into their lived experiences with emotional labor (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Palinkas et al., 2015). Recruitment began by obtaining site authorization from district leaders or superintendents, after which eligible principals were be directly invited to participate. This sampling strategy is designed to produce information-rich cases that will provide comprehensive insights into how these principals describe and manage their emotional labor, thereby enhancing the study's overall rigor and trustworthiness.

Recruiting Plan and Site Authorization

For this study, site authorization was obtained from three different school districts in the Midwest region of the United States. Emails were sent to obtain site authorization. One site authorization request was sent directly to the Superintendent of District 3 to

request permission to conduct research with three principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the district. An attachment (Appendix B) was included in the email to briefly describe the research study, the researcher, and contact information. In Districts 1 and 2, emails were sent to the Superintendent's designee and to departments with a detailed description of the study's recruiting plan. Both districts required forms to be completed and submitted to the departments that approve site authorization requests. In District 2, eight schools were identified as high-poverty elementary schools, with between 75% and 92% of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch. In District 1, there are 51 K-12 elementary schools, all of which are high-poverty. After submitting the site authorization forms, which included the research topic, problem statement, list of high-poverty schools in the district, research question, and interview questions, both Districts 1 and 2 approved the site authorization for research to be conducted with principals in the school districts (Appendix B). However, a verbal conversation with the testing director granted immediate access to conduct research in Region 3, only in District 1. After obtaining approval from the three districts, an introductory email was sent to the 20 principals, inviting them to volunteer for interviews for the research study. The introductory email included the research topic, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, and a link to the Google Calendar for principals to sign up for an interview time.

For data gathering, the principals who lead high-poverty schools in the Midwest will be interviewed. Interviews were conducted via telephone, Zoom, or in person and will be audio recorded. Principals who volunteered to participate in the interviews were required to serve as school leaders in high-poverty elementary schools, and the interviews

were scheduled to last no more than 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted at an agreed-upon time. For confidentiality, data collected from the interviews were stored in the researcher's password-protected Google Drive, and the documents were password-protected, with all identifiable information removed from the transcripts.

For this research study, the primary recruiting plan "A" was to recruit principals leading high-poverty elementary schools in a state in the Midwest of the United States from three different school districts. The population of high-poverty elementary schools varied in the three districts, thus limiting the number of potential principal participants due to the research study aiming to explore the emotional labor of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools. The first district is the smallest of the three districts selected, located in a state in the Midwest, with seven elementary schools and three schools meeting the classification of high-poverty elementary schools based on the National Center for Education Statistics (2024). The second school district is the sixth largest district in a state in the Midwest region of the United States, with sixteen elementary schools and eight schools described as high-poverty schools, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024). The third district is the largest school district in a Midwestern state. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), there are 74 elementary schools, all categorized as high-poverty schools, and 51 are identified as K-12 schools. The population of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools for the three selected school districts in a state in the Midwest region of the United States is eighty-five.

Plan B for recruiting principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools included a site in another area of the same state in the Midwest. The school district is in

the state's northern region. This site, if needed for authorization, is the state's third-largest school district. It is classified as an urban school district with sixty-eight elementary schools, all of which qualify as high-poverty schools under the requirements of the National Center for Education Statistics (2024).

If Plan A or B provided fewer samples for the research, Plan C will be implemented. Plan C identifies a population of forty-two elementary schools located in the southern region of the same state in the Midwest. All elementary schools in this district meet the high-poverty classification under the National Center for Education Statistics (2024) requirements.

Sources of Data

Confidentiality of responses, participants' names, schools, and district names were all protected in this study. A list of pre-tested interview questions to prepare for the interviews with principals leading high-poverty schools for the research study was used. All principals were informed that inclusion criteria were necessary for this study. The inclusion criteria for participant consent are that each participant must be a current principal of a high-poverty school district in the Midwest region of the United States. Participants completed the interviews by answering interview questions according to the outline in the Interview Protocol (Appendix E). The participants were expected to provide honest responses when sharing their experiences with emotional labor as principals of high-poverty schools. Research participants provided additional information on the interview questions and reviewed their responses post-interview to ensure clarity and accuracy. The interview explored how principals described their emotional labor while leading high-poverty elementary schools. Interviews were audio-recorded using

Notability, a note-taking app for Apple devices that allows users to combine text, photos, drawings, and audio recordings into a single note. All interviews were transcribed using Notability, which can also transcribe. The participant reviewed all interviews for member checking and accuracy. Lastly, had principals felt the need to provide artifacts such as newsletters, journal notes, or any documents that support their emotional labor, the documents were labeled as additional data.

No pressure was placed on any principal to participate in the study by site authorization approvers or the researcher. The recruitment process included an introductory email sent to the principals who lead high-poverty schools in three districts, requesting participation. In the introductory email, the research topic, problem statement, purpose statement, research question, interview duration, and interview start dates were explained. For participants who responded, an Informed Consent form was sent, along with a calendar for scheduling interview dates and times.

Research Data

The primary instrumentation for this study includes an interview protocol (Appendix E), which included a demographic questionnaire (questions designed to collect data that align with the research question and provide a detailed profile of the sample), and interview questions (13 semi-structured, open-ended questions that guide principals to describe their emotional labor while leading high-poverty elementary schools). This protocol was developed using the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) and has been reviewed by a panel of expert principals outside the study sample to ensure clarity and relevance. Interviews will be conducted one-on-one, either in person, by phone, or virtually, and will be audio recorded

using Notability on a laptop or desktop computer. The recording facilitated accurate transcription and subsequent thematic analysis, while clarifying questions were posed during the interviews as needed to probe participants' experiences more deeply.

To ensure that only the appropriate participants are included in the study, a screening/selection instrument was administered online. This instrument verified that potential participants are current principals of high-poverty elementary schools by collecting key information, including the principal's role, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (a benchmark defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), and years of leadership experience. Responses to the screening instrument will determine eligibility, ensuring that the sample reflects the target population with firsthand experience of emotional labor in high-poverty contexts.

In addition to the screening instrument, a demographic questionnaire will be used to gather essential background information from each participant. The survey will collect data on years of experience as a principal, gender identification, and the number of students enrolled in the school. This demographic data was critical, as it provided a profile of the sample, helping contextualize the qualitative findings and explore potential correlations between demographic variables and how principals describe their emotional labor. By understanding the characteristics of the sample, the study can more accurately interpret how factors such as experience or school size might influence the emotional labor strategies employed by principals.

The Interview Protocol includes the demographic questionnaire and interview questions that will generate comprehensive, qualitative data that not only address the central research question but also offer detailed insights into the unique challenges and

emotional regulation strategies of principals leading high-poverty elementary schools. The combined use of these data collection methods supported a rigorous qualitative descriptive design that enhances the depth and trustworthiness of the study's findings (Palinkas et al., 2015; Sandelowski, 2000). In this study, two primary data sources will be used to address the research question: "How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?"

Research Data Source #1. First, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews will be conducted using an interview protocol. This protocol consisted of three demographic questions and 13 scripted, open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the principals' experiences with emotional labor, including their use of surface acting and deep acting. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the resulting textual data will be analyzed thematically to identify patterns and themes related to emotion regulation and the challenges inherent in high-poverty school settings (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The intended length of the interviews did not exceed 90 minutes. An expert panel will be used prior to conducting the interview in order to adjust for the length of the interviewing process.

Research Data Source #2. An expert panel will be used to refine the interview protocol. The panel included three principals with expertise in leading high-poverty elementary schools. The expert panel reviewed the draft of the Interview Protocol, including the process and procedures, demographic questions, and interview questions. The expert panel's intent was to review the draft questions to assess their clarity and relevance and to check their alignment with the study's purpose. Their feedback helped improve the wording, reduce vagueness, and ensure that the questions would generate

rich, meaningful data. Necessary revisions were made based on the panel's recommendations to strengthen the trustworthiness and validity of the data collection process.

Additional Data

A demographic questionnaire will be collected by asking three questions verbally at the beginning of each interview. Participants described their role as a principal, their years of experience as a principal, questions specific to their school population, and the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch as an indicator of poverty. This demographic information was used to describe the participant sample and to ensure the participants met the criteria for participation.

Trustworthiness

To be relevant, all research must be trustworthy (Adler, 2022). It is essential to indicate trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability. The quantitative research process is more systematic and better suited to identifying relationships between variables (Adler, 2022). The scientific community considers qualitative research less credible (Adler, 2022). Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which participants reflect the reality of the phenomenon under investigation (Nassaji, 2020). This section describes the four key elements that together produce confidence in the research procedures and results of a qualitative study.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings and conclusions can be regarded as believable (Nassaji, 2020). In this study, the participants responded to interview questions honestly, reflectively, and descriptively. Credibility

hinged on the truthfulness of the findings and the degree to which the reality of the investigated phenomenon was accurately captured (Nassaji, 2020). Achieving this required an accurate and comprehensive understanding of participants, their context, and the study processes (Nassaji, 2020). Member checking helped to promote credibility by allowing participants to review and verify interpretations after data collection (Stahl & King, 2020). Following each interview, responses were revisited to clarify uncertainties, confirm accuracy, and mitigate any vagueness. In addition, the interview transcripts were reviewed with participants for their approval. Note-taking and reflection occurred immediately after each interview to address doubts or ambiguities and follow up for any necessary clarification. Finally, confirming participants' responses and feedback, along with time for reflection, helped strengthen the study's overall credibility.

Dependability

Dependability was demonstrated by the consistency and repeatability of the findings (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020). Dependability was also a means of ensuring consistency in qualitative research (Janis, 2022). To ensure the analysis was consistent and reproducible, a detailed methodological process was followed to ensure transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the concept of transparency ensured that procedures were clearly documented and traceable (Janis, 2022).

Dependability was promoted by employing a consistent, transparent approach to thematic analysis, outlining each phase of the process, from data collection to theme development. First, all participants were asked the same questions using the same interview guide. Next, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. An in-depth reading and

rereading of the transcripts was then conducted to become fully familiar with the data. To increase transparency, a codebook was created to identify and record each initial code (Appendix F). The process was iterative since the codes in the codebook will be revised as themes emerge and are refined. Notes were taken throughout the process to capture reflections, emerging ideas, explanations, and reasons for coding decisions. Additionally, notes were kept supporting decisions from raw data to finalized themes. These steps ensure that the process is replicable for future researchers. Ultimately, this thorough approach reinforces the dependability of the research and integrity of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher must have access to the participants immediately after the interviews, for note-taking, reviewing notes, and receiving participants' responses. This step is necessary when assessing any doubts or vagueness in the questions and following up with participants to address any identified clarity or uncertainty. In this research study, data saturation in the responses was necessary to ensure participants' dependability and that their reactions could be shared. Confirmation of participants' responses and feedback was conducted to provide evidence for the research, and the study allowed reflection time after each interview to ensure its validity.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which researchers' interpretations or conclusions can be applied to a similar context (Nassaji, 2020). In this research study, the emotional labor of principals leading high-poverty elementary schools can be transferred to school leadership in high-poverty middle schools and high schools. The transferability of the data is enhanced by the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria used in this

research (Campbell et al., 2020). For this research study, the participants are principals of high-poverty schools in the Midwest region of the United States who volunteer to participate in interviews. Transferability was affected by the detailed criteria, which allow readers to develop a clear picture of the participants (Campbell et al., 2020). A potential threat to the transferability is that this study was conducted with principals serving high-poverty schools in a Midwest region of the United States, and the data may not be transferable to other regions of the United States. The research study used data from high-poverty elementary school principals and will not include principals leading high-poverty high schools or middle schools.

Transferability should not be intended for researchers to make generalizable claims, but rather to provide sufficient details that enable transfer if readers wish to do so (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data collection from high-poverty elementary school principals was transferred to principals leading high schools, middle schools, and private schools. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the ability to generalize about other people or settings can be addressed through thick descriptive data. Thick description, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), is the literal description of the entity being investigated. Having thick, rich descriptive data minimizes the threat to transferability. For this descriptive study, the results will be presented in a lifelike manner through the participants' lived experiences in narrative form. When a presentation is rich in descriptive data and told in a lifelike manner that tells a story, other researchers can better understand it and apply it to other contexts and studies.

Confirmability

Confirmability is established when the data and findings are described in a way that allows others to verify their accuracy (Nassaji, 2020). In this study, codes and themes

will be developed from interview responses from principals leading high-poverty elementary schools, and further corroboration will come from comparing these responses with additional data sources. Confirmability aimed to approach an objective reality as closely as possible within a qualitative framework (Stahl & King, 2020). Conclusions addressing the research questions will emerge through a data reduction and display process involving selective coding, whereby themes are identified from participant interviews, collected artifacts, and relevant codes. The justification for confirmability will include a structured coding procedure in which units of meaning are assigned to data excerpts (Locke et al., 2020). During open coding, interview transcripts and artifacts were examined line by line, highlighting pertinent keywords and concepts to generate categories (Locke et al., 2020). This systematic approach ensures that the findings reflect participants' authentic experiences and perspectives.

As a former elementary school principal and current Assistant Superintendent responsible for principals, academics, and student achievement, I bring a professional background grounded in school leadership, instructional support, student safety, and district-level decision-making. I am an African American male who was raised in an inner-city community, where I personally witnessed the challenges associated with poverty, educational disparities, and community resilience growing up. These early life experiences continue to inform my commitment to equity and diversity, to support my understanding of the emotional demands placed on educators working in high-poverty contexts.

Throughout my K-12 educational experiences, I attended high-poverty schools, which have shaped my professional and personal interests. I hold a Master's degree in

Educational Leadership, and my professional journey has included leading schools and supporting principals as they navigate the complexities of student needs, staff morale, and community engagement with constrained resources. These experiences have shaped my interest in exploring the emotional labor of principals who work in high-poverty schools.

As a researcher focused on qualitative descriptive research, my role is to present participants' perspectives in their own words, with minimal interpretation. I acknowledge that my professional background and personal identity may influence how I approach this study. To maintain the descriptive integrity of the research, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the process, using journaling and peer debriefing to remain aware of any potential bias. My goal was to faithfully represent how principals describe their emotional labor and use strategies such as surface acting and deep acting to manage it, while ensuring that their voices, not mine, remain fundamental to the findings.

Data Collection and Management

The researcher collected data for this qualitative descriptive study based on participants' preferences through 60–90-minute interviews conducted via Zoom, in person, or by phone. The primary data collection method in qualitative description research is often semi-structured in-depth interviews (Stanley, 2015). The researcher will conduct semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews, and each interview will be audio recorded. The interviews will be transcribed verbatim using Dictate once they have been completed. The equipment used during the interviews for data collection will include a laptop with audio to facilitate the Zoom meeting, a reliable internet connection, paper, writing utensils, copies of the signed informed consent, either provided in person or emailed to participants, and copies of the interview questions. All materials and

equipment remained in the researcher's possession in a secure, password-protected electronic file, except materials intentionally made available to participants for member checking and accuracy of the interview results. The interviews served as documents with detailed descriptions from principals leading high-poverty elementary schools.

Participants for this qualitative descriptive study were recruited from high-poverty elementary schools across 20 school districts in one midwestern state. Recruitment began by obtaining site authorization from district leaders, followed by direct outreach to eligible principals. Principals are deemed eligible based on public information on the state website and confirmed on district websites. Within the three districts, there are 86 elementary schools. Of the 74 schools, 20 are classified as high-poverty based on varying degrees of poverty intensity (76%–100% FRPL).

The principals of the identified high-poverty elementary schools were invited to participate in the study using a recruitment flyer emailed to their school email addresses. Those who choose to self-select into the study based on interest, availability, and meeting participation criteria will be asked to respond to the email. Reminders were sent weekly until there was no response or a minimum of 10 participants self-selected to participate in the study.

Informed consent forms will be emailed to the principals of high-poverty elementary schools for signature before the interviews. Participants who agree to the terms of the informed consent form will be audio-recorded for interviews before each interview and will be able to participate in the research study. The interviewer allowed the participants to describe and share their experiences. Note-taking was used to capture essential elements and record thoughts during the interviews. The interview data

collection process and thematic analysis aim to uncover descriptive terms and meanings that principals of high-poverty schools use to describe their emotional labor. Principals of high-poverty schools were asked interview questions that allowed them to describe their emotional labor. Demographic information was collected at the beginning of each interview. The researcher will ask the questions verbally.

Interview questions for this study will be developed around the research questions to make data collection more efficient while remaining informal. A panel of experts reviewed the document to determine whether the interview questions are clear, understandable, and appropriate for answering the research question (P. Gill et al., 2008). To ensure that the interview questions were clear, understandable, and appropriate for answering the research question, a panel of experts reviewed the interview questions following these steps:

1. Selection of Expert Panel – A panel of three to five experts in educational leadership in high-poverty school environments was identified. These individuals may include current or former school principals with knowledge in qualitative methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Selecting experts ensures that the questions are valid and aligned with the research objectives (P. Gill et al., 2008).

2. Distribution of Interview Questions – The draft interview questions were shared with the expert panel in advance, along with an explanation of the study's research purpose, objectives, and research question. Panel members assessed whether each question is clear, relevant, and elicits in-depth responses related to principals' experiences with emotional labor (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

3. Expert Feedback and Revisions – Panel members provided written feedback and suggestions for refining the interview questions. They assessed whether the wording was precise, the structure was logical, and the questions allowed open-ended, descriptive responses (Kallio et al., 2016). The refinement process ensures interview validity by removing leading or ambiguous questions (Turner & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022).

4. Final Review and Refinement – Based on feedback from the expert panel, necessary modifications will be made to the interview questions. Any unclear, redundant, or leading questions were revised or removed to enhance the reliability and credibility of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5. Implementation of Finalized Interview Protocol – Once the questions have been reviewed and deemed reliable and valid, a finalized interview protocol will be created.

By following this process using an expert panel, the interview questions were refined to ensure they effectively capture principals' descriptions of their emotional labor while leading high-poverty elementary schools. An interview protocol was used to ensure the interviewer followed standard procedures from one interview to the next. The note-taking process was used to record additional comments or anything that alerted the interviewer to a particular comment or an issue with any of the devices during the interview.

The interviews began by asking participants questions related to, but not limited to, describing emotional labor as experienced by principals of high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest region of the United States. In this research, it is anticipated that non-scripted questions will also occur based on participant responses. Interviews permit the participants to recall experiences related to their leadership and emotional labor in their own words. The data collection process and thematic analysis aim to provide a descriptive account of emotional labor among principals leading high-poverty elementary schools. The participants were asked interview questions that allowed them to describe their emotional labor as elementary school principals. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the participants for member checking. Time was provided for the systematic debriefing process with participants. A review allowed time for reflection and feedback to the interviewer to identify and address any gaps in the data.

A research journal helped capture elements of the interview not captured by the audio recordings. Note-taking intends to gather and reflect on the responses to interview questions. Researchers use journals to conduct research and analysis (Cui, 2012). The

journal and note-taking will guide reflection on personal thoughts, emotions, experiences, and interview responses in this research study. Reflection can provide additional understanding and enhance the opportunity for further information.

Throughout data collection and analysis, data is kept in a locked file cabinet and on a password-protected computer. The data is securely stored for three years. At the end of the three-year period, the electronic data will be permanently destroyed using disk cleaning software. Disk cleaning software is designed to permanently remove data from a computer's hard drive, preventing recovery. All paper data will be destroyed using a shredder.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative research data analysis can involve several steps: collection, organization, and interpretation (Yin, 2018). For the data analysis in this study, collection, organization, and interpretation were used. Data collection consists of using data to understand and explain the phenomenon (Nassaji, 2020). The primary data collection method in qualitative descriptive research is often semi-structured in-depth interviews (Nassaji, 2020). Principals manage many responsibilities in different contexts and interact with various stakeholders in their work (Elomaa et al., 2022). As a result, it is essential to understand the emotional labor of principals leading high-poverty schools for this research study. Qualitative research data analysis typically involves several steps: collection, organization, and interpretation (Yin, 2018). Qualitative descriptive research is strictly data-derived because codes are generated from the data during the study (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). The data collection for this research study was conducted

through open-ended interviews created through expert review and journal notes. The following research question guided this qualitative research study:

RQ1: How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?

After the interviews were completed, the data were prepared and analyzed through a structured, transparent process. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to accurately capture participants' responses. Transcripts were then cleaned to ensure accuracy and to remove verbal fillers. This step will be completed to preserve the integrity of the interviews' original meaning. Furthermore, to ensure the study's credibility, member checking will be employed. A copy of the transcript was sent via email to each participant to verify the accuracy of the information and to provide clarifications or additions as needed. This validation step allowed for the correction of any misinterpretations and ensured that the data authentically reflect participants' lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Once verified, the transcripts will be organized in NVivo 11 (Robins & Eisen, 2017) to store, sort, and manage the qualitative data. Observational notes taken during interviews were entered into NVivo and linked to the corresponding transcripts. This systematic organization prepares the data for analysis. The study will then proceed with Braun and Clarke's (2014) thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes that capture how principals of high-poverty schools describe their emotional labor. This approach enables a rich, detailed examination of the data and supports the development of themes aligned with the study's research questions.

The interview responses were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic approach that involved multiple levels of analysis. At the start, an open coding process will be employed to generate themes from both the transcribed interviews and the observational notes taken during data collection. Charts and visualizations of the data were created in Microsoft Word and NVivo 11 (Robins & Eisen, 2017) to systematically record, sort, match, and link data, as recommended by Jackson and Bazeley (2019). The data from the raw matrix, tables, and charts were used to construct a narrative that describes each identified theme in detail. To promote validity and ensure accuracy, participants reviewed their transcriptions through a member checking process, and any clarifications were incorporated into the final analysis. Interview responses were transcribed to ensure member checking and promote validity in the research study. Member checking will be integral to this study's data analysis process, serving as a critical strategy to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. After transcribing the interview responses, individual transcripts were provided to the participant for review.

Following member checking, Braun and Clarke's (2014) thematic analysis was used to code interview data and identify emerging themes. Themes and codes were used to answer the research questions. The analysis method provided a process for obtaining a full description of the experiences of principals leading high-poverty elementary schools. This study uses Braun and Clarke's (2014) six-phase thematic analysis framework to ensure a systematic and rigorous method for identifying themes related to emotional labor among principals in high-poverty elementary schools. Each phase was conducted as follows.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Oneself with the Data

Thematic analysis begins with data immersion to build a profound understanding of participants' experiences. The process will begin by transcribing each interview verbatim to ensure accurate capture of the participants' words and emotions. The researcher repeatedly read and reread each participant's transcript to become deeply familiar with the content and begin identifying recurring patterns and potential themes. The researcher listened to the audio recordings while reviewing the transcripts to ensure accuracy and to capture subtle nuances, such as tone, emphasis, and pauses that may suggest emotional labor strategies. Throughout Phase 1 of familiarizing with the data, journaling was conducted on initial observations, potential codes, and key phrases related to concepts such as surface acting, deep acting, and emotional resilience. This reflective journaling supports the analytic process by providing a space to record insights and emerging patterns that may later develop into themes. This phase ensured immersion in the dataset, allowing for meaningful engagement with participants' narratives.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

In this phase, the data will be systematically coded by assigning labels to relevant segments in the interview transcripts. This will be done by using open coding to identify key concepts related to emotional labor, stress, coping mechanisms, and leadership challenges. Furthermore, line-by-line coding was applied, in which each relevant phrase, sentence, or paragraph was tagged with short, descriptive labels that represented its meaning. To manage codes efficiently, qualitative data analysis software, NVivo or MAXQDA, was used. Additionally, codes were compared across transcripts to identify commonalities and variations in principals’ descriptions of emotional labor.

The coding process in this phase yields themes such as "masking emotions," "emotional exhaustion," and "support systems."

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

After finishing the coding phase, researchers started identifying broader patterns by organizing related codes into possible themes. This involved examining coded data to detect recurring concepts and relationships between codes. Similar codes were grouped into higher-order themes, such as “Emotional Regulation Strategies” (which may encompass surface acting and deep acting) and “Challenges of Emotional Labor” (which may include burnout, stress, and emotional exhaustion). In Phase 3, a process for mapping connections between themes using a thematic mind map to visualize how different aspects of emotional labor are interrelated. Finally, themes were collapsed or expanded based on their cohesiveness and relevance to the research question. The final themes reflected the principals' descriptions of their experiences with emotional stress.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

This stage focuses on refining and validating the identified themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data. Steps in this phase will include revisiting coded extracts within each theme to assess whether they coherently capture participants’ perspectives. Next, redundant themes and splitting overly broad themes will be merged into more precise sub-themes. Cross-checking themes against the raw data to confirm that no significant patterns have been overlooked. The final step in this phase was to hold peer debriefing sessions with research advisors or committee members to validate thematic accuracy and coherence. At this stage, themes may emerge as refined categories.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

After finalizing the themes, they will receive precise definitions and simple names that reflect their fundamental characteristics. This phase involved crafting thematic definitions that summarize the key findings within each theme. Themes remained distinct from one another while collectively telling a coherent story about principals' emotional labor. Direct participant quotes were incorporated to illustrate each theme and ground findings in authentic narratives. This phase concluded when the sub-themes were finalized, providing deeper insights into the nuanced aspects of emotional labor. In this phase, sub-themes were further categorized to define and name the themes that guided this study.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involves writing the findings section of the dissertation, ensuring that the themes coherently address the research question: What characterizations do principals in charge of high-poverty elementary schools provide when discussing their emotional labor? The themes will be presented with supporting evidence, including direct quotes from participants to illustrate key points.

- Connections to existing literature was made to contextualize findings within prior research on emotional labor, surface acting, deep acting, and emotional resilience.
- The significance of the findings was discussed in relation to policy implications, leadership training, and future research.
- The study's limitations and areas for future research were acknowledged to ensure transparency.

By following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, this study will provide a systematic and credible thematic analysis of how principals describe their emotional labor, ensuring rich, meaningful, and trustworthy findings.

The research for this dissertation was compiled, collected, and analyzed on a single private computer. At no time will a public computer or browser be used. The private computer is password-protected. Throughout data collection and analysis, the data is kept in a locked file cabinet with a digital code. After the data has been coded, reviewed, and analyzed to develop themes for the presentation, all electronic and paper data will be securely stored for three years. At the end of the three-year period, the electronic data will be permanently destroyed using disk cleaning software. Disk cleaning software is designed to permanently erase data from a computer's hard drive, preventing recovery. All paper data will be destroyed using a shredder.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this research study will primarily concern confidentiality. The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative concluded before the research began. This study will establish its ethical framework by strictly complying with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines and the Belmont Report principles, as established by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (Miracle, 2016). According to Belmont, three ethical principles govern this research and its chosen population: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for people was observed by upholding participants' autonomy and ensuring their right to self-determination when deciding whether to participate. Beneficence was maintained by minimizing risks to participants' identities and by maximizing potential benefits by contributing knowledge about emotional labor in high-poverty schools. Justice was achieved by ensuring equitable recruitment and not

targeting or excluding any group based on age, race, gender, or ethnicity, thereby treating all qualified principals fairly (Miracle, 2016).

The main risks of harm arise from breaches of confidentiality and privacy, as principals could disclose sensitive details about school operations and their personal emotional experiences. We removed any personally identifying details from transcribed interviews and assigned pseudonyms to each participant to address these risks. The research data will reside in an encrypted Google Drive folder that requires a password and is available solely to the research team, including the dissertation chair, committee members, the IRB, peer reviewers, and authorized college representatives. The restricted, secure access system protects participants' identities from disclosure.

The informed consent process will adhere to IRB standards by providing participants with detailed information about the study's purpose and voluntary participation, as well as potential risks and benefits. Participants were given information about the data access list, including the researcher, chair, committee members, IRB officials, peer reviewers, and college representatives, along with details on how their privacy was protected. The study guarantees principals the right to exit the project at any time without negative consequences. Participant rights and well-being will be safeguarded by conducting interviews in private settings, such as secure virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom) or private phone calls, and by reminding participants of their right to skip any uncomfortable questions.

Other provisions uphold essential ethical standards for anonymity and confidentiality to protect privacy. In qualitative research, direct interaction means complete anonymity cannot always be achieved, but strict confidentiality protocols

protect individual identities from disclosure. Voluntary participation was protected from coercion through transparent communication that consent is optional and by excluding any individuals who supervise or are supervised by the researcher. The researcher avoided direct involvement in hierarchical and personal interests within the schools from which principals are recruited to address conflict-of-interest considerations. All materials, including audio files and transcripts, will be securely destroyed or archived in compliance with IRB requirements after the mandated retention period (a minimum of three years), thus respecting both legal and ethical standards for data management and participant protection.

Assumptions and Delimitations

The researcher aimed to describe the emotional labor of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools. This qualitative descriptive design identified principals' emotional labor through interviews with 10 or more school leaders until data saturation was reached. By sharing their experiences, knowledge, and understanding of the emotional labor of principals leading high-poverty schools, it was revealed. This research study had assumptions and delimitations. Delimitations are controllable factors in the research study, including where the research takes place, the selection of participants, and when the research is conducted (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Assumptions are the understood truths about the study and its participants (Given, 2008). Strategies for mitigating issues such as participant dishonesty or researcher bias can be neutralized by asking interview questions that have been reviewed by a panel of experts, asking questions with little deviation from the research protocol, and conducting member checking of collected data and the analysis of data.

Assumptions

The researcher aimed to describe the emotional labor of principals leading high-poverty schools in the Midwest. The semi-structured interviews gathered firsthand accounts of principals leading high-poverty schools and their descriptions of emotional labor. The data collected helped highlight meaningful concepts or themes that may support principals leading high-poverty schools in the education field, and it offers opportunities to leverage ongoing development and practice in school leadership through professional development, Human Resources departments, and principal preparation programs at colleges and universities. In this research study, the following assumptions will be made:

- It is assumed that participants truthfully described their emotional labor, answered the semi-structured interview questions based on their experiences as principals leading high-poverty schools, and were willing to be open to respond to the questions asked by the researcher.
- It is assumed that in this study, participants were invited as volunteers to understand emotional labor further.
- It is assumed all participants in this study were representatives of K-12 public school districts in a state located in the Midwest region of the United States and are principals in high-poverty elementary schools.

Delimitations

For this research study, some delimitations were under the researcher's control. Delimitations are boundaries or limits set by the researcher to ensure that the research aims and objectives are achievable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). They are essentially controllable influences of the study. For this research study, several delimitations will occur. The following examples illustrate delimitations present in the study:

1. This study was delimited to elementary school principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools.

2. This study was delimited to elementary schools from different school districts in one Midwest region of the United States.
3. This study was delimited to elementary school principals who lead high-poverty schools and not involve principals who lead private schools, non-public schools, virtual schools, or charter schools.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the emotional labor of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of how the data were collected and analyzed to ensure the trustworthiness of this research study. The qualitative descriptive study was detailed to ensure it is feasible for studying the identified problem. Purposive sampling involved selecting participants for the study. Whereas snowballing identifies an option if at least 10 participants have not been identified. For this research study, the sample population was principals who serve high-poverty elementary schools in three districts in central Ohio. An interview protocol was identified as the protocol for interviewing the participants.

In Chapter 4, data collection occurred through the interview process and note-taking. The interview questions will undergo a review by a panel of experts to ensure alignment with the research question. The study was guided by the following research question, shaping the rationale for a qualitative descriptive study and the data analysis method:

RQ1: How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?

Data analysis will follow several steps, including collection, organization, and interpretation (Yin, 2018). A raw data matrix, tables, and narratives will present the

analyzed data. Comparing responses will help identify similarities and uncover new information to support emerging themes. Charts were generated using Microsoft Word or NVivo software to structure textual data from the open-ended interview questions. NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis program, will support coding and thematic analysis (Adu, 2016).

Chapter 4 will present the data analysis and results based on the outline and procedures detailed in Chapter 3. It will include preparing raw data for analysis and presenting descriptive data. Data analysis procedures will be explained according to the reflexivity protocol and thematic analysis steps. The results will be systematically organized based on identified themes and study limitations. Synthesizing the data will ensure the inclusion of relevant findings while maintaining participant confidentiality. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the data findings and key conclusions drawn from the study.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

Chapter 4 presented the data, results, and analysis of this qualitative descriptive study, which examined how principals leading elementary schools with higher rates of poverty in the Midwest region of the United States describe their experiences of emotional labor. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to explore how principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor. The research problem guiding this study stemmed from the growing emotional pressures faced by principals in high-poverty schools, which are increased by inequities within the school systems and high-poverty areas, chronic underfunding, and the accountability-driven environment of K–12 education. Despite these challenges, little empirical research has explored how principals themselves describe and make sense of their emotional labor. Emotional labor, the phenomenon under investigation, focuses on how principals regulate or display emotions to meet role expectations. These issues stemming from emotional labor, often seen in public schools amid this poverty, are serious, as principals are often expected to maintain calm and professional decorum in the face of constant stressors, even though this type of work environment can deeply affect their well-being and effectiveness (Ackerman et al., 2023).

To address this gap stemming from limited empirical data, the study employed a qualitative methodology with a descriptive design, allowing for in-depth descriptions of principals' lived experiences. Data were collected using a pre-screening selection questionnaire, demographic questions, a journal for reflections and observational notes, and semi-structured interviews with 20 open-ended questions that explored how

principals perceive, experience, and respond to the emotional demands of their role. One central research question guided the study.

RQ1: How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?

The research proposal addressed in Chapters 1–3 anticipated challenges, including participant recruitment, the subjective nature of emotion description, and understanding of disclosure (Appendix I). In preparation, several adjustments were made that required rescheduling interviews with principals due to the end of school activities, family obligations, and IRB approval timing (Appendix C). Two adjustments were made to the interview schedule: after-school and before-school interviews, and weekend interviews. Participants varied in their outlook on emotional labor and in their capacity to articulate emotional understandings in depth. These differences influenced the richness of the data collected, requiring the researcher to engage in ongoing reflexivity to minimize interpretive bias. These issues are further addressed in the limitations regarding the accuracy and authenticity of participant accounts.

This chapter begins with a summary of the participant demographics and school contexts, then presents the six themes that emerged from the data. Each theme is supported by narrative insights that examine how participants behaved in their day-to-day experiences. The chapter concluded with a synthesis of the findings regarding the research question and the phenomenon of emotional labor.

Preparation of Raw Data and Descriptive Data

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, a demographic questionnaire, and observational notes documented in a

research journal. Eleven principals from high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest region of the United States participated. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes (Appendix G) and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, the researcher reviewed each transcript against the audio files to ensure accuracy and made minor edits for clarity, such as correcting inaudible words and adjusting punctuation to preserve the participants' intended meaning.

Once finalized, the transcripts were uploaded to MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software (VERBI Software, 2024), where codes were applied to text segments. The coding process combined inductive and deductive approaches: initial codes were generated directly from participants' language, while others were informed by the conceptual framework of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Codes were refined through iterative cycles, with overlapping codes merged and ambiguous codes clarified. A codebook was developed to ensure consistency in application, and all coding decisions were logged in the research journal for transparency.

The descriptive data provided a profile of the participants' pseudonym, gender, years of experience and the rate of poverty found in the schools. Each school was deemed a Title I school, another indication of poverty. Table 4 revealed descriptive data of the demographic profile of each principal.

Table 4

Descriptive Data of Demographic Profile of Participants

District	Gender	Years of Experience Range	# of Participants
One	Female	1 – 5	5
One	Male	1 – 3	
Two	Male	2	2
Two	Female	11	
Three	Female	5 - 20	4
Three	Male	13	

The participant group consisted of eleven principals, six women and five men, representing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their years of experience as principals ranged from 1 to 20 years, with an average of 9.6 years. Table 5 below summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 5

Descriptive Data of Demographic Profile of Participants' Schools

District	Range Student Population	Range of School Poverty Rate
One	430 – 505	75% – 83%
Two	340 – 540	100%
Three	300 – 717	74% – 85%

Note. Table summarizes student enrollment and percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch at each participant's school.

All participants worked in high-poverty elementary schools, with free and reduced-price lunch eligibility rates ranging from 74% to 100%. All participants led schools classified as Title I under federal funding guidelines (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Five of the principals work in District One, two principals in District Two, and four principals in District Three. Table 2 provides details about the schools led by the study participants, focusing on student population size and the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, a federal program administered by the

U.S. Department of Agriculture. Eligibility for this program is based on household income, making it a widely accepted indicator of student poverty and economic disadvantage in education research. The student population ranged from 300 students (Principal Kempson) to 717 students (Principal Gibson), illustrating the variation in school size across the sample. All schools represented in the study served high-poverty communities, with free and reduced lunch percentages ranging from 74% (Principal Jackson) to 100% (Principals Francis and Harris). Notably, two schools reported full participation in free and reduced lunch programs, underscoring the extreme economic challenges present in those communities. The high percentages across all schools highlight the consistent reality of poverty among participants' student populations. Even in schools with the "lowest" levels of poverty, nearly three-quarters of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, confirming that every participant led in a context of concentrated need.

School demographic data were drawn from district-provided accountability reports and cross-verified with publicly available state databases. The reliance on free and reduced lunch percentages as a poverty indicator is consistent with federal and state-level definitions of high-poverty schools, reinforcing the credibility of the sample selection. The data provided contextual grounding for understanding the emotional labor described by participants in Chapter 4, as leading schools with such high levels of poverty intensified the demands placed upon principals' leadership and emotional regulation.

Table 6 outlines the interview methods and durations used with the eleven principals who participated in this study. The majority of interviews (nine of eleven) were

conducted via Zoom, while two interviews (Principals Issac and Jackson) were conducted in person. This combination of formats allowed for flexibility while maintaining consistency in the interview protocol. Interview lengths ranged from 45 minutes (Principal Issac, in person) to 1 hour and 16 minutes (Principal Harris, Zoom), with most lasting just over an hour.

Table 6

Number of Interviews Conducted Duration of Interviews

Participants	Interview Modality	Duration	Pages of Transcripts
Principal Adams	Zoom	47:10 minutes	11
Principal Blake	Zoom	54 minutes	9
Principal Carson	Zoom	57:38 minutes	9
Principal Dixon	Zoom	62 minutes	10
Principal Edwards	Zoom	63 minutes	12
Principal Francis	Zoom	68 minutes	9
Principal Gibson	Zoom	61minutes	10
Principal Harris	Zoom	76 minutes	12
Principal Issac	In-Person	45:21minutes	9
Principal Jackson	In-Person	51:33 minutes	7
Principal Kempson	Zoom	71 minutes	11

Note. The table summarizes the method and duration of interviews conducted with each participant.

The predominance of hour-long interviews reflects the richness of the data collected, as principals shared detailed narratives about their professional and emotional experiences. Longer interviews, such as those conducted with Principals Harris, Kempson, and Francis, provided particularly rich accounts that highlighted the complexities of leading in high-poverty schools. It ensures rigorous data collection and clear reporting of interview locations and methods. The combination of Zoom and in-person methods reflects the study's adaptability. At the same time, the substantial duration of each session supports the depth and credibility of the qualitative findings

presented in Chapter 4. Zoom was chosen as the primary interview platform because it offered both convenience and flexibility for participants across districts. It also provided an efficient means to schedule and conduct interviews while minimizing travel burdens for principals. In-person interviews, while fewer in number, allowed for greater immediacy and rapport building, demonstrating that both modalities contributed to the credibility and depth of the data.

Descriptive Data: Data Collection Summary

In addition to demographic information, a systematic summary of data collection was maintained. Table 7 provides a summary of the data collection. Each participant completed a demographic survey prior to the one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interviews yielded a total of 104 transcript pages across the eleven participants, each transcribed in 12-point Times New Roman with double spacing, for an average of 9.4 pages per interview. The researcher's observational notes, recorded in a journal immediately following each interview, produced an additional 12 typed pages of data.

Table 7

Data Collection Summary

Data Source	Total Number	Average Duration	Transcript/Pages Produced
Interviews	11	60 min (avg.)	104 pages
Research Journal Notes	10 entries	20 min (avg.)	21 pages
Demographic Surveys	11	N/A	5 pages total

Visual Display of Codes and Data

The coding process produced 42 initial codes, which were refined into 8 final codes. A total of 42 initial codes were identified during first-cycle coding and subsequently refined through pattern coding into eight final codes. Codes with the highest

frequency included *role conflict*, *surface acting, deep acting, emotional exhaustion*, *coping strategies, emotional suppression, relationship management*, and *lack of emotional support*. Table 8 demonstrates the refinement of 42 initial codes into eight final codes, with emphasis on frequency prominence (Appendix F).

Table 8

Refinement of 42 Initial Codes Into Eight Final Codes

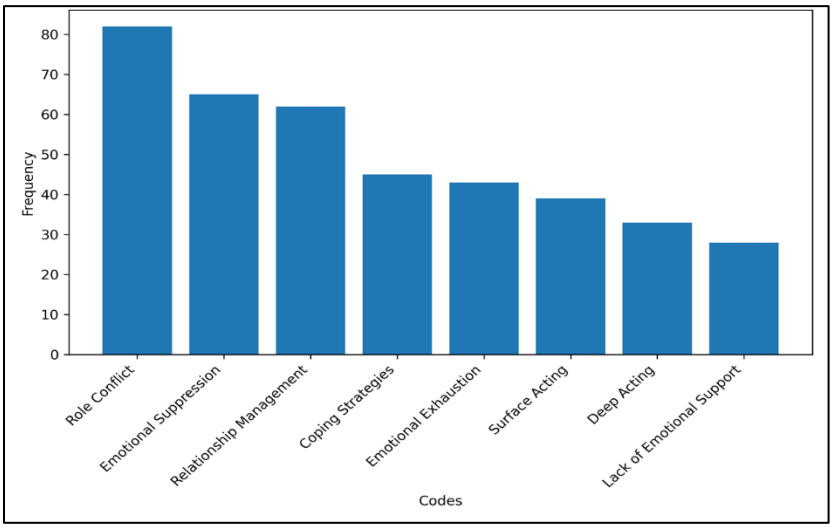
Final codes	Description	Initial codes (n = 42)
Role conflict	Tension between professional responsibilities and emotional or personal expectations	Competing role expectations; blurred professional boundaries; work–life imbalance; role overload; conflicting stakeholder demands; identity strain
Emotional suppression	Deliberate inhibition or concealment of emotions in professional contexts	Hiding true feelings; masking frustration; suppressing anger; emotional restraint; emotional neutrality; avoiding emotional disclosure
Relationship management	Efforts to maintain and navigate interpersonal relationships in emotionally demanding settings	Managing interpersonal conflict; maintaining professionalism; emotional diplomacy; relationship preservation; navigating power dynamics; people-pleasing behaviors
Coping strategies	Behavioral, cognitive, or emotional mechanisms used to manage stress and emotional labor	Seeking peer support; self-care practices; problem-solving strategies; emotional distancing; reframing experiences
Emotional exhaustion	Feelings of emotional depletion resulting from sustained emotional demands	Burnout symptoms; emotional fatigue; feeling drained; chronic stress; overwhelm
Surface acting	Modification of outward emotional expressions without altering internal feelings	Forced positivity; emotional masking; scripted emotional responses; displaying expected emotions
Deep acting	Internal regulation of emotions to align with professional expectations	Cognitive reappraisal; internal emotional adjustment; empathy alignment; emotional self-persuasion
Lack of emotional support	Absence of institutional, collegial, or supervisory emotional support	Lack of administrative support; limited collegial empathy; isolation; absence of safe emotional outlets

Figure 2 illustrates the frequency distribution of the eight final codes identified in the qualitative data analysis. Among these, role conflict was the most frequent code, occurring more than 80 times, indicating a pervasive tension between professional expectations and emotional demands. Emotional suppression and relationship

management also emerged as highly salient themes, each with more than 60 occurrences, suggesting that participants routinely regulated emotional expression while navigating interpersonal dynamics. Coping strategies and emotional exhaustion, each with more than 40 references, reflect participants' efforts to manage sustained emotional demands and the cumulative impact of emotional labor. In contrast, surface acting, deep acting, and a lack of emotional support occurred less frequently, ranging from 28 to 39; however, their presence underscores important variations in how emotional labor was enacted and supported.

Figure 2

Frequency of the Top 8 Emergent Codes



Narrative Summary of Data Collected

The collected data revealed both the diversity and commonality of principals' emotional labor experiences. For example, while some principals described prayer and faith as central coping mechanisms, others relied on exercise or professional mentorship. Across all participants, the tension between maintaining professional composure and

experiencing internal emotional strain was evident. The appendices contain sample interview transcripts and excerpts from coded data that illustrate how raw narratives were transformed into analytic findings.

Data Analysis Procedures

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 principals, each assigned a pseudonym to preserve confidentiality. Following transcription and careful review of the interview data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014) was employed to identify recurring patterns of meaning across participants' accounts. This analytic approach was chosen because it provided both flexibility and rigor in exploring principals' lived experiences while remaining closely aligned to the study's research questions.

To ensure the data's trustworthiness and credibility, multiple validation strategies were implemented throughout the research process. The data collection for this study included participant descriptions and semi-structured interviews, which allowed principals of high-poverty elementary schools to describe their emotional labor as school leaders (Appendix G). The semi-structured interview protocol was reviewed by an expert panel of three educational leadership scholars to assess question clarity, alignment with the research questions, and potential researcher bias (Appendix E). Revisions were made in response to their feedback to enhance content validity. In addition, two field-test interviews were conducted with principals who met the inclusion criteria but were not included in the final participant sample. These practice interviews helped refine the

wording of questions, pacing, and prompt sequencing, ensuring that each item elicited rich and authentic responses.

The descriptive data ensured the criteria were met and provided greater detail of a more comprehensive portrait of the principals who lead these schools. These details captured their years of experience, gender, school size, and community demographics. These data provided essential context for interpreting how each principal's professional background and school environment shaped their experiences of emotional labor. The semi-structured interview questions were best suited to this type of study, as they allow the researcher to describe, in detail and in their own words, how they experienced emotional labor while leading high-poverty elementary schools. The raw data for analysis were presented based on the participants' perspective. The study used Braun and Clarke's (2014) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which ensured rigor by providing a method to assess the analysis's rigor and to extract codes to identify themes related to emotional labor among principals in high-poverty elementary schools.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Oneself with Data

After the interviews were completed, the transcription of the recordings began. Each interview was transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate capture of the participants' words and emotions. The transcribed data from the first interview were read and reread repeatedly before moving to the subsequent transcript. The researcher became familiar with the content of each interview while constantly referring to descriptive data to ensure accuracy when linking the principal with the content. The audio recordings were replayed while reviewing the transcripts to capture tones and emphasis that may suggest emotional labor strategies not explicitly stated. During Phase 1, reflective journaling and highlights

were made, identifying observations, potential codes, and phrases related to emotional labor. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through reflexive practice, including journaling to set aside personal assumptions and peer debriefing, in which a colleague independently reviewed the codes and emerging themes. These practices minimized researcher bias and enhanced credibility. Patterns and codes began to emerge after reviewing the third transcript, which later developed into themes. Phase 1 was a critical step because it provided a process that allowed deep engagement with participants' narratives.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

In this phase, the data were coded when similar comments, phrases, and words were identified in the interview transcripts. The key concepts include conflicts, tiredness, relationship management, day-to-day stress, emotional labor, coping mechanisms, and challenges with multiple stakeholders. To identify the initial codes, line-by-line coding was applied. Each related phrase or sentence was tagged with short, descriptive labels representing its meaning. To efficiently organize and manage codes, MAXQDA was used to identify and organize them. Codes were color-coded, then compared across transcripts to identify commonalities and variations in principals' descriptions of emotional labor. The coding process in this phase yields themes used in Phase 3 of the analysis.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

After finishing the coding phase, broader patterns were identified by organizing related codes into possible themes. Coded data were examined to identify recurring concepts and relationships among codes, yielding six higher-order themes. In Phase 3, mapping connections between themes used a thematic mind map to visualize

relationships among themes, further identify themes, and refine them to determine aspects of emotional labor specific to the research question. Themes were further refined to reflect principals' descriptions of their experiences with emotional stress.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

This stage focused on refining and validating the six identified themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data. Redundant themes were eliminated, and broad themes were merged into more precise sub-themes. Once the cross-checking of themes against raw data was confirmed to ensure no significant patterns had been overlooked, the final themes were determined. The final themes that articulated the participants' perspectives were Navigating Conflicting Demands, Balancing Authenticity & Professionalism, Performing Leadership Through Emotional Display, Managing Emotional Exhaustion, Restoring Self to Sustain the Role, and Insufficient Emotional Support. Three of the themes used aligned with multiple codes.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this phase, a table was created to provide definitions for the final set of themes, reflecting their fundamental characteristics. Thematic definitions were written to summarize the key findings for each theme. Although the themes were distinct, they collectively told a comprehensive story that demonstrated the principals' emotional labor in their high-poverty schools. Direct participant quotes were incorporated to illustrate each theme and ground findings in authentic narratives, demonstrating transparency. Charts in the appendices summarized representative quotations for each code, while tables in this chapter aligned codes, categories, and themes. This presentation ensures the reader can trace the analytic pathway from raw data to thematic conclusions.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved writing the dissertation's findings section, ensuring that the themes addressed aligned with the research question: How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor? The themes were presented with supporting evidence, including direct quotes from participants to illustrate key points. Connections to prior literature were made to contextualize the findings within research on emotional labor, surface acting, deep acting, and emotional resilience.

Detail of Data Analysis

Table 9 presents exemplary quotes with the initial code and final codes. Round one codes were extracted from participants' comments. The codes are based on participants' comments. Some of the codes were taken directly from the participants' comments. Other codes were compiled in MAXQDA codes. The final codes were also summarized and condensed. The exemplar quotes represent other quotes used in the analysis to support the final themes.

Table 9

Exemplary Quoted Aligned With Initial Codes and Final Codes

Round One Codes	Final Codes	Exemplar Quote
Competing role expectations; blurred professional boundaries; work–life imbalance; role overload; conflicting stakeholder demands; identity strain	Role conflict	"There is a balance sometimes in this job to follow directions, protocol, and policies with which I don't always agree. Every day I'm pulled in two directions, and I'm the one stuck in the middle." Principal Adams
Hiding true feelings; masking frustration; suppressing anger; emotional restraint; emotional neutrality; avoid emotional disclosure	Emotional suppression	"I have to be regulated at all times and can't have a human moment at school unless it is in the privacy of my office." Principal Kempson
Managing interpersonal conflict; maintaining professionalism; emotional diplomacy; relationship preservation; navigating power dynamics; people-pleasing behaviors	Relationship management	I try to be a leader who is active. I'm in the classrooms every day. I try to be supportive. But I also try to make sure the lines are defined. I do not cross the line of being a friend. Principal Dixon
Seeking peer support; self-care practices; problem-solving strategies; emotional distancing; reframing experiences	Coping strategies	"I find a quiet place in the building where no one can see me. I walk outside around the building. I delay calling a parent back for a moment or two." Principal Kempson
Burnout symptoms; emotional fatigue; feeling drained; chronic stress; overwhelm	Emotional exhaustion	I've never worked so hard to stay calm while feeling like I'm drowning." Principal Francis
Forced positivity; emotional masking; scripted emotional responses; displaying expected emotions	Surface acting	"There are days I want to be real with my teachers about how frustrated I am, but I have to put on the professional face, or it looks like I've lost control." Principal Blake
Cognitive reappraisal; internal emotional adjustment; empathy alignment; emotional self-persuasion	Deep acting	Trying to match their emotion, what they were going through, especially with my parents this year." Principal Carson
Lack of administrative support; limited collegial empathy; isolation; absence of safe emotional outlets	Lack of emotional support	"Social-emotional PD is geared towards students and teachers, not school leaders." Principal Gibson

This process involved familiarization with the data to refine themes through iterative comparisons and member checking. Table 10 represents the alignment of codes to the emergent themes from the analysis of 11 semi-structured interviews produced six

major themes describing how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools experience emotional labor.

Table 10

Alignment of Codes to Emergent Themes

Theme	Theme Description	Contributing Codes
Navigating conflicting demands of leadership	Leaders' experiences managing competing professional expectations, role strain, and emotional obligations	Role conflict; relationship management
Balancing authenticity and professionalism	Ongoing tension between genuine emotional expression and adherence to professional norms	Emotional suppression; deep acting
Performing leadership through emotional display	Strategic use of emotional expression to meet leadership expectations and influence others	Surface acting
Managing emotional exhaustion	Experiences of emotional fatigue, burnout, and depletion resulting from sustained emotional labor	Emotional exhaustion
Restoring self to sustain the role	Intentional strategies used by leaders to cope, recover, and maintain emotional well-being	Coping strategies
Insufficient emotional support for leaders	Lack of institutional, collegial, or systemic emotional support for individuals in leadership roles	Lack of emotional support

Themes emerged through iterative coding and constant comparison. By the eighth interview, no new codes were identified, and subsequent interviews reinforced existing categories, suggesting data saturation had been achieved. While each principal's account was unique, the six themes consistently recurred across multiple cases. For example, *all 11 principals described navigating Conflicting Demands of Leadership and Managing Emotional Exhaustion*, while *Insufficient Emotional Support* was reflected in 8 of 11 cases. Table 11 presents the number of principal references, the percentage of samples, and the codes aligned with the themes.

Table 11

Alignment of Themes to Principal References, Percentage of Samples, and Codes

Theme	# of Principals Referencing	% of Sample	Illustrative Codes
Navigating Conflicting Demands	11	100%	Role Conflict, Relationship Management
Balancing Authenticity & Professionalism	10	91%	Deep Acting, Emotional Suppression
Performing Leadership Through Emotional Display	8	73%	Surface Acting
Managing Emotional Exhaustion	10	91%	Emotional Exhaustion
Restoring Self to Sustain the Role	9	82%	Coping Strategies
Insufficient Emotional Support	8	73%	Lack of Emotional Support

Note. Frequencies represent the number of principals who described experiences directly coded to each theme.

Using this process enabled the development of a rich narrative that described how 11 principals described and managed their experiences in high-poverty schools. The transcription process began with the recording of verbatim words of both the interviewer and the participants. The individual interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy, with the audio recordings used for additional assurance. The transcribed interviews were then sent to each participant for member checking to ensure the accuracy of their words, the intent of their responses, and to clarify any points. To further ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by returning each transcript to participants for review and verification. Member checking provided participant validation of the study and was found to be a vital technique for establishing the process's credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, data triangulation through interviews, descriptive profiles, and field notes provided multiple sources of evidence to corroborate patterns and reinforce dependability.

Reflexivity Protocols

Researcher reflexivity was maintained through a reflexive protocol that included journaling to set aside personal assumptions and peer debriefing, in which a colleague independently reviewed the codes and emerging themes. These practices minimized researcher bias and enhanced credibility. To strengthen trustworthiness, an expert panel reviewed the interview protocol to ensure content validity, and member checking allowed participants to review summaries of their interviews for accuracy. To enhance the study's credibility and trustworthiness, one modification was made to the proposal in Chapter 3. Two field test interviews were conducted with principals who met the inclusion criteria but were not included in the final participant sample. Both principals expressed support for the study but were unavailable when data collection began. These practice interviews were instrumental in refining question wording, pacing, and prompt sequencing to ensure each item elicited rich, authentic responses.

The analysis aligned with the research questions by organizing findings around the central phenomenon of principals' emotional labor in high-poverty schools. The six themes represented the patterns of experience that were most salient to participants and collectively addressed how principals described emotional regulation, exhaustion, coping, and perceived support. Findings were organized by themes to capture patterns across the dataset.

The data analysis for this study followed a systematic coding process consistent with qualitative descriptive research. Interview transcripts were transcribed, reviewed, and coded to capture participants' descriptions of their emotional labor experiences. Codes such as role conflict, surface acting, deep acting, emotional exhaustion, coping

strategies, relationship management, emotional suppression, and lack of emotional support were applied. These codes were grouped into categories and synthesized into six overarching themes that captured the essence of principals' experiences leading high-poverty schools. The iterative process included multiple rounds of coding, comparison across participants, and validation of findings through alignment with the research questions and relevant literature. By carefully following this process, the results of this study are specific to the design.

Results

The results are organized into six major themes that reflect how principals described their emotional labor while leading high-poverty elementary schools. Chapter 4 presents the results of this qualitative descriptive study, which explores how principals of high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest describe their emotional labor. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven principals, supported by a demographic survey and the researcher's reflexive journal. The analysis generated six overarching themes, each grounded in multiple codes and supported by direct quotes that amplify participants' voices. Themes 1 and 2 have multiple codes. The themes highlight how principals navigate emotional labor in contexts of poverty and systemic inequity, illustrating how they regulate, suppress, or reframe emotions to lead effectively. Each theme is presented below, with supporting evidence from the principals' narratives and interpretive notes.

Theme 1: Navigating Conflicting Demands of Leadership

All 11 principals described experiencing role conflict and relationship management in balancing the competing demands of leadership. This theme captured the

constant negotiation between district mandates, teacher needs, parent expectations, and student well-being. The coding frequency showed 33 instances of role conflict and 28 references to relationship management across the transcripts, underscoring the prevalence of this theme. The themes highlight how principals navigate emotional labor in contexts of poverty and systemic inequity, illustrating how they regulate, suppress, or reframe emotions to lead effectively. Each theme is presented below, with supporting evidence from the principals' narratives and interpretive notes.

Role Conflict. Several principals described role conflict as the experience of being positioned between district authority and community responsibility, with limited discretion to reconcile the two. Principal Adams articulated this tension clearly when discussing district-mandated school supply requirements: "I feel very strongly against requiring school supplies for any kids. Just knowing what our families go through… they're struggling to have some basic needs at home many times." Despite her strong personal and professional opposition, Adams explained that compliance was non-negotiable: "This year I had a district mandate requiring school supplies. Knowing their circumstances, I still very much disagree with it, but had to do it." She further reflected on the daily nature of this tension: "There is a balance sometimes in this job to follow directions, protocol, and policies with which I don't always agree. Every day I'm pulled in two directions, and I'm the one stuck in the middle." Adams' account illustrates role conflict as the experience of simultaneously serving as an advocate for families and an enforcer of district policy, roles that often conflicted in values, priorities, and outcomes.

Principal Blake similarly described role conflict as the challenge of responding appropriately to community needs while operating within institutional constraints. He

noted that understanding student and community needs was essential, yet responding to those needs was complicated by the limits of the role: “Assessing the needs of the students in the community is challenging most of the time. But as a principal… how to respond to the needs of the students and the community is very essential.”

Blake’s reflection highlights role conflict as the gap between recognition of need and capacity to act, a tension that left principals accountable for outcomes without full authority to address underlying issues. For other principals, role conflict emerged in situations where professional authority and ethical responsibility collided. Principal Edwards described a situation involving staff behavior that undermined her leadership: “There was a situation when one employee went behind my back and did something very off-putting… it made me feel like she totally disregarded and did not respect my leadership.” Edwards explained that while her emotional response was strong, her role required a measured professional response: “Even though I was really angry, I knew that if I responded in anger, I wasn’t going to get what I needed… which was really hard to do what was best for students and create a productive and safe culture.” This account demonstrates role conflict as the tension between personal authority and institutional responsibility, where principals were required to suppress personal reactions to meet broader organizational expectations.

Principal Edwards shared,

> While interacting with teachers and administrators, it has been very emotional this past year with the failure of a levy and having to manage the emotions and feelings of our staff after realizing that the district was going to have to make cuts. It was hard because, as a district employee, you have to make sure your words

> align with the information you share with staff. You have to align it with what the district is communicating while also making sure you acknowledge your staff's feelings and emotions. I found that to be very stressful for me, and it took an emotional toll on me as well.

Several principals described role conflict as a permanent condition of leadership, rather than a problem to be solved. Principal Harris reflected on the constant pressure to manage competing expectations efficiently: “I need you to understand I have very smart people that I work for, and there are smart people who work here, as well as smart children.” While Harris’s statement emphasized competence across stakeholders, it also underscored the complexity of navigating upward accountability to district leadership while managing downward responsibility to staff and students. Principals were expected to satisfy all parties, even when expectations were misaligned.

Across participants, role conflict was characterized by limited autonomy, competing loyalties, and constant prioritization under constraint. Principals described being accountable for decisions shaped by others, enforcing policies they did not always support, and mediating tensions they did not create. These conflicting demands required continuous negotiation and contributed to the emotional weight of leadership.

Relationship Management. Principals described relationship management as a central and ongoing component of their leadership practice, requiring constant attention to boundaries, trust, and emotional dynamics within the school community. Unlike role conflict, which stemmed from competing institutional demands, relationship management centered on how principals navigated interpersonal expectations while maintaining authority, credibility, and professional distance. Participants emphasized that managing

relationships was not optional or secondary, but an embedded requirement of the principalship. Several principals described the challenge of balancing approachability with authority. Principal Dixon articulated the importance of maintaining clear relational boundaries:

> I try to be a leader who is active. I'm in the classrooms every day. I try to be supportive. But I also try to make sure the lines are defined. I do not cross the line of being a friend.

Dixon's reflection highlights relationship management as a deliberate act of boundary-setting, where principals must remain accessible without compromising their leadership role. Her emphasis on mentorship rather than friendship reflects an intentional strategy to sustain professional relationships while preserving decision-making authority.

For other principals, relationship management involved navigating emotionally intense interactions with staff, students, and families. Principal Carson described the emotional weight of relational closeness: "I live every emotion that my teachers live. If they have problems at home, I feel it… If parents are struggling with a problem, I try to help." Carson noted that deep emotional engagement, while rooted in care and commitment, often blurred relational boundaries and intensified the emotional demands of leadership. His experience illustrates how relationship management requires principals to regulate the depth of emotional involvement to remain effective.

Relationship management also surfaced in principals' efforts to maintain respect and influence within their buildings. Principal Edwards described how interpersonal dynamics could challenge leadership legitimacy: "There was a situation when one employee went behind my back… it made me feel like she totally disregarded and did not

respect my leadership." While Edwards ultimately responded professionally, her account underscores how managing relationships involved navigating disrespect, trust breaches, and power dynamics, all while sustaining a productive school climate.

Several principals emphasized that relationship management required constant emotional calibration. Principal Harris described leadership as a process of managing interactions efficiently and respectfully: "I need you to understand I have very smart people that I work for, and there are smart people who work here, as well as smart children. So, we don't waste people's time here." Harris' statement reflects relationship management as an exercise in balancing competence, respect, and expectations across multiple groups, highlighting the cognitive and emotional effort required to maintain functional relationships. Across participants, relationship management was characterized by continuous negotiation, boundary maintenance, and emotional attunement. Principals were expected to be empathetic yet decisive, accessible yet authoritative, and relationally engaged without becoming emotionally overextended. These expectations required sustained emotional labor and contributed to the complexity of the leadership role.

I initially assumed that role conflict would primarily stem from state testing requirements, given my own professional experience in accountability-driven environments. However, participants expanded this understanding, pointing to relational strain as an equally significant source of conflict. This reflexive recognition prompted me to revisit the coding tree to ensure that both structural and relational aspects of conflict were captured as distinct but interconnected categories.

The first theme highlighted the persistent role conflict principals experienced as they navigated competing expectations from districts while maintaining relationships

with teachers, students, and families. Participants described the emotional strain of acting as intermediaries, expected to enforce compliance while preserving trust and relational stability. As Principal Adams explained, "Every day I'm pulled in two directions. The teachers want flexibility, but the district pushes for rigid compliance." This quote illustrates how role conflict and relationship management were inseparable, requiring principals to continually negotiate structural demands while sustaining relational commitments.

Theme 2: Balancing Authenticity and Professionalism

Principals described the tension between authenticity and professional composure in their leadership roles. The demands of high-poverty schools required them to continuously regulate their emotions, often leaving them with the sense that they were "masking" their true selves to meet professional expectations. Codes clustered around deep acting and emotional suppression, all of which describe the difficult balance between authenticity and professionalism. Codes included *deep acting* (29 references) and *emotional suppression* (66 references). This theme shows how leaders often felt compelled to "mask" their true emotions to meet professional expectations.

Deep Acting. The theme of Balancing Authenticity and Professionalism captures principals' deliberate efforts to regulate their emotions internally to lead effectively while remaining aligned with personal values and professional expectations. Across participants, deep acting emerged as a conscious, reflective process through which principals reshaped their emotional responses to ensure that leadership decisions, communication, and behaviors were congruent with both ethical commitments and institutional responsibilities. This emotional labor was described as developmental,

relational, and cumulative, evolving through experience, reflection, and intentional practice.

For several principals, deep acting reflected a shift in emotional perspective over time, particularly as leaders gained broader contextual understanding of families, staff, and systems. Principal Adams described this evolution explicitly when stating, “My emotions have changed when asking lots of questions, as such, I reconsidered something based on more information.” Adams’ statement reflects deep acting as cognitive–emotional recalibration, where new information prompted an internal reassessment of prior emotional judgments. This process did not eliminate emotional response. Adams acknowledged becoming “More empathetic towards our families, more judgmental as a teacher.” Deep acting thus functioned as an adaptive leadership skill, enabling principals to revise internal narratives while maintaining professional credibility.

Principal Blake framed deep acting as intentional boundary management, emphasizing the need to regulate emotions to sustain healthy professional interactions. He stated, “Put everything outside the building… interact in a healthy way.” This internal separation required conscious emotional discipline. Blake emphasized empathy as an intentional practice, stating, “Trying to understand empathy… understanding others’ emotions… listening to them carefully until the end.” Deep acting here involves slowing emotional reaction, prioritizing listening over response, and choosing understanding even in emotionally charged exchanges. Rather than suppressing emotion, Blake worked to transform emotional response into professional attentiveness, reinforcing trust and relational stability.

For Principal Carson, deep acting involved carefully matching emotional tone while maintaining leadership composure. He suggested, “Trying to like match their emotion, what they were going through, especially with my parent this year.” Principal Carson described empathizing with emotionally distressed staff members, stating, “If I got a staff member who's really down… I understand that… empathize a little bit with them.” This language suggests measured empathy, where deep acting allowed Carson to connect emotionally without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. The phrase “empathize a little bit” reflects intentional regulation of emotions while preserving leadership stability.

Principal Dixon highlighted deep acting as a daily leadership expectation. Dixon stated, “…every morning you are happy and you're welcoming the students into the building, even if you're having a bad day.” This practice required principals to reframe their personal stress internally so that their professional presence remained steady. Dixon further emphasized emotional self-management in challenging situations. She shared “when you're in a situation that is not going the way you want, you have to make sure that you're able to handle it.” Deep acting, in this context, involved internal emotional regulation to prevent personal frustration from shaping professional interactions.

For Principal Edwards, deep acting manifested through intentional reliance on data as an emotional anchor. She suggested, “Lean in on the data and speak really from a data lens… more so than my personal response.” Further, Edwards described using data to regulate emotional reactions, providing clarity and consistency when emotions could otherwise influence decision-making. She noted, “Trying to be more intentional about my interactions…” This intentionality reflects deep acting as a strategic leadership choice,

where emotional impulses were reframed through evidence-based reasoning to maintain fairness and transparency.

Principal Francis described seeking therapy as a means of managing emotional labor. He shared, “Managing my emotions at work… I got a therapist… because I wanted to have the same guy that was at the school come back to my house.” This illustrates deep acting as supported emotional work, recognizing that sustained emotional regulation requires external resources. Therapy became a mechanism for processing emotions so that professional identity could remain intact.

Principal Gibson framed deep acting as inseparable from moral purpose. Gibson stated, “I’m more on that deep side… the work is about the whole child.” She emphasized seeing students beyond surface behavior, sharing, “I see a person in that kid that nobody else sees… so therefore I’m going to show up.” Further, she described emotionally overwhelming moments: “When we talk about trauma and stress… that situation knocked the breath right out of me.” Yet she continued, “My human side is going to always win out for me.” Deep acting allowed Gibson to remain emotionally engaged without withdrawing, even in moments of conflict or verbal aggression. She concluded her thoughts referencing, stating, “I’ve definitely had situations… yelled at and screamed at… I overlook everything and just do the work.”

Principal Harris described deep acting as thoughtful emotional processing. Harris stated, “Sometimes you have to gather your thoughts differently… because they want to know what you think.” She emphasized accommodation as a value-driven choice, “I accommodate my teachers often… I genuinely think they are good for children.” Harris explicitly connected deep acting to navigation when she stated, “I think that

compartmentalization also comes with navigation." This reflects how principals separate emotion from reaction, allowing thoughtful leadership responses to emerge.

Principal Issac described deep acting as instructional. She stated, "I had to take it as a teachable moment for that adult… that took a lot to maintain the right composure." She articulated deep acting directly, "With deep acting, I'm trying to identify with you so you're working towards it." At the same time, Principal Jackson described grounding emotional regulation in student focus. Jackson mentioned, "I keep the kid in my mind… the kid's face stays up here." This mental anchoring enabled Jackson to consider alternative perspectives. She stated, "I do try to consider maybe another side." Deep acting here served as a moral center, ensuring decisions aligned with student well-being rather than emotional impulse.

Principal Kempson framed deep acting as a form of personal growth. She believed, "Changing my feelings sometimes is appropriate and helps me be a better person, be more compassionate." She described intentional strategies, "Find ways to start your day… a gratitude journal… talking with a colleague who gets it." Kempson also emphasized emotional moderation. She stated, "I needed to be calmer… give them facts… too much optimism would not have been good." This reflects deep acting as measured emotional calibration, balancing realism with care.

Across participants, Balancing Authenticity and Professionalism emerged as a dynamic emotional process, requiring principals to engage in deep acting as an essential leadership practice. Principals continuously reshaped internal emotional responses to align empathy with authority, values with policy, and humanity with professionalism.

Deep acting allowed leaders to remain authentic without emotional overexposure, sustaining relationships while navigating complex organizational demands.

For some leaders, deep acting provided a path to align their inner emotions with outward displays, leading to emotional suppression. Principal Gibson shared, “I remind myself why I’m here and who I’m serving. That helps me reframe the anger or sadness and show up in a way that feels genuine, not fake.” However, not all leaders found alignment easy. As Principal Francis said, “It’s exhausting to smile when inside you’re hurting. After a while, you don’t even know what’s real anymore.” Yet others emphasized how draining suppression could become over time. Principal Harris shared: “It’s exhausting to smile when inside you’re hurting. After a while, you start to lose track of what’s real and what’s not.” The costs of this balancing act were not confined to the school building. Principal Jackson described how professional suppression often spilled into her personal life: “I’ve gotten good at hiding my emotions at work, but at home it comes out. My family sees the version of me that my staff never does.”

Emotional Suppression. The code of emotional suppression emerged as a defining feature of how principals balanced authenticity with professionalism. Across participants, emotional suppression was not described as emotional absence or disengagement; rather, it functioned as an intentional leadership strategy in which principals contained, muted, or postponed their own emotional responses to meet the emotional needs of students, staff, families, and the broader community. This process required sustained self-regulation and often occurred in environments marked by crisis, trauma, and competing demands.

Many principals described emotionally charged situations involving students and families. These situations demanded immediate leadership response while simultaneously requiring the suppression of personal distress. These moments often involved crises, trauma, or conflict, in which principals felt intense emotional reactions but recognized that outward emotional expression could compromise safety, trust, or stability.

Several principals described the expectation that school leaders remain emotionally regulated at all times. Principal Kempson articulated this expectation succinctly: “I have to be regulated at all times and can’t have a human moment at school unless it is in the privacy of my office.” This sentiment was echoed across participants, who described leadership as a role that restricted visible emotional vulnerability. Principals understood that emotional expression, particularly frustration, sadness, or exhaustion, could destabilize staff morale or student safety. As a result, emotional suppression became embedded in daily leadership routines. Kempson further described leadership as: “Riding the roller coaster of emotions every day… that’s just your work emotions.”

Principal Adams described the emotional weight of supporting students and families in crisis, noting: “Hearing things that students and their families are going through at home is emotionally taxing… students in crisis, families in crisis.” During large-scale situations involving multiple families, Adams emphasized the effort required to remain composed: “I had to stay cool, calm, and collected… even though I was feeling very escalated emotions myself on the inside.”

Similarly, Principal Dixon described emotionally intense interactions that required immediate emotional restraint. Reflecting on encounters with students and

parents in distress, Dixon stated: “On the inside your heart is breaking because you're hearing what this kid is going through, but you have to stay calm and collective… so they feel safe and comfortable.” In situations involving aggressive adults, Dixon acknowledged the internal struggle to suppress instinctive reactions: “One staff member… very aggressive and angry… you want to just snap back… I try really hard to stay calm and show respect.”

These experiences illustrate emotional suppression as a deliberate leadership response intended to de-escalate emotionally volatile situations. Principal Carson also described crises that accumulated over time, intensifying emotional strain: “There are times when you're getting hit with something that happened to a family, something that happened to a kid, and it just builds and builds.” Despite this accumulation, Carson emphasized the necessity of maintaining a positive and steady demeanor: “Being able to stay positive all the time and be a true leader in the building… is a big factor in that.” Carson further described moments when emotional suppression was essential to continue functioning: “Sometimes you got to be able to put on a show… part of being positive and being strong for everyone else.”

Additionally, Principal Gibson described routine exposure to emotionally charged interactions with families and community members: “You get cussed out and you're like okay next. You hear some of the craziest, heart-wrenching stories.” Gibson’s comments suggest that emotional suppression became normalized as part of daily leadership practice, allowing her to move from one emotionally intense situation to the next without visible emotional disruption.

Finally, Principal Jackson described responding to students' unmet basic needs, which required emotional control to remain effective: "Sometimes it was… the kid was hungry." Jackson noted taking proactive steps to support students' safety: "Walking the neighborhood after school to make sure kids got home safely." These actions required emotional restraint and focus, even when confronted with distressing realities affecting students' lives. This internal–external divide highlights emotional suppression as emotional labor that preserves institutional stability, often at high personal cost.

Several principals described sustained exposure to student and family trauma as a major driver of emotional suppression, noting that leadership in trauma-affected school communities required intentional containment of personal emotional responses to preserve safety, stability, and trust. While principals experienced profound emotional reactions internally, they consistently emphasized the necessity of remaining outwardly calm and composed to support students, staff, and families navigating a crisis. Principal Carson described the cumulative emotional toll of repeated exposure to trauma: "There are times when you're getting hit with something that happened to a family, something that happened to a kid, and it just builds and builds, and you hit that breaking point where there's going to be tears." Despite reaching emotional thresholds internally, Carson emphasized the importance of maintaining a steady presence, noting that leaders often had to "put on a show" to remain positive and reassuring for others. This suppression of emotional response functioned as a protective mechanism, ensuring that students and staff did not absorb the leader's distress.

Similarly, Principal Dixon described emotionally devastating student situations that required immediate emotional restraint: "On the inside your heart is breaking

because you're hearing what this kid is going through but you have to stay calm and collective… so they feel safe and comfortable." Dixon emphasized that emotional suppression was not indicative of indifference, but rather a deliberate effort to create emotional safety for students. Even when facing aggressive or emotionally volatile parents, Dixon noted: The father continued to scream and holler… it made me feel uncomfortable." These experiences highlight emotional suppression as a form of containment in the presence of crisis, prioritizing student well-being over personal emotional release.

Principal Adams also described trauma exposure as emotionally draining, particularly when supporting families in crisis: "Hearing things that students and their families are going through at home is emotionally taxing… students in crisis, families in crisis… added more draining than typical years." Adams explained that during large-scale family crises, she had to remain outwardly regulated: "I had to stay cool, calm, and collected… even though I was feeling very escalated emotions myself on the inside." Her experience reflects emotional suppression as a professional necessity, requiring leaders to manage internal emotional escalation while projecting steadiness to large groups of distressed families.

Additionally, Principal Gibson described routine exposure to trauma narratives and emotionally charged interactions: "You hear some of the most crazy, you know, heart-wrenching stories." "You get cussed out and you're like okay next." Gibson's language suggests emotional suppression as normalization—where repeated exposure to trauma necessitated emotional containment simply to continue functioning in the role.

Despite the emotional weight of these encounters, she emphasized continuing the work without visible emotional disruption.

Finally, Principal Harris highlighted how trauma-exposed students often sought emotionally regulated adults: “Supporting students in crisis… staff well-being and morale.” Further, she stated, “They come to people that they feel the safest with.” Harris’s comments underscore how emotional suppression served as a signal of safety, reinforcing the expectation that school leaders provide emotional steadiness amid uncertainty.

Across participants, emotional suppression functioned as a necessary yet costly leadership practice. Principals routinely withheld personal emotional expression to maintain stability, safety, and professionalism. While emotional suppression allowed leaders to navigate crisis, conflict, and trauma effectively, participants consistently described emotional depletion, callousing, and the need for external support. Within the broader theme of Balancing Authenticity and Professionalism, emotional suppression emerged as a double-edged process, one that enabled ethical leadership and relational trust while simultaneously placing principals at risk for emotional exhaustion. These findings highlight the need for systemic supports that acknowledge emotional labor as a central component of school leadership.

Principals described the need to manage emotional expression carefully, striving to remain authentic while adhering to professional expectations. This finding is consistent with the emotional labor theory, which posits that leaders must regulate their emotional displays to align with organizational norms (Hochschild, 1983). Literature on authentic leadership acknowledges that authenticity in leadership is often constrained by

institutional contexts, particularly in emotionally charged environments (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The findings extend this literature by illustrating how principals continually recalibrate authenticity to maintain trust while preserving professional credibility.

I initially approached this theme assuming that principals would frame authenticity and professionalism as complementary rather than competing constructs. My own leadership experience led me to believe that authenticity was largely viewed as an asset that could be expressed openly within professional norms. However, participants complicated this assumption by describing authenticity as something that often had to be carefully managed, delayed, or partially concealed to preserve credibility and trust. This realization prompted me to revisit early codes related to emotional expression and refine them to distinguish between authentic feeling and professional display, ensuring the analysis reflected the nuanced negotiation principals described rather than an idealized view of authentic leadership.

Theme 3: Performing Leadership Through Emotional Display

Principals described performing leadership through strategic emotional display to set the tone and inspire confidence. The code surface acting (34 references) suggests that outward emotion was often strategic. The code of surface acting emerged as a central mechanism through which principals enacted leadership within emotionally demanding school environments. Surface acting refers to the deliberate regulation of outward emotional expression, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and demeanor, without corresponding changes to internal emotional states. Within the theme of Performing Leadership Through Emotional Display, surface acting served as a visible,

performative aspect of leadership, enabling principals to project calm, attentiveness, and emotional stability despite their internal emotional experience.

Several principals admitted that surface acting required them to frequently put on a professional face regardless of how they actually felt. Principal Carson shared how he may behave with students and teachers: “Sometimes you got to be able to put on a show. A student might say something silly, and on the inside, I'm laughing, but I got the mean scowl trying to hold it.” Principal Blake explained, “There are days I want to be real with my teachers about how frustrated I am, but I have to put on the professional face, or it looks like I’ve lost control.” Similarly, Principal Kempson added, “You can’t cry in front of staff, even when you want to. They need you to be steady, so you learn to hold it in.”

Many principals shared that, in their day-to-day roles, surface acting came into play as they masked their frustration and fear with more acceptable emotions. By doing so, they maintained composure and projected strength, even when privately experiencing doubt or strain. Principal Adams explained: “There are days I have to display my facial expression and my emotions to meet their needs at the same time, even when it feels overly dramatic to me, inaccurate.” Principal Harris shared: “I suppress my personal views to maintain professional neutrality.” Principal Issac explained, “Sometimes you’re performing, not leading. You smile, shake hands, reassure parents—all while panicking inside.” Similarly, Principal Kempson shared, “I raise my voice in staff meetings sometimes, not because I’m angry, but because I need to show strength. They expect a strong leader.”

Principals consistently described projecting calm and emotional control in situations when they were experiencing heightened internal emotional arousal. Principal

Adams recounted maintaining composure during an aggressive parent interaction: “I stayed calm and ended the meeting even though I had an angry parent screaming and cussing… even though I was feeling very escalated emotions myself.” Similarly, Principal Dixon described moments when internal frustration contrasted sharply with external professionalism: “On the inside, I might be frustrated, but I try really hard to stay calm and show respect.” “Coming into school every day, exhausted and frustrated… I had to appear calm and collected and ready for the day.” Principal Kempson echoed this internal–external divide, noting: “Inside, I just wanted to scream at them… but on the outside, I had to remain that professional, logical, regulated person.” Across participants, surface acting served as a stabilizing mechanism, allowing principals to de-escalate conflict, maintain authority, and preserve emotional safety despite intense internal emotional responses.

Many principals described surface acting as a way to visibly signal attentiveness and understanding, even when their internal reactions differed. Principal Blake emphasized the need to appear engaged and empathetic: “I need to show that I am understanding and I am listening.” “I'm inhaling and exhaling at the same time because I need to suppress my feelings.” Despite this effort, Blake acknowledged emotional dissonance: “I feel like I was not honest.” Similarly, Principal Dixon described intentionally modulating emotions to meet others’ needs: “You have to match your feelings to what people need and be aware of the people around you.” Principal Edwards further highlighted suppressing personal viewpoints to maintain professional neutrality: “On the outside, I was being positive and optimistic and encouraging… while on the inside, I knew that it was going to be completely opposite.” These accounts illustrate how

surface acting enabled principals to convey attentiveness and empathy while containing personal emotions that could complicate professional interactions.

Principals demonstrated acute awareness of emotional contagion and its influence on school climate. Principal Harris articulated this directly: “If I was frazzled, I knew that they were going to be frazzled.” As a result, she intentionally refined her emotional presentation over time: “My game face has definitely gotten better through the years.” “My silence. My email is shorter. I say less.” Similarly, Principal Carson described maintaining a consistent positive presence: “Every day. I come in the building… it’s a smile. No matter what's going on.” These reflections suggest that surface acting served as a leadership tool to regulate collective emotion, reinforcing the expectation that principals’ emotional displays set the tone for staff and students.

Several principals described surface acting as a form of emotional code-switching, adjusting demeanor based on audience and context. Principal Issac articulated this explicitly: “Surface acting still exists. It’s kind of like code-switching… I know what my audience is and kind of what their appetite is for.” She further described rapid emotional transitions: “We had a serious conversation, and then the voice changes… fake it and make everybody feel comfortable.” Principal Adams similarly described amplifying positivity when necessary: “I had to be smiling, handshaking, a little cheerier than my normal self.” These examples illustrate surface acting as a situational performance, requiring principals to strategically adapt their emotional expression to maintain relational stability and organizational functioning.

Principals frequently described carrying strong emotions internally while deliberately concealing them externally. Principal Jackson explained: “You couldn't show

that anger because all you're going to do is fuel the situation." "I still would carry the rage, but people really see it." Likewise, Principal Issac described emotional compartmentalization: "I might pull up in my car in tears, but the minute I get out… I have to turn it all off and put on a smile and a brave face." Principal Gibson echoed this internal restraint: "I'm not going to escalate with them… I can use a very calm voice." Across these accounts, surface acting emerged as a way to contain emotion without resolving it, allowing principals to function effectively while internal emotional residue persisted.

Across participants, surface acting emerged as an essential leadership performance in maintaining order, safety, and trust. Principals consistently adjusted emotional displays, smiling, calming tone, silence, optimism to meet situational demands, even when internal emotions were incongruent. This supports Blackmore's (2010) argument that leadership is inherently performative, particularly under stress. Reflexively, I recognized that principals' emotional displays were not reactive but intentional leadership strategies.

The findings highlight surface acting as a visible and routine leadership practice, where principals consciously manage emotional displays to influence school climate and de-escalate conflict. This aligns with research indicating that leaders' emotional expressions shape collective emotional tone and organizational functioning (Humphrey, 2012). Studies of emotional contagion further suggest that leaders' affective regulation directly impacts staff morale and stability (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). The prominence of surface acting in the findings underscores leadership as performative emotional work rather than solely administrative or instructional practice.

Prior to analysis, I viewed emotional display primarily as a situational leadership skill used during moments of crisis or conflict. As coding progressed, however, participants' narratives revealed that emotional performance, particularly surface acting, was not episodic but embedded in daily leadership practice. This challenged my initial framing and required me to reconsider emotional display as a core leadership function rather than a secondary strategy. Reflexively, I recognized that my own familiarity with leadership norms may have normalized this emotional labor, leading me initially to undercode routine emotional performance. Revisiting transcripts with this awareness allowed me to more accurately capture the pervasive nature of emotional display described by participants.

Theme 4: Managing Emotional Exhaustion

The most universal experience described was emotional exhaustion, which is represented in Theme 4. Codes included emotional exhaustion (50 references) and emotional suppression (32 references). Emotional exhaustion emerged as a pervasive and deeply embodied experience among principals, characterized by chronic fatigue, emotional depletion, and a diminished capacity to engage fully with others. Unlike momentary stress or situational overwhelm, emotional exhaustion was described as cumulative and enduring, developing over time as principals carried sustained responsibility for students, staff, families, and organizational outcomes. Participants consistently emphasized that exhaustion was not tied to isolated incidents, but rather to the unceasing nature of leadership demands.

Principals noted that the impact of exhaustion was often difficult to recognize while they were experiencing it. Principal Kempson reflected,

> We don't even realize we're doing it anymore or the true magnitude of its impact. Sure, we notice the physical signs like stress, weight changes, or hair loss, but the emotional and mental toll is harder to see or measure.

She added that others sometimes recognized the changes first, stating, “Sometimes others, like my husband, might notice our changes before we do.” This delayed awareness underscores how emotional exhaustion became normalized within the role.

Many principals attributed emotional exhaustion to the relentlessness of leadership in high-need contexts. Principal Jackson described his deep commitment to student safety, noting that he often went beyond his expected duties to ensure students’ well-being. Over time, he recognized the cost of this sustained commitment, reflecting that his focus on students’ needs occurred at the expense of his own health. Similarly, Principal Francis described emotional exhaustion as a state of internal overwhelm masked by outward composure, stating, “I’ve never worked so hard to stay calm while feeling like I’m drowning.” These accounts illustrate how exhaustion emerged not from disengagement, but from prolonged emotional investment without adequate recovery.

Several principals described emotional exhaustion as a gradual desensitization to experiences that once elicited strong emotional responses. Principal Adams reflected, “I feel more calloused as a human… desensitized to some things,” and noted that by the end of many days, she had little emotional capacity left to engage with others personally. This depletion extended beyond the school day, affecting relationships and emotional availability outside of work. Similarly, Principal Carson described emotional exhaustion as something that accumulated slowly until it became overwhelming, stating, “I can feel it building up… it takes its toll on you,” and recalling periods of “deep, deep emotional

distress." Together, these reflections portray emotional exhaustion as a prolonged emotional burden in which leadership demands exceeded available emotional resources.

Sleep deprivation and sustained fatigue further intensified emotional exhaustion. Principal Dixon described extended periods of exhaustion marked by minimal sleep and persistent emotional strain, noting that despite feeling "exhausted and frustrated," she was expected to continue functioning professionally. This expectation to maintain composure, even during periods of extreme fatigue, reinforced the chronic nature of emotional exhaustion rather than allowing opportunities for recovery.

For some principals, emotional exhaustion was closely tied to empathy and relational leadership. Principal Edwards described empathy as both a strength and a source of fatigue, noting that constant emotional availability took a toll on her personal life. She explained, "You find yourself not even having a moment to yourself… it's like I belong to other people all day long." This lack of emotional space contributed to sustained depletion that extended beyond the school environment.

Others described exhaustion as the weight of collective responsibility. Principal Francis stated, "You take on the weight of your staff. You take on the weight of your students. You take on the weight of everything." While this sense of responsibility aligned with leadership values, it often surfaced privately once professional demands subsided. Principal Gibson described the intensity of exhaustion during particularly challenging periods, noting that her emotional capacity felt "full and overflowing" and that prolonged strain left her "tired of being in that space." These reflections underscore emotional exhaustion as a sustained condition rather than a temporary response to acute stress.

Principals also described the challenge of transitioning quickly from emotionally charged interactions back into routine leadership tasks. Principal Harris noted the difficulty of moving forward after emotionally intense moments, such as supporting families in crisis, stating that she often had to carry on as if "like nothing happened." She also observed broader patterns of exhaustion among peers, noting that many principals were struggling with mental health challenges. In response, Harris described making intentional adjustments, such as removing email access from her phone, to mitigate the constant emotional demand.

Similarly, Principal Issac described emotional exhaustion as feeling unable to pause or show vulnerability, noting that the expectation to remain consistently present and available left her overwhelmed, with nights that ended in tears. Principal Jackson echoed this sentiment, reflecting that his prioritization of others' well-being led him to neglect his own health, ultimately contributing to significant health concerns. Finally, Principal Kempson captured the depth of emotional exhaustion experienced by many participants, stating, "Some days I just want to put the keys on the table, walk away and never come back." She identified the most exhausting aspect of the role not as interactions with students or families, but the cumulative strain of managing adults and organizational demands. Her reflection that principals must "find a way… to take a minute" highlights both the severity of exhaustion and the limited space leaders felt they had to address it.

Across participants, emotional exhaustion emerged as a persistent and multifaceted condition, shaped by chronic emotional demands, sustained responsibility for others, and limited opportunities for recovery. Principals described exhaustion not as

a failure of resilience but as an expected consequence of leadership roles that require continuous emotional engagement. Emotional exhaustion affected physical health, emotional availability, and personal well-being, underscoring the need for systemic recognition of emotional labor and intentional supports for school leaders. This finding aligns with existing burnout literature (Riley et al., 2021) and highlights emotional exhaustion as a dominant and urgent theme within principals' lived experiences.

I entered the study expecting emotional exhaustion to emerge as a consequence discussed toward the periphery of principals' experiences. Instead, participants consistently described exhaustion as central and ongoing, reshaping how they experienced both their professional and personal lives. This prompted a reflexive shift in my analysis, as I recognized a tendency to initially frame exhaustion as an outcome rather than a lived condition influencing daily leadership behavior. Acknowledging this bias led me to elevate emotional exhaustion from a secondary category to a central theme, reflecting its dominance across participants' narratives and its role in shaping other emotional labor practices.

Theme 5: Restoring Self to Sustain the Role

Despite challenges, principals developed personal resilience coping strategies (39 references). The code, coping strategies, and alignment with Theme 5: restoring self to sustain the role. Beyond recognizing emotional exhaustion, principals described engaging in intentional coping strategies to restore themselves and sustain their ability to lead effectively. These strategies were not framed as optional self-care practices, but rather as necessary acts of preservation, enabling principals to continue functioning in roles characterized by relentless emotional demand. Across participants, coping strategies

emerged as practical, often private behaviors that created moments of relief, distance, or emotional release within otherwise demanding schedules.

Several principals described the importance of intentional quiet and solitude for emotional recovery. Principal Dixon described creating protected time at the end of the day: “Well, about 30 minutes where I just chill and quiet and my kids are not allowed to come downstairs. And I usually listen to music or read a book or go on a walk if it's a rough day.” This practice allowed Dixon to decompress after emotionally demanding days, serving as a buffer between professional responsibilities and personal life. Similarly, Principal Issac described seeking solitude after work: “After work, I would go for a walk, close the door, or just have some quiet time.” For Issac, these moments of silence provided space to process emotions privately, highlighting how coping strategies often involved intentional withdrawal rather than engagement.

Others emphasized the importance of slowing down emotional response as a coping mechanism. Principal Kempson described using delay as a strategic form of emotional regulation: “I find a quiet place in the building where no one can see me. I walk outside around the building. I delay calling a parent back for a moment or two.” She explained that postponing immediate responses allowed her to regain composure and avoid reactive decision-making: “I've learned it's okay to not knee-jerk and jump at everything.” This approach reflects coping strategies as temporal boundaries, allowing principals to manage emotional load without escalating stress. Principal Dixon echoed this approach in professional settings, noting: “I tend to just be quiet and not say too much in meetings.” This intentional restraint functioned as a coping strategy, enabling

Dixon to conserve emotional energy and reduce unnecessary engagement during periods of fatigue.

Peer support emerged as a critical coping strategy for sustaining leadership. Principal Gibson emphasized the importance of trusted relationships: “Talking with a trusted colleague after a hard day keeps me sane. It reminds me I’m not alone.” She further described creating intentional spaces for emotional release: “I'm going to have a sister circle. I'm going to talk with trusted colleagues… get some things off of our chest in a private and safe space. And then I'm going to keep it moving.” These peer interactions provided validation, perspective, and emotional relief, reinforcing the role of relational coping in sustaining principals’ well-being.

Across participants, coping strategies were characterized by intentional pauses, whether through solitude, delayed responses, or selective engagement. Principals described learning, often through experience, that constant availability was unsustainable. By carving out moments of quiet, postponing emotionally charged interactions, or seeking support from trusted colleagues, principals actively worked to preserve emotional capacity. Notably, these coping strategies were often informal and self-initiated, rather than institutionally supported. Principals did not describe structured systems or formal resources designed to support emotional recovery. Instead, they relied on personal routines, environmental adjustments, and peer relationships to manage the demands of leadership. This reliance underscores both principals’ resilience and the absence of systemic mechanisms to support emotional sustainability.

Collectively, these findings suggest that Restoring Self to Sustain the Role involved deliberate, adaptive coping strategies that allowed principals to continue leading

amid emotional strain. While these strategies did not eliminate exhaustion, they provided essential moments of relief that made sustained leadership possible. Coping strategies thus functioned as protective practices, enabling principals to remain present, effective, and emotionally available over time.

Principals' use of coping strategies, such as solitude, delayed responses, and peer support, reflects adaptive efforts to preserve emotional capacity. This aligns with stress and coping frameworks that emphasize emotion-focused coping as essential in high-demand professions (Biggs et al., 2017). Leadership research suggests that informal coping mechanisms often compensate for the absence of institutional supports (Biggs et al., 2017). The findings highlight coping strategies as necessary, though insufficient, tools principals use to sustain themselves in emotionally taxing roles.

Initially, I assumed principals' coping strategies would be formalized or institutionally supported, such as through district programs or leadership development initiatives. Participant accounts disrupted this assumption, revealing that most coping strategies were informal, self-initiated, and often hidden from organizational view. This realization required me to reexamine how coping was conceptualized in the coding process, shifting from a focus on organizational supports to individual adaptive practices. Reflexively, I recognized that my expectations may have been influenced by leadership literature emphasizing structured supports, whereas participants' realities reflected coping as a personal survival mechanism rather than a systemic provision.

Theme 6: Insufficient Emotional Support for Leaders

Perhaps the most sobering finding was the lack of systemic emotional support (47 references). The code and the lack of emotional support (25 references) align with Theme

6, insufficient emotional support for leaders. Principals described significant barriers to accessing emotional support, noting that vulnerability was often perceived as incompatible with leadership expectations. Many expressed concern that seeking emotional support could prompt questions about their competence, stability, or leadership capacity. Principal Kimpson reflected on this hesitation, stating, “You pride yourself on not asking for help unless you really need it, and asking for emotional support is not always easy because you don’t want anyone to question your leadership ability, your stability, or your mental health.” This fear of judgment reinforced emotional isolation and normalized the expectation that principals manage distress privately.

Beyond personal reluctance, principals consistently described a systemic absence of emotional support structures within their roles. While they were expected to provide emotional guidance, reassurance, and stability to students, staff, and families, participants noted that similar support was rarely extended to school leaders themselves. This imbalance contributed to feelings of vulnerability, overload, and isolation, reinforcing the perception that principals must navigate emotional labor largely on their own.

The emotional demands of leadership were further intensified by the responsibility to absorb and regulate others' emotions. Principal Edwards described navigating emotionally charged interactions following the failure of a levy and the resulting budget cuts. She explained that supporting staff while maintaining consistency with district communication was “very hard” and “took an emotional toll.” Edwards’ experience illustrates how principals often carried emotional burdens without corresponding support, particularly during periods of organizational instability.

Isolation emerged as a persistent and widely shared experience. Principal Kimpson described leadership as inherently solitary, stating, “I think it’s a lonely job,” and noted that even when support personnel were present, principals often lacked someone who fully understood the emotional demands of the role. Principal Dixon echoed this sentiment, describing moments of emotional overload that required temporary withdrawal: “There’s some days it is too much and I have to shut my door and say, leave me alone.” However, Dixon also emphasized the tension between personal need and professional obligation, reopening her door to meet others' emotional needs.

Structural gaps in staffing and resources further compounded the lack of emotional support. Principal Adams described operating without critical support personnel, stating, “We spent the majority of the school year without a social worker… funneling even more situations through myself.” This absence intensified emotional strain as Adams became the primary responder for student and family crises. She also noted the lack of formal preparation for managing emotional labor, explaining that while supportive people existed, there was “not necessarily training or professional development ongoing.” These comments underscore how emotional support was often informal and inconsistent rather than intentionally designed.

Several principals described difficulty being emotionally open within their own buildings. Principal Blake shared, “It was so hard for me to be open to anyone in my building,” noting a sense of being misunderstood. As a result, Blake described avoidance as a response to insufficient support, acknowledging that, although it was not effective, emotional openness felt unsafe. These experiences highlight how limited emotional support can undermine authentic connection among colleagues.

The absence of professional development focused on emotional labor or leadership well-being was repeatedly noted. Principal Francis stated, “I have never received nothing like that, professional. Not actual training.” Similarly, Principal Gibson reflected, “Social-emotional PD is geared towards students and teachers not school leaders.” These observations reveal a systemic emphasis on supporting others’ emotional needs while overlooking those of principals.

Other participants described district efforts to address emotional needs as well-intentioned but ineffective. Principal Harris observed, “They’re trying, but they don’t know how to land it,” and reflected on the disproportionate burden placed on principals, stating, “There aren’t many of us here… I’m carrying a flag I didn’t mean to carry.” Harris also acknowledged the unrealistic expectations associated with the role, noting, “I don’t have enough time to be everyone’s counselor. I wish I did.”

Principal Issac questioned whether emotional labor training for principals existed at all, stating, “I don’t know if [emotional labor training] even exists… if it does, I don’t think I’ve ever really heard of it.” She further emphasized the lack of actionable guidance, noting that while leaders were told emotional labor was understood, “there’s never really been any ideas and supports or suggestions on how to manage that.”

Finally, Principal Jackson articulated the emotional risk associated with seeking support, reiterating concerns about being perceived as unstable or ineffective. He described leadership as inherently isolating, stating, “It’s a lonely job… no one will truly understand how hard these jobs are,” and reflected on the broader implications of this isolation: “I don’t think we even truly know the magnitude of the impact on ourselves.”

Across participants, insufficient emotional support emerged as a systemic condition rather than an individual shortcoming. Principals consistently described limited access to formal emotional support, a lack of targeted training, and few safe spaces for vulnerability. While leaders were expected to manage the emotional needs of others, they often did so without parallel support, reinforcing isolation and compounding emotional strain. These findings suggest that emotional labor in school leadership is both underrecognized and under-supported, underscoring the need for intentional structures that address principals' emotional well-being as a core component of leadership sustainability.

This theme underscores the systemic lack of emotional support structures for principals, reinforcing the literature identifying leadership isolation as a significant risk factor for burnout (Grissom et al., 2021). Participants' experiences align with research indicating that professional development often prioritizes instructional leadership while neglecting leaders' emotional well-being (Grissom et al., 2021). The findings extend this literature by illustrating how cultural norms discouraging vulnerability further exacerbate isolation and emotional strain, underscoring the need for intentional emotional support systems for school leaders.

Summary of Findings

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative descriptive study exploring how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest describe their emotional labor. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven principals, supported by a demographic survey and the researcher's reflexive journal.

Analysis generated six overarching themes, each grounded in multiple codes and supported by direct quotes to amplify participant voices.

Data saturation was reached by the eighth interview, at which point no new codes or concepts emerged, and subsequent interviews confirmed previously identified patterns. The final six themes were consistently represented across participants, though the frequency of emphasis varied. For example, navigating conflicting demands of leadership and managing emotional exhaustion appeared in all eleven interviews, while insufficient emotional support for leaders was present in seven of the eleven cases. This distribution reflects both the shared and individualized nature of principals' emotional experiences, reinforcing the study's credibility through cross-case recurrence. The six themes demonstrate that principals in high-poverty schools face constant emotional triggers, balance authenticity with professionalism, perform leadership through emotional display, manage exhaustion, develop restorative practices, yet lack systemic emotional support. These findings not only deepen understanding of the emotional labor of principals but also highlight urgent areas for intervention in policy, leadership preparation, and district-level support.

Limitations

No research study is without limitations, and this investigation is no exception. The present study sought to explore how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest describe their experiences of emotional labor. While the findings provide meaningful insights, several limitations related to sampling, data sources, data collection, and data analysis must be acknowledged. These limitations shape the

transferability and applicability of the results and should be considered when interpreting the study's contributions.

The first limitation is specific to the sampling and participant representation. This study relied on a purposive sample of 11 principals from three school districts. While appropriate for generating in-depth descriptions, this sampling approach limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations of principals. As anticipated in Chapter 1, voluntary participation introduced the possibility of self-selection bias. Principals who agreed to be interviewed may have been those more comfortable reflecting on emotional labor, while those experiencing the most acute stress or burnout may have declined. Consequently, the findings may underrepresent the perspectives of principals facing the greatest emotional strain.

The second limitation references data sources and instruments. The study employed semi-structured interviews as the sole source of data. While this method elicited rich, descriptive accounts, it also introduces self-reporting bias. Participants may have minimized negative experiences or emphasized effective coping strategies to project professional competence. The absence of complementary data sources, such as observations, document reviews, or survey instruments limited opportunities for triangulation and cross-validation of findings. This limitation, anticipated in Chapter 1, narrowed the breadth of perspectives captured even as depth was prioritized.

Procedural differences also posed limitations. While most interviews were conducted via Zoom, two were held in person. Variation in modality, setting, and privacy may have influenced participants' openness or the depth of their reflections. Additionally, principals' demanding schedules occasionally constrained interview length, with some

responses appearing rushed or abbreviated. These factors introduced inconsistencies that may have affected the richness and comparability of the data.

Together, these limitations affect how the results should be interpreted. The findings represent contextually rich but situationally bound accounts from 11 principals. They illuminate important patterns of emotional labor consistent with existing literature, but they cannot capture the full range of principal experiences nationally or globally. Acknowledging these limitations demonstrates transparency and reinforces that the study's strength lies in its descriptive depth and its contribution to understanding principals' emotional labor in high-poverty settings, rather than in its breadth of applicability.

Summary

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest describe their emotional labor. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool, supported by demographic surveys and the researcher's observational notes. Data were transcribed verbatim, systematically coded, and then grouped into categories that captured recurring ideas. Through inductive analysis, six major themes were identified. Tables 4.1 through 4.6 present a clear trail of evidence by linking codes and categories to each theme, demonstrating transparency in the data analysis process. This analytic pathway ensured that findings remained firmly grounded in participant narratives, and principals' voices were prioritized through extensive use of direct quotations.

The six themes, *Navigating Conflicting Demands of Leadership, Balancing Authenticity and Professionalism, Performing Leadership Through Emotional Display,*

Managing Emotional Exhaustion, Restoring Self to Sustain the Role, and Insufficient Emotional Support for Leaders, collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of principals' emotional labor in high-poverty schools. Together, they reveal that principals must continuously regulate, suppress, and display emotions in ways that preserve school stability, maintain staff morale, and meet district mandates. These descriptions directly address the central research question: *How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?*

The first theme highlighted the persistent role conflict experienced by principals. They reported being torn between district compliance and the immediate needs of teachers and students. For example, Principal Adams described, "Every day I'm pulled in two directions—teachers want flexibility, but the district pushes for rigid compliance." Similarly, Principal King explained, "I feel like a middleman, constantly having to translate district demands into something my staff can live with." These accounts show how emotional labor arises not only from interpersonal exchanges but also from managing structural contradictions inherent in the role.

The second theme demonstrated how principals regulate emotions to maintain professional identity. They described the difficulty of being authentic while upholding expectations of calm, positivity, and composure. Principal Blake admitted, "Sometimes I plaster on a smile even when I'm hurting inside, because that's what people expect of me." In contrast, Principal Edwards engaged in deep acting, sharing, "I tell myself that I believe it, because if I believe it, I can convince others." Others spoke about emotional suppression, such as Principal Harris: "There are moments when I just push everything down because I don't want to burden anyone." These narratives underscore how

principals balance authenticity and professionalism, often at personal cost, in order to preserve their legitimacy as leaders.

The third theme emphasized the performative nature of leadership. Principals consistently described needing to "put on the leader face" in order to inspire confidence in others. As Principal Dixon reflected, "It doesn't matter if I've had a rough morning; once I walk in, I have to put on the leader face." Principal Gibson reinforced this, explaining, "People are watching you every second. If you're down, they're down. So, you learn to perform." This emotional display functioned as a leadership strategy, signaling stability and optimism to staff, students, and families even when leaders themselves were fatigued or discouraged.

The fourth theme revealed the cumulative toll of emotional labor. Principals repeatedly described feelings of depletion and stress. Principal Jackson confessed, "By the end of the week, I feel completely drained, but I have to keep going." Similarly, Principal Harris shared the long-term weight of suppression: "I bottle it up so I can make it through the day, but it wears on me over time." These testimonies illustrate how emotional exhaustion accumulates over days, weeks, and years, threatening sustainability in the role. This finding aligns with the anticipated limitations in Chapter 1, where the challenge of articulating deeply personal emotional experiences was expected to affect the richness of data. In practice, the depth of participants' disclosures varied, but the overarching message of exhaustion was consistent.

The fifth theme showed how principals actively sought ways to replenish their emotional reserves. Coping strategies ranged from prayer and physical activity to leaning on trusted relationships. Principal Edwards explained, "I walk every evening to clear my

head. That's the only way I can reset." Principal Adams emphasized the importance of professional camaraderie: "Spending time with colleagues who understand keeps me grounded." Others described faith practices as central, with Principal Thomas stating, "Prayer is what keeps me steady in the storm." These restorative practices highlight how leaders create spaces of renewal in order to sustain their demanding roles over time.

The sixth theme identified a critical gap: the lack of systemic support for principals' emotional well-being. Many described feeling isolated with no safe outlet for their emotions. Principal Kempson observed, "There's no space for principals to talk about how we really feel nobody wants to hear it." Principal Carson added, "I can't vent to my staff, and I can't admit vulnerability to my superiors, so where does that leave me?" These reflections illustrate how the absence of institutional supports compounds emotional strain, leaving principals to shoulder heavy burdens alone.

While these findings provide a rich portrait of principals' experiences, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported interviews created the potential for social desirability bias, as participants may have emphasized coping over vulnerability. Second, variation in interview modality (Zoom versus in-person) created differences in context and rapport, which may have affected responses. Finally, the purposive sample of 11 principals, while appropriate for depth, limits the transferability of findings to other regions or school types. These limitations, anticipated in Chapter 1, suggest that the results should be interpreted as contextually situated insights rather than universal generalizations.

In summary, the findings reveal a coherent narrative. Principals constantly negotiate conflicting demands between district and school needs. They regulate emotions

to balance authenticity and professionalism. Leadership is enacted through emotional display, shaping school climate. These practices contribute to emotional exhaustion and fatigue. Principals depend on restorative practices to sustain their work. Yet, they remain underserved by systemic support, leaving them vulnerable to burnout. The data analysis demonstrates how principals' emotional labor is both adaptive and costly, underscoring the resilience of leaders while also exposing structural gaps in support. These findings directly address the central research question and provide the foundation for the implications and recommendations discussed in Chapter 5, where connections to leadership practice, preparation, and policy will be explored.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction and Summary of Study

This qualitative descriptive study investigated how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest describe their emotional labor. The study is important because, while emotional labor has been widely studied in education and leadership (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), little research captures how principals in high-poverty contexts experience and manage it. Existing literature points to a crisis of principal burnout, stress, and turnover due to teacher attrition, accountability demands, and community challenges (McKay et al., 2024; Riley et al., 2021). Yet no professional guidelines exist to help leaders address these emotional demands, leaving principals vulnerable to exhaustion and attrition. This study addresses that gap by documenting principals' lived experiences.

The problem guiding this study was that it is not known how principals in high-poverty schools describe their emotional labor. Community and student poverty add unique pressures that compound principals' stress, often leaving them underprepared to balance district mandates with community needs (Barry et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore those experiences and give voice to principals' perspectives. One research question framed the inquiry: *How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?* Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven principals, supplemented by a researcher journal, and analyzed thematically. Six themes emerged: (a) navigating conflicting demands of leadership, (b) balancing authenticity and professionalism, (c) performing leadership through emotional

display, (d) managing emotional exhaustion, (e) restoring self to sustain the role, and (f) insufficient emotional support for leaders.

Chapter 5 summarizes these findings and situates them within existing scholarship, showing how they extend theories of emotional labor and leadership. The chapter also presents conclusions, theoretical and practical implications, and recommendations for future practice and research. Finally, it offers a reflection on the dissertation process and highlights the broader significance of understanding emotional labor for preparing and supporting principals in high-poverty schools. In doing so, this chapter directly connects the findings back to the problem space defined in Chapter 2, affirming that principals' emotional labor is both a critical challenge and an underacknowledged dimension of educational leadership in high-poverty contexts.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

This section is organized around the central research question and the six themes that emerged from the data, directly corresponding to participants' descriptions of emotional labor in high-poverty schools. Each theme is compared, contrasted, and synthesized in light of the body of knowledge reviewed in Chapter 2, particularly scholarship on emotional labor by Hochschild (1983), Grandey (2000), and Maslach and Leiter (2016). The problem addressed in this study was that it was unclear how principals of high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor. Chapters 1 and 2 provided context and a literature review on the problem space, while Chapter 3 outlined the qualitative descriptive design used to answer the research question. Chapter 4 presented the descriptive data and thematic findings, and this chapter now offers a

summary of findings, conclusions, implications, and reflections to integrate the study's contribution.

The research question guiding this study was: *How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?* Data collected from semi-structured interviews and research journal notes yielded six themes, which are summarized, contextualized with prior research, and interpreted below. Each of them is also related to the broader problem space defined in Chapters 1 and 2, enhancing the transferability of the findings to other contexts where principals face similar conditions.

Theme 1: Navigating Conflicting Demands of Leadership

For principals, navigating the demands of leadership was often a source of conflict. Principals described role conflict as a persistent challenge, balancing district mandates, accountability measures, and their own moral imperative to serve children and families in poverty. This produced relational strain, as leaders managed difficult interactions with staff and parents under stress. These findings confirm Blackmore's (2010) argument that leaders face competing demands between bureaucratic compliance and moral purpose, and echo Starr and White's (2008) evidence that principals in high-need schools often mediate systemic demands at personal cost. In Chapter 1, the background established that principals in high-poverty schools face unique pressures that test their moral compass while meeting external accountability requirements. In Chapter 2, the problem space identified a gap in empirical accounts of how principals navigate conflicts emotionally. These findings fill that gap by demonstrating that emotional labor is deeply rooted in leaders' constant negotiations between institutional expectations and personal values. Based on the findings, the study concluded: Principals' emotional labor

is deeply rooted in constant negotiation between institutional expectations and personal values, highlighting role conflict and strained relationships as central to leadership.

Theme 2: Balancing Authenticity and Professionalism

When balancing authenticity and professionalism, leaders routinely regulated their emotions through surface acting, deep acting, and suppression. Surface acting allowed them to project composure; deep acting helped align inner feelings with outward expressions; suppression prevented visible stress but created internal strain. These findings extend Hochschild's (1983) framework into educational leadership, affirm Grandey's (2000) claim that surface acting fosters dissonance, and confirm Brotheridge and Lee's (2008) concern that chronic suppression heightens emotional exhaustion. In Chapter 1, the background discussed the rising attention to emotional regulation in leadership, but without clarity on how authenticity is sustained in high-poverty contexts. In Chapter 2, the problem space identified the lack of descriptive evidence of principals' strategies for balancing authenticity with professionalism. These findings contribute by showing that principal's cycle through multiple strategies, but often at the cost of strain on authenticity and well-being, offering transferable lessons for other high-stress leadership roles. Based on these findings, it was concluded the principals balance authenticity and professionalism by cycling through multiple regulation strategies, but the trade-offs often strain authenticity and increase vulnerability.

Theme 3: Performing Leadership Through Emotional Display

Principals performing leadership through emotional display explained that leadership itself often felt like a performance. Through surface acting and relationship management, they deliberately displayed optimism, empathy, and composure to maintain

morale and inspire confidence. These results align with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens of leadership as performance and with Goleman's (1998) work on emotional intelligence, where relationship management is key to mobilizing others. In Chapter 1, the background highlighted the relational demands of leadership in high-poverty schools, where leaders must project to inspire others. In Chapter 2, the problem space pointed to the lack of empirical insight into how principals enact emotional displays as a form of leadership. The findings demonstrate that emotional display is not incidental but intrinsic to leadership practice in high-poverty contexts and is transferable to understanding leadership performance in similarly challenged environments. One conclusion drawn from this finding is that leadership in high-poverty contexts requires principals to perform emotional displays as part of the job, highlighting the performative nature of emotional labor in school leadership.

Theme 4: Managing Emotional Exhaustion

The ongoing demands of emotional regulation and suppression often led to fatigue, burnout, and emotional overload. Principals reported that exhaustion threatened both their well-being and their professional effectiveness. This finding is consistent with Maslach and Leiter's (2016) burnout framework and Riley et al.'s (2021) evidence that principals' emotional well-being is uniquely at risk. In Chapter 1, the background situates burnout as a national crisis among principals, intensified in high-poverty schools. In Chapter 2, the problem space emphasized the gap in linking emotional labor directly to principal burnout. This study's findings confirm that exhaustion is a predictable consequence of emotional labor, transferable to any leadership role marked by chronic stress and limited support. As such, the following conclusion was drawn: Sustained

emotional labor produces exhaustion that undermines principals' resilience, underscoring the need for organizational and systemic support structures.

Theme 5: Restoring Self to Sustain the Role

Principals found ways to practice self-care even in emotionally charged situations to be effective in their roles. To mitigate day-to-day stress and challenges, principals employed coping and re-centering strategies such as prayer, exercise, mentorship, and supportive networks. These practices enabled them to sustain leadership capacity over time. Montgomery and Rupp (2005) emphasized coping as a moderator of emotional strain, while Chen (2020) highlighted relational resilience as essential to sustaining principal leadership. Based on these findings, one conclusion was drawn: Principals' deliberate self-care and relational practices serve as protective factors that help them withstand the emotional toll of leadership.

Theme 6: Insufficient Emotional Support for Leaders

There was insufficient emotional support for school leaders, according to comments from principals. Participants described systemic gaps in emotional support, including professional isolation, lack of safe spaces for processing emotions, and inadequate institutional attention to leader well-being. These findings mirror Bauer and Brazer's (2012) conclusion that principals often feel isolated, as well as Friedman's (1995) assertion that systemic neglect of leaders' emotional needs contributes to burnout. One conclusion produced as a result of the findings was that emotional labor in high-poverty schools is exacerbated by the absence of systemic emotional supports, intensifying leaders' vulnerability.

Overall Conclusions

This study explores how principals in high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor. The six themes presented in Chapter 4 together highlight the complex emotional landscape of school leadership in high-poverty contexts. Taken together, these themes illustrate that emotional labor is both central to principals' leadership practice and a significant source of defenselessness. Each theme provided a nuanced account of how principals regulate, suppress, or display emotions in order to meet institutional expectations, serve their school communities, and preserve their own well-being.

The findings extend Hochschild's (1983) foundational framework by showing that emotional labor in school leadership is not only an individual regulation strategy but also a systemic and relational process shaped by institutional demands, community pressures, and inadequate support structures. They confirm and expand upon Grandey's (2000) framework and Maslach and Leiter's (2016) burnout model, while providing empirical evidence to address the gaps identified in Chapter 2, particularly the need for descriptive accounts of how principals in high-poverty schools manage the demands of emotional labor. Based on the findings, this study advances the literature by:

1. Demonstrating how emotional labor manifests uniquely in high-poverty schools, where competing demands, relational strain, and systemic neglect increase the challenges.
2. Demonstrating how principals rely on multiple strategies, including acting, suppression, and restoration to expand upon existing emotional labor frameworks.
3. Highlighting the critical need for systemic and organizational supports to reduce burnout and enhance leader sustainability.

Taken as a whole, this study demonstrates that principals' emotional labor is not peripheral but central to the work of leading schools in contexts of persistent poverty.

Their narratives reveal the double bind of leadership: the need to sustain composure and inspire confidence while absorbing the stresses of systemic inequities and limited support. While bound by the qualitative descriptive design outlined in Chapters 1-3, the findings hold transferability to other high-poverty contexts, offering insights that may resonate with leaders facing similar pressures.

By linking the lived experiences of principals addressed in Chapter 4 with the theoretical and empirical foundations outlined in the literature found in Chapter 2, this study ties together its purpose and contributions. The findings underscore the importance of acknowledging, preparing for, and addressing the emotional dimensions of leadership. Specifically, if these dimensions are left unattended, there becomes a risk of compromising both leaders' resilience and school effectiveness. Ultimately, the study affirms that the emotional lives of principals' matter, and that understanding their labor is essential for sustaining leadership in high-poverty schools.

Personal Reflection

Completing this dissertation has been both an academic milestone and a deep personal journey. As I reflect on my desire to earn a doctorate, I have come to understand that this dissertation journey is the culmination of my dream of conducting meaningful research. Yet, I find myself reflecting not only on the research itself but also on how the process has reshaped my identity as both an assistant superintendent and scholar. When I began, I thought of this study primarily as scholarly contribution. I was eager to explore principals' experiences of emotional labor in high-poverty schools and to add to the academic conversation. Along the way, however, it became much more than that. It

became a mirror held up to my own leadership practice and a reminder of the human dimensions of the work I help to guide at the district level.

As an assistant superintendent, much of my daily focus is on systems, policies, and instructional priorities. This research re-centered my attention on the principals who implement those priorities under conditions of enormous emotional strain. Hearing their stories about role conflict, exhaustion, and the constant performance of composure was both affirming and, in some way, quite chilling. It reminded me that while we often celebrate student growth and system gains, we rarely pause to ask what the cost is to those who lead schools on the ground. That realization has changed the way I approach my role. I now see the advocacy for principals' emotional well-being as inseparable from advancing student achievement.

The process of delegating, conducting, and interpreting this study also reshaped understanding of research itself. I learned that research is not a neat, linear pathway but an iterative, relational, and humbling process. My participants' openness stretched the theories I had once read at a distance, forcing me to see that emotional labor in education is not only an individual act of regulation by a systemic and relational phenomenon, shaped by inequities and inadequate supports. This shift in perspective has left me with both deeper respect for the scholarship that came before and a sense of responsibility to carry the work forward.

Ultimately, this dissertation represents more than a set of findings; it represents my growth as a leader, a researcher, and an advocate. I leave this process with a renewed commitment to lead with both head and heart to honor data and evidence while never losing sight of the people behind them. My hope is that this study not only contributes to

the literature but also sparks conversations in districts, policy, higher education, superintendent hiring, and leadership preparation programs about how we sustain the well-being of those who sustain our schools.

Implications

The findings of this study on principals' experiences with emotional labor in high-poverty schools have theoretical, practical, and future research implications. The study also presents strengths and weaknesses that shape the credibility and transferability of its conclusions. Together, these implications underscore the importance of understanding the intersection between leadership, emotions, and systemic support structures in schools.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study extends and deepens existing scholarship on emotional labor by applying Hochschild's (1983) framework and subsequent refinements (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008; Grandey, 2000) to the context of school leadership. Findings confirm that principals engage in surface acting, deep acting, suppression, and relationship management as part of their daily practice. However, the study also highlights the compounding impact of role conflict, systemic lack of emotional support, and the need for coping strategies, which enrich the theoretical discussion of emotional labor beyond workplace settings into the emotionally intense sphere of educational leadership.

The retrospective examination of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 shows that emotional labor among principals is not only an individual phenomenon but also a systemic one, shaped by organizational expectations and inadequate support. The themes that emerged, such as balancing authenticity with professionalism and performing

leadership through emotional display, illustrate how existing theories of emotional labor intersect with leadership theories and emotional intelligence frameworks (Goleman, 1998). This reinforces the credibility of conclusions, while also revealing the limits of current frameworks in accounting for the unique pressures faced by principals in high-poverty schools. A key theoretical implication is the recognition that emotional labor in leadership roles must be conceptualized as both intrapersonal (regulating one's own feelings) and relational (strategically managing interactions). The study thereby contributes to bridging gaps between leadership theory, organizational psychology, and educational research.

Practical Implications and Future Implications

The practical implications of this study are significant for school districts, leadership preparation programs, and policymakers. First, the findings suggest that principals in high-poverty schools need systemic structures of emotional support to reduce burnout and sustain leadership effectiveness. Districts could implement mentorship programs, professional learning communities, and structured opportunities for principals to share and reflect on their emotional experiences without fear of judgment or repercussions.

Second, leadership preparation programs should integrate training in emotional intelligence, stress management, and coping strategies as essential components of principal preparation. Findings such as principals' reliance on suppression or surface acting highlight the risks of ignoring the emotional dimensions of leadership. Preparing leaders to engage in deep acting, reframing, and healthy coping practices can foster authenticity, relational trust, and long-term resilience.

Finally, policymakers should recognize the role of context. High-poverty schools impose additional emotional demands on leaders, including heightened role conflict, community pressures, and relational strain. Funding and policy should prioritize resources for mental health supports, leadership coaching, and reduced administrative burdens to allow principals to focus on both instructional leadership and emotional well-being.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study

This study holds several noble strengths. The use of semi-structured interviews created space for principals to describe their experiences in their own words, producing the kind of rich, thick descriptions that qualitative inquiry values. This method not only captured the complexity of emotional labor but also provided participants the flexibility to surface issues the researcher might not have anticipated. The diversity of participants in terms of gender, years of experience and district contexts broadened the perspectives represented, allowing the thematic patterns that were not bound to a single demographic group or school setting. Grounding the analysis in established theoretical frameworks such as Hochschild's (1983) emotional labor, Grandey's (2000) emotion regulation strategies, and Maslach and Leiter's (2016) burnout model further strengthened the credibility of the findings by situating them within a well-developed scholarly tradition. Additionally, the systematic coding procedures, audit train of analytic decisions, and reflexive journaling enhanced the transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis, lending credibility to the conclusions drawn.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged as weaknesses for the study. The relatively small sample size, though consistent with qualitative descriptive

design, constrains the breadth of voices and limits transferability to broader populations. The use of self-reported data introduced the possibility of social desirability bias, as principals may have unconsciously portrayed themselves as more resilient or composed than they felt, particularly when reflecting on their professional competence. The absence of longitudinal observational data limited the ability to capture how emotional labor unfolds in real time or evolves across a school year. Furthermore, because participants were drawn from high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwest, the findings may not reflect the experiences of principals in other regions, grade configurations, or socioeconomic contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study's conclusions remain credible given the rigor of the research design. The consistency of findings across diverse participants, the careful application of coding and theme development, and the alignment with existing literature extend or complicate prior scholarship, enhancing its scholarly value rather than undermining its credibility. The weaknesses identified serve more as prompts for future inquiry than as threats to validity. For example, by incorporating observational methods, larger samples, or longitudinal designs to capture the dynamics of emotional labor over time.

Taken together, the study’s strengths demonstrate its contribution to advancing both theoretical and practical understanding of principals’ emotional labor, while its limitations highlight clear directions for continuing research. By critically weighing in these strengths and weaknesses, the study positions its conclusions as both credible and provisional. It is credible given the rigor of the design and analysis, and provisional in that it invites further exploration and refinement in new contexts.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The findings of this study suggest several actionable recommendations for future practice that can strengthen principal leadership in high-poverty elementary schools. The findings of this study, when situated within the broader literature reviewed in Chapter 2, point to several recommendations for practice, preparation, and future research. Because emotional labor is central to principals' leadership practice, particularly in high-poverty contexts, efforts to sustain leaders must intentionally address the relational regulatory dimensions of their work.

First, districts should create structured opportunities for principals to receive ongoing training in managing emotional labor, particularly in navigating role conflicts and maintaining healthy relationships with staff and families. As highlighted in the literature, emotional labor strategies such as surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983; Huang & Yin, 2024) are critical to principals' daily leadership practice, yet professional development rarely prepares leaders for these demands (D. DeMatthews et al., 2021). Leadership preparation programs and ongoing professional learning should include modules on emotional regulation, mindfulness, and coping strategies (Güler et al., 2023; Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020). Enhancing the preparation for principals with both the language and skills to recognize and manage emotional labor can reduce the risk of fake interactions, burnout, and attrition.

Second, school systems should develop institutional supports that address emotional exhaustion and burnout, a recurring theme across participants' experiences. Practical supports may include district-wide wellness programs, confidential counseling services, or structured release time for reflection and renewal. Principals like Adams and

Harris expressed the toll of constant emotional suppression, which literature confirms is a predictor of long-term burnout (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Embedding wellness initiatives within leadership practice not only benefits principals but also ensures stability in schools serving vulnerable student populations.

Third, the study highlights the importance of peer networks and mentoring opportunities for principals. Several participants described feelings of isolation, exacerbated by role conflict and a lack of emotional support. The literature underscores that while deep acting can build trust, it may also create fatigue if not paired with organizational supports (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; J. Huppertz et al., 2020). Districts and professional organizations could establish principal learning communities where leaders share coping strategies, practice deep acting through reflective dialogue, and re-center themselves through collective problem-solving. Research supports the value of professional networks in mitigating stress and fostering resilience among educational leaders (Leithwood et al., 2020). Such structures could particularly benefit novice principals, like Blake and Carson, who are still developing their leadership identity.

Fourth, multiple studies confirm the steep toll that sustained emotional labor exacts on leaders' mental and physical (Skaalvik, 2023; F. Wang & Pollock, 2020). Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to capture how principals' strategies evolve across time and how coping mechanisms interact with stress cycles throughout the school year. Additionally, research across varied contexts, such as rural, suburban, or secondary schools would extend transferability and strengthen understanding of how emotional labor manifests differently across settings.

Further, this study opens avenues for future research in multiple directions. One possibility is to expand the participant pool across different geographic regions and school levels (elementary, middle, and high school) to assess whether the emotional labor experiences identified here are consistent across contexts. Another promising area is longitudinal research that tracks principals over time, examining how their emotional labor strategies evolve and how these affect burnout, turnover, and student outcomes.

Additionally, while this study relied on semi-structured interviews, future studies could incorporate multiple data sources, such as observations, reflective journals, or physiological measures of stress. This process is necessary to triangulate findings and reduce reliance on self-reported data. Further, comparative studies between principals in high-poverty schools and those in more affluent contexts could illuminate the extent to which socioeconomic conditions intensify emotional labor demands. Finally, future research should also consider interventions, such as mindfulness programs, coaching models, or systemic reforms, which may reduce emotional exhaustion and strengthen principals' ability to sustain leadership over time.

Finally, leadership preparation and policy must explicitly acknowledge the emotional dimensions of school leadership. Preparation programs should incorporate training on surface and deep acting, emotional suppression, and strategies for self-care, directly reflecting the themes identified in this study. Policymakers and district leaders should also review systemic structures that exacerbate role conflict, such as unrealistic accountability measures and ensure principals are not left to navigate conflicting demands without adequate resources. Addressing these issues directly connects to the problem space outlined in Chapter 2, where emotional labor was shown to have long-

term consequences for symptoms of stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction (Scott et al., 2020). Other long-term consequences based on collaboration, trust, and teacher retention for leadership effectiveness and stability, underscoring the urgency to examine how principals cope with emotional demands over time (Hochschild, 1983).

Taken together, these recommendations can help districts, preparation programs, and policymakers recognize that principalship in high-poverty schools requires more than technical management skills. It requires intentional support for the emotional labor of leadership. By implementing these changes, schools can better sustain effective leadership and, ultimately, improve outcomes for students in high-poverty communities.

Holistic Reflection on the Problem Space

This study was grounded in the problem space of principals leading high-poverty elementary schools, who experience significant emotional labor that has historically been underexplored in educational leadership research. The problem space highlighted the tension between the technical and emotional dimensions of leadership, in which principals are responsible not only for instructional outcomes and organizational management but also for the relational and emotional well-being of staff, students, and families. From this foundation, the study highlighted the emotional costs of role conflict, surface and deep acting, and emotional suppression, as well as the resulting emotional exhaustion that principals must navigate daily.

The findings of this study contribute to the problem space by showing how principals personally experience and describe their emotional labor, offering a narrative that goes beyond abstract theory. Through their voices, the study confirmed that emotional labor is not a peripheral challenge, but rather a central, defining feature of

leadership in high-poverty schools. For example, principals described masking their frustration to avoid escalating tensions with parents or teachers, while simultaneously suppressing their own exhaustion to project stability to their school communities. These insights deepen the understanding of how emotional labor manifests in practice and extend the scholarly conversation by grounding it in lived realities rather than theoretical speculation.

This study was also relevant to the problem space because it illuminated both the consequences and coping mechanisms associated with principals' emotional labor. By identifying themes such as navigating conflicting demands, balancing authenticity and professionalism, and restoring self to sustain the role, the research highlighted not only the challenges but also the adaptive strategies principals employ. These findings reinforce the importance of designing systemic supports and professional development that address the emotional dimensions of leadership, which have been largely invisible in policy and practice to date.

Ultimately, this study contributed to understanding by providing a holistic view of principals' emotional labor in high-poverty contexts. It underscores that effective leadership cannot be separated from the emotional demands placed on principals and that sustainable school improvement requires acknowledging and supporting this hidden but vital aspect of leadership. The research, therefore, strengthens the call for districts, preparation programs, and policymakers to integrate emotional labor into both the theory and practice of educational leadership.

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Appendix A.

Ten Strategic Points

Strategic Points Descriptor		Learner Strategic Points for Proposed Study
1.	**Dissertation Topic**- Provides a broad research topic area/title.	How Do Principals Leading High-Poverty Elementary Schools Describe Their Emotional Labor
2.	**Literature Review** - Lists primary points for four sections in the Literature Review: (a) Background of the problem and the need for the study based on citations from the literature; (b) Theoretical foundations (theories, models, and concepts) and if appropriate the conceptual framework to provide the foundation for study); (c) Review of literature topics with key themes for each one; (d) Summary.	**Background to the problem** (a) Leithwood et al., 2020 discovered that perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways can explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness. (b) School leaders experience high levels of work-related stress, burnout, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Mahfouz, 2020; Riley et al., 2021; Wells & Klocko, 2015) (c) The work of principals is emotionally intense, and the nature of the work has direct consequences for principals' health, well-being and personal relationships (McKay et al., 2024). (c) **Theme 1: Emotional Job Demand** Principals handle a multitude of responsibilities, work under stressful conditions (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Elomaa et al., 2021) and they solve problems among teachers, students, and parents or guardians which according to them is one of the most demanding aspects of their work (Elomaa et al., 2021). Principals do not work in isolation and have to deal with elements they cannot(?) affect but have an influence on their leadership such as interaction with different stakeholders on a daily basis who are essential to their work (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Tintore et al., 2020). Different stakeholders can include teacher unions, state educational agencies, students' families, community members and program providers on different levels (Prado Tuma and Spillane, 2019). **Theme 2: High Poverty Schools and Emotional Labor** Researchers found that high-poverty schools, defined as student populations with 75% or higher free and reduced lunch, are different from other schools because students demonstrated lower academic achievement than students who attended (schools that are more affluent?) non-high poverty schools (Lippman et al., 1996). The original concept of emotional labor was first introduced by Hochschild when he referred to emotional labor as controlling feelings in a purposeful way in order to outwardly demonstrate appropriate facial and body displays (Hochschild, 1983; Shrivasta et al., 2024). According to Hochschild, this can be managed by using surface-

Strategic Points Descriptor		Learner Strategic Points for Proposed Study
		acting or deep-acting (Hochschild, 1983; Shrivasta et al., 2024). Surface acting involves faking, suppressing, or increasing felt emotions in order for the appropriate emotional display to proceed (Nguyen et al., 2022). Deep acting requires individuals to have a conscious effort to feel the appropriate emotion to obtain authenticity and personal accomplishment (Philipp & Schüpbach, 2010).
3.	**Problem Statement** - Describes the problem to address through the study based on defined needs or problem space supported by the literature	It is not known how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor.
4.	**Sample and Location** – Identifies sample, needed sample size, and location (study phenomenon with small numbers).	Principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in districts located in the Midwest. The size is 10 principals for the research study.
5.	**Research Questions** – Provides research questions to collect data to address the problem statement.	**RQ 1:** How do principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor?
6.	**Phenomenon** - Describes the phenomenon to be better understood (qualitative).	The landscape of educational leadership in the twenty-first century provides a range of emotional challenges that are rarely acknowledged or appreciated, thus requiring principals to develop a well-rounded sense of self, trusting in one's feelings, intuition, imagination, and resourcefulness, which is thought to be a primary concern considering the current state of schooling and leadership
7.	**Methodology and Design** - Describes the selected methodology and specific research design to address the problem statement and research questions.	Qualitative Descriptive Design Qualitative research is the best methodology because it provides insight that is not possible to explain with quantitative data alone (Kandel, 2020). The intent of qualitative research is to develop concepts that allow researchers to understand phenomena in their natural setting and provide meaning to experiences and from the views of the participants (Kandel, 2020).
8.	**Purpose Statement** – Provides one sentence statement of purpose including the problem statement, methodology, design, target population, and location.	The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to explore how principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor. I added the location because that is required in the purpose statement.
9.	**Data Collection** – Describes primary instruments and sources of data to answer research questions.	Interview questions with principals who are experiencing burnout due to emotional labor while leading high-poverty schools.
10.	**Data Analysis** – Describes the specific data analysis approaches to be used to address research questions.	Interviews and they will need to be coded in themes both inductively and deductively in the transcripts.

Appendix B.

Site Authorization

Site Authorization Letters on File at Grand Canyon University.

Appendix C.

IRB Approval Letter

GRAND CANYON UNIVERSITY

3300 West Camelback Road, Phoenix Arizona 85017 602.639.7500 Toll Free 800.800.9776 www.gcu.edu

DATE:	July 01, 2025
TO:	Naim Sanders
FROM:	Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board
STUDY TITLE:	Copy of How Do Principals Leading High-Poverty Elementary Schools Describe Their Emotional Labor
IRB REFERENCE #:	IRB-2025-7568
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Submission Response for Initial Review Submission Packet
ACTION:	Determination of Exempt Status
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Category 2

Thank you for your submission of study materials.

Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board has determined this study to be EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations. You now have GCU IRB approval to collect data.

If you make any changes to your approved IRB application, you need to return to the IRB with a modification for that change PRIOR to implementation. Making any changes without prior approval from the IRB will lead to a Code of Conduct and may lead to all unauthorized data being removed from your analysis.

For exempt studies involving human participants, researchers must use the approved recruitment script and IRB stamped informed consent that are located in the published IRB Study Documents. To access IRB approved materials, log into iRIS > click on My Studies > click the pen/pad icon to open the submission and access approved study documents.

Please note: All GCU doctoral learners must include a copy of this determination letter, any modifications, the IRB stamped informed consent, and approved recruiting document(s) in the appropriate dissertation appendices. For exempt studies designated as not human subjects research or only using archival data where recruiting/informed consent materials are not required, include this

determination letter in the appropriate dissertation appendix.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at irb@gcu.edu or 602-639-7804. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

ADVANCEMENT TO CANDIDACY

Congratulations!

On behalf of the College of Doctoral Studies, we are pleased to inform you that you have now advanced to the Candidacy stage of your Doctoral journey. This means you have completed all of the required proposal phases of the dissertation and you are now ready to move into the research portion of the dissertation work.

This is an important step in the doctoral process. Through advancing to candidacy, you are now among an elite group of learners who are doing academic research. This also means you are representing yourself and Grand Canyon University as an independent doctoral researcher and with that comes a great deal of responsibility. We wish you the best in your endeavors! Congratulations on this important step in your doctoral journey and welcome to Candidacy!

Dr. Michael Berger
Dean
College of Doctoral Studies

Dr. Cynthia Bainbridge
Associate Dean, Research and Dissertations
Chair, Institutional Review Board
College of Doctoral Studies

Dr. Nicholas J. Markette
Assistant Dean
Ed.D. Program Chair
College of Doctoral Studies

Dr. Melissa A. Singer Pressman
Director, Institutional Review Board
College of Doctoral Studies

Appendix D.

Informed Consent

Grand Canyon University
Institutional Review Board
3300 W. Camelback Rd.
Phoenix, AZ 85017
602-639-7804 | irb@gcu.edu

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Introduction

The title of this research study is How Do Principals Leading High-Poverty Elementary Schools Describe Their Emotional Labor.

I am Naim Sanders, a doctoral student under the supervision of Dr. Shad Morrow in the College of Doctoral Studies at Grand Canyon University.

The purpose of this study is to describe the emotional labor of principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools.

Key Information

This document defines the terms and conditions for consenting to participate in this research study.

How do I know if I can be in this study?

You can participate in this study if you:

- Are currently serving as a principal of a high-poverty elementary school where t least 75% of your students qualify for free and reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024"
- Currently serves as a principal of a high-poverty elementary school in the Midwest region of the United States.
- Willing to answer required personally identifiable questions related to gender and years of experience as a principal.

- You cannot participate in this study if you:
  - If you are the principal of a non-high-poverty school.
  - If you serve as a school principal of a school outside of the Midwest region of the United States
  - If you are not willing to answer identifiable questions related to gender and years of experience as a principal.

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Research Activities: What am I being asked to do?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a 60 – 90 minute interview by phone, virtually, or in person.

- ***What?***
  For this research study, the researcher requests that the participants participate in a 60 to 90-minute interview either in person, by phone, or virtually. During the interview, the participants will be asked to respond to 20-25 questions about emotional labor in the workplace. Demographic questions will include gender identification and years of experience as a principal.

- ***When?***
  The research will take place between May 2025 and September 2025.

- ***Where?***
  The research interviews will be in-person, via phone, or virtually. Participants can choose where they would like the interview to be conducted.

- ***How?***
  Research data will be collected through interviews with participants. The interviews will occur by phone, in-person, or virtually through Zoom video conferencing. Interviews will occur 1:1 between the researcher and participants.

- ***Audio Recording:***
  I will use an audio recorder or the audio recording feature of Zoom's online conferencing platform to record your responses. You can only participate if you wish to be recorded. The researcher will protect participants' identities. The researcher will maintain the recordings in a password-protected Google Drive that will not be shared. https://dc.gcu.edu/documents/irb_documents__iris/3-irb-policy-and-procedures/gcu_irb_handbookpdf

- ***Video Recording***
  I will use Zoom for video recording, an iPhone for recording interviews by phone, and an iPad for recording in-person and virtual interviews. The security data collected from the interviews will be kept in a password-protected Google Drive. You can only participate if you wish to be recorded. The identity of participants will be kept in. a Google Drive that is password protected.

Who will have access to my data/information?

I will have access to all of your data and information. In addition, my dissertation chair, committee members, and all College of Doctoral Studies Reviewers may view your information and your answers as part of the dissertation review process.

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DOCTORATES WITH PURPOSE
COMMUNITY | SUPPORT | INNOVATION

and your answers as part of the dissertation review process.

Am I required to participate in this study?
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. After reading this informed consent, you can decide whether to participate in this study. Also, if you choose to participate and then change your mind, you can leave the study at any time, even if you have yet to finish, without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to stop participating, you may do so by letting the researcher know. I will not use any of the information provided by any participant who chooses not to participate or stops during the interview. If so, I will not use the information I collected from you before you stopped.

Any possible risks or discomforts?
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study.

Any direct benefits for me?
No.

Any paid compensation or incentives for my time?
Participants will not get paid for their participation.

Presentation of Information Collected

The research data will be published as a dissertation. This will include key findings and information based on themes. Pseudonyms will replace participants' real names, and identifying information will be omitted to remove confidential information. The dissertation will be published in accordance to Grand Canyon University's requirements. .

Privacy and Data Security

Will researchers ever be able to link my data/responses back to me?
Yes. All confidential, identifiable information is kept separate from the data in a password-protected file.

Will my initial data include information that can identify me (names, addresses, or other identifying material, such as audio, specific demographics, etc.)
My initial data will include identifiers that will be replaced with codes. A key will be created to link the codes to the participants. The participants' codes will be destroyed after the data has been collected. Once the key has been destroyed, the data will no longer be linked to the participants.

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Will researchers assign my data/responses a research ID code to use instead of my name?
Yes. The researcher will use pseudonyms (e.g., "Participant A") instead of participants' names. The actual data will be labeled with the pseudonyms, not the participants' names.

If yes, how will researchers create a list to link names with their research ID codes?
I will create a key code master list to connect participants to their assigned code. The list will include three columns (the participants' name, email address/phone numbers and the codes). This master list will not be kept with the transcripts or any other data collected.

If yes, how will researchers secure the link of names and research ID codes? How long will the link be kept? Who has access? What is the approximate destruction date?
The master code list will be stored in a password-protected file on a secure computer. The master code list will be kept as long as it takes for the dissertation to be approved. The master code list will then be destroyed when the dissertation is approved. Only the researcher/principal investigator will have access to the master code list. The master code and any other password-protected files will be permanently destroyed by cleaning the drive January 1, 2029.

How and where will my data be protected (electronic and hardcopy)?
Audio recordings, informed consent, interview transcripts, and demographic information will be protected in a Google Drive that is password-protected.

Will artificial intelligence (AI) software be used?
No.

How long will the data be kept in the protected space?
For a minimum of three years.

Who will have access to the protected data?
I will have access to all of your data and information. In addition, my dissertation chair, committee members, and all College of Doctoral Studies Reviewers may view your information and your answers as part of the dissertation review process.

What is the privacy policy for survey platforms (Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, mTurk, Google, etc.), any recording software (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.), interview software, survey software, artificial intelligence software, or transcription software companies?
https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/

Where and how will the signed informed consent forms be secured?
The signed informed consent forms will be stored and secured in a Google Drive password-protected.

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Future Research

Once identifiers, names, and addresses are removed from the data collected for this study, the gender and years of experience leading high-poverty schools could be used for future

research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative.

Study Contacts

Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study, before or after your informed consent, will be answered by Naim Sanders, [redacted]

If you have questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the College of Doctoral Studies at IRB@gcu.edu; (602) 639-7804.

Voluntary Consent

Participant Rights

- You have been given an opportunity to read and discuss the informed consent and ask questions about this study.
- You have been given enough time to consider whether or not you want to participate.
- You have read and understand the terms and conditions and agree to take part in this research study.
- You understand your participation is voluntary and that you may stop participation at any time without penalty.

Your signature means that you understand your rights listed above and agree to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant or Legally Authorized Representative **Date**

Appendix E.

Interview Protocol

Beginning Script

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. The purpose of this study is to explore how principals leading high-poverty elementary schools describe their emotional labor. Your participation is vital, as your experiences and insights will help illuminate the challenges and strategies involved in managing emotions in your unique leadership role. Please know that your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may skip any question or withdraw from the study at any point without any penalty. All of your responses will be kept confidential, and your identity will be protected by using a pseudonym throughout the research process. Before we begin, I would like to review the confidentiality statement and obtain your informed consent. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and meets all ethical guidelines according to the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) and IRB requirements. Your data will be securely stored, and only the research team, the dissertation chair, committee members, IRB representatives, and peer reviewers will have access to it. Please be careful not to mention names during the interview process. If you must use a name, please use only first names in referencing others. Do you have any questions about the study or your rights as a participant? [Pause for questions]. Thank you. Please review and sign the consent form. Your assigned pseudonym for this study is _____.

Interview Script

I have now received your signed informed consent form. Today, I will be asking you a series of open-ended questions designed to gather detailed descriptions of your experiences with emotional labor as a principal in a high-poverty elementary school. There are no right or wrong answers; I am interested in your honest reflections based on your lived experiences. All interviews will be audio recorded using Notability and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript to verify that it accurately reflects your responses. If you feel uncomfortable or wish to stop, please let me know. We will begin with some demographic questions and then move into the core interview questions.

Interview Questions

Demographic and Background Questions

1. Can you please tell me about your role as a principal, including how many years you have served in this position?
2. Approximately what percentage of students at your school are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch?
3. What is the size of your student body, and what are some key characteristics of your school community?
4. What is your gender identity?

Core Questions on Emotional Labor

1. How would you describe your overall experience of emotional stress as a principal in a high-poverty school?
2. Can you share an example of a situation in which you had to manage your emotions while interacting with teachers, students, parents, or district officials?
3. Can you describe a time when you showed a different emotion on the outside than what you were really feeling on the inside? What made you decide to do that?
4. Describe a time when you felt one way but had to act a different way.

5. Can you describe a time when you had to not only show a certain emotion at work, but also found yourself working to genuinely feel that way in order to better support your students, staff, or community?
6. How does managing your emotions at work affect your personal well-being and how you lead others? ,
7. How do you cope with or manage the stress associated with these emotional demands?
8. Have you received any training or support (e.g., professional development, mentoring) related to managing emotional labor? If so, how has this influenced your approach?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about how you describe or manage your emotional labor in your leadership role?
10. Do you show fake emotions and respond to situations opposite to how you feel? If so, how often?
11. How do you regulate your emotional expressions or fake communicate how you feel?
12. Do you find that surface acting to be exhausting and impact your level of job satisfaction?
13. Do you change how you feel at work to adjust to the feelings of others, if so when and what causes it?
14. In your opinion what are some positive benefits to deep acting or surface acting?
15. What strategies do you use for regulating your emotions at work?
16. When do you feel the need to modify your felt emotions (ie, dealing with parents, teachers, staff, district administrators, or others)?

Follow-Up and Probing Questions

1. Can you describe what it looks like when you work to genuinely feel the emotions you need to show during your day?
2. Could you provide more details on how these emotional regulation strategies affect your interactions with stakeholders?
3. Have there been any specific challenges in your school environment that have shaped the way you manage your emotions?
4. Tell me about a time when changes in your school community or your role led you to manage your emotions differently than you had before.

Interview Completion Script

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview, which serves as the primary tool for collecting data in my study. Following this interview, the audio recordings will be transcribed verbatim. The transcripts, along with observational notes from a research journal, will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2014) six-phase thematic analysis. This process will involve familiarizing with the data, open coding to identify relevant themes (such as experiences of surface acting, deep acting, and emotional resilience), and refining these themes through iterative comparisons and member checking. The aim is to develop a rich narrative that describes how principals in high-poverty schools experience and manage their emotional labor. You will have the opportunity to review your transcript using a process called member checking. At that time, you will ensure the accuracy of your words. At this time, do you have any questions or comments? [Pause for questions]. Thank you again for your participation.

Appendix F.

Codebook

INITIAL CODES

1. Surface acting
2. Deep acting
3. Genuine emotional expression
4. Emotional suppression
5. Emotional regulation
6. Emotional masking
7. Emotional dissonance
8. Emotional exhaustion
9. Compassion fatigue
10. Burnout
11. Role conflict
12. Role overload
13. Identity tension
14. Professional identity strain
15. Moral distress
16. Managing anger
17. Managing frustration
18. Managing anxiety
19. Managing sadness
20. Displaying optimism
21. Displaying calmness
22. Performing confidence
23. Maintaining professionalism
24. Relational maintenance
25. Conflict mediation
26. Managing difficult conversations
27. Power and authority tension
28. Accountability pressure
29. Stakeholder expectations
30. Emotional labor with teachers
31. Emotional labor with students
32. Emotional labor with parents
33. Emotional labor with supervisors
34. Lack of emotional support
35. Isolation in leadership
36. Coping strategies
37. Boundary setting
38. Emotional spillover (work to home)
39. Emotional resilience
40. Self-care practices
41. Sensemaking of emotions
42. Meaning-making through reflection

Code, Code Descriptions Themes and Participant Quotes

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
Role Conflict	Tension or difficulty experienced when the expectations of the principal's role conflict with personal values, responsibilities, or other professional duties.	Navigating Conflicting Demands,	"I feel very strongly against requiring school supplies for any kids… this year I had to give them something… trying to find the balance to do right by my family as well." "With district staff, it's when I feel like my moral compass is getting pushed to do something that I don't want to do is when I have felt the most triggered." "Assessing the needs of the students in the community is challenging" "Teachers...kept refusing to provide that support in our building" "District...some things we were told was not really applicable" "Even if it doesn't make sense to me...I try to embrace it and apply it" "I live every emotion that my teachers live... If they're struggling with, I mean, we had a parent this year who was under the substance abuse..." "…constantly re-explain yourself and trying to make sure that what's best for kids is always happening..." "…staff member who I felt was constantly coming after me… very challenging to maintain a professional working relationship…" "…staff member who I felt was constantly coming after me… very challenging to maintain a professional working relationship…" "...you have to make sure that you align your what you say and you know the information that you communicate to the staff you have to align it to what the district is communicating with you while also making sure that you are acknowledging the feelings and the emotions of your staff."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"Participant E expresses tension between meeting district expectations and being emotionally supportive to staff."
			"Indicates conflict between personal well-being and professional responsibilities."
			"You're dealing with district mandates, staff expectations, and the community. At any time, there's about 600 people... I have to deal with that."
			"Going into this year, we got a lot of budget constraints... I couldn't call the district that I'm pissed off and I'm upset..."
			"I had to be strong. And I had to be stoic... I had to lead." (funeral situation)
			"I'm still going to do what's best for your child, even when I don't want to."
			"I need to write this letter for this parent... or go to the principal's meeting... I'm going to court."
			"You are the therapist, psychoanalyst... and you are definitely talking your young teachers through..."
			"You might want to pause to take. So the flip side of that though is that as a building leader..."
			"Not that I recall... it's always primarily geared toward students and teachers. It's not really geared toward school leaders."
			"I have to be like the best mom, that you could be the best daughter, that you could be the best mentor... while trying to support my assistant principal."
			"We cannot do anything that impedes the law... but seeing the fear in their face and not trying to reciprocate that... is one of the hardest things."
			"You're not a good principal if you don't look at your email all the time."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"I'm carrying the flag that I didn't mean to carry."
			"Just because the position changes doesn't mean the learner does."
			"...their expectations and what they think I should be doing and what they believe that my role is looks a little different, I guess, than what I think."
			"...the teachers are expecting you to handle all the Black moms that give them grief...because they see me as a person that should be able to connect with them."
			"...I had to show them the motion to support them...still be able to say, you know, I have to support the district decision."
			"...you're taking the teachers, their drama on, they got stuff going on..."
			"...not only for my, because even as a leader of adults..."
			"…how do you defend a teacher's actions to an angry parent when in your heart of hearts you know the teacher was wrong but yet you have to pretend you have to support…"
			"…I might not like a situation or decision, but it doesn't mean it was made to make me miserable. It was made considering all 16 of us elementary principals…"
			"…I have to put the children first. And if I don't have capacity to do for all, I don't do for one…"
Surface Acting	The act of displaying emotions that are not genuinely felt, in order to comply with expected emotional expressions at work. Emotions are suppressed or faked to maintain	Performing Leadership Through Emotional Display	"Yes, the surface acting… daily to be honest… I have to display my facial expressions and my emotions to meet their needs at the time, even when it feels overly dramatic to me or inaccurate.
			"I stayed calm and ended the meeting even though I had an angry parent screaming and cussing… even though I was feeling very… escalated emotions myself."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
	professionalism or harmony.		
			“I had to be smiling, handshaking, a little cheerier than my normal self.”
			“I need to show that I am understanding and I am listening”
			“I'm inhaling and exhaling at the same time because I need to oppress my feelings”
			“I feel like I was not honest
			“Sometimes you got to be able to put on a show... student might say something silly, and on the inside I'm laughing, but I got the mean
			Everyday. I come in the building... it's a smile. No matter what's going on...
			“…you have to match your feelings to what people need and being aware of the people around you."
			"…on the inside, I might be frustrated, but
			“…every morning has to come and have a 10-minute hello… have to make sure I’m giving them that positive energy…"
			‘Participant suppresses personal views to maintain professional neutrality.”
			“on the outside, I was being positive and optimistic and encouraging and trying to uplift them. While on the inside, I knew that it was not, it was gonna be completely opposite.”
			“I think I fake emotions more with my personal views...”
			“So I, I'd come off like I was super upset with him... but really inside, I'm like, man, that's just a kid thing to do.”
			“You get somebody doing something that you disagree with... you can't completely show it the way that you really want to show.”

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"I'm not going to escalate with them... I can use a very calm voice."
			"I will sit there and be silent for the whole PD."
			"I just keep my mouth closed. Unless it violates the rights of others..."
			"Surface acting is okay when you're trying to get through the day, the meeting, or avoid a negative emotional outburst."
			"My facial expressions, that's an area of weakness... even when I think I'm doing a good job masking it."
			"If I was frazzled, I knew that they were going to be frazzled."
			"My game face has definitely gotten better through the years."
			"My silence. My email is shorter. I say less."
			"I might pull up in my car in tears, but the minute I get out of my car, I have to turn it all off and put on a smile and a brave face..."
			"...surface acting still exists. It's kind of like code-switching... I know what my audience is and kind of what their appetite is for."
			"...we had a serious conversation, and then the voice changes… it's surface like… fake it and make everybody feel comfortable..."
			"...I had to put on the gray face smile and say everything's gonna be okay..."
			"You couldn't show that anger because all you're going to do is fuel the situation..."
			"...I still would carry the rage, but people really see it."
			"…my outward persona and my inside brain are not in the same space, but I have to fake it till I make it."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"…inside, I just wanted to scream at them… but on the outside, I had to remain that professional, logical, regulated person…"
			"…good that I can fake it till I make it when I'm having a moment because then my staff don't have to worry about me…"
			"…faking that not screaming back at people when I want to helps…deescalate…"
Deep Acting	A conscious effort to align internal emotions with expected external expressions. Involves mentally reframing a situation to genuinely feel the emotions one is expected to show (e.g., empathy, calm, encouragement).	Balancing Authenticity & Professionalism	"My emotions… have changed… asking lots of questions… reconsidered something myself based on more information."
			"I do think that I… got more empathetic towards our families… more judgmental as a teacher."
			"Put everything outside the building...interact in a healthy way"
			"Trying to understand empathy...understanding other emotions"
			"Listening to them carefully until the end"
			"Trying to like match their emotion, what they were going through... especially with my parent this year..."
			"If I got a staff member who's really down... I understand that... empathize a little bit with them...
			"…every morning you are happy and you're welcoming the students into the building, even if you're having a bad day…"
			"…when you're in a situation that is not going the way you want, you have to make sure that you're able to handle it…"
			"lean in on the data and speak really from a data lens and I provide clarity and awareness more so... than my personal response."
			"trying to be more intentional about my interactions..."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"Mr. T is a different character, he's invested in this community, his staff, and his students. He's deeply invested in that."
			"Managing my emotions at work... I got a therapist... because I wanted to have the same guy that was at the school come back to my house."
			"I'm more on that deep side... the work is about the whole child."
			"I see a person in that kid that nobody else sees... so therefore I'm going to show up."
			"When we talk about trauma and stress... that situation knocked the breath right out of me."
			"My human side is going to always win out for me."
			"I've definitely had situations... yelled at and screamed at... I overlook everything and just do the work."
			"So sometimes you have to gather your thoughts differently... because they want to know what you think."
			"I accommodate my teachers often... I genuinely think they are good for children."
			"I think that compartmentalization also comes with navigation."
			"...I had to take it as a teachable moment for that adult for them to understand… that took a lot to maintain the right composure."
			"With deep acting, I'm trying to identify with you so you're working towards it..."
			"...staff that I've worked with, the surface acting seems to make them comfortable before I can get to the deep acting part."
			"I keep the kid in my mind...I said, the kid's face stays up here."
			"I do try to consider maybe another side..."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"…changing my feelings sometimes is appropriate and helps me be a better person, be more compassionate, be more understanding."
			"…find ways to start your day, whether it's a gratitude journal… talking with a colleague who gets it…"
			"…I needed to be more calm… give them facts… too much optimism would not have been good…"
Emotional Exhaustion	Feelings of being emotionally overextended or depleted due to sustained emotional demands. May manifest as fatigue, burnout, irritability, or a sense of being overwhelmed.	Managing Emotional Exhaustion	"I feel more calloused as a human… desensitized to some things."
			"Surface acting… feeling completely depleted some days… not sustainable."
			"I don't have emotionally a lot left in my tank to interact with people personally."
			"You need to be strong...mentally you have to be healthy"
			"I think I oppress my feelings most of the times."
			"That kind of feels sometimes exhausting"
			"I can feel it building up. It's about to hit me... it takes its toll on you..."
			"There were times in the past, it was deep, deep emotional distress..."
			"…three weeks of no sleep and outbursts 24/7… coming into school every day exhausted and frustrated…"
			"…very frustrated and hurt… had to remember not to bring those feelings back to work…"
			"I took an emotional toll on me as well this year because one of my strengths is empathy."
			"sometimes it takes a major emotional toll on my personal life."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"you find yourself not even having a moment to yourself... it's like I belong to other people all day long..."
			"You take on the weight of your staff. You take on the weight of your students. You take on the weight of everything."
			"Before... I would be cool and calm at work then come home and just pretty much let everybody have it."
			"It was definitely several times at 9.5 [out of 10] this year."
			"This year I just really have reached... my cup is full and overflowing."
			"I'm just tired... of being in that space."
			"It's a thankless job... but you ain't gotta rub it in my face."
			"These last two years have been really rough."
			"It was very difficult when you had a family come in, say bye to you, and leave. And then you had to go about your day like nothing happened."
			"There was a lot of principals... that were like cracking and they were having mental health issues."
			"I took email off of my phone...I felt like it was one of those things like you're not a good principal if you don't look at your email all the time."
			"...I feel like I can't have a moment of weakness... I can't be stressed. I can't take off work."
			"..it can be exhausting...a whole lot of surface stuff...then I don't feel like I'm as impacted."
			"...it was overwhelming. It really was. There were plenty of nights when I went home to tears."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"...I was very invested in their wellness. And I don't think I took a lot of care of mine..."
			"...I actually, that's where I started covering some major health issues."
Coping Strategies	Personal or professional techniques used to manage emotional labor and reduce stress. These may be reactive (after stress arises) or proactive (to prevent stress buildup).	Restoring Self to Sustain the Role	"Step away… walk into classrooms… walk around the building… put myself in timeout in my car."
			"Unleash something on [assistant principal] verbally… get it out of my system."
			"Sought out therapy… for almost a year."
			"Close my door and drink water...inhale and exhale
			"Do something not related to my building...like time with my family."
			"Walking is kind of my favorite"
			"Pickleball... I've played about an hour and a half every night since summer break..."
			"I step away... go outside... that walk with a student... helps me regulate as well."
			"Trusted adults... AP last year... we shut the door and we have a good conversation..."
			"…shut my door for five minutes and just kind of take a break…"
			"…go on a walk if it's a rough day… listen to music or read a book…"
			"…make a phone call… need someone to talk me off this ledge…"
			"sometimes I close my door...turn off my light...put on a dim lamp...read my daily scripture..."
			"just being able to vent...use some choice words...relate to people who are in the field..."
			"I don't hold grudges...I always look at the bright side..."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"I go to the gym right after work to decompress... listen to my favorite podcast."
			"I got great friends... good friends to conversate with... having a therapist helped out a lot too."
			"I became very intentional about leaving work at work... taking walks... monthly massage... reading novels."
			"I have the right to say no... she believed she could, but she's tired."
			"If it's really rough and tough... I'm going to go into my office, turn on gospel music... call my mom."
			"Sister circle... safe space to get some things off our chest."
			"The listening and being quiet has allowed me to sit at tables with stakeholders."
			"I always tell them that they need to go find a counselor because I tell them I can't be this amazing without them."
			"I took email off my phone… You're not a good principal if you don't look at your email all the time."
			"Making sure I see a counselor, especially with some of our heavier things."
			"I try to do [difficult meetings] on particular days...I really try not to ruin people's weekends."
			"I only have 30 minutes for this meeting and that's it."
			"After work, it would be go for a walk...or just have some quiet time."
			"While I'm at work...going in my office and closing the door...maybe I might have a quiet night."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"...I always have a bottle of water with me to take a drink before I speak..."
			"...I do walk away. I will have to pause...say, I need to come back to that."
			"...write some stuff down… have a notepad… help me cope..."
			"...now I come in with a different mindset...on that drive home, I can release it all out..."
			"...I'm really working on taking that self-care, having better boundaries..."
			"…close my door and pretend to be on the phone…"
			"…walk outside around the building… delay calling a parent back…"
			"…go to music with kindergarten… nothing cheers you up more…"
			"…focus on one positive thing a day…"
			"…send three text messages to three people to tell them I appreciate them…"
Relationship Management	Efforts to build, maintain, or repair professional relationships while managing emotions. Involves emotional skill in navigating interactions with students, staff, parents, or colleagues.	Navigating Conflicting Demands,	"Trying to help deescalate the adults and reassure the kids nearby."
			"Make a good impression… wanted them to understand I was there for them."
			"Trying to understand different points of view… to help resolve issues."
			"Listening to the parent...even if I don't understand."
			"Leading questions...help me regulate my emotions"
			"Be very careful what is coming out of your mouth"
			"You're the leader in the building... if you're down... being able to stay positive..."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			“I can be a little bit emotional with her at times... she's one of my go-tos...”
			"…you have to be mindful… show them that support and make sure you're giving them what they need."
			"…I try to be a leader that is active… I'm in the classrooms every day… not crossing the line of being a friend."
			“teachers need to know that they are seen and they're heard and they have a safe space...”
			“...called a meeting with that particular employee...help me to understand...”
			“It allows me to treat them respectfully... they feel like they’re a part of the school.”
			“Even same time being supportive of the teacher who I didn't agree with at all...”
			“I can calm this parent down...I'm modeling for my APs and my secretary.”
			“Let’s talk about why that wasn’t okay in front of your child.”
			“Listening and being quiet has allowed me to sit at tables with stakeholders.”
			“Me letting you in, I need you to understand I'm protecting their peace as well as my own.”
			“So if I could create that climate and culture where teachers like to be at work, then my kids like to be at school.”
			“...trying to get them to see where the parent is coming from, where the teacher is coming from, and getting that teacher to build that bridge instead of leaving it just to me.”
			“...how can we work together to do that... then I have a much higher job satisfaction.”

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"...they knew how I felt… we would have those conversations... we just had to come together and figure out how to make it work."
			"I like to communicate...I need to understand where you are, the why behind it."
			"...once people see who you are...they care, you can have your heart conversation."
			"…I needed to… give them support… wallow with them for a little bit…"
			"…you have to be careful not to overdo. It's also okay to be human… say, I'm frustrated too."
			"…if I need to vent, I can vent to [a trusted colleague] and I know it stays there…"
Emotional Suppression	Consciously acting to inhibit outward expressions of emotions while experiencing an emotion.	Balancing Authenticity & Professionalism	"Hearing things that students and their families are going through at home is emotionally taxing... students in crisis, families in crisis... added more draining than typical years.
			"Sometimes we're emotionally trying to help regulate the adults as well... managing the social emotional skills of adults and kids in the job."
			"We had about 50 families... I had to stay cool, calm, and collected... took so much energy to stay composed and professional and manage all of those different people."
			"Even though I was feeling very... escalated emotions myself on the inside, I kept myself composed."
			"I feel very strongly against requiring school supplies for any kids... had to give them something... I still very much disagree with it."
			"I feel more calloused as a human... I don't have emotionally a lot left in my tank to interact with people personally."
			"I sought out therapy outside of work... was feeling so heightened with all of my responsibilities... professional help to talk through things."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"Not necessarily training or professional development... supportive people and roles that help me work through it."
			"I daily... have to display my facial expressions and my emotions to meet their needs... even when it feels overly dramatic to me or inaccurate."
			"I feel like I truly just got more empathetic and changed some of my feelings and my emotions towards things in this role."
			"This job has changed me for the better as a person... given me a better spectrum of what is a big deal and what's a small deal in life."
			"Service acting is what aids, I think, to feeling completely depleted some days at the end of the day... doesn't feel sustainable."
			"Sometimes I will step away... walk and give myself space to distract myself... I have put myself in timeout in my car... and cool down."
			"With district staff, it's when I feel like my moral compass is getting pushed to do something that I don't want to do... most triggered."
			"Assessing the needs of the students in the community is challenging most of the times. But as a principal... how to respond to the needs of the students and the community is very essential.
			"As a principal, I need to take a break, times to times... you need to be strong, you need to be perseverant and resilient, and mentally you have to be healthy."
			"I did not want any of my decisions be clouded by the fact that I'm going through a hard time in my private life... I had to oppress my feelings most of the times."
			"Parents have much difficulties... teachers... had resistance to provide the support... with the district level, it was challenging sometimes."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"I do close my door and drink water... I look up a ceiling with open eyes... take a deep breath, inhale and exhale.
			"When I leave the building, go and do something not really related to what I am doing in my building time with my family or reading something not related to education."
			"You must know not to take things personal and at the same time you still need to have the self-awareness about your own emotions."
			"Even if I do not agree with them, I am doing surface acting because I'm trying to elevate the tension."
			"I can mentally be stable and have that healthy conversation... I do feel like I am able to interact in a better way with my teachers."
			"There are so many different personalities inevitably in the building... you still need to know how to interact and work with that person."
			"This is district wide decision, and we have to use this resource... listening to them carefully until the end that was kind of challenging.
			"...there are times when you're getting hit with something that happened to a family, something that happened to a kid, and it just builds and builds, and you hit that breaking point where there's going to be tears."
			"...I live every emotion that my teachers live. If they have problems at home, I feel it... It had emotional toll where she was like, her feeling was like you were her rescuer... it takes toll on you."
			"...being able to stay positive all the time and be a true leader in the building... is a big factor in that."
			"...he was searching for how to kill your best friend... how to obtain a gun permit as a minor... That, to me, where a 10-year-old has found access to that... it breaks my heart to see

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			a child who's been exposed to this stuff at such an early age."
			"...sometimes you got to be able to put on a show... you've got to be a little bit mean in your conversation with that student."
			"...those departments are getting too full. And then I go in with my social worker, shut the door. I'm like, I've had it."
			"...you got to put on that show a little bit on the outside... part of being positive and being strong for everyone else... it takes its toll."
			"...I got to the point where sometimes I don't even hear them no more... what they see from me is them acknowledging what they are saying."
			"...when we hugged, we cried because she was a good teacher. She didn't want to leave... it takes a different toll on you."
			"I've had to turn my head away from the student and the mother... it breaks my heart..."
			"I've got to be able to take a deep breath and like, look, let me help you understand..."
			"Had to have a conversation with my two leaders about the things that were being said about me... I was very frustrated and hurt... I had to maintain a professional attitude."
			"Three to four times a week... you have to make sure you're making them feel special and excited... sometimes you don't want to be bothered... but you have to give them the attention they need."
			"You had to remember like they're frustrated because you're changing their whole way of work... maintain a positive attitude about it and did not let their frustrations overwhelm me."
			"You have to stay neutral... a lot of people just need to be heard... try and bring them back down to that neutral level."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"Every morning you are happy and you're welcoming the students... even if you're having a bad day."
			"Coming into school every day, exhausted and frustrated... I had to appear calm and collective and ready for the day where inside I just wanted to have a moment to break down."
			"One staff member who's constantly would come in very aggressive and angry... you want to just snap back... I try really hard to stay calm and show respect."
			"I had to be supportive... I was a little stressed out because I knew they were about to leave and the bell was about to ring, but I couldn't show them that."
			"On the inside your heart is breaking because you're hearing what this kid is going through but you have to stay calm and collective... so they feel safe and comfortable."
			"The father continued to scream and holler even when I had calmly asked him multiple times... So finally I had to ask him to leave... it made me feel uncomfortable."
			"Trying to fight a history of the teachers who haven't changed with the climate... They are used to having kids who came on grade level. They had good behaviors. They have active parents and our clientele has changed."
			"Helping staff members to understand students' feelings and the way they express them and having compassion towards the teaching. Teachers have enough compassion towards our struggling students who are facing challenges at home."
			"You're dealing with people... our kids didn't sign up to live in the neighborhood they live in... they should be taken care of."
			"It's a very stressful job. I just don't let it impact me like that. There's more of a call to me than a job."
			"You get cussed out and you're like okay next."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"You hear some of the craziest, you know, heart-wrenching stories."
			"Helping others...I understand what trauma does...what poverty does."
			"Supporting students in crisis because that could happen daily and staff well-being and morale."
			"Today's political climate because of my clientele…"
			"They come to people that they feel the safest with."
			"...stress comes in with trying to meet the needs of all the students...staff is not as diverse as the student population..."
			"...how they manage students...they're not necessarily understanding where a student might be coming from..."
			"...made to sit in a quote-unquote cell...they feel that that's their only path."
			"...students came to school with a lot of needs...sometimes it was...the kid was hungry."
			"...walking the neighborhood after school to make sure kids got home safely."
			"…I have to be regulated at all times… can't have a human moment at school unless… in the privacy of my office…"
			"…riding the roller coaster of emotions every day… that's just your work emotions…"
			"…help teachers provide opportunities for children… remove the barriers…"
			"...balancing my professional emotions as well as the staff's emotions..."
			"...called a meeting with that particular employee...help me to understand..."

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
Lack of Emotional Support	A perceived or real absence of structures, people, or systems that validate, support, or help manage the emotional demands of leadership.	Insufficient Emotional Support	“We spent majority of the school year without a social worker… funneling even more situations through myself.”
			“I wouldn’t say necessarily training or professional development ongoing.”
			“Not necessarily professional development… supportive people… but not training.
			“It was so hard for me to be open to anyone in my building.”
			“That person is not really understanding you.”
			“I think I’m avoiding the person...you know that’s not going to work.”
			“I don't think there's been any PD... more comes from HR...”
			"…I don’t know. I guess not sure if we've had a lot of professional development now on that topic."
			"…very challenging to maintain a professional working relationship…"
			“...it is a lonely profession...you can't even trust the people in your field...”
			“...most people don't recognize, they don't honor it...”
			“I have never received nothing like that, professional. Not actual training. It’s more about people showing you a different way.”
			“Not that I recall...not at all.”
			“Social-emotional PD is geared towards students and teachers...not school leaders.”
			“No one will ever understand...it's a thankless job.”
			“They’re trying, but they don’t know how to land it.”

Codes	Code Descriptions	Themes	Participant Quotes
			"There's not many of us here... I'm carrying a flag I didn't mean to carry."
			"I don't have enough time to be everyone's counselor. I wish I did."
			"I don't know if [emotional labor training] even exists… if it does, I don't think I've ever really heard of it."
			"...they say they get it...but there's never really been any ideas and supports or suggestions on how to manage that."
			"I have not [received training or mentoring]."
			"...I don't think I ever really...figured out how they impacted me."
			"…asking for emotional support is not always easy… you don't want anyone to question your leadership ability or stability…"
			"…it's a lonely job… no one will truly understand how hard these jobs are…"
			"…I don't think we even truly know the magnitude of the impact on ourselves…"

Appendix G.

Partial Transcript (Participant H)

Researcher:
Today I will be asking you a series of open-ended questions designed to gather detailed descriptions of your experiences with emotional labor as a principal in a high-poverty elementary school. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your honest reflections based on your lived experiences.
So can you tell me about your role as a principal including how many years you have served in this position?

Participant H:
Yes, I've been a principal for 11 years. I have been an educator for school settings, where 100% of my students have qualified for free and reduced lunch. Throughout my time in education, I have truly enjoyed most experiences, and most of my experiences have taught me many, many things different experiences, not only from my students, but also from my staff.

Researcher:
And approximately what percentage of students at your school are eligible for free or reduced lunch?

Participant H:
100%

Researcher:
What is the size of your student body and what are some key characteristics of your school community?

Participant H:
We serve about 540 students. The majority of our students are newcomer students. So about 350 are newcomer students. Our school also has a dual immersion pathway program for French and Spanish. And we are incredibly diverse, with over 41 different countries represented. We really tried to develop global awareness and language development so that our students, by the time they leave us, will have a seal of biliteracy on their high school diploma.

Researcher:
So now I'm going to ask you some core questions on emotional labor. How would you describe your overall experience of emotional stress as a principal in a high poverty school?

Participant H:
Emotional stress that comes in like a high poverty school or even a high diverse school such as mine is the, I call it the skill of compartmentalization. It's very, very difficult to compartmentalize and not bring things home with me have to handle are not only just based off of student experiences, but also staff experiences. So understanding that if it affects you, it'll affect your teacher, which then will affect your students. So that one family that you've been trying to help, it is not just about that student is about the family, or it's about that teacher, or it's about that class trying to just compartmentalize that one situation. It's extremely difficult but knowing that it's about the greater good of the goal of the school or the mission or the vision of your school. And sometimes it doesn't always turn out the way that you want it to doing the best that you can to

compartmentalize so that you could be like the best mom, that you could be the best daughter, that you could be the best mentor that you could be when you're trying to make sure that your system principal gets what they need to

Researcher:
How did you, how did you learn to compartmentalize?

Participant H:
A huge work in progress for me. So I continue to compartmentalize in many areas, especially when it comes to what is the most important and how we can get to the biggest goal and how many people are going to be affected.

Researcher:
You want to elaborate more?

Participant H:
I think that compartmentalization also comes with navigation. Okay. So how can I navigate this issue, whatever the issue might be, whether it's transportation, whether it's whatever, you know, like we get faced with many things or, you know, for instance, like a particular family not having housing make sure that this family has housing, the students still come to school, they get whatever they need.

Researcher:
What are some of the biggest emotional demands that you have as a principal?

Participant H:
I think just off hand. I would say supporting students in crisis because that could happen daily and staff, well-being, and morale.

Researcher:
Can you share an example of a situation in which you had to manage your emotions while interacting with teachers, students, parents, or district administrators?

Participant H:
Yes, today's political climate because of my clientele that I have

Researcher:
And how does that impact you directly and your emotions?

Participant H:
To stand in front of my staff knowing that 385 of our students can be affected at any given time and watching the news and not knowing if one you know at this time they're saying like ice could come to the building anything could happen and they look at me I'm 411 and we're looking they're looking at me like what are you able to do and I have to be very honest like we all have to follow the law. We cannot do anything that impedes the law and we are we just remain hopeful and knowing like my personal background, anything happened to my family at that point and but anything that happened also to their families at that point and try to be the best educators that we can and seeing the fear in their face and not trying to reciprocate that same feeling as their leader is probably one of the hardest things that I had to do this year.

Researcher:
And this kind of relates to it, but can you describe a time when you showed a different emotion on the outside than what you were really feeling on the inside and what made you decide to do that?

Participant H:
We put forth together. And they entrusted in me. So at that moment, it was the four years that they'd given me and they trusted me. So I had to make sure that I wasn't leading in the chaos. And I was leading in all the life that they have given me in the last four years in their trust. So if I was frazzled, I knew that they were going to be good-frazzled educators. We know what we do for kids every day. We know what we do in this school community. We are gonna create a safe and calm climate because this might be the only climate that they come to that safe and calm. And that's what we have to do. So if I acted like I was frazzled, I knew that they were gonna act frazzled. And if I showed anything differently, that's what they were gonna give me back. They were going to match my energy.

Researcher:
Do you find that to be additional emotional labor that extends outside of just the school building?

Participant H:
Absolutely. Especially for I feel as a woman leader. I feel like my staff looks at me to anytime that they need something they need more of a response from a female leader than they do a male leader because we are to be looked at as a more nurturing being than a male leader.

Researcher:
Thank you for sharing that. Describe a time when you felt one way, but it had to act a different way.

Participant H:
I think still this time that this specific time because it's a personal, it's a personal effect, and you don't want to be you know in any political You don't want to feel like you're with the other and feeling like, you know, hey, you know, this is whoever you vote for and anything like that. But at the end of the day, I know that all of my teachers are good people and they're there for our kids. So we don't speak on it. If you are here for my kids, this is who you're here for, and that's it. So I don't want to hear about the political person whom you believe in, and any of that. We are here strictly for our children. I just need to have. We have no biases. We're going to do what was best for kids, especially in this building. And I don't want to hear about it. And I shouldn't hear about it. And our kids shouldn't hear about it. Because this is a place with a 93% attendance rate. They didn't come to see me. They come and rush through these doors to see their teachers. And that hasn't changed. And we're going to continue doing the same things we do every single day. Because they're going to keep coming to see their teachers. And our attendance rate hasn't changed since we opened four years ago.

Researcher:
Do you think a lot of the biases come from internal factors or external? So from the community or just external issues or people or internal amongst your staff and students?

Participant H:
I think sometimes it comes from experiences. So I think a little bit of both. So I think when people are not raised, different elements like I have you know people from different age groups and if they're not ever exposed to anything different than where they were raised then they don't

know any different but then when they see different backgrounds like one of one time my school was described as like the London Airport and I was like I've never been to London Airport so I think that's a good thing but you could tell. Like the London airport, they're like, no, that's a great thing. Like it's super diverse. Everybody looks comfortable, all of these things. So they have to describe that to me. So if they didn't describe that type of, like if they didn't paint that picture for me, I would have no idea. So they had to give me their experience of what that looked like to them because I would have had no idea. So they're like, it's amazing what you have done here in, you know, in this space. It's what have you been exposed to regardless of age?

Researcher:
Can you describe a time when you had to not only show a certain emotion at work, but also found yourself working to genuinely feel that way in order to better support your students, staff, or community?

Participant H:
So sometimes you have to gather your thoughts differently. You have to say it a particular way so that people particular rooms and people gravitate because they want to know what you think. So when you're in those spaces are you waiting to just build trust with people or are trying to identify a psychologically safe environment? I think a little bit of both and sometimes I know what I have to say is much more important so I just wait to hear the other like what other people have to say and then they're like well I know back to me I know every single time every single time they always say well what do you think I said I want to hear what other people have to say I said I always have something to say my ideas are always green but I just sometimes need to hear what you have to say first and they just are like what do you mean sometimes my ideas need to be I need to just wait just give me a second I said I don't always need to bust out my ideas sometimes I need to process a little bit because my silence I said, when I walk in a room, I know that people are going to listen to me. And sometimes they're like, that's arrogant. I said, for me, it's confidence. I said, I navigate very well. And I said, for being the only Latina leader, I said, I navigate very well. And I said, I make moves for my students. I said, but I need other people to start moving mountains for all kids.

Researcher:
How does managing your emotions at work affect your personal well-being and how you lead others?

Participant H:
I think it's gotten a lot better, especially for women leaders, because it was always when you first started this position, and I was like, " Don't cry when you're sad, or don't show people that you're you know that you just dealt with an emotional situation. I think, or like, even you know, hey, like with this job. We dealt with very heavy things. And now I think about the whole mental health, there were a lot of principals in the beginning of my career that were cracking, and they were having mental health issues, and the things that they would carry at home. I remember my first staff meeting, I said, hey, we have a lot of heavy things that we deal with. We have really good insurance. I hope that you find a counselor. I said, we carry a lot of things, and I want everybody in this room, if you're married, to stay that way. So please find a counselor because I don't have enough time to be everyone's counselor. I wish I did. So as far as dealing with managing emotions and my own well-being and how I lead others, I definitely tell them that this job is definitely heavy, and I always tell them that they need to find a counselor because I tell them I can't be this amazing without them.

Appendix H.

Recruitment

Grand Canyon University
Institutional Review Board
3300 W. Camelback Rd.
Phoenix, AZ 85017
602-639-7804 | irb@gcu.edu

RECRUITMENT

Date:

Hello. I am a doctoral learner under the direction of Professor Dr. Shad Morrow in the College of Education at Grand Canyon University. My name is Naim Sanders. I am conducting a research study to explore how principals who lead high-poverty elementary schools in the Midwestern United States describe their emotional labor.

INCLUSION- I am recruiting individuals that meet these criteria:

- Currently serving as principal of a high-poverty elementary school where at least 75% of your students qualify for free and reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).
- Currently serves as a principal of a high-poverty elementary school in the Midwest of the United States.
- Willing to answer required personally identifiable questions related to gender and number of years' experience as a principal.

EXCLUSION- You cannot be in this study if:

- If you are the principal of a non-high-poverty school.
- If you serve as a school principal of a school outside of the Midwest region of the United States.

The **ACTIVITIES** for this research project will include:

- Participate in a 60-90 minute interview by phone, virtually, or in person.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and your Informed Consent is necessary in order to participate in the study. All data in this study will be protected in a Google Drive that is password protected.

If you have questions about this study or are interested in participating, please contact me at: [redacted] more information and next steps.

Thank you!
Naim Sanders

IRB APPROVED
IRB NUMBER: IRB-2025-7568
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 06/27/2025

Appendix I.

Artificial Intelligence Use Disclosure Form

Table I.1

AI Use Disclosure Table for Level 1 (Chapter 1-Prospectus) Review

Chapter 1 AI Use	Did you use AI to support your Chapter 4 and/or 5? No
Tool Name(s) and Purpose of Use	N/A
How you Critically Analyzed and Used the AI Output	N/A
Write a short reflection on what you learned (i.e. critical thinking, refining ideas, improved research skills for the dissertation process) from the use of AI. Explain how you ensured ethical use and academic integrity when incorporating AI-generated content, including proper attributions.	N/A

Table I.2

AI Use Disclosure Table for Level 2 (Proposal) Review

Chapter 2 and/or 3 AI Use	Did you use AI to support your Chapter 4 and/or 5? No
Tool Name(s) and Purpose of Use	N/A
How you Critically Analyzed and Used the AI Output	N/A
Write a short reflection on what you learned (i.e. critical thinking, refining ideas, improved research skills for the dissertation process) from the use of AI. Explain how you ensured ethical use and academic integrity when incorporating AI-generated content, including proper attributions.	N/A

Table I.3

AI Use Disclosure Table for Level 5 (Dissertation) Review

Chapter 4 and/or 5 AI Use	Did you use AI to support your Chapter 4 and/or 5? No
Tool Name(s) and Purpose of Use	N/A
How you Critically Analyzed and Used the AI Output	N/A
Write a short reflection on what you learned (i.e. critical thinking, refining ideas, improved research skills for the dissertation process) from the use of AI. Explain how you ensured ethical use and academic	N/A

Chapter 4 and/or 5 AI Use	Did you use AI to support your Chapter 4 and/or 5? No
integrity when incorporating AI-generated content, including proper attributions.	