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High School Math and Language Arts Teachers' Experience Meeting the Mental Health

Needs of Anxious Students in High-Poverty, Rural Schools: A Qualitative

Phenomenological Study

By

Cory W. Strasser

The Dissertation is Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

the Educational Doctorate Degree

in Educational Leadership

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This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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For my wife Jamie, who supported me throughout and endured the whole process, I am grateful for your commitment to seeing me to the end goal. Through your belief in me, your prayers and your encouragement, we made it to the end. Finally, for my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, all glory.

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Abstract

Mental health, and specifically anxiety, is a growing problem significantly impacting the well-being of adolescents in the United States. Thirteen percent of adolescent's experience anxiety-related disorders annually (Hill, Waite & Creswell, 2016; Peterson, 2018). School districts are critical settings in which to provide the prevention and intervention of anxiety (DeKruyf, Auger & Trice-Black, 2013; Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley & Weissberg, 2017; Lendrum, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2013; Warner et al., 2016). Using transcendental phenomenology, this study drew on the lived experiences of math and language arts teachers to show their perceptions of their role with students experiencing anxiety along with their background knowledge of working with anxious students. High school teachers directly educate students on a daily basis and can support students experiencing anxiety. Understanding the relationship teachers have with anxious students is essential for their success.

The purpose of this study was to discover the lived experiences of math and language arts teachers as they educate high school students in high-poverty rural schools affected by anxiety. By investigating teachers lived experiences, the beliefs, attitudes and needs regarding their support of anxious students was drawn out. The analysis found several themes woven throughout the interviews of all eight participants. Those themes included: (a) teachers perceived role, (b) relationship building, (c) finding balance, (d) the learning environment, (e) changes in the classroom, (f) background knowledge and training, and (g) positive perceptions of the school counselor.

The themes revealed relevant information for teachers, counselors, and school leaders as they consider the phenomenon of adolescent anxiety and the practical implications it has on student learning, the learning environment, and student well-being. The implications focus on teacher skill development along with building teacher social and emotional competency to foster positive relationships with students.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background of the Problem

Anxiety is a growing problem significantly impacting the well-being of

adolescents in the United States. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness

(NAMI) (2018), anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concerns among

the general population in the United States. NAMI (2018) defines mental illness as a

"condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, or mood" (Mental Health section,

para. 1), whereas anxiety is a "persistent, excessive fear or worry in situations that are not

threatening" (NAMI, 2018, Anxiety section para. 3).

Likewise, eighteen percent of American adults have an anxiety disorder with most

of their disorder developed before age 21 (NAMI, 2018). Adolescents with an anxiety

disorder have an age-of-onset (AOO) as early as six years old (Merikangas et al., 2010).

That implication has associations to adolescent well-being in schools, as approximately

20 percent of adolescents experience a mental health disorder each year (Perou et al.,

2013) to coincide with 13 percent of adolescents who experience anxiety-related

disorders annually (Hill, Waite & Creswell, 2016; Peterson, 2018). Likewise, the

National Institute of Mental Health's (2018b) National Comorbidity Survey "estimated

that 31.9 percent of adolescents had an anxiety disorder" (Mental Health Statistics, para.

2) and even showed increasing levels each year for adolescents ages 13-18. The effect of

rising rates of anxiety along with Hill, Waite and Creswell's (2016) acknowledgement

that anxiety disorders are known to interfere with the general function of young people,

including their performance in school, puts pressure on schools to understand anxiety and respond to it.

Considering the growing evidence that anxiety is a severe health-based problem for adolescents, an appropriate response is to address or treat the disorder during the early stages of AOO (Kessler et al., 2007a). School districts are consistently seen as critical settings for prevention and intervention of mental health needs (DeKruyf, Auger & Trice-Black, 2013; Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley & Weissberg, 2017; Lendrum, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2013; Warner et al., 2016). In the school setting, both teachers and professional school counselors work closely with students who experience anxiety daily and play a role in supporting anxious students through prevention and intervention practices (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2018; Peterson, 2018). Two forms of providing prevention and intervention that high-poverty, rural school leaders have turned toward include school-based mental health (SBMH) and social-emotional learning (SEL) due to their proven, evidence-based programs.

Anxiety impacts high-poverty, rural schools. Rural schools are uniquely impacted by student anxiety and the supports available to address mental health. Implementing an education program with an emphasis on SBMH takes time and resources that can strain rural schools. Rural schools have limited access to mental health services (Bain, Rueda, Mata-Villarreal, & Mundy, 2011; O'Malley, Wendt, & Pate, 2018). Correspondingly, Forner's (2010) research indicated close correlations between rural schools and increased poverty rates. Students in high-poverty, rural schools often face the obstacle of not affording mental health treatment or even accessing that

treatment due to lack of transportation (Blackstock et al., 2018). Furthermore, O'Malley et al. (2018) found that rural school superintendents have a significant gap in their knowledge of mental health and how to provide mental health services in their school districts.

Rural schools with elevated poverty rates face the challenge of creating positive learning environments as a means to support students experiencing anxiety. Social and emotional learning programming has been shown to make positive impacts on creating constructive learning environments and reducing anxiety, regardless of socio-economic status (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013; Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, & Ben, 2012; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Some rural school districts establish safe and supportive systems by incorporating evidence-based social and emotional learning programming that can be found from organizations like the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) or in the curriculum from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg & Schellinger, 2011). Still, incorporating SEL has its challenges. High-poverty, rural schools fail to implement SEL programming due to their lack of resources and budget constraints (Bridgeland et al., 2013; O'Malley, Wendt & Pate, 2018). Elias et al. (1997) warn that schools struggle to implement SEL in large part because of a lack of coordinated strategy or the perception of SEL as a passing trend.

Anxiety related to performance. Schools are experiencing increases in student anxiety due in part to the performance culture. Performance culture manifests itself in high stakes testing. Legislation such as the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S.

Department of Education, 2019) contributes to the performance culture through its emphasis on testing students to measure learning. A performance culture establishes expectations of students that change the learning environment. Studies show increases in performance anxiety on multiple levels. First, students experience anxiety in the content area, such as math and language arts. Research on math anxiety has increased dramatically in the last two decades (Morsanyi et al., 2016). The research, as noted by Morsanyi et al. (2016), indicates that there is a moderate negative correlation between math anxiety and test performance. High levels of math anxiety can impact a student's life opportunities due to its potential to disrupt math performance (Morsanyi et al., 2016). Second, learning environments with expectations of high achievement cause student anxiety that significantly impacts their academic and social-emotional functioning. Anxiety disorders have adverse effects on day-to-day student functioning and social, emotional, and academic success (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015; Hill et al., 2016). Also, Guerra (2017) found the effects of anxiety to be seen in gifted students, not just in students in general. Finally, Tramonte and Willms (2010) identified a lack of confidence in student skills as a high correlation to anxiety. Students with low skills in an atmosphere of high challenge are at the most significant risk of experiencing anxiety (Tramonte & Willms, 2010).

   Social and emotional learning. Mental health issues distinctly unite with SEL. While mental health focuses on the mind, SEL focuses on the heart (O'Malley et al., 2018). Quite often, social and emotional learning is referred to as the missing piece for

student achievement and schools, creating a whole child approach (Elias et al., 1997).

Elias et al. (1997), define social and emotional learning as:

> The ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects
> of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as
> learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the
> complex demands of growth and development. (p. 2)

According to CASEL (2019), SEL encompasses five core competencies: Self-Awareness,
Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision
Making. These five competencies allow adolescents opportunities to develop skills that
can reduce their anxiety.

Educating the whole child. Utilizing the concepts of SEL allows schools to
educate the whole child. Whole child education refers to moving beyond the narrow
scope of academics to ensure "that each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported and
challenged" (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2018, para. 2).
Armstrong (2006) outlines the need for SEL. He decries the negative impact of federal
legislative changes with their heavy emphasis on academic achievement at the expense of
educating the whole child. Schools have adjusted their resources in order to
accommodate the testing culture and left behind elements of the whole child that are
developmentally appropriate (Armstrong, 2006).

In contrast, the research is clear about the value of preparing the whole child and
the role SEL plays (Elias et al., 1997). Farrington et al. (2012) noted that noncognitive
factors related to academic performance "are shown to have a direct positive relationship

to students' concurrent school performance as well as future academic outcomes" (p. 4).

Cohen (2006) emphasized the role SEL based programming has on providing a sound

civic background in students. The purpose of SEL is to support the student in being able

to participate in society. Cohen (2006) further made the correlation between SEL and

safe learning environments. When students have their emotional and academic needs

met, they are more likely "to become lifelong learners and active participants in society"

(Cohen, 2006, p. 227). Meeting their emotional and academic needs echoes educating

the whole child.

School-based mental health. Rural schools face challenges to provide effective

SBMH programming. Collins (2014) noted that there exists a reliance on school social

workers or outside support to deliver mental health services. With a lack of trained

professional school counselors or lack of access to a social worker, rural school leaders

look to community mental health agency partnerships to provide school-based mental

health (Brown, Dahlbeck, & Sparkman-Barnes, 2006). While SBMH helps improve the

identification of mental health needs and creates accessibility to students who receive

support for the first time, it is still limited in the number of students served. Many

students, therefore, are left underserved or even unidentified (DeKruyf et al., 2013).

"Students' untreated mental health needs affect their school experiences and learning

outcomes, making it imperative that schools integrate prevention and early identification

supports" (O'Malley et al., 2018, p.3). Understanding these issues allow school leaders

to pursue appropriate solutions.

School-based mental health can be a part of the solution to providing intervention and prevention of adolescent anxiety. According to Jergenson (2018), those solutions included using an evidence-based approach to implementation, practice, and policy. Mental health issues can be identified, treated, and even prevented through the development of SEL skills. Like specific evidence-based SEL programs, school-based mental health provides an opportunity for students to meet the demands of school, both social and academic aspects (Cook, 2018). Petersen (2018) identified the value of SBMH and how it could help keep students from falling through the cracks.

Teachers impact students with anxiety. High school teachers are uniquely positioned to provide prevention or intervention for students experiencing anxiety. Within the school system, teachers understand the need for SEL to address student anxiety. A report completed for CASEL by Bridgeland et al. (2013) showed that teachers firmly believe there needs to be an emphasis on teaching SEL. Still, there are limits to teacher training and program implementation in the areas of social-emotional learning and mental health. To improve teacher training and program implementation, teachers need a working knowledge of SEL. High school teachers, in particular, are less trained in SEL instruction than their middle school or elementary colleagues (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Cohen, 2006). Lendrum et al. (2013) concluded that "staff members need to feel better supported and prepared so that they are confident and have the necessary knowledge, skills and self-efficacy to play their part in this important aspect of schooling" (p. 163). This lack of training can lead to confusion and misdiagnosis of the problem.

Often, students and teachers may misinterpret the more common symptoms of

anxiety (i.e., inattention, difficulty remembering, and fidgeting) to be related to

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Students with misdiagnosis of

symptoms often pursue pharmacological treatment of ADHD - further

exacerbating anxiety symptoms. (Guerra, 2017. p. 1)

In contrast, teachers with appropriate training have a better awareness of student mental

health problems, which can lead to earlier identification (Meadows, 2018).

Correspondingly, teachers see the success rate of students increase when embedding SEL

into instruction (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2003; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor

et al., 2017). By making this relationship, teachers can create a whole-school approach

by developing lessons with SEL as an integral part of their regular curriculum. Teachers

can continue SEL-based instruction throughout the curriculum, allowing for consistent

student exposure and potential for growth and development. Moss (2016), in his

evaluation of a social-emotional learning program, noted, "Schools that fully integrate an

SEL curriculum not only teach additional specific skill sets but also adopt a new

paradigm of learning that negates the split between the development of social-emotional

and academic skills" (p. 11).

Furthermore, research completed by Durlak et al. (2011) indicated an 11-point

gain in achievement for students exposed to consistent, evidence-based SEL

programming. The 11-point gain in achievement comes from data from the Iowa Test of

Basic Skills, the Stanford Achievement Test, and student GPAs (Durlak et al., 2011).

The value of teaching SEL and incorporating the concepts in the classroom on a

schoolwide basis are integral to the success of students (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2003; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017).

Professional school counselors support anxious students. Similar to teachers, professional school counselors have limits in their knowledge and experience with the application of techniques to provide appropriate support for adolescent anxiety. DeKruyf et al. (2013) explained that "emerging data has suggested that school counselors are often minimally involved in supporting students with mental health needs" (p. 272). Bain, Rueda, Mata-Villarreal, and Mundy (2011) researched perceptions of rural school counselors, finding that a majority of counselors themselves identified the need for training, specifically for mental health training. In contrast, research has established that professional school counselors, as part of a comprehensive program, could implement responsive services through collaboration and advocacy with school personnel, parents, and community providers (Thompson, Robertson, Curtis & Frick, 2012).

Problem Statement

With growing concern regarding anxious students, questions remain about effective means for teachers to address the social-emotional and mental health needs of these students. Reed (2018) indicated that there is scarce research regarding the connections between SEL and adolescent anxiety. Still, there are distinct associations between a student's social-emotional competence and their level of anxiety (Reed, 2018). Because schools are an ideal setting for adolescents to develop the skills related to social-emotional competence and address their anxiety (DeKruyf et al., 2013; Domitrovich et

al., 2017; Lendrum et al., 2013; Warner et al., 2016), the role teachers play in supporting those needs is increasingly valuable (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015).

Even though there is a broad literature base regarding social-emotional learning and mental health-related anxiety, how teachers are addressing the issue of student anxiety in their daily interactions remains relatively unknown. Also, a substantial amount of research on SEL practices has been accomplished primarily at the elementary or middle school level as well as in urban school districts. Understanding the perspectives of teachers in high-poverty rural high schools as they address students experiencing anxiety, especially within the performance culture, could expand the current literature on the topic. Taking into account research by Conner, Miles, and Pope (2014), which signaled that students who do not connect with a teacher experienced high levels of anxiety, the value of understanding teacher perspectives increases. An investigation into how high school teachers are implementing programming, providing resources, coordinating strategy, perceiving their role, determining outcomes, and focusing efforts on addressing students experiencing anxiety can help determine how they can meet the growing needs of anxious students. Schools and teachers that meet the needs of anxious students through appropriate program implementation and personnel training can expect more success in academic performance and overall student well-being (Bridgeland, et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Moss, 2016; Sklad, et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017).

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Purpose Statement

Schools function as more than academic institutions but alternatively seek to educate the whole child while creating lifelong learners who actively participate in society (Cohen, 2006). Teachers are integral to creating a culture of lifelong learning. Teachers, through their daily interaction with students, are on the front line to support students experiencing anxiety. It is through the daily interaction with students that teachers see the deleterious influence of the performance culture, specifically in math and language arts. The performance culture exacerbates anxiety disorders that have adverse effects on day-to-day student functioning and social, emotional, and academic success (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015; Hill et al., 2016). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine meaning according to the lived experiences of teachers as they interact with students experiencing anxiety in high-poverty rural high schools. Meaning derives from the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). "Meaning is at the heart of perceiving, remembering, judging, feeling, and thinking" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 68). The lived experiences were visible through their teaching practice, program implementation, relationship building with students, and student well-being and achievement.

Central Question and Subquestions

The goal of this study was to assign meaning to the lived experiences of teachers who work with anxious students. Studying teacher's perceptions of anxious students should draw out their attitudes, beliefs, and needs. Therefore, the central question of the study asks:

What are the lived experiences of high school math and language arts teachers in high-poverty, rural schools in terms of educating and meeting the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety?

To further explore the research question, the following sub-questions were created to accurately discover the attitudes, beliefs, and needs of math and language arts teachers as they educate anxious students.

1. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools describe or perceive their role in addressing student anxiety?

2. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the effectiveness of their support on student anxiety, in particular, academic anxiety?

3. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the impact of students experiencing anxiety on their teaching practice?

4. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools working with students experiencing anxiety describe their knowledge and training in order to educate anxious students?

5. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the role and effectiveness of professional school counselors in addressing students experiencing anxiety?

Significance of the Research

The goal of this study is to discover the lived experiences of math and language arts teachers as they educate high school students affected by anxiety. School leaders,

along with teachers, are fundamentally responsible for the prevention and intervention of adolescent anxiety (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015). Therefore, they can implement evidence-based programs to support the needs of students experiencing anxiety. To best meet the needs of students, the research has indicated a clear need for effective implementations of these programs (Durlak et al., 2011). Understanding the relationship teachers have with anxious students in utilizing evidence-based programs as well as carrying out program implementation is essential for success. There should be relationships identified between teachers and their approaches to support anxious students and implement SEL or SBMH programs.

This qualitative study regarding adolescent anxiety in the high school setting follows the transcendental phenomenological research approach. The study's corresponding results will contribute to the knowledge base of mental health and social and emotional learning. While there has been significant research on SEL, mental health, and adolescent anxiety, seldom has this research utilized qualitative methods. Much of the research has used quantitative studies to collect data and make conclusions based on that data. Furthermore, there exist few qualitative studies that focus on the identified gaps in SEL and SBMH program implementation, specifically in four areas: the use of evidence-based programs, lack of training for teachers, the implementation process in terms of reliability, and the measurement of outcomes.

This study will contribute to the development of the professional understanding of supporting students experiencing anxiety. This study will extend the current research through its qualitative phenomenological methods approach and narrow focus on high-

poverty rural high schools. The study will also provide greater depth to the phenomenon of adolescent anxiety in the high school setting. This research will have a profound impact for teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, and school leaders as they consider the phenomenon of adolescent anxiety and the practical implications it has on student learning, the learning environment, and student well-being. Finally, the study will add to the body of literature on quality practices for high school teachers to address adolescent anxiety in the classroom setting.

Delimitations (and Limitations)

Several limitations may affect the results. The sample size focuses on two unique teaching content areas: math and language arts. This focus limits the number of possible teachers available for interviews. It also limits the study of anxiety to just two content areas while there are many content areas in which students could experience anxiety. The sample size does fit within the recommended 3-8 interviews, according to Creswell and Poth (2018).   Furthermore, conducting interviews through video conference presents the researcher's presence electronically, which may skew responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) due to a possible perception of a lack of personal connection.

The Researcher

Qualitative studies involve the researcher in the process as the principle instrument. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate that phenomenological research "describes the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon" (p. 314). In the role of researcher, I will be collecting data through the interview process in order to gather the information and find the essence of the participants' experience. As the grades 5-12

principal of a high-poverty rural school, this researcher has observed education change as a result of student anxiety. I have witnessed the impact anxiety has on student learning and well-being. The researcher has worked with high school teachers to identify and implement programs to address adolescent anxiety. Despite the researcher's personal experiences in the high school setting working with anxious students, the researcher's goal is to remain objective so that existing biases do not influence the study and its results. This approach follows the concept of "phenomenological reduction" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34) to set aside preconceived notions. Phenomenological reduction allows the researcher to engage in the experiences of the participants in an objective manner (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher is hopeful that the results of this study would reveal effective processes and associations for teachers to connect with students experiencing anxiety. Regular communication with the researcher's advisor will support the researcher to maintain objectivity.

Definition of Key Terms

Several definitions of key terms provide a background understanding of the problem.

Adolescent: Time of life generally between the ages of 13-18.

Age of Onset (AOO): The age at which an individual acquires, develops, or first experiences a condition or symptoms of a disease or disorder.

Anxiety: A persistent, excessive fear or worry in situations that are not threatening (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2018).

Co-morbidity: The presence of two or more conditions at the same time.

High School Teacher: An appropriately licensed educator who has achieved tenure status of three or more consecutive years educating students at the high school level of grades 9-12.

Mental Illness: A condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, or mood (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2018).

Professional School Counselor: Certified/licensed educators who improve student success for all students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program (American School Counselor Association, 2019).

Social and Emotional Learning: The ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development. (Elias et al., 1997).

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Adolescent mental health is a growing concern, especially for students experiencing anxiety. School leaders rely on teachers and counselors to address student anxiety regularly, and this literature review addresses the changing roles and responsibilities of teachers and professional school counselors in addressing issues surrounding student anxiety and mental health. School leaders look to programs associated with social-emotional learning and mental health to provide support, prevention, and interventions for students. This review of the literature highlights these critical concepts, along with the challenges and barriers associated with each.

Mental Health

Significant developmental changes occur during adolescence, including the regulation of emotion and executive function (Rockhill et al., 2010). In relation with those changes, there is evidence regarding the prevalence of adolescent mental health issues. A growing body of research highlighted by Kessler et al. (2007a) showed that mental health concerns are prevalent in mid to late teens, the primary adolescent years, and therefore, the primary high school years. Over half of these mental health issues were not just prevalent but began in adolescence. Roughly one in five or 20 percent of adolescents annually experience a mental health disorder (Merikangas et al., 2010; Perou et al., 2013; WHO, 2019). Research completed by de Girolamo, Dagani, Purcell, Cocchi, and McGorry (2012) noted that most mental disorders have an age of onset (AAO) within the first three decades of a person's life, in particular, early adolescence and early

adulthood. Even more alarming is that Hamdi and Iacono (2014) found that "emerging adulthood is a high-risk period for the development of mental illness, with increases in the lifetime prevalence and co-morbidity of mental disorders during this time" (p. 314). Co-morbidity is the presence of two or more conditions at the same time. Researchers have documented that these conditions in adolescents come with a cost.

The costs of mental health. In a comprehensive research report for the World Health Organization (WHO), Kessler et al. (2007b) showed that unmet needs exist in the treatment of mental health disorders. Coles et al. (2016) indicated in their survey of adolescents that almost 80 percent who had a mental health disorder did not receive adequate treatment. The Minnesota Student Survey (2016) results found a significant gap in students identifying that they had a long-term mental health problem, a behavioral or emotional problem, and treatment for that problem. While 13 percent of male and 27 percent of female students indicated they had a problem, only 9 percent of males and 18 percent of females received treatment for that problem within the year previous to the survey (Minnesota Student Survey, 2016).

The lack of treating mental disorders places a burden on society that manifests itself in multiple ways (Kessler et al., 2007b). One such way is in economic terms. Hamdi and Iacono's (2014) research illustrated the strong correlation between lifetime prevalence and co-morbidity and their impact on the costs associated with mental illness. The authors specified that the costs lie in providing the resources necessary to support mental health services (Hamdi & Iacono, 2014). Further research by Kessler et al. (2012) reinforced the concept that adolescent mental disorders were co-morbid, especially

concerning fear disorders such as anxiety. Providing interventions for fear disorders in adolescence could lessen co-morbid conditions and future treatment necessary for adults, thus reducing the costs of mental health treatment.

Another burden of mental disorders occurs through illness and disability. Mental health disorders, such as depression, have caused illness and disability among adolescents (WHO, 2019). Further effects have included isolation, avoidance, and even suicide. Recommendations from research conducted by the World Health Organization (2019) and Hamdi and Iacono (2014) targeted promoting mental health intervention as a way to protect adolescents from adverse conditions and reduce the symptoms that come with mental health disorders. These disorders can impact learning and attendance at school negatively. Given this finding, schools have a vested interest in the mental well-being of their adolescent students.

Adolescents bear the costs of mental health disorders as evidenced through the recognition of their mental health needs.   Results from the Minnesota Student Survey (2016), a student survey schools administer every three years in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Education, provided insight for school leaders, counselors, and teachers to understand the mental health needs of their students. The Minnesota Student Survey (2016) results highlighted key mental health findings. The study showed students' increasing mental health needs between the 8th, 9th, and 11th grades based on answers to four key questions regarding long-term mental health, behavioral or emotional problems; being treated for mental health, emotional or behavioral problem; feeling down, depressed or hopeless; and considering attempting suicide. Rockhill et al. (2010)

explained that developmental changes, peer relationships, and personal independence have caused stress. The author's research indicated that adolescents under stress exhibited escape behavior (Rockhill et al., 2010).

Rockhill et al.'s (2010) research corroborated with the findings from the Minnesota Student Survey (2016) that showed that 23 percent of male and 32 percent of female 11th-grade students noted feeling down, depressed, or hopeless in the last several days. That directly correlated to the next survey question: asked if they ever seriously considered suicide, 18 percent of male and 36 percent of female 11th-grade students indicated they had. Considering the growing evidence, mental health disorders have been revealed to have an AOO during adolescence and therefore significantly impact the present and future well-being of students. Even though addressing mental health proved to be a worldwide need (World Health Organization, 2019), school districts should be proactive and target efforts to address mental health such as anxiety through interventions (Hamdi & Iacono, 2014).

Adolescent anxiety. To a certain extent, anxiety is a normal function in all people that is useful and often necessary (Rockhill et al., 2010). At some point, however, anxiety becomes a disorder with severe repercussions. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) characterized anxiety as a mental health disorder illustrated by feelings of worry, anxiety, or fear that were strong enough to interfere with one's daily activities. These characteristics were recurring (American Psychological Association, 2019). According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (2018), anxiety disorders were the

most common mental health concerns among the general population in the United States.

On a global scale, anxiety was the eighth leading cause of illness and disability among

adolescents (World Health Organization, 2019). Hill, Waite, and Creswell (2016)

indicated that between 9 percent and 32 percent of children and adolescents experience

anxiety disorders. Further supporting the high rate of anxiety disorders, the National

Institute of Mental Health's (2018b) National Comorbidity Survey "estimated that 31.9

percent of adolescents had an anxiety disorder" (Mental Health Statistics, para. 2) and

even showed increasing levels each year for adolescents ages 13 to 18. Anxiety, like

mental health disorders in general, are known to be comorbid in that it likely exhibits

itself in two or more disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder.

While there are several anxiety disorders, the two prominent disorders of social

anxiety disorder and generalized anxiety disorder are particularly relevant to this

literature review. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2018a), a social

anxiety disorder occurs when an individual experiences anxiety toward or a fear of social

situations or doing general everyday tasks in front of people. The anxiety or fear results

in feelings of humiliation or rejection and a sense of lacking control over the situation.

This disorder can cause students to not attend school or, when in school, avoid social

situations. Social anxiety disorder impacts seven percent of Americans (National

Institute of Mental Health, 2018a). While social anxiety disorder is only triggered by

social situations, generalized anxiety disorder manifests as excessive anxiety or worry

about everyday events (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018a). Symptoms of this

ongoing anxiety include the loss of control of feelings, general irritability, difficulty concentrating, disrupted sleep, and feeling tense, easily fatigued, and restless.

Historically, studies show an increase in the number of adolescents experiencing anxiety. Twenge's (2000) meta-analysis of both child and adult samples reported that adolescents in the 1980s had higher levels of anxiety than equivalent adolescents in the 1950s. The analysis revealed the rise in anxiety due to increases in divorce rates, crime, and environmental dangers along with decreases in social connectedness such as people living alone or not trusting others. Correspondingly, the common bond constructed in social environments contributed to increased anxiety (Twenge, 2000). Furthermore, continued increases in anxiety led to corresponding increases in depression as anxiety tended to predispose people to depression (Twenge, 2000).

Anxiety in the school setting. Anxiety is a normal process of life for adolescents. Rockhill et al. (2010) pointed out that anxiety is a typical function for teens that can have a positive impact on academic performance and peer relationships: "It is developmentally very normal for teens to worry about school performance, peer relationships, and plans for their future, such as what their choices might be after high school (p. 75). Yet the negative impact of atypical levels of anxiety is prevalent in the school setting. Deb, Strodl, and Sun's (2015) research on the academic stress of year 12 students in India suggested that anxiety had adverse effects on students' social, emotional, and academic success. The Child Mind Institute (2018) identified how teachers and counselors could recognize the many forms of anxiety in a school setting. Anxiety often looked like inattention, refusal to attend school, blatant acting out,

repetitive questioning, and aggressiveness (Child Mind Institute, 2018). When students exhibited these responses, it was frequently seen as a response to a level of danger or threatening situation (Rockhill et al., 2010). The anxiety interfered with normal student functioning (Rockhill et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2016).

Further signs of anxiety include students freezing when called on in the classroom, withdrawing from classroom participation, complaining about physical ailments, or even showing signs of worry about tests (Child Mind Institute 2018). Research conducted by Rockhill et al. (2010) also revealed that anxious students lack communication skills to inform teachers, counselors, and even their parents. According to Rockhill et al. (2010), students exposed to an anxiety trigger often exhibit escape behaviors such as avoidance or leaving situations such as a class or the school altogether. This behavior could become habitual as students seek to avoid anxiety trigger situations.

Performance culture. Education in the United States has taken on a distinct emphasis on academic performance that has correspondingly led to increases in student anxiety. Legislative changes in the Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) contributed to producing the performance culture. Armstrong (2006) noted that legislative changes harmed students due to its heavy emphasis on academic achievement, which limits opportunities to educate the whole child. These legislative acts, focused particularly on math and reading test scores, formed an atmosphere of academic stress, anxiety, and psychiatric problems (Meadows, 2018).

The performance culture manifests itself in competition, high expectations, and pressure situations that lead to increases in student anxiety (Deb et al., 2015; Guerra,

2017; Meadows, 2018). The National Institute of Mental Health (Anxiety Disorders, 2018) pointed out that social anxiety disorder can show up as performance anxiety. In the case of adolescents, this causes physical symptoms that can prevent them from participating in certain situations. In a study performed in Kolkata, India on Year 12 public school students, Deb et al. (2015) reported that performance anxiety reflected itself in testing and impacted all students regardless of their background. The same researchers also found that 82 percent of surveyed students had test-related anxiety. Their research also showed that 63 percent of students surveyed identified themselves as being stressed based on academic pressure (Deb et al., 2015). This academic pressure was found to correspond to mental health problems.

Guerra's (2017) review of the literature surrounding anxiety and social-emotional learning found the effects of anxiety impacting the self-confidence and social-emotional functioning of gifted students as they pursue high achievement. Similarly, Tramonte and Willms (2010) acknowledged a lack of confidence in student skills with a high correlation to anxiety. Students with low skills in an atmosphere of high challenge possessed the most significant risk. In their study, almost 30 percent of students identified with having low skills (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Therefore, one-third of students were at significant risk for an anxiety disorder. Finally, the pressures of performing at a high level on tests had dire consequences as Deb et al. (2015) connected high-performance testing to psychiatric problems.

Intervention and prevention of adolescent anxiety. Anxiety disorders have an age of onset in the adolescent years. Research suggests that anxiety disorders are

prevalent in adolescents and lead to other mental health issues later in life (De Girolamo et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2016; Kessler et al., 2007a). Kessler et al. (2007b) summarized that while diagnosis frequently occurs at the adolescent stage of life, often people with anxiety disorders do not seek treatment until years later. To address the age of onset of anxiety disorders in adolescents, De Girolamo et al. (2012) and Kessler et al. (2007b) came to the conclusion that early interventions could help reduce the anxiety disorder or the recurrence of the anxiety disorder. Evidence of the high number of mental disorders at the end of adolescence revealed that this is a vital timeframe in which to address the issue and enact preventative efforts (Hamdi & Iacono, 2014). In the study of adolescent anxiety, research shows that school districts are the critical settings for prevention and intervention of mental health needs (DeKruyf et al., 2013; Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley & Weissberg, 2017; Lendrum, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2013; Warner et al., 2016). School districts, recognizing the need to implement and apply early intervention and prevention methods, have turned to two concepts: social and emotional learning (SEL) and school-based mental health (SBMH).

Social and emotional learning. In a world with frequent school shootings, disparities in suspensions along racial lines, teacher shortages, high stakes testing, academic stress, and rising mental illnesses, Gilliam showed that students often come to school underprepared to learn (as cited in Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 496). This lack of under preparation coincided with research conducted by Goodwin (2010), who noted that the four variables of home environment, prior knowledge, motivation, and aptitude and interest significantly influenced student achievement. Together, those four

non-school variables account for 80 percent of achievement, specifying the uncertainty of student preparation for school. Therefore, teachers and schools hold a mere 20 percent influence on student achievement (Goodwin, 2010). Goodwin's (2010) research indicated that schools had only a 20 percent opportunity to work with students and positively influence their learning, thereby increasing the value of social-emotional learning and mental health support. Therefore, schools look to effectuate social and emotional learning programs to support student mental health needs as a means to improve academic achievement and the well-being of students.

Social and emotional learning developed as a framework to address the needs of adolescents and allow schools a way to meet their needs (Greenberg et al., 2003). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2018), SEL addresses five core competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making. Schools place these five competencies into practice to improve behavior, student well-being, and student skills. Taylor et al. (2017) showed in studies on positive youth development that students participating in interventions in SEL programming demonstrated significant benefits. These benefits could affect both the positive and negative indicators of well-being. Greenberg et al. (2003) explained that SEL programming proves useful because it arrives at the underlying causes of behaviors by focusing on skill development.

Some schools have moved toward establishing SEL programming on the same level as academics (Thiers, 2018). Through their research, Elias et al. (1997) described this investment as the missing piece to adolescent achievement and growth. The research

marked that evidenced-based programming proves to be an essential element to an active

SEL program that supports student success (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al.'s (2011)

meta-analysis on school-based interventions highlighted that students who went through

an evidence-based SEL program had increased levels of academic performance on

achievement tests and grades. Conducted across all grade levels and school types (urban,

suburban, and rural), these universal SEL programs showed positive academic results

(Durlak et al., 2011).

   With effective SEL programs, studies showed positive results for both academic

performance and life outcomes (Thiers, 2018). Cook (2018) pointed out that social and

emotional skills have elevated indicators of overall success in life. The skills of

emotional competence, self-sufficiency, or resilience prove to be stronger indicators than

test scores of a successful life (Cook, 2018; Thiers, 2018). An approach focused on SEL

develops students' assets and regulatory skills that contain the foundation to applied use

of academic knowledge. The skills developed through SEL, such as solving conflicts, are

essential skills perceived as missing in many adolescents (Thiers, 2018). This emphasis

on skill training promotes long-term benefits more than a focus on attitudes (Taylor et al.,

2017). Farrington et al.'s (2012) literature review noted that noncognitive factors related

to academic performance "are shown to have a direct positive relationship to students'

concurrent school performance as well as future academic outcomes" (p. 4).

   Sklad et al. (2012) explained that SEL programming is an effective intervention

that reduces anxiety and promotes prosocial behavior. Further evidence-based SEL

program benefits for students include reduced absenteeism and improved motivation

(Bridgeland et al., 2013). The benefits of reduced anxiety, reduced absenteeism, and improved motivation accomplishes the purpose of SEL to support the student to be able to participate in society. Cohen (2006) identified another valuable benefit, the relationship between SEL and safe learning environments. When students' emotional and academic needs are met, they are more likely "to become lifelong learners and active participants in society" (Cohen, 2006, p. 227).

      School-based mental health. Brown, Dahlbeck, and Sparkman-Barnes's (2006) study surveyed counselors and school administrators in middle and high schools regarding the mental health needs of students. The study indicated that when schools expanded their mental health programs to take place in the school setting, the expansion significantly impacted schools in their role in addressing student mental health. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) identified the research that showed that students were not coming to school prepared (as cited in Gilliam, 2005) and discussed the responsiveness of teachers to the emotional needs of their students. The study showed that teachers receive little training in order to appropriately respond to the needs of students as they come to school (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Domitrovich et al. (2017) agreed with Jennings and Greenberg (2009), stating that schools are vital for prevention efforts due to the time students spend in school. According to Jergenson (2018), this time allowed schools to provide the resources necessary to deliver mental health services.

      In contrast, gaps in services are prevalent due to the fact that, even though services are available, they lack organization. They require following the research and an evidence-based approach to implementation, practice, and policy (Jergenson 2018).

Jergenson's (2018) findings regarding the need for implementing an evidence-based school-based mental health process correlated to Durlak et al.'s (2011) conclusions for effective SEL program implementation. Durlak et al.'s (2011) results pointed to the need for using evidence-based programming combined with effective implementation.

Mental health issues can be identified, treated, and even prevented through the development of SEL skills. While SEL focuses on the heart, mental health focuses on the mind (O'Malley et al., 2018). Cohen (2006) noted the similarities between SEL and school-based mental health and how they overlap. Like specific evidence-based SEL programs, SBMH provides an opportunity for schools to meet the demands of school, both social and academic (Cook, 2018). Petersen (2018) identified the value of SBMH and how it can help keep students from falling through the cracks.

In spite of the well-documented positive impact of SBMH, barriers exist in schools that establish SBMH programming. Petersen (2018) identified the main barrier as the stigma or negative perception of SBMH. Petersen (2018) explained that students and parents showed hesitation to initiate treatment for fear of being labeled negatively and having a perception of needing treatment. Furthermore, Petersen's (2018) research also exposed that a large number of schools do not offer SBMH programs.

High-Poverty, Rural Schools

According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) (2019a), rural and small-town communities are those with fewer than 25,000 people. In the United States, NCES data showed that 12 percent of students were coded as rural (2019b). Similarly, rural school students make up 20 percent of the student population in

Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019b). With a higher percentage of rural students in Minnesota than nationwide, Minnesota has a greater challenge to address the mental health needs of its students in rural communities.

      Mental health barriers for rural schools. In a literature review conducted by Blackstock, Chae, Mauk, and McDonald (2018), the authors illustrated challenges or barriers rural schools and their communities face regarding mental health. Several impediments exist between rural school students and urban school students concerning treatment for mental health concerns. According to Blackstock et al. (2018), rural school students commonly did not receive similar evidence-based mental health care compared to their urban counterparts. Blackstock et al. (2018) indicated this lack of care to be low treatment rates and a reliance on medication instead of face-to-face therapy. O'Malley et al. (2018) identified that rural schools have limited mental health access. Most of the service providers live outside of the community, increasing the lack of availability (Blackstock et al., 2018). Furthermore, rural communities exhibited preconceived beliefs about mental health that hinder their acceptance of support. Blackstock et al. (2018) highlighted this stigma as a social factor. The stigma exists because people in small communities won't access mental health support since their access is less likely to be anonymous (Blackstock et al., 2018).

      Correspondingly, Forner's (2010) qualitative research on superintendent leadership indicated a correlation between rural schools and high poverty rates. Rural schools have high levels of poverty as defined by free and reduced lunch eligibility. Data from the Minnesota Department of Education (2019a) showed that in 25 percent of rural

schools, 50 percent of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Forner

(2010) established that the more rural a school became, the higher the level of poverty.

The Minnesota Department of Education (2019a) data allied with prior research shown

by O'Malley et al. (2018) that students in rural environments were more susceptible to

risk factors, in large part due to their significant poverty rate.

Furthermore, providing mental health support was impacted by the prevalence of

poverty in rural communities (Blackstock et al., 2018). Mental health support has a

financial cost that many in high-poverty rural communities struggle to afford. That cost

includes transportation when mental health support is not associated with the school

system. Finally, Blackstock et al. (2018) indicated that while these obstacles to mental

health support have negative impacts on students, they can also turn into positives for

school-aged children living in small communities. The distinctiveness of small

communities, such as their close-knit sense, their familial relationships, and specific

values all set them apart from urban communities, even when viewing mental health

support for school-aged children (Blackstock et al., 2018).

The issues of scarce resources, limited transportation, unaffordable costs for those

in poverty, and preconceived beliefs about mental health became compounded when

taking into account research by O'Malley et al. (2018) that found that leaders of poverty-

identified schools struggle to provide mental health support for their students. O'Malley

et al. (2018) illustrated that budget constraints significantly hinder what resources school

superintendents could put together to meet the growing mental health needs of their

students. Further compounding the issue is the scarcity of scholarly research about rural

school districts (Blackstock et al., 2018; Forner, 2010). The lack of research impacts the mental health knowledge base of rural school leaders to be effective school leaders. Due to the high costs of resources and the leadership knowledge gap, rural school districts have a unique need for supporting students with anxiety through targeted programming.

   Social-emotional learning in rural schools. In contrast to previous findings on the barriers to providing mental health support for rural communities, a national teacher survey on social-emotional learning conducted by Bridgeland et al. (2013) highlighted the positive impact SEL has for students in poverty-identified schools. Building on this, teachers in poverty-identified schools exhibit a clearer receptiveness to SEL programming due to the general lack of resources available in rural schools (Blackstock et al., 2018; Bridgeland et al., 2013; O'Malley et al., 2018). This lack of support proves to be a common trend in under-resourced schools (Conner, Miles & Pope, 2014). Survey findings by Bridgeland et al. (2013) that displayed a distinction in socio-economic status among schools showed that low-income schools are less likely to implement SEL programming. According to Petersen (2018), schools often relied on one-size-fits-all programs, but an equitable SEL program benefits all students by identifying cultural values. This approach not only ensures equity but reduces cultural barriers.

Teachers

   While schools traditionally focus on academics, teachers are becoming more in tune with the importance of implementing programming for social and emotional learning and the impact on reducing anxiety in students. Studies completed nationwide showed that a majority of teachers firmly believe there needs to be an emphasis on

teaching SEL due to its benefits for all students (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2017). Teachers, when appropriately trained, prove to be vital to promoting the social and academic growth of students in the classroom (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Teachers understand the core components of SEL such as teamwork, life skills, and self-control and their impact on student academic performance. Moss (2016) identified in his evaluation of a social-emotional learning program that "schools that fully integrate an SEL curriculum not only teach additional specific skill sets but also adopt a new paradigm of learning that negates the split between the development of social-emotional and academic skills" (p. 11).

Research completed by Durlak et al. (2011) highlighted the impact teachers have on student academic performance. The study indicated an 11-point gain in achievement for students exposed to consistent SEL programming. Data gathered from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Stanford Achievement Test, and student GPA's (Durlak et al., 2011) provided the measurement for the achievement scores. The value of teaching SEL and incorporating the concepts in the classroom on a schoolwide basis has proven integral to the success of students.

Teacher support for reducing anxiety. High school teachers play a significant role in supporting students who experience anxiety, mostly by being the foremost contact with students at school. Because of their daily role, teachers can take timely steps to support anxious students (Blackstock et al., 2018). Peterson's (2018) research highlighted that teachers understand the significant issues students experience daily in their classrooms due to their regular interaction with students. Brooks' (2007) study of

students dealing with stress and coping noted that though not their primary role, teachers are in the prime position to anticipate, address, and intervene with proactive stress relieving measures in the classroom.

Connor, Miles, and Pope (2014) indicated a need for further study in the area of teachers relating with students and academic anxiety. Their research showed that students who did not associate with a teacher experienced more academic anxiety (Conner et al., 2014). Teachers play an important role in building relationships with anxious students and are therefore privy to the challenges and barriers that limit students from achieving success in schools. Prevalent concerns such as lack of practical teacher training, teachers with limited social-emotional competence, and poor implementation of SEL programs serve as barriers to effectively reducing anxiety.

Teacher training. Recent research reveals the disparity in providing appropriate teacher mental health and social-emotional learning training. A study by Bridgeland et al. (2013) indicated that more than half of high school teachers are likely to lack training in addressing social and emotional skills through classroom management strategies. Holtz's (2017) quantitative research of the level of mental health knowledge of high school teachers found that a gap persists in high school teacher training and school support given to address mental health concerns in the classroom. The study's results identified clear roles for teaching and support staff as essential in mental health training. Holtz (2017) outlined the importance of organizational structure that connects with a whole-school mentality to improve teacher education on mental health. Ultimately, Holtz

(2017) found that when the gap in support for teachers exists, students' mental health levels are not at their optimum.

A mixed methods study of high school leaders concerning mental health and wellness conducted by Meadows (2018) highlighted that site professionals and superintendents place a high value on training teachers in mental health. Meadows' (2018) emphasis focused on early identification of mental health problems, pointing out that teachers are vital to recognizing and reporting these problems. Brooks (2007) and Cohen (2006) noted the expectation for teachers to support anxious students despite their lack of training. Brooks (2007) signified that teachers are not taught stress management but rather focus on behavioral management. They simply lack the skills necessary to support students' needs for stress and coping, skills directly related to student anxiety. Cohen's (2006) research specifically found high school teachers with limited time and understanding of how to work with anxious students. Compounding this lack of training is a gap in working knowledge. While teachers understand the core tenets of SEL and believe that it should be implemented in schools, a gap in the working knowledge or practical implementation of SEL exists (Bridgeland et al. 2013).

The gap in their working knowledge of SEL continued to highlight the challenge for teachers to recognize anxiety. Hill et al.(2016) determined that the central concern with students and anxiety is that they do not seek help. Guerra (2017) showed that teachers and even students regularly misinterpret the symptoms of anxiety and that undertrained teachers confuse anxiety with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This undertraining has profound implications based on medical treatment for

both anxiety and ADHD. Guerra (2017) explained that treatment for ADHD did not support students with anxiety symptoms and may even make student anxiety worse.

A significant obstacle to implementing quality SEL programming is the lack of time for teachers (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Cohen, 2006). When supported with appropriate time and training, the teacher's role creates multiple benefits. Teachers trained in implementing SEL managed student behavior better (Greenberg, Brown & Abenavoli, 2016); exhibited improved personal accomplishment (Greenberg et al., 2016); and improved their confidence in their ability to handle that part of teaching (Lendrum et al., 2013).

Social-emotional competency. Teachers who exhibit Social-Emotional Competency (SEC) have the skills to make positive connections with students and impact the learning environment. When students perceive that their teachers care, they are more open to supporting and making a positive relationship with their teacher (Conner, Miles & Pope, 2014; Cohen, 2006). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) acknowledged that when teachers demonstrate strong social-emotional competency, they can utilize these associations to establish positive learning environments. Petersen (2019) noted that when teachers have high levels of SEC, they are better equipped to teach SEL skills to students and identify, refer, or support student needs.

Conversely, when teachers exhibit underdeveloped SEC, they are more subject to burnout leading to a negative impact on behaviors and the learning environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Research by Greenberg et al. (2016) revealed the struggles teachers have with stress. Teachers experience levels of stress in their

profession that negatively impact student learning (Greenberg et al., 2016). A Gallup

(2014) survey affirmed this by reporting that 46 percent of teachers reported high daily

stress during the school year. The value of professional development to support teachers

can reduce their stress levels and improve their wellness (Greenberg et al., 2016).

Greenberg et al. (2016) posited that teacher stress comes with an academic and

economic cost. As previously noted, high teacher stress leads to teacher turnover, and

teachers with low SEC negatively influence student academic outcomes. Greenberg et al.

(2016) outlined the economic cost of rising medical claims for teachers and suggested

that the academic and economic cost can be mitigated through participation in a wellness

program. Their study showed that teachers participating in a wellness program have

reduced absenteeism (Greenberg et al., 2016). Through a wellness program, teachers

have reduced absenteeism, support student learning, and have a positive economic effect

on school districts.

Implementation of social-emotional learning. A growing literature base has

revealed that SEL programming can be useful to support students as they move through

high school and beyond (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, Brown & Abenavoli, 2016;

Moss, 2016; Taylor et al., 2017). In contrast, both poor implementation of SEL programs

and poor use of evidence-based SEL programs continue to be obstructions to reducing

student anxiety. Findings from the Durlak et al. (2011) meta-analysis indicate the need

for quality implementation, noting that many schools do not use evidence-based

programs. Further evidence suggests that teachers are not effectively implementing SEL

curriculum or using the practices (Durlak et al., 2011; Jergenson, 2018). Durlak et al.

(2011) and Jergenson (2018) reiterated that the challenge for schools lies in carrying out

the implementation, including the daily practices and interventions associated with the

program. As previously documented, when teachers are trained and supported

appropriately, they can effectively carry out the practices of evidence-based SEL

programs (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2017).

Counselors

In addition to the role teachers play in addressing and reducing anxiety for

students, it proves essential to look at the impact of school counselors on remedying

anxiety for high school students. The traditional role of a counselor has undergone a

significant shift from its historical roots. Lambie and Williamson (2004) advocated for

counselors to change their position from the traditional notion of the guidance counselor

to that of the professional school counselor as a way to broaden and evolve their role.

The historical concept of the guidance counselor focused on vocations, test

administration, and academics (Collins, 2014). In contrast, current research by Meadows

(2018) discussed the imperative for changes in the role of school counselors in the face of

increased student mental health concerns and corresponding demands for resources and

services.

Furthermore, DeKruyf et al., (2013), having recognized the changing needs of

students, advocated for a conjoint professional identity. This conjoint identity fuses the

academic and the responsive, pursuing a model where the counselor becomes both an

educational leader and mental health service provider. This conjoint identity promotes a

modern concept of a professional school counselor that balances academic counseling

with responsive counseling (DeKruyf et al. 2013). Responsive counseling consists of providing both social and emotional learning and mental health services to students in individual, small, or large group settings. To address students facing high demands for performance, schools have utilized their counselors (Meadows, 2018).

With the counseling role becoming more dynamic in its identity and delivery of services, it has, therefore, become more comprehensive. Research by Cook, Goodman-Scott, Parker, and Welch (2018) underscored the change from reactionary career guidance to a comprehensive school counseling program. The authors continued defining the role of the counselor and the barriers they come up against. Evolving the part of the guidance counselor leads to changes at the national level. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (2012) developed several comprehensive school counseling models that move the counseling program to include the promotion of social and emotional development of students. The comprehensive approach is proactive and has prevention at its core (Bowers & Hatch, 2005; Brown, et al., 2006).

Comprehensive programs in rural schools. Research conducted by Gruman, Marston, and Koon (2013) revealed that a rural school can benefit from school-wide extensive counseling programming. However, while comprehensive school counseling is the model to achieve, evidence suggests that rural school districts face unique deficits in providing comprehensive services. Research by Bain, Rueda, Mata-Villarreal, and Mundy (2011) identified that rural schools have limited resources to address mental health needs. Their research indicated that the leading limited resource is school personnel (Bain et al., 2011). Often rural schools have one counselor, and this

professional is expected to deliver a comprehensive counseling program, including mental health services (Duncan, Brown-Rice, & Bardhoshi, 2014). As the lone counselor in the school, there are limits to support and supervision (Duncan et al., 2014). Also, counselors reported a need for more student resources such as direct counseling services, funding support, and community resources in rural schools (Bain et al., 2011). A lack of community resources is compounded by a distinct lack of knowledge of mental health support reported by parents of students in rural schools (Bain et al., 2011).

Students need counseling. At its core, several drivers exist for changes in the counseling role, starting with the needs of students. High school students face intense pressure to perform at a high level academically. These pressures can result in extreme levels of anxiety. Rockhill et al. (2010) indicated that while a certain natural level of anxiety can be a positive response for students, the extreme nature of anxiety causes distinct issues for the health and well-being of the student. To combat the pressures students face, schools rely on their counselors to provide mental health services (Meadows, 2018). According to McCormac (2016), school counselors are on the front lines daily and could address student anxiety.

The critical component for supporting students occurs when counselors have the right training. Brown et al.s (2006) research demonstrated that counselors perceive they have sufficient training and can provide appropriate counseling. DeKruyf et al. (2013) stated that counselors need to be active in two roles, as educational leaders and as mental health professionals, in order to impact the mental health needs of students positively. They further suggest that counselors cannot leave the mental health needs of students to

outside referrals but rather must prepare to address the needs themselves (DeKruyf et al., 2013). Leaving the mental health needs of students to outside providers results in students being missed and unserved.

        Administrator and teacher support for counselors. School administrators and teachers recognized the unique role of school counselors in supporting students. According to research by Bardhoshi and Duncan (2009), school administrators significantly value the work of school counselors, especially those in rural Midwest schools. Their research found that administrators highly value the counselor to address peer relationships and coping strategies, practice social skills, perform individual counseling, and identify and resolve student issues, needs, and problems (Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009). The value administrators place on counselors are reflective of the comprehensive counseling model and move away from older models that focus on academic counseling.

        Brown et al.'s (2006) research expanded on administrators' perceptions of school counselors, reporting that they understood counselors' work to be wide-ranging and supporting the whole child, specifically with crisis and mental health services. Also, research by Reiner, Colbert, and Pérusse (2009) showed that teachers believe counselors need to be active in the roles advocated by the ASCA National Model. Reiner et al. (2009) also revealed that teachers believe counselors should be providing individual counseling, a key finding for supporting the role of a counselor. Counselors can better understand the perceptions teachers have about counselor effectiveness through program

analysis and assessment. This program analysis allows counselors to address prevalent

needs they might otherwise not see (Reiner et al., 2009).

Lack of time. A main barrier to providing quality counseling service to students

comes from the amount of time available to provide that service. Because counselors'

time is a vital resource, schools realize that a school-wide or system-wide SEL program

can provide benefits to students and lessen counseling time (McCormac, 2016).

Furthermore, even with the support of national models for comprehensive counseling,

administrative tasks such as supervision of students or disciplining students often

consume counselors' time, notably in rural schools (Blackstock et al., 2018; Cook et al.,

2018). Bain et al.'s (2011) research described that counselors spent more time doing

administrative tasks outside of their area of training in contrast to time spent on

counseling activities. Cook et al. (2018) indicated that counselors should be dedicating

80 percent of their time providing direct or indirect service. In addition to spending time

on non-counseling duties, counselors are subject to the time it takes to provide

appropriate counseling. O'Connor and Coyne (2017) identified that counselors need to be

aware of how to handle their contact obligations with students, regardless of the length of

time that takes, to avoid consuming their time in this area disproportionally.

When considering students who experience anxiety, McCormac (2016) noted the

levels of anxiety and stress counselors see in students daily and the necessity for

resources to address the levels of anxiety. McCormac (2016) expressed the role

counselors have in making decisions on whether students stay in school or not contingent

on their level of anxiety. Furthermore, Cook et al. (2018) indicated that counselors often

provide these services for the school community and in the classroom, again increasing the time used on counseling services that do not fit the role of a professional school counselor with less emphasis on prevention. However, according to Gruman et al. (2013), evidence suggested that comprehensive programming opens up time for counselors for prevention services. Counselors who implement a school-wide advisory program/academic program gain more time eventually to address all student needs, including those related to mental health (Gruman et al., 2013).

Intervention, responsive services, and supervision. According to many in the field, schools are the best place for providing mental health services (Collins, 2014; DeKruyf et al., 2013; O'Connor & Coyne, 2017). Professional school counselors, as part of a comprehensive program, can implement responsive services through collaboration and advocacy with school personnel, parents, and community providers (Thompson, Robertson, Curtis & Frick, 2012). DeKruyf et al. (2013) explained that when schools offer mental health services, student access to those services also increases. The barriers to receiving mental health support, such as transportation and loss of school time, became significantly reduced.

Supervision and training. Duncan et al. (2014) found through their quantitative study that rural school counselors require supervision. Clinical supervision in a school setting is distinct from administrative supervision. According to Mulhauser (2019), supervision allowed a way for counselors to utilize the expertise of other counselors to review their work, provide training, and receive professional development. To best support counselors, the work of supervision is based on consulting, not management

(Mulhauser, 2019). Duncan et al. (2014) reported that the need became evident, as over 90 percent of counselors in rural schools are not receiving supervision, limiting their clinical skill development. To address their limited clinical skills, Duncan et al. (2014) identified that counselors need to be creative with how to make supervision available both during the school day and after the school day.

Training is one of the critical components to create comprehensive counseling programs. A growing body of evidence supports training opportunities for counselors from research completed by Bain et al. (2011), Blackstock et al., (2018), Collins (2014) and O'Connor and Coyne (2017). Bain et al. (2011) researched perceptions of rural school counselors, finding that a majority of counselors themselves identify the need for training, specifically for mental health training. While DeKruyf and Pehrsson's (2011) research takes a broader scope than just rural schools, their findings still correlate with Bain et al. (2011) in finding that counselors consistently lack appropriate training. As noted previously, time is a valuable resource. O'Connor and Coyne (2017) indicated the need for time management when providing counseling services to students and noted that such management comes from being appropriately trained.

Counselors can change their role and provide appropriate services to students experiencing anxiety primarily through training opportunities. Modern technology can be used to provide supervision for counselors in rural schools (Duncan et al., 2014). This notion is supported by research from DeKruyf and Pehrsson (2011) that indicated that training opportunities must be accessible and of short duration. When presented with the right training, counselors can provide support to students when access to mental health

professionals do not exist. The most common type of support incorporates using the cognitive behavioral therapy model (Rockhill et al., 2010).

Cognitive-behavioral therapy. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the primary intervention used by professional school counselors and mental health providers. Rockhill et al. (2010) identified that CBT is a standard therapy used for anxiety disorders. The therapy approach addresses several areas, among them understanding primary symptoms, learning responses to anxiety, and practicing specific techniques for problem-solving. CBT supports students through opportunities to learn and practice new ways to react to anxiety.

Thompson et al. (2012) indicated that CBT has value in that it has been shown to enhance both academic performance and social development of youth. Thompson et al. (2012) discussed the prevention and intervention options for professional school counselors, noting that school-wide programs are useful for reducing symptoms of student anxiety. Thompson et al. (2012) also recognized best practices for effective programs such as using screening tests for identifying symptoms and conducting interventions with assessments. Meadows (2018) reinforced the research on best practices stating that early intervention make a significant impact in getting support to students experiencing anxiety. Early identification allows professional school counselors to take a proactive approach to provide services to students experiencing anxiety (Meadows, 2018).

As a result, many counselors utilized CBT as an intervention within the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). McCormac (2016) outlined the levels of MTSS by

starting with the base level of support being an evidence-based social and emotional learning program geared toward all students. This base level is followed by Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions that exist in individual or small group settings (McCormac, 2016). Counselors use CBT at the Tier 2 and 3 levels, and utilizing CBT as a component of MTSS, professional school counselors possess options to address student anxiety.

Advocacy. Counselors need to advocate for their role and duties. Reiner et al. (2009) illustrated a perception of ineffectiveness or invisibility of the professional school counselor. Bardhoshi and Duncan (2009) highlighted ways to be proactive advocates for their profession, and Lambie and Williamson (2004) discussed in-service programs that provide training for counselors. Through in-service programs, counselors can inform school professionals of their training and aptitudes (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Further research by Gruman et al. (2013) found that when counselors take a leadership role, they become more adept at collecting data and advocating for change. When professional school counselors bring awareness, they can show the effectiveness of their work and link to student achievement (Reiner et al., 2009).

Student achievement. While evidence points to schools valuing the integration of school-wide social and emotional learning (McCormac, 2016) within a comprehensive counseling program, measurements of that impact remain largely vague and incomplete. One exception is Gruman et al. (2013), who studied a rural school that implemented a comprehensive counseling program and noted a 20-point increase above state averages on their achievement tests over six years. In addition to the academic achievement, counselors were acknowledged as being able to meet the mental health needs of their

students. The counselors took a proactive, leadership role, getting teachers and administrators involved. The results were two-fold, increased academic achievement, and improved well-being of students (Gruman et al., 2013).

The survey conducted by Bridgeland et al. (2013) highlighted the educational value of counselors supporting social and emotional learning. When counselors and teachers work together to provide services for students and reach into the classroom with SEL, schools report higher academic functioning (Bridgeland et al., 2013). The research found that evidence-based programming is essential to an active SEL program that supports student success. This success translates to fewer student absences and elevates student interest. These traits also transformed into higher graduation rates (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Furthermore, as explained earlier, school-wide SEL programs have shown a gain of 11 points in achievement (Durlak et al., 2011).

The literature about the professional school counselor indicates a transition to a comprehensive counseling program that promotes responsive services with specific prevention and interventions geared toward the health and well-being of students. This focus shows that a gap exists in the resources necessary to build and deliver comprehensive programming. Durlak et al.'s (2011) research explained that the gap is due to the ineffective implementation of programs, specifically the practice element of delivering interventions. This is the main stumbling block to providing students the services and support they demand (Durlak et al., 2011). Programs implemented with fidelity have more consistent results in all areas (Durlak et al., 2011).

Summary

This literature review covered mental health and social-emotional learning as it relates to students experiencing anxiety in high-poverty, rural schools. Mental health was investigated showing distinct costs for anxiety disorders such as the price of providing services and the rise of illness and disability among students. Mental health programming was explored showing the barriers for adolescents such as limited resources and access and ineffective program implementation. Since student anxiety is wide-ranging, the literature included information from students outside the United States. The professional role of teachers and counselors was also analyzed as they work closely with students and have a direct impact on their mental health and social-emotional learning.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Thirteen percent of adolescents experience an anxiety disorder each year (Peterson, 2018). This qualitative study, based on the transcendental phenomenological approach, will examine how teachers address adolescent anxiety. Phenomenological studies describe "the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314), reducing the study to the essence of the experience. Therefore, this study is qualitative in order to capture the essence of how high school math and language arts teachers are meeting the needs of students experiencing anxiety, specifically in high-poverty, rural Minnesota high schools. Hill et al. (2016) indicated that anxiety disorders are known to interfere with the general function of young people, including their performance in school. Anxiety is also manifest in the performance culture. Morsanyi et al. (2016) showed the negative association between math anxiety and test performance. When students have anxiety trying to solve mathematical problems, it leads to impaired math performance (Morsanyi, Busdraghi & Primi, 2014). Furthermore, Morsanyi et al.'s (2014) experiments with secondary school students demonstrated that mathematical anxiety might negatively impact a students' ability to make good decisions.

This study further investigated responses from teachers who work directly with students experiencing symptoms of anxiety. Since the Minnesota Department of Education (2019c), in accordance with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), mandated that schools administer annual tests for

students in math and reading the participants would have direct experience and licensure in math and language arts. Therefore, this study intended to find meaning through the perceptions of high school math and language arts teachers who work with students exhibiting characteristics of anxiety, thus bringing a more profound understanding of teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and needs in the classroom setting. Students experiencing anxiety referred to any student claiming anxiety as a determining factor in their educational progress, regardless if a doctor had identified their anxiety disorder or not.

Qualitative Research and Phenomenology

Qualitative studies are practical when problems need exploring (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study sought to explore how math and language arts teachers address the problems associated with adolescent anxiety in the high school setting such as interference with general function and low academic performance (Hill et al., 2016; Morsanyi et al., 2016). Qualitative research takes a broad philosophical research approach. This study resembled the ontological assumption as it seeks to develop themes from several viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since this study relied on interactions between students and their teachers, the researcher can take those views and draw meaning. Taking these meanings, the researcher sought to identify patterns of meaning, always keeping in mind the context and setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants' documented words allowed for discovering meaning and themes in order to report out their different experiences intentionally.

Furthermore, the ontological assumption fit within a distinct interpretive framework. Interpretive frameworks are a worldview or set of beliefs brought to the

research by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is mainly interpretive, following the researcher's "intent to make sense of the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell & Poth, p. 24). This qualitative study fit in the mold of a constructivist worldview. In a constructivist worldview, the researcher finds that "meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Therefore, a study within the constructivist worldview is predominantly social as it focuses on human interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moustakas (1994) attached the constructivist worldview to phenomenological research due to its emphasis on describing lived experiences.

Phenomenology rationale. A phenomenological approach proved to be the most appropriate method for this study due to its emphasis on understanding several individuals' common and lived experiences while seeking the essence of their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lived experiences exist around a particular phenomenon, in this case, adolescent anxiety. Phenomenological study focuses on the meaning of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018) further describe phenomenological research as seeking the what and how of individuals experience of the phenomenon. This is the essence of the experience.

Within phenomenological study was the research and analysis approach outlined by Moustakas (1994) called transcendental phenomenology. According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology included several steps, starting with epoche, or bracketing, where presuppositions were set aside. The steps move to the concept of

transcendental, seeing things in a fresh perspective. "The phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Finally, the concept of reduction brings the researcher back to the source of the meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) summarized it this way: "Transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness" (p. 49).

Being able to gain insight directly from the perspectives of teachers was essential to find out how they were addressing the impact of anxiety on their teaching practice, relationship building with students, and student well-being and achievement. Therefore, a phenomenological study, which allowed for exploring a phenomenon such as adolescent anxiety in the high school setting, was the most appropriate method for the researcher. Transcendental phenomenology accentuated seeing the phenomenon with a fresh view. The meaning of teachers' experiences in this study can lead to understandings (Moustakas, 1994) applicable to their profession.

Participants

Participants were eight current math and language arts high school teachers from high-poverty schools in rural Minnesota, which created a state-level consistency regarding access to resources, financial funding, school staffing, education law, and curriculum. The participants were experienced teachers who, through a process of purposive sampling, met three main criteria. First, the participant was currently teaching math or language arts in a grades 9-12 high school. Second, the participant was currently a tier 4 licensed math or language arts teacher. Third, the participant had currently

attained tenure status in the school district. Tenure status referred to four or more years of continual teaching in a school district. As such, participants had participated in the mental health training that is required for renewing and maintaining a teaching license in the state of Minnesota. Mental health training can be attained through a district SEL or SBMH program initiative or dedicated workshop where teachers earn continuing education units toward renewing and maintaining their license. As a result, the participants had significant experience in their profession to be able to identify adolescent anxiety while possessing a skill set with which to provide interventions and preventions with students experiencing anxiety. This education background allowed each teacher to reflect on their lived experience with anxious students. The gender of participants was not a relevant component of the study and was not a consideration for inviting participants.

Potential participants were contacted directly through email using the public-information school district's staff directory. If the teacher's content area was not stated, an email was sent to the entire staff. The email included an overview of the research, criteria for participation, and the consent form request for their participation, ensuring that prospective participants have all the information regarding the study. Based on a teachers' correspondence through the email, the researcher contacted potential participants through a phone call to further explain the purpose of the study, receive consent, and establish the interview. The consent form was included in the initial email and shown in Appendix B.

Site selection. Schools are an ideal setting for adolescents to develop the skills related to social-emotional competence and address their anxiety (DeKruyf, Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Lendrum et al., 2013; Warner et al., 2016). Therefore, the study relied on participants from high-poverty, rural Minnesota high schools. Requirements for participation included rural school districts, which were identified as enrolling 3500 students or less. Furthermore, each school district represented in the study had a free and reduced priced meals rate of 42 percent or more, as identified in the Minnesota Report Card data (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019d).

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected and analyzed primarily using procedures consistent with phenomenological research methods based on the writing of Creswell and Poth (2018) and the work of transcendental phenomenology methods of Moustakas (1994). Utilizing a specific research approach created a consistent method to follow and ensured the validity of the study. Moustakas (1994) followed a process of transcendental phenomenology, whereas the researcher identifies a phenomenon and follows the systematic steps of bracketing, data collection, and data analysis. Within these steps was the research interview. To create consistency with transcendental phenomenological data collection, Moustakas (1994) outlined the following criteria for conducting interviews:

- Researchers conduct interviews with between three and eight individuals who have experience with the phenomenon.

- The interview process requires two broad questions: a textural question to learn what participants experienced and a structural question to learn how they experienced the phenomenon.

- Interviews are recorded and transcribed.

Instrumentation. Phenomenological interviews follow an informal and interactive process (Moustakas, 1994). The method used in this study was a single set of interviews conducted by the researcher with each of the eight high school math and language arts teachers in a high-poverty, rural school district to collect qualitative data regarding their lived experience working with students experiencing anxiety. Using the semi-structured interview process with open-ended questions (see Appendix C) allowed for the flexibility of participants providing more in-depth insight into the problem. The questions were designed in terms of the two broad questions Moustakas (1994) emphasizes in transcendental phenomenology: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79)?

The 30-45-minute interviews were digitally recorded to ensure accuracy and a transcription service was used to transcribe the voice-recorded data. The interview site was set by mutual agreement and occurred through either video conference or at a confidential meeting space secured at a local library or other secure site by mutual agreement. Prior to the start of the interview, the researcher established an appropriate comfort level for the participant through social conversation (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher conducted interviews with the participants from November 2019 through

February 2020.

     Role of the Researcher. In a phenomenological study, the researcher must focus diligently on the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moustakas (1994), the concept of bracketing is the data analysis process of setting aside a researcher's own experiences in order to gain a fresh perspective of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) emphasizes the transcendental approach as seeing things with a freshness or openness. So, while in phenomenological research it was important that the researcher suspend prior knowledge and perceptions of the problem, there was value for the researcher to bring personal experiences to the study.

     I collected interview data to reduce participants' information to the essence of the experience while also being aware of my biases, values, and personal background concerning the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a teacher for nine years and a school administrator for 14 years, I possessed direct knowledge and understanding of the issues facing students, and specifically as the middle and high school principal of a high-poverty, rural school, I had witnessed the negative impact of anxiety on student learning and well-being. I had worked with teachers and professional school counselors to identify and implement programs that address adolescent anxiety. Despite my personal experiences in the high school setting working with anxious students, my goal was to remain objective so that existing biases did not corrupt or influence the study and its results. Since bias could occur in the results due to the researcher's preconceived perceptions of student anxiety, I maintained regular communication with my advisor to maintain objectivity in reaching themes and conclusions.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is about organizing data, coding data into themes, representing data, and creating interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological data analysis was conducted using steps outlined by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas's (1994) data analysis procedure provides a tight structure for organizing and analyzing the report. The first three phases are bracketing, horizonalization, and clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

- Data analysis begins with bracketing, the process of phenomenological reduction, where the researcher puts aside preconceived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing supports the researcher to understand the experiences of the participants fully. Still, Moustakas (1994) does give weight to reflexivity, where the researcher can bring personal experiences to the study.

- The researcher follows horizonalization by listing significant statements and giving them equal value.

- The researcher creates clusters of meaning with statements organized into themes without overlapping and repetitive statements.

There exist multiple ways to analyze data. The Modification of the Van Kaam Method (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120) sets a distinct plan to adhere to. This data analysis involves significant detail found in textural and structural descriptions. In the textural description, the researcher describes the meaning of the experience by writing about what was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Textural description includes the use of verbatim

text (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the structural description, the researcher focuses on how the phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher can go into depth to find all possible meanings (Moustakas, 1994). To complete the analysis procedure, the researcher takes the descriptions from the textural and structural writing to compile a composite description of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) identifies that phenomenological data analysis ends with an exhaustive description of the essence of the experience. The final writing is the essence of the experience, telling the reader the what and the how of the participants' experience (Moustakas, 1994). When closing the report, Moustakas (1994) recommends the final writing be written as, "a brief creative close that speaks to the essence of the study and its inspiration to you in terms of the value of the knowledge and future directions of your professional-personal life" (p. 184).

The researcher utilized computer software technology in data analysis to support organizing and representing the data. NVivo statistical and data analysis software contributed to accurate transcription of the interview recordings, the development of themes, and representing and visualizing themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness, authenticity, and validity. The goal of trustworthy accuracy and validity of this phenomenological research began with member-checking, in which each participant was given their finished transcript for review, comments, and additions. The analysis gained additional validity through clarifying bias and peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher ensured validity by creating a rich, thick description that relied on participants' verbatim words. Validity was also

guaranteed through communicating the role of the researcher and outlining the process of

epoche.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe the lived experiences of math and language arts teachers working with students experiencing anxiety in high-poverty, rural high schools. This chapter discusses the key findings of the participants' experiences, beginning with a professional textural-structural description of each participant followed by theme development through composite textural and composite structural descriptions. The chapter finishes with a summary of the key findings as the essence of the phenomenon.

Central Question and Subquestions

The purpose of this research was to find meaning in how teachers in a high-poverty, rural high school are addressing students experiencing anxiety through their teaching practice, program implementation, relationship building with students, and student well-being and achievement. The central question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of high school math and language arts teachers in high-poverty, rural schools in terms of educating and meeting the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety?

To further explore the research question, the following subquestions have been created to accurately discover the attitudes, beliefs, and needs of math and language arts teachers as they educate anxious students.

1. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools describe or perceive their role in addressing student anxiety?

2. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the effectiveness of their support on student anxiety, in particular, academic anxiety?

3. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the impact of students experiencing anxiety on their teaching practice?

4. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools working with students experiencing anxiety describe their knowledge and training in order to educate anxious students?

5. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the role and effectiveness of professional school counselors in addressing students experiencing anxiety?

The interviews contained additional questions that built on the five subquestions to discover the lived experiences of each participant. These experiences were explored using the transcendental phenomenology research approach.

Epoche

Phenomenological research begins with epoche, the process of identifying our preconceived ideas and beliefs about a subject (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche allows the researcher to bracket, or single out, the assumptions and attitudes they have developed about a topic based on their experience of it in order to be open to a new, pure vantage point of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). My epoche related to the study of anxiety in

high school students began with reflecting on my teaching experience., in which I observed students struggling with social and academic anxiety. This perception of these anxieties as a reality of student life continued into my role as an administrator. My subjective experience also includes conversations with teachers and my own work in carrying out disciplinary measures with student behaviors, reviewing student attendance, and monitoring student academic progress have provided insight on their underlying mental health concerns. By identifying my own experiences through the process of epoche, I was better able to listen to and analyze the experiences of my participants through their lens rather than my own standpoint and obtain a clear picture of their experience.

Selection of Participants

Each of the participants met the stated criteria that they were either a math or language arts teacher with a Tier 4 teaching license, teach in a high school, have attained tenure status, and work in a school classified as rural and high-poverty. The school districts of prospective participants were identified by reviewing data from the Minnesota Department of Education report card. Each school district represented in this study were known as having a 42 percent Free and Reduced Lunch rate. An email (Appendix A) with an attached consent form (Appendix B) was sent to math and language arts teachers requesting their participation in the research study. Eight participants, six female and two male, were subsequently selected and engaged in semi-structured interviews.

As shown in Table 1, six participants were English-Language Arts teachers and two were math teachers. Experience ranged from 9 to 31 years of teaching. Pseudonyms are used to ensure participant anonymity.

Table 1 - Participants

Participant Information

Participant	Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience	License Tier	Teaching License	Content
1	Aubrey	F	29	4	English/Language Arts	ELA
2	Christopher	M	31	4	English/Language Arts	ELA
3	Leah	F	21	4	English/Language Arts	ELA
4	Allison	F	9	4	Communication Arts/Literature	ELA
5	Monica	F	9	4	English/Language Arts	ELA
6	Tanya	F	14	4	Communication Arts/Literature	ELA
7	John	M	29	4	Mathematics	Math
8	Carly	F	14	4	Mathematics	Math

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in a manner consistent with transcendental phenomenology. The procedures began with an interview protocol (Appendix C) conducted over a four-month period from November 2019 to February 2020. One interview was held in person while the other seven took place via video conference. Interviews lasted from 25 to 45 minutes. Upon completion of the interview, audio recordings were uploaded to a transcription service. Participants followed the member

checking process by reviewing their transcript. Two participants provided further clarification via email to present full accuracy of their experiences.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed the steps associated with the Modification of the Van Kaam Method (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120), beginning with listing relevant horizons, the act of giving equal value to every significant statement. Step two followed the process of reduction and determining invariant constituents: looking through the data, reductions were made by determining the necessity of the experience, eliminating repetitions, and creating labels (Moustakas 1994, p. 120). During the next two steps, as the constituents are labeled, the core themes emerge followed by an additional check of each transcript to provide validation of the core themes (Moustakas 1994, p. 120). The next level involved creating individual textural descriptions for each participant. Step six moved to the development of individual structural descriptions, bringing in imaginative variation, which examines the underlying themes to account for the emergence of the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994, p. 99). The textural and structural descriptions were then combined to create meaning and essence (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120). Finally, a composite description connected the whole of the data, establishing the essence of the experience for each participant (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120) as documented in the following section.

Individual Textural and Structural Narrative

The individual textural and structural narratives bring together each participants' meaning and essence through description and verbatim text. The narratives resulted from the themes, consistent with the process of reduction and imaginative variation.

Participant 1. Aubrey brings her 29 years of experience teaching language arts into her perceptions of students experiencing anxiety. Aubrey articulated an understanding of the changes that have occurred in education related to mental health and anxiety in particular, stating,

> When I first started teaching it was not something on our radar. Mental health issues were, I think, sometimes seen as behavior issues, but not recognized as mental health issues unless a kid had a real serious diagnosis …[written in a] 504 plan.

Aubrey's experience with student anxiety included a distinct sense of gaining more awareness. She connected her thoughts on anxiety to her current teaching stating, "Now it feels common. I'm much more aware of it now." This awareness has brought about a change in her teaching style to fit the needs of students, as she has become more of an encourager.

> I am more patient now with makeup work. I am not a demanding person. 'Oh, you were gone yesterday—didn't you look online to see what we did? You have to have it done today or you get a zero.' I'm never that person . . . I'm encouraging but not threatening.

Changes to her teaching style were also witnessed when she recognized the prevalence of performance-based anxiety. As a language arts teacher, Aubrey associated performance anxiety with speech class. She structured this class to reduce performance-based anxiety while still providing "participatory active learning."

Aubrey's experiences have left her with feelings of helplessness and possessing a sense of empathy. She revealed in the interview how dire some situations have been and the consequences of anxiety, while describing several positive and negative interactions with anxious students. One particular positive experience ended with the student receiving support because the parents took a proactive approach. Aubrey noted that "I don't think I've ever had a case where the parent was involved and that [participation] made it worse." Conversely, Aubrey related a negative interaction with a student, describing the student as having "very high anxiety." The student eventually withdrew from school. Through these experiences, Aubrey clearly felt the relevance of student support stating: "If he can get the mental health help he needs . . . this kind of cry for help will have a positive end." She continued pondering the impact of anxiety beyond high school. She recalled a situation where a former student struggled with anxiety traits in college because the structure around them was so different.

> I wonder if some of the transferring and some of the not making it at college that
> seems to be more prevalent now is anxiety based and just not knowing how to
> deal with their own insecurities and failures and getting their work done.

She expanded on this by relaying her knowledge of a former student who struggled with anxiety traits in college because the structure around them was so different.

Aubrey's interview felt very personal, especially as she portrayed the district training conducted in response to a crisis that involved a colleague. Her experience in training, specifically through school-led programs in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), has increased her awareness to student anxiety. "I know from our trainings that

when a kid has anxiety and that's what's in their brain, they're not really great at that code-switching . . . putting it aside and jumping into the work and getting the work done." Aubrey said that she strained repeatedly to focus on the balance of effectively working with anxious students while simultaneously moving the class and academics forward. "I feel like I have a decent balance and that's kind of what you strive for as a teacher," she said, and revealed that she has many students, roughly one hundred twenty, to teach daily. To support the balance of academics, and student anxiety, she is grateful for help from the counselor. Finally, Aubrey emphasized that anxiety is not an issue exclusively for high school students, but also for her teacher colleagues, describing experiences where they were overworked and correspondingly developed a level of anxiety. Those experiences negatively impacted her colleagues work with students.

Participant 2. Christopher has been a language arts teacher for 30 years, and while a veteran teacher was only in his second year at his current school at the time of our interview. Even though Christopher could draw differences between his experiences at the various schools in which he has worked, his stated that his approach to anxious students has only improved and become more focused on ways to help them. He brought a wealth of knowledge and examples to share regarding these students, starting with his ability to recognize what anxiety is. Christopher identified classroom situations where students "look like they just have a hard time focusing or are apprehensive about something." He also pointed out a different dynamic in which students "learned how to manipulate certain situations." He distinguished that as a survival mechanism.

Christopher's experience working with anxious students is highlighted by a willingness to find help for them. "I was lucky enough to be part of some . . . experiences that [allowed me] to find people that could help." The help he referred to has a purpose. "We're all just really trying to find a way to . . . help the student get to a better spot." Christopher described that "spot" with an emphasis on comfort and safety, noting the need to "find some support to help get that straight before they can be in a position again to feel comfortable and safe in your classroom." His teaching has been impacted as he balances how far to support students and yet get the outcomes necessary in a class. His teaching practice focused on daily routines and clear expectations.

The key to Christopher's success as a teacher addressing anxiety came through experience and a willingness to solve problems and find support:

As you get more experience you realize that there's probably some outside factors that often are causing the student to act the way they are. So, you can't necessarily get mad because of [the student] disappointing you or not following your expectations. You have to try and work with them to see what the actual problem is.

Christopher's experiences were built not only on the knowledge gained with years of experience, but also through specific training opportunities such as ACEs that helped expand his skills to work with anxious students. He shared how being on specific organization boards have also provided benefits. "I've been on the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership board for thirteen years, so that probably puts me ahead of the curve," he said. He reflected that training and experience made a huge difference in being

able to recognize that something needed to change and that it was more about students than himself:

> When I did that training at the Science Museum, I [kept realizing] 'I shouldn't be doing this; I'm not going to do that anymore.' There was a lot of stuff that I [learned] was more about my convenience and me feeling comfortable than it was about students.

In a different look at anxiety, Christopher recognized the need for training and resources for teachers, especially new teachers who may take things personally. He commented that he felt compelled to help mentor younger teachers:

> I think it's really hard for a new teacher. . . If . . . the kid . . . is having some anxiety and they're not able to appropriately . . . express that or deal with it, it may look like they don't like your class . . . they don't like your lesson, [or] they don't like you. It's hard for people with lesser experience to maybe recognize that and understand it.

When Christopher started teaching, he explained, the resources didn't exist. "There wasn't any support. I didn't have a teacher's edition; I didn't have anything. And you couldn't google it. So, there were a lot of mistakes I made." Christopher continued sharing that his connection with students, especially through coaching, was also an important part of recognizing and supporting anxious students. He also indicated that the size of school played a role in recognizing anxiety, stating that "it helps a lot to be in a smaller school and within the community."

Participant 3. Leah has 20 years teaching experience in language arts. Meeting over video conference, she approached the interview in a positive manner, freely sharing concrete details of her experiences including her knowledge of students, how she changed her teaching style, and an understanding of the impact of anxiety on student learning. Her journey was one of revelation through personal and professional growth resulting in impactful change.

Leah's experiences started with a general knowledge of how to adjust her approach to working with students experiencing anxiety. She highlighted a particular situation with a female student:

She was in a little bit earlier and instead of approaching it from the 'Where's your work?' standpoint, I said, 'I noticed that Monday was a pretty tough day for you. I hope today is going better.' And that conversation, because I started it that way . . . led us into talking about the work and getting that whole situation figured out.

As Leah described her background knowledge and experiences, she identified several descriptors of anxiety such as "nonattendance," "sad," and "non-compliance." She outlined a clear grasp of the range of behaviors associated with anxiety from the "blow-ups" to the emotional reactions and finally the defiant refusal to complete any schoolwork. Leah indicated that anxiety is not relegated to school, but also occurs at home. That leaks into the struggle's students have while at school.

When asked about her perceived role, Leah believes her role has changed, becoming more focused on students' everyday lives. As a teacher with two decades of experience, she commented on her changing role:

More and more I'm finding that my role is not just to prepare them for life when

they're leaving us in high school, but to be there for them in their everyday lives

and provide them with that one stable place and that one stable person that they

can count on.

Leah has taken a longer view of student learning and adjusted her courses accordingly. "I

know that preparing students for what's coming up is becoming more and more important

to me so that . . . they see the long-term objective of what we're doing in class." To make

those adjustments she reviews her content, looking for triggers and working to eliminate

potential issues.

Leah communicated a keen awareness of the role performance anxiety places on

students. When asked about performance-based assessments, specifically taking the ACT

test, Leah responded, "I can see the level of anxiety rise for everybody, not just particular

students; they know that a lot is riding on that one thing." Student anxiety also showed

up in College in the Schools classes, something Leah heard students talk about

frequently. She concluded by noting that high stakes tests cause "big anxiety for the

students."

Ultimately, Leah made reference to her personal growth, becoming more

empathetic while recognizing the need to change how she teaches and leads her

classroom. Leah indicated that as her own children get older, she has learned from

parenting to become more empathic to students experiencing anxiety.

I maybe wasn't as patient as I should have been with students . . . so I realize now

that my approach to things needed to change. After reflection and growth in my

own life, I've definitely made those changes. So that is . . . really important for us

to know that. Our own personal experiences definitely impact the kids.

Leah was asked about the role of the school counselor in providing support for her. She

explained that training from counselors and social workers had basically been tidbits of

information sent through email. While beneficial, she noted, "I think that their workload

is so heavy that their ability to interact and help us on a day to day basis is very difficult."

The challenges in high workloads for counselors then spreads to the role of the teacher.

I feel like everybody else in the building is having to take on more of the school

counselor/social worker role because there are so many students with needs that

can't be met by this small amount of staff that we have.

Furthermore, when asked to describe her overall training experiences in the school setting

regarding anxiety, Leah stated, "It's very little." She did speak highly of an SEL-based

program called Top 20 that is an offshoot of Positive Behavior Interventions and

Supports. "I've been lucky so far that in my own experience it's going really well."

While the program has been in place for only a short time period, she sees this program

reflecting positively on her students based on the fact that the whole staff is using

common language to communicate with students.

Participant 4. Allison has nine years of experience teaching language arts with a

background teaching at an Alternative Learning Center prior to teaching in the traditional

public-school setting. During the interview she drew on the experiences from both

settings while making distinctions in how she taught and addressed anxiety in each. She

stated that "ALC students typically do not have performance anxiety necessarily, but they

have anxiety from family issues or trauma or some other case. And in that situation, I found myself going much slower through academic material." Recognizing this challenge, Allison adjusted her teaching to find themes and content that would connect more with their experiences. Taking this approach allowed students to "see how themes or characters represented maybe something that they were going through as well and how they dealt with it." This merging of students' experiences with academic work formed the essence of Allison's experience. "I do see myself using still that thematic idea of how can we look at life in an academic way that maybe will also help students in an emotional way."

Allison had a clear grasp of issues that anxiety brings to students. She keenly listened to students to recognize the language they use, including body language, when traits rather than words are expressed. She noted that students seek acceptance with peers, which is often manifested on social media posts:

> [As] a fitting in and trying to be cool or trying to do the right thing according to their peers . . . that anxiety that I see a lot from what gets posted on Snapchat or Tik Tok has become a new thing that they seem to really be into, and those things come up all the time in class.

Allison pointed out that the pull of social anxiety is constant. Students check their social media continually yet don't want peers to notice their anxiety. She sees the defense mechanisms students use to hide their anxiety, specifically in making jokes, which she perceives as "a defense mechanism for how they truly see a situation."

Allison classified the impact of anxiety on learning in two ways. On one end of the spectrum, students shut down. On the other side of the spectrum, students become overly focused on the task of completion, not learning. A focus on completion tends to lead to shortcuts like cheating. Allison expressed a willingness to adjust her teaching to better support student learning. Along with that, however, she expressed the difficulties of working with students who shut down in particular:

As a teacher I find that very difficult to work with because not only have they shut down with their assignments, but they're going to shut down with you as the teacher because they're going to see you as part of the problem as well.

Causing further frustration for Allison is the recognition of not being able to know what to do, especially with peer anxiety. She matter-of-factly stated, "I don't really know how to handle it." She realized that while as a teacher she makes adjustments to address anxiety, students don't always see it that way. The things teachers say to students don't necessarily resonate with them.

When asked about the role of school counselors, Allison portrayed counselors as someone students can talk too, a safe place to be. Conversely, Allison questioned the effectiveness of counselors due to the number of students they have to work with. She identified that the limited resources of time and staff have created surface-level relationships between counselors and students, stating, "Sometimes I don't know how effective they can be if they don't truly understand or know these kids." Their school has implemented an advisory program to bridge the relationship gap, yet Allison acknowledged that there are limitations:

As an adviser I have twenty-three students I'm in charge of and we meet with

every day. But even then, with twenty minutes with twenty-three students, that's

really giving me an opportunity to talk to each student for one minute a day,

which is hard as well.

Regarding her background in training to work with anxious students, Allison commented,

"I don't think I have very much knowledge on working with anxious kids specifically.

My district has really pushed recently to educate and give professional development to

teachers on cultural diversity trainings." While observing that she had more training

while teaching at the Alternative Learning Center (ALC), the trainings were not anxiety

specific.

Allison perceived her role to support her students through her advisor position.

Since Allison's school does not use a specific SEL-based program in their advisory, she

has taken the initiative to use SEL programming on her own as an advisor. She felt

comfortable doing this largely due to correlating work in her master's program. "We

don't use this evidence-based program, but . . . I use a program . . . because I'm currently

taking master's classes and doing my own research on socially emotional learning." In

pushing for an SEL-based program, she has taken her case to gain support from her

principal and counselor. As Allison experienced student anxiety, she has run the range of

not knowing how to handle certain anxious students to taking the initiative to try and

address anxious students.

Participant 5. Monica's nine years of language arts teaching experience started at

an alternative learning center prior to her current role in a public school. Anxiety hits

close to home for Monica, who talked extensively about how she battles anxiety and depression. She walked through her significant personal experiences with her own family and of being in a rural setting her whole life, associating her anxious feeling to what she sees in students. These formed the backdrop for her lived experience working with anxious students.

Monica spoke with a passion for her students. She communicated that there is a palpable need to support anxious students, noting that students' mental health needs are not being met. "The majority of those students I have that are failing right now are dealing with some pretty serious mental health issues that are not being helped in any way." Monica's main contention is that students don't often recognize that what they are dealing with is anxiety—they exhibit the behaviors but cannot name the condition. She said that "they don't know that's what it is because they've never been told that's what it is or . . . they come from a background where 'we don't do those things.'" In order to break down some of these issues, Monica said that she teaches in a manner that is open and matter of fact and is transparent in her conversations with students. She has supported anxious students by making a plan, putting a name to anxiety, and framing the language necessary for students to communicate effectively in the situation.

With her background growing up in rural areas, Monica indicated her understanding of teenage students in this setting, including their perceptions of how they are to be. Monica explained this specifically in relation to boys: "I get that if you are a fifteen-year-old boy you're not going to want to ask for help because you're supposed to be big and tough." She understood the issues boys have with anxiety and has at times

assumed the 'mom' role. She recognized that sometimes boys need a place to vent, to "say a whole bunch of swear words and dump their crap on somebody's lap." Monica works to provide that outlet as she has noticed a stigma in place for those identifying as having anxiety, especially in rural areas. Not providing an outlet is a lack of support, she said: "I think that that has helped them, especially those who are not willing to seek outside help. They need it."

Monica identified attendance as a major issue for student academic performance and explained that students miss school due to anxiety, which adds to the anxiety due to feeling that they can't get caught up. The challenge for teachers is they keep going with learning. "I think that the absenteeism is one of the things that compounds the issue so much that leads to failure."

Monica shared a unique insight when asked about performance assessments and student anxiety. "All they see is, 'Oh, I failed another test.' So why would you try if you know you're going to fail?" She sees testing as reinforcing a students' self-defeating views, noting that students will feel stupid and like failures. She took that a step further by explaining what students understand about tests:

> They know that when that number goes in the grade book their parents are going to see it and they're going to feel all these horrible feelings because . . . it's like reaffirming what they already know. That they suck and they can't do it.

To that end, Monica expressed feelings of helplessness, declaring, "I don't know how to help them get past that."

Monica approaches anxious students in a grounded manner, knowing what they are going through due to her personal issues in the areas of anxiety and depression.

> I recognize how I feel in those situations and I can see kids exhibiting those same physical symptoms—their eyes get big and their cheeks get red and they have that look on their face of like, 'Oh my God, my heart is going to explode' or 'Oh my God, I feel like I'm dying.'

When asked about recognizing the differences between ADHD and anxiety, Monica saw a blurred line. "It's hard for me to see a dividing line between anxiety and ADHD because I think so many of the issues that ADHD brings about in students leads to anxiety." She continued to rationalize that the two are connected and that a misdiagnosis is an underlying problem as students might not receive the proper treatment. She also illuminated the potential for the stigma associated with being labeled as ADD or ADHD.

Monica has been able to organize her learning environment and lessons to benefit anxious students. "I'm very intentional about how I structure my class and also how I present stuff to students." Monica acknowledged using visual schedules and an online learning management system for communication in order to prepare students well ahead of time. Monica's teaching load includes several special education students, and making accommodations for them changes the way she works with the entire class. "For tests, I give the option to everybody to use a self-made note card. . . . I also try to give a lot of choice in terms of assessments and the option to present or not present." While Monica provided choices for students at different parts of their learning experience, she said she

would like to do more, such as offering flexible seating, but understands that the school does not have adequate funds to pay for it.

Monica articulated that the difficulty for teachers is where to balance social-emotional support and academic progress. The challenge as a teacher is real.

I struggle as a teacher with where to draw the line between 'I have to get this and this and this and this done and also support this one kid and what they're going through right now.'

To bring Monica's lived experience of working with anxious students together, she has leaned heavily on her own issues with anxiety. This has allowed her to recognize that what kids are exhibiting is similar to her own experience. "You can see that on someone else's face when you have felt that yourself."

When discussing her training, Monica felt that the training she has received has been thorough, noting that "our school district has done a pretty good job of providing professional development regarding mental health issues." These professional development presentations have provided facts about anxiety along with what to look for to recognize anxiety. From a programmatic standpoint, her school has created a ninth-grade seminar class with a portion devoted to the development of soft skills. The course "becomes a way for us to practice some of the social emotional stuff," she said. She felt that the practice element was essential to support student's ability to self-advocate and manage their impulsivity.

Monica shared a positive perception of the role of the school counselor. To her, counselors are valuable because they are great at recognizing and addressing student

anxiety in the immediate situation. She also felt that her school's counseling staff was "awesome" at finding ways to get students back in a right frame of mind so that they could return to class. That quality comes from their own training, their own reading, and their own conversations about how to deal with students experiencing anxiety.

Anxiety remains a prevalent topic for Monica. She acknowledged a lack of understanding about anxiety in schools. People need to be talking about anxiety because of its impact on students and learning. She connected many classroom issues to "anxiety and how a student is reacting to their own anxiety." Monica is adamant that knowledge of anxiety is beneficial to all and that possessing "a toolbox of coping skills" will allow teachers to better support students.

Participant 6. Tanya has served for 14 years in multiple districts in the role of language arts teacher while more recently she has add duties as an instructional coach. Like Monica, anxiety is a personal topic for Tanya. She explained her personal experiences with anxiety and also her experiences with the impact anxiety has had on her family members. Yoga and meditation play an integral part of how she works through her personal anxiety. She frequently referenced the value of mindfulness as a means to reduce anxiety both personally and for her students.

Translating that personal experience to the classroom, Tanya is adept at identifying anxiety and adjusting to student anxiety. Tanya communicated a strong grasp of anxiety and the indicators that she sees in students. She noted that students "freeze up" or "clam up" and possess a "frantic energy." Seeing these signs of anxiety has given

Tanya a grounded perspective on teaching anxious students. She started with a basic principle, stating,

> One of the things that stands out to me most of all the things that I've learned and done is just that kids are people first. So, you know if you just look at what's in front of you, that tells you what you need to do.

What Tanya has learned to do is go beyond identifying anxiety by learning how to adjust the way she views each student's situation. In addition, Tanya's unique background as an instructional coach has allowed her to gain perspective as she sees other teachers and how they work with anxious students. That experience has built on the concept that classroom awareness matters.

> You have to read the room. You have to read the people in front of you. And I think a lot of teachers really understand that . . . each kid has a unique situation and you don't even really need to worry so much about 'what's the label' as 'what's happening right now and what do I need to do to be responsive to that.'

Tanya's teaching practice has changed due to student anxiety. In response to student struggles with anxiety, and especially test anxiety, she started the practice of mindfulness as a way to calm students at the beginning of class. This, coupled with the teaching strategy of bell work, contribute to a daily routine that has allowed her students to release what she calls "frantic energy" and be able to focus on the work at hand.

Tanya discussed the bigger picture of handling students' anxiety in the classroom, a space for learning content and skills:

We're really here for a pretty clear purpose, I think. So my goal is to always be

helping kids get outside of these things that are upsetting and frustrating and

trying to find strength through their challenges.

Tanya frequently circled back to the use of mindfulness practice. "If we didn't do this

mindfulness, I would bet that more essays would be shorter, less coherent, less organized,

less thoughtful. I do think they would be much worse." While implementing mindfulness

techniques, Tanya's passion for student learning and how to get the best out of students is

prevalent. That led to communication with students on how they can work through issues

like anxiety:

I think what they need to learn in life too is that when you're feeling upset, you

still have a job to do and that's what saves you a lot of times. You can't just sit

around forever in your thoughts and be sad. You've got to do something to pull

yourself out, if you can. And that's what we try to work on in class.

Tanya was asked about how she perceived her effectiveness as a teacher. "I feel like

every year keeps getting better," she said. She reflected on the learning environment she

creates for students, stating, "I feel like I have a good little space and my kids . . . feel

safe and comfortable to try and to get feedback." Tanya put in perspective that the

learning culture can be greatly impacted by an anxious student. She noted that she needs

to get ahead of an anxious student's behavior before it can negatively impact the whole

classroom.

Looking more at the crux of anxiety, Tanya shared an interesting dialogue she had

with a colleague in which they discussed, "Is anxiety cultural?" They explored if anxiety

appears to be more prevalent now because it is talked about more and thus more people are "labeling and diagnosing."

When discussing her background knowledge and specific training on anxiety, Tanya said it was a mixed bag. She couldn't remember any formal training, instead relying on her own experience to address the challenges of anxiety.

> We've had training at school . . . our social workers have done mindfulness trainings. But I guess mine comes more from my own experience, just being in front of kids and reading the room. You learn based on what you have in front of you.

Ultimately, Tanya's experience could be summed up this way: "I could just tell they needed that. So that's what we did."

Participant 7. John has been teaching every high-school level of math for 29 years and has also earned a master's degree. With his extensive background, John has seen the influence anxiety has on students and the changes it causes. He recognized the wide-ranging nature of anxiety, commenting, "I think all students get anxious at some point. Shoot, I get anxious sometimes." John shared that the changes he makes as a teacher for anxious students tend to work well with all his students.

When explaining his perspective on the role he plays, John pointed to communication as the key to working with students. "With a child who I suspect or know has anxiety, I make sure that I do make a little contact with them, hopefully to kind of lower that level of anxiety." That communication, when done a certain way, can help a student feel comfortable, he explained, adding that how a student feels in a class or

around a teacher lowers anxiety. "I just try to make him feel comfortable and just keep asking, 'Hey, you need help?'" John feels strongly about interpersonal communication and carries it beyond the classroom to the work he does as a coach and as a Minnesota State High School League official. His personal connections in multiple environments create the level of comfort he continually referenced, stating that most kids would probably say that they were "pretty comfortable" with him and that he got along with "any type of kid."

When asked about his approach to teaching anxious students, John maintains a keen awareness of where they are social-emotionally. "I try to check in with kids almost every day," he said. He shared how his teaching emphasis has changed over the years, bringing balance to the content that needs to be taught and knowing the needs of the student. John looks at the learning environment in terms of students' level of comfort and level of being ready to learn. "Now it's more [about] trying to make the classroom itself comfortable. And then we can learn that math." Beyond the learning environment, John has made adjustments in his teaching approach by breaking up the daily pieces and being "nice and slow and consistent." John identified that larger summative or performance assessments create pressure and anxiety and makes it tough on students. Breaking information down supports creating an "ease" within students. It is a calming factor.

The essence of the work John does with students in his classroom revolves around making students feel the "ease" he described and has allowed him to make meaningful connections with students and reduce anxiety:

Trying to help them without them knowing you're helping them is huge . . . I've had many kids come back who I know were anxious and they say, 'Hey, thanks for teaching me, Mr. Johnson. I didn't learn anything in math, but thanks for teaching me.' So hopefully I'm doing the right thing and that's the best you can always hope for.

John spoke highly of the value of school counselors, especially counselors engaged in supporting teachers on what to see in students. He noted how one counselor in his school would give hints and clues to teachers in order for them to keep an eye on students. His perspective is that the counselor's approach makes the difference. "How she does things . . . really helps the kids. To me, that's a huge part of school."

John's background knowledge with anxiety developed on a personal level. He feels the personal tug of anxiety, explaining that his family members have been deeply impacted and how that has created a unique situation for him. "More of my training background comes because of my situation. I see it and live it firsthand at home." John contends that his personal experiences with anxiety also give him an advantage over fellow teachers who do not have that subjective viewpoint. He perceives the training provided by the school district as relegated to low-level information, noting that "the district level is still struggling with how much they should put out."

Participant 8. Carly wears the burden of anxiety in her expressions. Her personal experience with a family member living with anxiety framed her work with students who experience the condition. Due to her family situation, Carly was proactive in learning about anxiety, educating herself in a way that directly carried over to her

teaching experience with anxious students. In spite of her learning, she discovered that she always had more to learn, such as in one exchange with a student:

I said, 'Kelly, why, it can't be that bad.' And I remember her looking me right in the eye and saying, 'You have no idea.' That hit me like a bomb. And it's never left me. That was at least twelve years ago and I always think about it, because she's right. I have no idea. I've always been in a stable environment. I've never had any physical abuse. I have no idea what that young lady was going through.

Carly described another eye-opening moment with a student who had experienced a trauma that brought new realizations and purpose to her experience with anxiety:

It was pretty frightening to be looking at a sixteen-year-old that had just gone through something like that. I teared up and gave her a hug. And I told her that if she ever wanted to talk to me, she could come in and talk or find someone to talk to. Just don't keep it in.

Carly said she could tell when students are anxious by identifying characteristics such as fidgeting, visual shaking, "searching eyes," and a lack of attention. "They're not really focusing on what you're doing," she said. "There's something else on their mind."

Working in a small school as a math teacher, Carly knows her students well. She perceived that her role with anxious students included finding them the level of support for the anxiety they are showing.

The main thing we can do as classroom teachers is make sure they go to the right resource people and just try to remain calm. Don't get upset at them because they want to leave, just grant them the opportunity to leave and try to remain as calm

as possible. And that will help them get to the place where they can then get some

more help.

She leaned heavily on a school social worker as the key resource, noting their expertise

with high-anxiety students. Carly recognized that professional's role clearly, stating,

"They need to control the anxiety first. I am not really this resource to help them control

their anxiety, especially if there's twenty-five other students in the room." She

maintained close communication with the social worker to be able to address each

student's needs.

Carly has learned to have patience with anxious students, stating that she has had

success with de-escalating situations and getting them back into a calm place. She makes

accommodations for anxious students, reasoning that if they did not have anxiety, their

academic performance would be higher. "I will excuse them from some of the activities

that we've done in class so that they can get a passing grade, especially if I think they

have the minimum skills." Carly also emphasized the importance of acknowledging

students in the classroom. She intentionally looks for that student with whom she needs

to connect, knowing the personal connection can make all the difference:

I think it's really important for them to feel like they are important to other

people, that they're not invisible. This can be huge with students who are anxious.

They can go through a whole school day and think, 'Nobody even said my name.

Nobody cares.' It hurts me to think about students who feel that way, who think

they are invisible.

Carly applied her approach to anxious students to those struggling with performance anxiety. She talked in depth specifically about test anxiety and the techniques she has conveyed to students, such as:

> When you get the test in front of you, just take a minute. Close your eyes and take two very deep breaths, very slow. Breathe in and breathe out, because it's been proven that if you do that with your physical self, it also will slow down your mental self and it can help calm the anxiety.

Carly's background experience was rooted in family struggles with anxiety and her quest to learn about anxiety and mental illness. She indicated that the school district provided minimal training since it was used primarily as a re-licensure opportunity, and that the training was significantly inferior to what she pursued through the National Alliance on Mental Illness. When asked about specific programs her school offers, Carly referred back to the school social worker and the resources that flow from that position.

The essence of Carly's lived experience shined through as the value of connecting with students to help them feel seen and valued:

> When I walk through the halls, I'm going to have a smile on my face. . . . Sometimes I feel pretty crabby and I don't feel like smiling, but I just try to put that face on. I try my best to make sure that my students, all one hundred or so of them, know that I know their name and that I care and connect with them about something.

Themes

Applying the modified Van Kaam Method of data analysis, themes emerged from the composite textural and structural descriptions of all the participants (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120). Textural descriptions highlight what participants were experiencing while structural descriptions relay how they were experiencing the phenomenon. The following provides a narrative of each theme, representative of participants' experience working with anxious students. The themes align with the research subquestions:

1. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools describe or perceive their role in addressing student anxiety?

2. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the effectiveness of their support on student anxiety, in particular, academic anxiety?

3. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the impact of students experiencing anxiety on their teaching practice?

4. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools working with students experiencing anxiety describe their knowledge and training in order to educate anxious students?

5. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the role and effectiveness of professional school counselors in addressing students experiencing anxiety?

Composite Textural Descriptions

Composite textural descriptions pull together the meanings and essences of the participants' collective experiences. The themes revealed in questions 1-3 derive from the participants' individual textural descriptions and focus on what was experienced.

Research subquestion 1 – Perceived roles. The first question related to the theme of describing or perceiving the participants' role in addressing student anxiety (see Table 2, p. 97). Four sub-themes developed in reaction to how they viewed their role: (1) their own unique perceived role; (2) how they establish relationship building; (3) the delicate balance of support for academics and support for emotional needs; and 4) the use of dedicated school time through an advisory to encourage anxious students.

Perceived role. When addressing students experiencing anxiety, Leah focused on developing students into good, productive people. She stated it this way, "My first instinct is to say that my role is to help them really develop themselves into good productive people outside of the school world." She elaborated that adults in the school are "sometimes the only stable people that students encounter now in their daily interactions." Tanya established a similar view of anxious students, putting the emphasis on the content. She was clear in her purpose "for students to learn the content" as that leads to future opportunities where students "have the skills to go on to college and be successful in their careers; be successful managers and bosses." Tanya informed her students that the end goal is for them to do well and become "a leader" because that's "who you are." She stated that students cannot perform academically when they are upset and frustrated by positing, "I don't think kids can write well or do well if they're

feeling emotionally disturbed or anxious." In order to accomplish this, Tanya indicated that it was her role to get her students in the right frame of mind. She explained that this is a focus of her teaching. Comparably, Aubrey described how she uses her instruction to meet the anxiety-based challenges of her students.

In a unique comparison, Aubrey and Monica concurred about their perception of anxious boys. Aubrey pointed out those differences between connecting with boys versus connecting with girls.

> It is harder for the boys to ask for help. If I were to list kids I knew for sure were dealing with anxiety, they would be almost all girls. I think boys are better at bravado and they're less good at stating feelings even though they're having a lot of feelings.

Monica agreed, commenting that she understands the fifteen-year-old boy mentality, "If you are a fifteen-year-old boy you're not going to want to ask for help because you're supposed to be big and tough and not needed."

Christopher, Leah, Allison, Monica, and Carly viewed their roles specifically through the lens of support. Each participant described that support as generally finding resources for their students while showing a willingness to help in various ways. Christopher and Leah felt their role was to find out what is going on with a student and then find the right resources to support him/her. Leah stated her role as "to help where I can and when I can and make sure I keep in contact with the parents and see what I can do." Allison explained her role by illustrating how she utilizes student one-to-one time that allows students to complete their schoolwork while dealing with their anxiety. Carly

focused on what it takes to discretely move a student from the classroom to an appropriate resource:

> If they approach me and look like they have anxiety and say, 'I need to get out of here,' I'm going to respect that. I usually try to talk very quietly and calmly and ask them where they would like to go. Then I write out a pass and send them on their way, because I know that keeping them in the classroom is not the best thing at that point.

Monica's perceived role is that of an advocate. Since students often don't have someone in their corner supporting them, the school should respond as the advocate for the student. Furthermore, Monica's personal issues with anxiety played a part in how she perceives her role in addressing student anxiety. She felt her knowledge and recognition of anxiety compelled her to respond with distinct intention.

> I might be able to recognize it a little better than some people who may not ever have had those feelings. I'm always very intentional about responding to those as calmly and with the most grounding that I can.

She also identified her role as being able to communicate with a student about general feelings and making determinations about whether or not a student should go see a counselor. Monica described how she would help students frame situations they were encountering due to their anxiety as a coping mechanism.

> Monica continued to perceive her role from the vantage point that people need to know about student anxiety.

I feel like this really is something that people need to talk about. It is something

that people need to read, study, and understand more because a regular, normal,

Joe Schmo teacher has so many classroom issues to deal with throughout the day.

Many of those can be linked to anxiety and how a student is reacting to their own

anxiety.

She concluded that teachers, who are overwhelmed with work, would benefit from a 'here's-what-to-do' checklist or 'list of coping skills' to greatly increase their ability to support anxious students.

Relationship building. Christopher explained how students need relationships with adults in the school setting. The relationships go beyond academics. He shared an experience where he observed a student who had the appearance of having "everything going," yet he knew the student needed more support even though "her academics were fine." He explained she had an anxiety and challenge that were connected to something beyond school but her relatives "weren't in a position to help her." Christopher felt compelled to work with her based on his experiences where he "could find people that could help." Christopher noted how that relationship still exists years later and the student has had success in many areas of life.

Christopher continued emphasizing his own experiences as the key to working with anxious students, while using different approaches to create the bond with each student. The focus remained on knowing the student. "The better you know the student, the more they will respect you and respond to you. When they have the feeling of comfort and safety, they will respond to you." To accomplish making connections, both

Christopher and Leah identified that working with anxious students takes time. Building

trust and getting students through their anxiety and into a place where they feel safe and

comfortable is time intensive. To know students better, Tanya explained her role in

establishing relationships as focused on reading the room to ascertain knowledge of the

students in front of her. Much of that knowledge would come from checking in with

students on a regular basis.

John echoed those sentiments when describing the various means in which he

connects with students. Both Christopher and John emphasized the success they've had

with relationships built outside the normal school day, often accomplished through

coaching. John took his role further as an activity official. Furthermore, John described

being intentional with how he treats students and does so with an awareness for how he is

treating them both in the classroom and out of the classroom. With his intentional

approach and continual contact with students, he fostered positive relationships, bringing

encouragement to students while making sure they feel comfortable in his classroom.

Aubrey viewed her role in relationship building with students differently than the

other participants. The contrast was evident when Aubrey distinguished herself from

Monica and Carly, who made statements about having the "mom factor." Aubrey clearly

defined roles of relationship building, noting that some teachers "can connect one on one

with a kid" and have "that type of relationship." That type of relationship reflected

providing a safety net for students, having a teacher they can "chat with and unload on

and tell all their problems to.". Aubrey indicated she is "not that person…not a mom."

Monica embraced her role as a mother-type figure. She described her role in relationship

building as that of a cheerleader while questioning at the same time if that was making an impact. Carly concurred, noting that she also embraced the mother-type role, particularly drawing on her perspective as a parent who has raised three daughters. This perspective led Carly to take the initiative to make sure her students "know that I know their name and know that I care and connect with them about something."

  Balance. Several participants encountered the dilemma of where to draw the line between supporting students with their academic work and their emotional needs. Aubrey, Christopher, Monica, and Carly all expressed different challenges with finding that balance. Aubrey felt compelled to support students with anxiety yet felt overwhelmed with the number of students she teaches daily. She stressed knowing her student's anxiety is:

> Probably something I could be more aware of, but I know I have one hundred and twenty students. I can't take all their anxiety on myself, so I feel like I have a decent balance and that's kind of what you strive for as a teacher.

Carly concurred, stating, "I am not really this resource to help them control their anxiety, especially if there's twenty-five other students in the room." Christopher's perspective viewed the balance in terms of the sacrifice teachers are willing to make to help student learn. "There's a little bit of a battle with how far we sacrifice as teachers and bend and be flexible and still get the outcome we want," he said. Monica also felt the pressure of completing the curriculum and supporting anxious students. She explained that she is expected to "get this and this and this done" while "supporting this one kid and what they're going through right now."

Advisory. Leah, Allison and Monica all explained how their school uses advisory or homeroom to help build relationships with students. Leah shared their school's approach for learning and communicating, with certain lessons containing elements of teamwork, motivation, and developing growth mindsets. She stated that her experience using advisory "is going really well." As Leah perceived her role, she revealed that her role as a parent along with her own personal experience have encouraged her to be more empathetic toward anxious students. She changed her approach in response to "reflection and growth in my own life," noting that "our own personal experiences definitely impact the kids.

Allison shared the value of daily advisory time by describing her interactions with students. Conversely, she expressed trepidation with the overall lack of time to try and build the relationship with a student, noting, "with twenty minutes with twenty-three students that's really giving me an opportunity to talk to each student for one minute a day which is hard as well." Correspondingly, Monica described her school's approach as incorporating opportunities to build relationships with students through a classroom model. Having that dedicated time allows for practicing certain skills that can support anxious students.

Table 2 – Perceived roles

Summary of Composite Textural Description: Theme 1

Textural Themes	Textural Horizons
Perceived Role	Develop productive people
	Provide support
	Utilize coping mechanisms
	Be intentional
	Be an advocate
	Create a checklist of 'what to do'
Relationship Building	Know the student
	Go beyond the classroom
	Read the room
Balance	Support students with academic work
	Support students with emotional needs
Advisory	Dedicate time to connect with students

Research subquestion 2 – Perceived effectiveness. The second research

subquestion connected with the theme of discovering how high school teachers in high-

poverty, rural schools perceive the effectiveness of their support on student anxiety, in

particular, academic anxiety (see Table 3, p. 102). When examining the transcripts, one

sub-theme regarding the learning environment became evident. The participants

articulated the learning environment in several ways, but they all focused on changes they

made to better support students, specifically seen in their teaching. The experiences from

the participants regarding their perceived effectiveness carried over multiple times into

the next research question, where participants viewed changes in their teaching practice.

In essence, they couldn't articulate one without the other. Still, the emerging theme of

the learning environment is one of support for students. Teachers identified a willingness to accommodate student anxiety since they know it helps the student find success.

Initially, Allison described the challenges when students exhibit anxiety and how their response is to shut down.

As a teacher I find that very difficult to work with because not only have they shut down with their assignments, but they're going to shut down with you as the teacher because they're going to see you as part of the problem as well.

Recognizing this conundrum, Allison worked on conversations to try and reduce students' anxiety, even though she expressed that those conversations have had limited success. Monica also expressed being discouraged with her effectiveness, regardless of what she has done. Despite continual encouragement and support, she noted, "It isn't enough, and I don't know how to help them get past that." Students too often dwell on their perceived failures when it comes to tests, thinking they can't do it, she added.

In contrast, participants shared the means they use to create a learning environment and break through the student's negative mentality that is affected by anxiety. Aubrey and Monica referred to their teaching style that focused on routine. Aubrey knew that she is effective in part because students will tell her they are dealing with anxiety. She fashioned her classroom to be responsive to support students with their anxieties, focusing on routine and pacing. When students don't have time to think about their anxieties, they get more academic work done. She likened it to:

The way people deal with grief: routine and work. In the absence of a routine or work your mind is just going to spin on your grief and spin on your anxieties. But if you can come to class, there's just no time to even think about it.

Monica concurred that routine matters. She discussed how she shares information with students ahead of time in order to reduce anxiety. Her students "know on Monday morning what we're doing all week and they will know what to expect within pretty narrow parameters of what we're doing." Conversely, Monica also expressed the choices she gives anxious students and what that does for her learning environment:

I try to give as much choice as possible in terms of where they sit and to a certain extent who they sit by. Sometimes you need to have your friends sitting next to you; it just makes things better.

Christopher and John both moved from routine to creating a structure regarding certain situations with students. In Christopher's experience, he took time to explain to an anxious student how he would structure his class to help reduce the students' anxiety. Monica's experience also contained a level of structure. She reviewed a situation with a student having a panic attack in which she supported the student through a conversation and ideas about how to handle her anxiety. "I helped her make a plan because that's all she needed help with." The plan involved clear expectations that lead to reduced anxiety:

She has a signal she shows me, and I just nod my head and then she goes and works in my office. We set that up at the beginning of the school year and it seems to work pretty well.

Aubrey, Christopher, Leah, John, and Carly all related how they perceived their effectiveness of their support on student anxiety with various strategies. Christopher perceived his effectiveness by purveying to students that he is aware of their needs and that their learning extends beyond academics. He emphasized helping students recognize that he is "able to help them see beyond the content" to get to "the lesson they can learn." This lesson can "help them deal with the situation and to understand that it's not always going to be that bad." When students know "they're not the only one" they are more likely to work with the teacher through their anxiety. John focused on a strategy of breaking down academic work into smaller bits as a means to reduce anxiety, keep anxiety from overtaking the student, and help them learn. Aubrey observed that "if they know that they need to do the work, but the pressure is lessened, it seems to help them get the work done." She believed that this directly leads to student success.

Leah described experiences she has worked through by changing her approach and conversations. She intentionally adjusted a follow up conversation with a student which led to "a better day for her and led us into talking about the work and getting that whole situation figured out." This, along with a new schedule has made a difference. She perceived more confidence coming out in students through their work as a result of a new schedule implemented this school year. "Against what we've had in the past, I see more confidence in schoolwork," she said. Christopher similarly had conversations with students that kept them in his class and led to student success. "She stuck with the class and she did just fine . . . I listened to her, but I also tried to reassure her about what I was going to do and the purpose and value of doing those presentations."

Tanya indicated that when the learning environment promotes calm and students can take time to be centered, she sees academic success increase:

> If you can just take a little bit of time to get centered and focused on the task and to feel calm, legitimately calm, they do a pretty good job. I feel their essays are really strong and the level of focus is a lot better because I think they've just wiped their mind of all their worries and now have one task ahead of them.

Carly elaborated on her effectiveness through two key elements in her learning environment, making sure the student is acknowledged and having a smile on her face. "I think it's really important for them to feel like they are important to other people, that they're not just invisible. I think that can be huge with students who are anxious." Carly focused on acknowledging students by name on a continual basis. She does this by being intentional about reading her room and noticing who she has talked to or who she hasn't. That also has led her to approach students with a smile on her face.

Christopher relied on his experience to help anxious students work through situations, stating:

> It helps to be in your thirtieth-year teaching where you can call on some different experiences and be able to handle conversation. That helps both sides move closer without necessarily being authoritative or judgmental about it, but put the ideas out there in a way that students can examine and think about.

The lived experience of the participants shared through the theme of the learning environment can be summarized as support for students. As teachers, all the participants

acknowledged a willingness to accommodate student anxiety since they know it helps the student find success.

Table 3 – Perceived effectiveness

Summary of Composite Textural Description: Theme 2

Textural Themes	Textural Horizons
Learning Environment	Routines and expectations
	Learning extends beyond academics
	Positive conversations
	Acknowledge students
	Teacher experience matters

Research subquestion 3 – Perceived impact on teaching. The third research question contained a composite textural description that flowed naturally from the second research question. The third question and theme pertained to the participants' perception of the impact of students experiencing anxiety on their teaching practice (see Table 4, p. 107). The composite description yielded the sub-themes of: (1) changes in the classroom and (2) performance anxiety.

Changes in the classroom. Student anxiety changed the way the participants approach their classroom. Several participants reflected that experience matters—their experiences in making connections with students along with knowing teaching resources and their curriculum all go a long way toward reducing anxiety. Still more, participants expressed that their awareness in what they teach can provide triggers for anxiety. Leah explained that "I will give warnings about the literature that we sometimes study if it is

something that I feel might trigger something in a student." Christopher stressed that the way he delivers the content matters, noting potential triggers:

> I ask myself how I can present it in a way that's going to help them feel comfortable and safe with information or an aspect or topic that might be a potential trigger for an experience that they've had or a situation that they're struggling with.

Other participants indicated their control over the content and what they were delivering to students. They felt they could choose content, especially in literature, that touches on sensitive topics but yet allows for discussion of life themes and situations. Allison commented, "I found myself picking texts that I thought more related to their life situations so they could see how themes or characters maybe represented something they were going through and how they dealt with it." Aubrey stated that she also tried to incorporate these issues into her lessons:

> For example, I'm teaching The Catcher in The Rye right now. Obvious mental health issues come up in the book, and we've had some conversations about resiliency and depression specifically and what you do and what helps teenagers when they're going through hard times. But I try to touch on it if there is an opportunity in any class, no matter what we're really talking about.

Leah stressed the importance of seeing the end. She affirmed, "I know that preparing students for what's coming up is becoming more and more important to me so that . . . they see the long-term objective of what we're doing in class." Christopher permitted

students to control what they write about. He signified how that brings benefit by allowing students to express themselves and cope with their stressors.

> There's something that they feel like they need to write about. So being open to that can be important for seeing the impact on a student—they see that as a gateway to write about and be able to cope with it. I'm talking about the benefits of being able to write about what you're thinking. Your reading and writing all go together and help guide them a little bit and to be open to the direction that they might want to take.

Each participant has a unique way of teaching that supports anxious students. Multiple participants identified time as a factor in working with anxious students. Leah viewed it as time to work with student on their writing, stating, "I see that me taking the time I can now to really work with students on their writing helps them feel more confident about it the next time we do that same kind of writing." Allison identified time as necessary to reduce performance anxiety. "A lot of times I'll give extra time on tests or assignments. Sometimes I'll have them come in at a different time when we can work in more one-on-one situations."

Monica took the strategy of choice in the assignments and assessments they do and complete: "For some assignments they have to say it out loud, but they'll have the choice to do it in front of the class or to do it just with me." Leah is purposeful about the groups she uses, keeping in mind their level of anxiety. Monica used strategies of allowing notecards on certain tests feeling that that approach helps student retain information and build confidence. Tanya's teaching style promoted the process of

allowing students to revise their learning with a goal of providing feedback to help them continue learning. She commented, "My class is standards-based, so I allow kids to revise their papers . . . I think that's reduced a lot of anxiety too, knowing that they can use feedback to keep improving and don't have to be perfect on the first try."

John understood that you can't expect anxious students to be inundated with a lot of material, so breaking information down is central to the success of anxious students. Tanya agreed that students can only do so much. She focused on students accomplishing one thing at a time, stating, "We're here to do our best on this one task that we have." She confirmed that students have more success in their writing when they approach it this way.

Performance anxiety. Discussing their teaching practice as it related to performance anxiety, all of the participants expressed elements of pressure and the means that they took to reduce that anxiety when it came to summative tests or state level tests like the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA).

Several participants shared experiences of increased student anxiety when they knew they had a test coming up or anxiety over the grades in general. Leah noticed that student anxiety increased just by discussing the ACT or Accuplacer college entrance exams. "I can already start to see them panic when I say things like, 'You have forty-five minutes and seventy-five questions,'" she said. When students know there is a lot riding on a test, Leah saw their anxiety level rise. Carly translated performance anxiety to their grade, stating, "If they weren't so stressed out and could clearly focus, maybe they could get a whole grade level higher." John expressed a similar observation: "They may be

very, very capable and they may be 'A' students, but they can't perform because of that anxiety that's hitting them." Tanya discussed the anxiety that arose when students were simply preparing for a test. "They get so nervous because it's a test, but it's not a test. It's practice. It's supposed to be very relaxed and calm, but they get so nervous about the practice."

Several participants articulated the changes to their classroom practices based on performance anxiety. Aubrey has a teaching style that reflected participatory active learning. This approach kept students on task while reducing time to think about their anxieties. "I do a lot of . . . participatory active learning where they're on their feet and they're talking, but they're not doing in front of everybody . . . and everybody else is doing it too." This allowed her to move her classroom forward and limit potential struggles with anxious students.

Monica created routine and expectations in her classroom through a visual schedule for students each week. The consistency in her teaching supports eliminating anxiety. "I do that specifically because I want to eliminate as much testing anxiety as I can. If you are freaking out about it being a test, then you can't show what you know. And the whole purpose is for them to show what they know."

Carly's teaching developed with an approach where she talks individually with anxious students while giving them some suggestions for how to handle their test anxiety. After noticing that students want to do well but freeze up because they are worried about the test, she taught them a mindfulness routine for focusing on their breathing when they sat for the test.

Allison recognized how performance anxiety looks in alternative learning centers and adjusted her teaching practice accordingly. "ALC students typically do not have performance anxiety, but they experience anxiety from family issues or trauma or some other case. And in that situation, I found myself going much slower through academic material." She said that she uses the thematic idea of "looking at life in an academic way that may also help students in an emotional way." She also observed performance anxiety in two unique ways, one in which students shut down and the other extreme where their learning focuses on completion. She noted that "they'll find shortcuts to complete what they need to complete so that they don't have that assignment looming over them anymore."

Table 4 – Perceived impact on teaching

Summary of Composite Textural Description: Theme 3

Textural Themes	Textural Horizons
Changes in the Classroom	Teacher control over the content
	Student control over the content
	Time
	Choice in the assignments and assessments
	Break information down
Performance Anxiety	Participatory active learning
	Visual schedules create routine
	Breathing techniques
	Slower through academic content

Composite Structural Descriptions

Composite structural descriptions rely on imaginative variation which seeks, "possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of

reference…and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions (Moustakas, 1994)." The unique perspectives of the participants are brought together into one description. The themes revealed in questions four and five originate from the participants' individual structural descriptions and concentrate on **how** the phenomenon was experienced.

Research subquestion 4 – Acquired knowledge and training. The fourth research question contained a composite structural description and theme related to how participants gained background knowledge along with acquired training in order to educate anxious students (see Table 5, p. 119). Participants indicated their background knowledge rooted in 4 sub-themes: (1) recognition of anxiety, (2) personal connections they have with anxiety, (3) relationship building they worked on with students, and (4) training opportunities that supported their background knowledge.

Recognition of anxiety. Participants recognized anxiety in the following ways: physical symptoms, emotional symptoms and behavior, social anxiety, and performance anxiety. Participants' experiences with student anxiety corresponded to the Child Mind Institute's (2018) descriptions of anxiety as looking like inattention, refusal to attend school, blatant acting out, repetitive questioning, and aggressiveness.

Physical symptoms. Participants described physical features such as widened eyes, paleness, visible shaking, and red cheeks, and a general look of exasperation and fear on the faces of students when they are experiencing anxiety. Two participants noted that students made no eye contact and others noticed that students would wiggle, twitch, shake, ball-up, shell-up and complain of headaches or migraines. Aubrey verified that

one student had terrible headaches, migraines, that were "clearly connected to anxiety."

Tanya recalled a student who made limited eye contact but also expressed anxiety by "not

looking up at all . . . [showing] just this very protected, posturing . . . of herself." Leah

reported students' physical systems of being quiet and crying. For John, student anxiety

"looks a little jittery . . . they might show that physically." Carly described a situation in

which an anxious student was shaking and pale, and added she sees physical effects such

as "fidgeting" and students' "eyes searching around the room."

Bringing clarity to what anxiety is proved troublesome for the participants. Most

struggled to determine the difference between anxiety and Attention

Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In a study of anxiety, Guerra (2017) showed

that teachers and even students regularly misinterpret the symptoms of anxiety, often

confusing them with ADHD. Participant comments indicated that there is not a clear

dividing line, such as Allison's remarks that a diagnosis would need to be specified on a

student's Individual Education Plan for her to know the student has anxiety. Carly,

however, articulated her understanding of the line between anxiety and ADHD. "The

difference that I see is the students (with ADHD) are not real upset. And when they're

anxious, they're pretty upset. It's affecting them internally. It's not just their external

behavior." She mentioned that she sees students control their ADHD better the older

they get, but that anxiety is very clear in her older students.

Emotional symptoms. Participants described anxious behavior that manifests in

both outward and inward displays of emotion. Outward displays were those exhibiting

frustration, anger, panic, and impulsivity. Students were seen as loud, intense, and jittery.

Leah had seen students go from being quiet and reserved to becoming frustrated and angry, basically on the verge of blowing up. Tanya also described students' changes in outward emotion as it built up and, more importantly, changed the people around them:

> I have had a lot of kids who are very outgoing with their anxiety. You can hear them talking, and I get anxious just looking at them because they talk intensely about how upset, angry, frustrated, or confused they are. They're more intense to be around and can impact the people around them with their anxiety.

Participants explained inward behaviors predominately as a general lack of engagement that revealed itself largely in student attendance. Five participants expressed a clear connection between anxiety and student attendance in school. Aubrey noted, "The way it manifests in the classroom is usually attendance. Kids don't show up." Students would communicate with her and be clear about the effect of anxiety. "I'll get an email from a student who says 'I'm not in school today. I had to stay home. My anxiety was just too strong.'" Leah also saw "patterns of being absent because of the anxiety." Working with students as an advisor, Allison described attendance in terms of skipping a class or school day, leading to conversations with students about the detrimental impact of poor attendance on their academic work. Monica stated, "I think a lot of times the biggest impact I see on their academic performance is that their anxiety is leading to absenteeism. They are too anxious to be in the class." John lamented the inconsistency in seeing students in class; they would be there one day but then not for the next two days.

Participants further associated attendance with avoidance, feelings of being overwhelmed, lack of focus, and failure. Previous research by Rockhill et al. (2010)

indicated that students exposed to an anxiety trigger often exhibit escape behaviors such as avoidance or leaving situations such as a class or even school altogether. Aubrey described the negative impact of this reality about students' experience, stating that missing school adds to their anxiety because they fall behind and fall behind, "and then school becomes part of the problem too." Monica elaborated on the concern over avoidance. "They either avoid or they're sick. Or they go to the bathroom for a long time and then they miss stuff." When students miss school, teachers do not slow down or wait, continually compounding their anxiety. Monica reiterated, "They get behind on what they need to do and then they feel even more anxious because they're behind and they feel like they can never get caught up. But we still have to keep going."

Monica concluded that students struggle to respond to their anxiety and their situation. They often seek avoidance structures like their phones as a means of coping. Aubrey related this as an inability to code-switch, the process of putting aside their anxieties, their feelings, in order to get into the task the teacher wants them to be doing. Tanya expanded on the code-switching concept by describing the different ways it shows up in anxious students: "One emotionally can't get themselves out of their thoughts and another cannot put their thoughts into an organized manner." John associated code-switching with students trying to figure out what is going on inside of themselves. They are unable to focus on schoolwork because they are trying hard to figure out who they are:

They're focusing in on themselves, trying to figure out 'what the heck's going on

with my body . . . what's going on in my mind.' If you don't have that taken care

of, I think it makes learning very challenging for those kids.

Carly also associated anxiety with a lack of focus:

There's not really a way to get them to focus on the math concepts when I can see

that there is high anxiety. And if they ask to leave the room, I allow it at that point

because I know it's not good for them to stay in a classroom.

Christopher identified coping in terms of survival. "For some kids, in order to survive

they've learned how to manipulate certain situations, so that can be a different dynamic."

Social anxiety. Participants described emotional symptoms spilling into the

social side of anxiety as the result of students' overarching need to feel comfortable and

safe while having a sense of belonging or acceptance. Social anxiety causes people to

fear social situations (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018a), and students described

by the participants often felt a lack of control over tasks or situations. All the participants

generated examples of students struggling with aspects of social anxiety, mainly

avoidance. In particular, Allison stressed that students don't want their peers to notice

them:

As far as the social aspect goes with anxiety, I think that is more hidden and they

try to hide it a little bit more. They don't want people to notice that they're

worried about how other people are perceiving them, especially their peers.

Allison kept a keen eye on anxious students to see how they would respond in certain

situations. She observed that students used defense mechanisms such as joking as a way

to avoid a situation or bring attention to their fears. Both Allison and John expressed student anxiety in terms of social media, which they believe students see as a way to fit in and be accepted by their peers. Both participants noticed that students check their devices frequently, highlighting that need for peer acceptance.

Performance anxiety. The National Institute of Mental Health (Anxiety Disorders, 2018) pointed out that social anxiety disorder can show up as performance anxiety. Performance anxiety causes adolescents to feel physical symptoms that could prevent them from participating in certain situations. Christopher, Allison, Tanya, and John shared their background knowledge of performance anxiety.

Allison believed that students have performance anxiety in relation to their peers and driven by their parents. The pull of peer acceptance heightened the students' anxiety and drive to achieve certain grades. She associated the push from parents with their expectations of student achievement. Several other participants explained their approach to students' learning expectations. Aubrey noted that some students were up front about this type of anxiety:

> Kids who have any performance anxiety will tell me the first day, 'I am shy. I don't like to give speeches. I don't like to talk in front of the class. Don't call on me. Don't make me read out loud.' They will say that.

Christopher responded to performance anxiety by carefully structuring the learning environment to ensure that anxious students felt safe and comfortable. Without that safe space, he said, "it's going to be hard for them to meet some expectations that you have." Tanya discussed the anxiousness she sees before students take tests, and John noted that

anxiety causes students to not perform at their best level. Carly concurred that students' anxiety inhibits their academic performance. "I think that some students go through all of school with test anxiety, and I think it does affect their GPA overall."

Personal connections. Participants shared a variety of factors that impact how they have changed, how they have become more connected to the issues around anxiety and used their experiences to become better professionals. Through their personal experiences, the participants exhibited self-awareness of the phenomenon of anxiety. Ultimately, the participants' collective personal and teaching experiences have fashioned their effectiveness in working with anxious students.

Aubrey described her experience of losing a colleague and how that shaped her school's approach to trauma. She associated anxiety with trauma and poured over the effects it had on students and moreso on the staff. Christopher's personal connection came from the concept of self-awareness. He knew he needed to change the way he was working with students. This led to his involvement on certain state-level boards and participating in specific training opportunities that allowed him to be introspective about his teaching practice. Through introspection he gained more awareness of the subtle messages he might be unintentionally sending that negatively impact students in poverty or inequitable situations. Monica talked extensively about how her own experiences with anxiety, "knowing how I react in anxious situations," as well as being in education for a good amount of time has led to better recognition of student anxiety.

Tanya, John, and Carly shared their family associations with anxiety that drive their background knowledge. Tanya had a strong family relationship that allows her to

understand the condition "on a new level." Likewise, John expressed his family's experience with anxiety and how that has facilitated his understanding of working with anxious students. He's taken time to learn about anxiety and depression in order to support his family. Similar to Tanya, he acknowledged that living with anxiety firsthand gives him a unique perspective and background that other teachers may not have. Comparably, Carly experienced first-hand the pain of anxiety in her family that led her to pursue training through the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Relationship building. Participants' background knowledge led to another emergent theme, relationship building, that entailed an awareness of their surroundings and what students are doing, communication, and responsiveness to situations. Aubrey described a conflict with an anxious student brought on by outside factors that escalated into them both "losing it that day." She correlated working through anxiety in her classroom to working through grief and emphasized helping students move forward by having routine and work to do.

Tanya took her view of the classroom a step further remarking that understanding the student means "reading the room, the people in front of you" and their situation in the classroom. By reading the room Tanya realized she could be responsive to "what's happening right now." Like Tanya, Aubrey explained that a teacher really has to pay attention to their surroundings, to see what students are doing. She relied on her experience to get to the point of feeling confident with "what I'm doing in the classroom." That confidence is parlayed into her work with students. "Then it's a lot easier to pay attention to what's going on with the student," she said.

Christopher had more to say about connecting with students. He recognized that students won't generally come and tell teachers that they are experiencing anxiety. If they do, they need more support than what a teacher can provide. Christopher shared an experience where he felt he could identify what a student was going through. He expressed how students need to "feel comfortable and safe" as he sought out the root cause of the student's behavior while also seeking support systems. Furthermore, Christopher felt that experience matters in understanding situations. Christopher observed that new teachers struggle to separate their professional work from taking what happens in their profession personally. When anxious students exhibit outward behaviors, newer teachers have less resources and knowledge to draw on.

Several participants valued their communication that supports making connections with anxious students. Aubrey was able to develop open communication through email, and Leah indicated by understanding the students' unique situation she has tailored her communication to have more success with reducing anxiety. Tanya took a pragmatic approach toward each individual student, opting to "check in with them and use the approach that works best for that kid." Correspondingly, Monica promoted an attitude to be intentional with anxious students and maintain a level of calm and grounding. That calm demeanor can assist the teacher when anxieties arise in students while building a relationship with them at the same time.

Some of the participants described programming that allowed them to communicate effectively with students. Leah, Allison and Monica used a daily advisory time to speak with students. Monica, Tanya and John discussed counselors' or social

workers' embedded material about anxiety in health and other classes. Leah described her school district's programming that made a distinct push "to find some way that we could go further, go deeper, help more kids." Her school now follows the Top 20 model and that has given her the means to engage in meaningful conversations with students while assessing their immediate mental health perception on a daily basis. The ultimate goal is to have at least one adult be able to connect with each student. Comparably, Allison uses an advisory time to connect with students, although she noted the challenge of scheduling as a drawback. The time allowed in advisory simply didn't provide enough time for her to make meaningful connections with students. Christopher placed a large emphasis on building community by "knowing your students well enough" that you create a level of respect, so the student knows that "you're trying to help them understand something beyond just what's written in a book."

Training opportunities. Participants identified training opportunities about student anxiety as largely derived from the school district but at times sought out on their own. As mentioned earlier, background knowledge can result from personal experiences and teaching experiences. Correspondingly, each participant has gained varying levels of knowledge through training in their teaching experience.

Aubrey talked extensively about her districts' professional development, noting that the district has pursued mental health training beyond the normal requirements and that the trainings supported her in identifying when a student has anxiety and what that means for helping the student make progress academically. With her district's active approach to professional development, Aubrey explained other training experiences such

as trying to build empathy through seeing how other teachers help students as well as supporting teachers through keeping themselves healthy. Christopher also acknowledged this emphasis on the health of the teacher.

Three participants, Aubrey, Christopher, and Allison, specifically mentioned training in trauma. Aubrey and Christopher were exposed in various ways to training in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which focuses on trauma. Allison and Monica both had experience working at ALCs prior to working in the public school, where they learned to connect trauma with anxiety. Allison noted that her ALC offered many more trainings on working with student trauma that can lead to anxiety. Both Monica and Tanya leaned on the role of the counselor or social worker to provide training. Monica appeared satisfied with the school counselor's training in her school, stating that although they only provided general facts about anxiety and how to recognize it, the information was valuable. Tanya also indicated that social workers led trainings in her district, primarily on mindfulness.

Christopher, Monica and Carly all shared unique training experiences. Monica mentioned training provided by the organization Greater Minnesota. Taking the initiative to seek training, Christopher has been involved in multiple projects that have educated him about student anxiety. "I've been able to search out and find some professional development that really puts the emphasis on the student needs more so than getting them to do what you want," he said. Carly sought out her own training on anxiety and mental health through the National Alliance on Mental Health, which has made an impact on her work with students. "I didn't know that much about mental illness before that," she said.

"Parents talk to me and I have great compassion for anxiety and any type of mental health issues."

Leah, Tanya, John, and Carly voiced their experiences in training as minimal. Leah stated that anxiety has not been much of a topic for professional development, so she has encountered "very little" training on it over her years of teaching. Tanya couldn't recall "any formal classes about anxiety or nervousness in students," while John said that his district's minimal training mostly involved learning definitions of anxiety. Carly shared that her district training was simply a formality of licensure. "We have one every three or four years or so. It's a check off on our licensure."

Table 5 – Acquired knowledge and training

Summary of Composite Structural Description: Theme 4

Structural Theme	Structural Horizons	Structural Constituents
Background Knowledge	Recognition of Anxiety	Physical symptoms
		Emotional symptoms
		Social anxiety
Training Opportunities		Performance anxiety
	Personal Connections	Personal experience
		Family associations with anxiety
	Relationship Building	Understand the student's situation
		Connect with students
		Communicate with students
		Use Advisory
	Training Opportunities	Minimal training
		ACEs
		Trauma-Informed
		Basic facts about anxiety, mental health
		Check off for licensure
		Unique training outside of the school.

Research subquestion 5 – Perception of the counselor. The fifth question and theme focused on the participants' perception of the role and effectiveness of school counselors in addressing student anxiety (see Table 6, p. 125). Four structural horizons emerged: (1) counselors provide training, (2) counselors support teachers, (3) counselors have limitations, and (4) other resources. In responding to the role of counselors, participants were in accord with the value of the counselor and most of the participants spoke highly of the role as a necessary part of school and supporting students. Christopher referenced that he felt supported by the counselor and that the support was all about getting students to be in a better place. Carly acknowledged the common perception of the role of the counselor, stating, "The school counselor tries to offer support to students." Through all their interviews, the participants noted the responsive nature of the counselor.

Counselors provide training. Leah, Monica, Tanya, and Carly indicated that training provided by the district through counselors had been minimal in both time dedicated to the training and the content of the training. Leah noted that her school counselors, social workers, and psychologists provided teachers with monthly emails with mental health tips for students that she considered very valuable. Counselors' presentations about the facts of anxiety have helped her and other teachers "not feel like we're completely in the dark."

Carly shared that her counselor's hour-long mental illness training has taught her that "the main thing we can do as classroom teachers is make sure we go to the right resource people and try to remain calm." She concluded that taking the calm approach

allows teachers to respond to the needs of students and get them to the right place for the right help. Monica echoed those sentiments, stating that she believes the counseling staff in her school have done "a lot of professional development and reading and talking about how to deal with kids presenting anxiety."

Counselors support teachers. Each participant shared their experiences of the support counselors give them and correspondingly their students. Several participants noticed that having a counselor available for students serves as a safety net. Aubrey described her relationship with the counselor as "a partner to work with," a professional who is there "so that I don't have to be the person the kid unloads on. . . . If a student is having a bad day and they need to leave the room to get some space . . . they have a place to go. Allison concurred:

> I think that the school counselor provides an outlet for students. If students are
>
> really in need of someone to talk to, the school counselor is definitely someone
>
> they can turn to. It also gives them kind of a safe outlet to get out of class.

Some participants said having a counselor provides relief due to the way they can help the student who is struggling in the classroom while the teacher is trying to teach all the students. Aubrey put it this way:

> I hate to say it's a way to hand off those kids, but in a way it is because I've got
>
> one hundred and twenty kids and if three of them are melting down today I still
>
> have one hundred and seventeen who need to read the short story and do some
>
> good quality Common Core Standard learning.

Monica recognized that the counselor provides a safety net that includes specific strategies for students to work through their anxiety:

> Our school counselors have done an exceptional job at helping anxious students learn some coping techniques and [giving them] a place to go where they can de-escalate [without] turning it into, 'Oh, you can stay here all day and do nothing at all.'

Monica further explained the problem-solving role counselors play that can lead to keeping students focused more on learning by being in the classroom more often.

> They've done a really good job at recognizing 'This is what's happening and we're going to figure out how to deal with what's happening right now. But then we're going to figure out how to get you back to the place where you could go back to class and be successful.'

John distinguished between the counselor's role with academic guidance and responsive support for issues like anxiety, noting that counselors have supported his work by continually communicating the needs of students and being both responsive and accessible. His school counselor, he said, "will come down and talk to us every once in awhile and say . . . 'Keep an eye out for this kid . . . tell me if you see this or that.' She gives hints and clues as to what to look for." Monica also recognized that responsiveness as valuable. "They're really good at their jobs, but they're also really good about responding to what is happening right now with our student body."

Counselors have limitations. Despite the way counselors are able to support teachers and students, the participants recognized their limitations. Many of the

limitations are due to time constraints and the number of students that need support with limited counselors available. Leah felt as if everyone in the building had to take on more of the school counselor or social worker role because there are so many students with needs that can't be met by the small amount of staff that they have. Allison shared that when a counselor was out on maternity leave, her absence created a prevalent sense among the staff that they did not know what to do with their anxious students. She continued to explain the ratio of counselor to student at her school only allowed for basic relationships with students:

> The relationships our school counselors have with students can be very challenging. I work at a school with a thousand kids, and we have two counselors. I can only imagine that these counselors have very surface level relationships with a lot of the students. And sometimes I don't know how effective they can be if they don't truly understand or know these kids.

Even with recognizing certain limitations, the participants agreed that access to counselors is generally available for students. Allison talked about how she is able to refer students to counselors, stating, "If I had a concern about a student, I have referred students to counselors so it's not like students have to seek out the counselor."

Tanya and Leah lamented that the lack of resources and staff cause schools to be more reactive to the needs of students instead of proactive. Tanya advocated for a systemic approach to meeting the mental health needs of students so that schools are proactive. She also commented on the disconnect between teachers and counselor in terms of not having a lot of experience working with them. However, she allied with the

counselor through short trainings and working together with a struggling student. Leah discussed the heavy workload that creates the disconnect between counselors and teachers: "The counselor's role has impacted me only in the little tidbits of information that they're able to pass on when they have time to share it with us."

Other resources. The participants identified the need for more resources beyond the role of the counselor to support students. While discussing the role of the counselor, the participants' interviews showed a general awareness of mental health provided both at the school and outside the school primarily by social workers, yet most expressed little to no knowledge of their role. Allison shared how she sought outside resources when she realized the counselors were overwhelmed and the needs of her students still remained:

> I've dabbled in reaching out in different directions to see ways that we can help
> the student, but a lot of times it's me looking for outsiders to help me instead of
> me using an individual strategy in my classroom.

Carly talked extensively about the role of the school collaborator, essentially a school social worker, in addressing anxiety. Her perception is that the depth of mental health issues such as anxiety need more than what a counselor can provide a student. She labored closely with the school collaborator to address anxiety.

> For students who have an ongoing problem with anxiety, they should be in close
> contact with a collaborator. A lot of times I'll just go in after school to the
> collaborator and say, 'I'm really worried about this student.' And they say, 'Yeah,
> there's a lot of things going on at home right now.' They know their mind is
> elsewhere. Those things need to be addressed before that student can focus.

She continued to point out that, like school counselors, there aren't enough school

collaborators to support the needs of students. "I would like to see more healthy

resources readily available for students with mental health. I think one collaborative

worker in the district is not enough to really know what's going on in homes."

Table 6 – Perception of the counselor

Summary of Composite Structural Description: Theme 5

Structural Theme	Structural Horizons	Structural Constituents
School Counselor's Role	Counselors provide training	Short trainings focused on basics of anxiety
Perception of School Counselors	Counselors support teachers	Safety Net Safe Outlet Relief for the teacher Coping Strategies Accessibility Responsiveness
	Counselors have limitations	Time constraints Workload
	Other resources	Mental Health providers Limited knowledge of providers Social Workers

Essence

Moustakas (1994) shared that essence is about what is common, ideas or concepts

that are universal. Constructing the descriptions and searching for themes brought out the

unique capabilities of each participant working with students experiencing anxiety. The

participants were bound by their passion for students. In addition, several participants

expressed deep personal connections with their own anxiety and translated that to their lived experiences with anxious students. Each participants' essence of working with anxious students is primarily seen through the lens of building relationships that assisted the participants with making accommodations for students, finding appropriate resources, and keeping them focused in the classroom. The role of being a teacher with anxious students is also one of finding balance between the social and emotional support given to students and the focus on academic work.

The results further presented that the participants believed their learning environment strongly impacts student anxiety. The participants leaned on their experience, striving to establish routines, acknowledge students, and create positive interactions. Participants regularly adjusted their teaching to flow with the needs of students. They considered their delivery and content for opportunities to connect with students. Participants also described the essence of their work with students experiencing anxiety in terms of the detrimental influence of performance anxiety.

Participants' personal backgrounds strongly influenced their teaching practice in relation to anxious students. They took advantage of unique training opportunities, whether provided by the school district or seeking training on their own. Participants viewed counselors favorably along with their vital role in responding to emerging needs. The perception is that counselors are effective and fundamental to schools, despite the challenges of a shortage of counselors on a school's staff connected to the large number of students they are expected to serve. The participants felt strongly that counselors support teachers and provide a necessary safety net for students.

In conclusion, the participants showed their passion for the work they do, the students they serve, and the opportunities they take advantage of to improve themselves.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter IV was to utilize the transcendental phenomenology method to share the data findings of the deep descriptions of participants' experiences. Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam Method of analysis follows a seven-step process. The process developed through epoche, finding invariant constituents, labeling core themes, and checking for areas of reduction that were then written in independent textural-structural descriptions. These descriptions were viewed through imaginative variation to support a written composite textural-structural description, leading to the essence of the experience. The findings were insightful responses to the study's research question: What are the lived experiences of high school math and language arts teachers in high-poverty, rural schools educating and meeting the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety? The findings produced several themes signifying the essence of each participants' perceptions about their role, effectiveness, impact, knowledge and training, and the role of the counselor.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This chapter was to explain the relevance and implications of the study, analyze themes related to the five main questions, and provide recommendations for future research. The central question of the study was: What are the lived experiences of high school math and language arts teachers in high-poverty, rural schools in terms of educating and meeting the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety? In addition, five core research subquestions were derived from the background literature:

1. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools describe or perceive their role in addressing student anxiety?

2. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the effectiveness of their support on student anxiety, in particular, academic anxiety?

3. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the impact of students experiencing anxiety on their teaching practice?

4. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools working with students experiencing anxiety describe their knowledge and training in order to educate anxious students?

5. How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the role and effectiveness of professional school counselors in addressing students experiencing anxiety?

Through interviews with eight participants, the study identified the educators' awareness of anxiety in their students and the need to develop strong relationships with students in order to support them. It further explored the changes in the participants' learning environment and their teaching practice. Analysis of the interview data, using the transcendental phenomenological research approach, showed that participants' experience, formed from personal knowledge and/or professional training, significantly matters for providing appropriate support to anxious students.

Furthermore, transcendental phenomenology categorizes data into textural descriptions and structural descriptions. Textural descriptions describe the what of the experience and is associated with the process of reduction (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78). Structural descriptions identify how the phenomenon is experienced and realized through imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78). When combined, the textural-structural descriptions create the essence of the phenomenon.

Throughout this chapter, the findings of the study were connected with current literature from Chapter II to offer a richer understanding of the themes. Finally, the implications of the study, limitations, and recommendations for future research were considered.

Discussion of Themes

The themes uncovered in the study are aligned to the five subquestions focusing on participants' perceptions of their role, effectiveness, impact on their teaching practice, background knowledge and training, and the role of the school counselor. The themes in questions 1-3 are textural, addressing what the participants indicated they were

experiencing. Themes in questions 4 and 5 described how participants experienced the phenomenon.

In the study of adolescent anxiety, research shows that school districts are the critical settings for prevention and intervention of mental health needs (DeKruyf et al., 2013; Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley & Weissberg, 2017; Lendrum, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2013; Warner et al., 2016). The participants shared how they perceived their role, their effectiveness and the impact on their teaching with students experiencing anxiety. They verbalized the means they use to be proactive in supporting anxious students, finding ways to intervene. The participants also sought out opportunities to grow their knowledge of mental health and anxiety. Through the development of themes, the participants attitudes, beliefs and needs about students experiencing anxiety became evident.

Research subquestion 1. Participants answered the question: How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools describe or perceive their role in addressing student anxiety? Their responses led to four key textural themes with several horizons. In reacting to anxious students, participants articulated how they perceived their role, established relationships, found balance and utilized advisory time. The literature review recognized the positive role of teachers in reducing anxiety through their daily interaction with students (Blackstock et al., 2018; Brooks, 2007; Connor et al., 2014; Peterson, 2018). There is evidence that participants took proactive measures to address and intervene with stress relieving practices.

Perceived role. Participants viewed their role in various ways. Participants knew that the value of education and learning for their students leads to future success. Their interpretations of their role were consistent with research by Blackstock et al. (2018) who noted that teachers can take steps to support students. Most participants, especially Leah and Tanya, established their main role as helping students become productive members of society. Research by Cohen (2006) illustrated that SEL based programming has strong correlations with promoting students' ability to participate in society while simultaneously establishing a safe learning environment.

Further examination of these ideals showed most participants describing their efforts to provide support for students. Providing support revealed itself through advocacy efforts, locating resources, developing coping mechanisms, and being intentional with knowing what anxiety is and how to recognize it. Monica concluded that, "I feel like this really is something that people need to talk about." Monica also posited that if teachers are serious about providing support for students, possessing a checklist of coping skills to reference would greatly support their ability to address students experiencing anxiety.

Relationship building. Connor et al.'s (2014) research pointed out that students who do not connect or associate with a teacher experience more academic anxiety. All the participants continually explained elements of how they build relationships with students as the means to reduce anxiety. Participants like Christopher used his experiences to get to know students, as that was the key to creating a mutual bond of respect. That respect lead to a positive level of safety and comfort. Carly summarized it

this way: "I just try my best to make sure that my students . . . know that I know their name and that I care and connect with them about something." Relationship building was the common bond and belief held by all participants as the main way to address student anxiety.

Balance. The participants noted there is a real challenge to finding the balance between what they are expected to teach and how they perceive they should be supporting students. One participant stated when teachers receive support it "relieves some of the pressure of having to be that person" and another participant wondered "how far do we sacrifice as teachers and bend and be flexible and still get the outcome that we want?" The participants expressed pressure to continue in their teaching and content regardless of what was happening emotionally to the student. The murky waters of student anxiety do not allow for a clear line for teachers to follow. Participants like Carly stated, "I am not really this resource to help them control their anxiety."

Advisory. Several participants shared their experiences through an advisory model implemented by their school. This model gave them dedicated time to connect with students, including one participants' use of a social-emotional program. While having this dedicated time, participants did share that the time falls short of what they really need to make a difference for students.

Research subquestion 2. The main characteristics of participants' perspective of their effectiveness addressing students experiencing anxiety were centered on the learning environment. Participants wrestled with how to express their effectiveness in concrete terms. They focused on classroom expectations and routines, conversations they

have with students both in the classroom and out of the classroom, their attempts to acknowledge students and drawing on their teaching experience. Routine and pacing reduce anxiety as students have less time to fixate on their anxieties.

Brook's (2007) study reflected on the role of the teacher, indicating that teachers are in the prime position of anticipating, addressing and intervening with stress-relieving measures in the classroom. The findings in this study showed that several of the participants did possess an ability to structure their classrooms in ways to accommodate immediate needs. Monica shared her experience of helping a student who experienced panic attacks. Tanya and Carly promoted calm among their students that leads to what they described as centeredness. Tanya specifically led students through mindfulness practices to reduce anxiety, commenting that the practices positively impacted learning. John, Aubrey, Leah, Tanya, Carly and Christopher all indicated that when their classroom learning environment is in a good place, they have stronger connections with students and the academic outcome is positive.

Research subquestion 3. Participants synthesized the third research question of their teaching practice through their classroom and in relation to performance anxiety.

Changes in the classroom. Significant classroom changes in teaching practice revolved around the concept of student choice, allowing time for students to complete assignments and breaking down complex information. Participants also identified their role of control over the content of the curriculum as a means to engage students where they are at in their personal lives. Leah, Christopher, Allison, and Aubrey explained how they pick certain texts or literature with the purposes of relating to life situations. They

were cognizant of potential triggers yet navigated the content to create opportunities to give support to students to understand and cope with their anxiety through their learning. Time is an essential element desired for students to receive help from the participants, using that as an anxiety reducer. John and Tanya concentrated on breaking information down, being slow and consistent, and being one task oriented with anxious learners. Tanya summarized that she uses "the approach that works best for that kid."

Performance anxiety. Participants clearly saw the strain of preparing for summative or state level tests. They described students as nervous, freaking out, exhibiting panic and stress. The participants reinforced their teaching routines and expectations through visual schedules and coping mechanisms like breathing techniques. Allison shared how students will go to extremes to deal with performance anxiety. Going to extremes has two effects; students either shut down or find shortcuts to alleviate their stress.

Research subquestion 4. Structural descriptions focus on the how of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The findings related to the knowledge and training of teachers were positioned within the structural description as their personal background and the training they received from the school or through school counselors were a construction of the experience and laid a basis to their approach for working with anxious students. Research question 4 examined participants' background knowledge of anxiety as well as their training opportunities to better know, understand and develop their skills regarding student anxiety.

The literature review specifically detailed the disconnect in teachers not receiving training for mental health. Studies by Bridgeland et al. (2013) and Holtz (2017) indicated that high school teachers are undertrained in order to appropriately support student mental health. Yet in this study the gap in training was less prevalent because participants owned their experience of anxiety through their personal trials with anxiety and the training they sought out. In essence, the participants had developed their own social-emotional competency (SEC). Peterson (2019) showed that teachers with high levels of SEC are more prepared to identify, refer, or support students' mental health needs. Conversely, two participants, Aubrey and Christopher, both noted the adverse side of SEC. They shared their perception that teachers possess high levels of stress that negatively impacts their job and how they connect with students. This is consistent with research presented by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) and Greenberg et al. (2016).

Recognition of anxiety. Participants perceived students experiencing anxiety through their physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, social anxiety and performance anxiety. The traits recognized by the participants were similar to the traits signified by the Child Mind Institute (2018). Hill et al. (2016) and Rockhill et al. (2010) noted that these traits interfered with normal student functioning.

The physical symptoms were seen as affecting the whole person. Each participant pointed to traits such as limited or no eye contact, visible shaking, jitteriness, and fidgeting that exemplified student anxiety. Still, misdiagnosis of anxiety can be an issue. Guerra's (2017) research pointed out that teachers don't fully recognize the symptoms of anxiety and often confuse them with ADHD. This can lead to teachers using the wrong

strategies to address anxiety. Only Carly clearly differentiated anxiety traits from ADHD traits.

The participants shared the outward expressions of anxiety in that students would express anger, panic and impulsivity. Pent up frustration led students to an emotional edge. The other end of the spectrum was described as lack of engagement, manifesting in student absences from school and general avoidance of school and academic work. Both the World Health Organization (2019) and Hamdi and Iacono (2014) illustrated how the symptoms of anxiety can disrupt a student's attendance. This is consistent with the study as most participants commented on the negative impact anxiety has on a student's attendance. Participants realized that the anxiety snowball of poor attendance, avoidance, and feelings of being overwhelmed can lead to academic failure.

Participants also recognized students' performance anxiety. Several studies explained how the performance culture reveals itself in competition, high expectations, and pressure situations that lead to increases in student anxiety (Deb et al., 2015; Guerra, 2017; Meadows, 2018). Some participants explained how performance anxiety takes away from students achieving at their best level. Whether they have test anxiety or feel pressured from parents, performance anxiety impedes their academic performance, connecting with the current research by Deb et al. (2015), Guerra (2017), and Meadows (2018).

Personal connections. Participants related their personal experiences with anxiety along with family members who have anxiety. The personal impact of anxiety weighed heavily on the participants according to their narratives about their unique

backgrounds. These backgrounds profoundly altered the way they teach along with their attitudes and beliefs toward their students. Participants described the toll of their own anxiety in terms of losing friends, dealing with personal anxiety, and witnessing family members battle anxiety.

Relationship building. Participants indicated that relationship building is essential to support anxious students. The participants expressed confidence in understanding students' situations, finding ways to connect with students, and the means with which to communicate with students. The participants portrayed being able to observe their students or as Tanya put it, read the room, in order to determine how they should respond to a student need. Responding to student needs had to be proactive. Being proactive meant that participants had to know their resources. One of the opportunities several participants used was time in their advisory program. Advisory, often called homeroom, served as a structured time that participants perceived as building community among students and teachers. Yet most participants were vague on the structured nature of the time, describing primarily the connections they developed with students based on their own expertise.

Training. The study found a strong correlation of training opportunities influencing participants' background knowledge. Some districts provided certain professional development opportunities within the district and participants also sought out their own professional development, primarily in the context of mental health. The participants signified that anxiety was rarely the focal point, but rather lumped in with other elements of mental health or trauma informed care. Sometimes training was

offered to 'check a box,' for license renewal. Several participants declared their opinion regarding training on anxiety as minimal with comments like, "It's very little."

The research behind this study spoke heavily on the emphasis, and corresponding benefit, of teachers implementing an evidence-based social-emotional program (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2016; Moss, 2016; Taylor et al., 2017). The participants asserted limited knowledge of social-emotional learning or if their school was even doing a social-emotional program. The participants' lack of describing SEL based programming in their school identifies with Bridgeland et al.'s (2013) study showing that more than half of high school teachers in rural schools are likely to lack training in addressing social and emotional skills. Even though Allison explained her school's use of advisory, only Leah described a specific homeroom-time program they used to connect with students and be responsive to their needs.

Furthermore, there exists a divergence between participants' perceptions of their role with anxious students and the research behind SEL based programming. Cohen's (2006) research clearly pointed to the association between SEL based programming and how it supports students in being able to participate in society. While participants perceived their role as helping anxious students learn to be productive members of society, they also described limited use or knowledge of SEL based programming in their schools. Their goals and their schools' approach to working with anxious students do not connect. Cohen (2006) also made the correlation between SEL and safe learning environments, another perceived responsibility the participants continually advanced.

Research subquestion 5. School counselors have an integral role in working with students experiencing anxiety. Participants viewed the role of the counselor in a positive light. They recognized that counselors provide teachers with training and provide support for the teacher. Conversely, most participants realized that counselors have limitations and cannot meet the needs of all students. Research by Bain et al., (2011) and Duncan et al. (2014) specified that these limitations are highlighted in the challenges rural schools have with providing counseling services, personnel, and supervision. There are also other resources that must be made more accessible to students.

Participants acknowledged having counselors train them in basic mental health topics. Though most participants labeled these trainings as minimal, Carly and Monica noted the value of the training regardless. Participants distinguished the support they receive when counselors give them advice on how to help a student or provide relief for the teacher by taking a student from their classroom. They are perceived as responsive and accessible. Counselors often served as a safety net for students by way of being an outlet, someone to talk to. Counselors also support students with specific strategies to work through their anxiety.

Yet, counselors have limitations due to their extensive workload and time constraints. Research examined the barriers to quality counseling programming, indicating that rural schools struggle to provide enough time for counselors to be effective given the heavy workload they have (Bain et al., 2011; Blackstock et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2018). Participants articulated that having a high workload forced counselors

to be reactive to student needs and not develop the necessary relationships to best serve anxious students. Time constraints kept counselors from sharing appropriate information with teachers regarding a student or helpful strategies to work with the student. This created a distinct counselor and teacher disconnect. Gruman et al. (2013) explained one way to meet all students' social-emotional needs is for counselors to utilize a specific timeframe in the school day, typically called an advisory. Only Leah and Allison described how they and their school use advisory to support students.

Participants identified the need for resources beyond the counselor. Even though some participants knew about resources like school based mental health, they possessed limited knowledge on how those services worked or the process for helping a student receive those services. Like school counselors, there are limited mental health workers or resources to provide students. These resources can connect home and school, giving another layer of support to students. Carly mentioned, "I would like to see more healthy resources available for students with mental health."

Implications

The findings of this study are intended to inform teachers, counselors and school administrators who work directly with students experiencing anxiety. With the rise in adolescent anxiety according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2018b), it is imperative to know the perceptions of teachers' roles with anxious students in order to provide a better system of support for both the teacher and the student.

Implications for teachers. A teacher's experience matters for making the classroom a safe and effective place for anxious students to learn. The personal impact of

anxiety weighed heavily on the participants, driving their attitude toward anxious students. The participants in this study showed that their background knowledge, in large part due to personal connections with anxiety, along with their desire to seek specific training better equipped them to address students experiencing anxiety. Participants' personal experiences created a high level of social and emotional competency that allowed them to find more success with students. Peterson's (2019) research indicated when teachers possess the ability to identify, refer, or support students' mental health needs, students are more likely to have academic success. The implication is that teachers need to develop their own social and emotional competency so they can more effectively identify, understand and refer students with mental health needs.

Through a keen focus on care for the student, combined with compassion and empathy, the participants shared their lived experiences of how they built relationships and changed their classroom. Each participant fostered relationships in unique ways but the willingness to see the social and emotional need and make connections with students took intentional effort. Current teachers could review the various practices the participants stated in this study for use in their own teaching. Combining those practices with intentional effort will allow teachers to establish effective relationships and learning environments for their students.

Knowing that teachers are essential to reducing anxiety through their daily interaction with students (Blackstock et al., 2018; Brooks, 2007; Connor et al., 2014; Peterson, 2018), the imperative turns to building the skill set of teachers. Teachers need to recognize that addressing anxiety takes a level of skill that is learned over time. Most

participants in this study indicated they received adequate training to address anxiety, showing that training is crucial for all teachers to develop the skills to work with anxious students. The participants reported mixed experiences of the intensity of training and how often they received training leading to the implication that continual training in mental health topics, and specifically anxiety, is essential to support all teachers. Teachers who engage in training, whether through the counselor, district-mandated programs, or outside-of-school opportunities, could break down the misperceptions they have toward anxious students. For example, the study showed the difficulty for most participants of distinguishing anxiety from the characteristics of ADHD. When teachers improve their skills for working with anxious students, they are increasing their own social-emotional competency. This has benefits for the teacher both personally and professionally.

Teachers should consider advocating for implementing and participating in a SEL program in their school. This study pointed to a lack of evidence-based SEL programming and implementation in these high-poverty, rural schools. Though not identified by the participants in this study, Bridgeland et al.'s (2013) national teacher survey found teachers are receptive to SEL programming in rural schools. Not only are teachers receptive to SEL programming, but when teachers are trained, they are vital to the social and academic growth of students in the classroom (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Following the multi-tiered systems of supports model, implementing a SEL program is a Tier 1 intervention that promotes equity in support of all students.

Implications for counselors. Through all their interviews, it became clear that the participants recognized that the high school counselor has a duty to be responsive to the needs of students. Counselors could draw from the conclusions of the participants in this study that the work they do is acknowledged and necessary. The participants also explained the heavy workload and time constraints teachers have. Counselors need to advocate for their positions in schools and for having the appropriate resources and staffing to do their work. Since several participants felt the role of the counselor was valuable and appreciated the training that was presented, counselors should continue to reach out to teachers, gather their input, and provide learning opportunities. A collaborative effort could break down misperceptions of the counselor's role.

Counselors would do well to address student anxiety through promoting evidence-based SEL programs. Rural schools clearly struggle to provide counseling service and support. Gruman et al. (2013) recommended the use of advisory to address all student needs and also gain back lost time working with anxious students. According to Gruman et al. (2013), evidence suggested that comprehensive programming opens up time for counselors to provide prevention services. Counselors who lead initiatives to implement a school-wide advisory program/academic program gain more time eventually to address all student needs, including those related to mental health (Gruman et al., 2013).

Finally, high school counselors need to advocate for other resources that could support student anxiety. Some of the participants acknowledged school-based mental health programs where they work, but also expressed limited details of how they worked or supported anxious students.

Implications for school leaders in high poverty, rural high schools. O'Malley et al. (2018) identified that rural schools have limited mental health access. School districts bear the burden of providing resources for their teachers to effectively teach and work with all students. This research showed that the participants, displaying high levels of social and emotional competency, took the initiative on their own to address and intervene with students experiencing anxiety, whether it was through relationship building or in anxiety reducing mindfulness techniques. It would behoove the school district to incorporate a more system wide and coherent approach to supporting anxious students through both SEL based programs and mental health programs, specifically in the high school.

Support all staff. As more experienced teachers have an advantage to support anxious students, school districts could promote training in mental health, specifically anxiety, as part of mentoring programs or through annual targeted training to their whole staff. Newer to the profession and younger teachers, typically those who recently completed education programs, need to build their capacity and knowledge of resources in a timely manner so they can appropriately respond to and direct students experiencing anxiety.

Implement and train teachers with evidence-based programming. As signified in earlier comments, school districts leaders would benefit students by implementing an evidenced-based SEL program. This is difficult in high poverty, rural high schools. Teachers, when appropriately trained in SEL, prove to be vital to promoting the social and academic growth of students in the classroom (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Seeking out

and finding programs that fit within budget structures should be a high priority for school leaders along with the commitment to fully implement the SEL program.

Recommendations for Further Research

Several opportunities for further research evolved from the study. Considerations could be made for adding or creating a focus group where teachers could share their lived experiences in a common platform. The group focus could enrich the descriptions of participants' experiences that might bring out more detail. Another opportunity to enrich descriptions could occur through journaling, asking participants to observe student anxiety closely over a set period of time. The journaling of those observations could bring timelier and potentially relevant experiences to light.

This study's premise relied on teachers who had specific qualifications, notably having a Tier 4 license and being tenured in their current school. A study could pursue a broader selection of participants by looking at a sample of participants that include non-tenured teachers and teachers from all content areas, not just math and language arts. Requests of all licensed teachers would allow for a broader range of viewpoints, especially concerning the experience factor of the teacher. Most participants in the study had experience with personal anxiety in some capacity. The study's results could look different with a wider base of participants, notably those who have less personal connection with anxiety or mental health. Expanding the participants available for the study could lead to a more comprehensive examination of teachers lived experiences.

In addition, a more expansive research design could benefit our understanding of students experiencing anxiety. The study could be conducted by adding a quantitative

measure, creating a mixed-methods study. This could support more depth of information about the use and implementation of specific SEL programming or specific teaching strategies used with anxious students.

Summary and Closing

In bringing the study of how teachers address anxious students to a close, it is appropriate to consider the findings in reflection of what we already know. This study has reviewed recent literature to frame the research and give it a purpose and validation of need. Through a comprehensive search and evaluation of information on the topic, a comparison was made of the findings and the literature review. As this comparison was revealed in the composite textural and structural descriptions, the descriptions added unique value to the existing knowledge of teachers experiences with anxious students. This study drew from the concept that anxiety is a growing threat to students normal functioning. A high rate, between 9 and 32 percent, of adolescents experience anxiety disorders (World Health Organization, 2019; Hill et al., 2016). The study differs from others in that it focused on high-poverty rural high schools. The methods and procedures allowed for seeking meaning and essence through the described lived experiences of each participant. The study's results were more about awareness, insight and opportunity that is inherent in a search for meaning and essence. That essence was made known through the lived experiences of teachers as they shared their perceptions of their role, effectiveness, and impact on their teaching. When bringing the strength of the research together, no other literature pursued meaning that reflected the wholeness of the participants' experience at the high school level.

The research presents a descriptive process, showing the relevance of each theme. The research indicated that participants view their role as balancing the academic work of students with the social and emotional needs of students as seen through their anxiety. Teachers can promote positive outcomes for students through how they organize the learning environment, build positive relationships with students, and put strategic practices in place in the classroom. The research is clear about the value of the teacher being in a primary position to anticipate, address, and intervene with stress relieving measures in the classroom (Brooks, 2007). As Minnesota has a higher percentage of rural students in high poverty schools than urban and suburban students, the challenge exists to address the mental health needs of students in rural communities.

Therefore, this study focused on the lived experiences of rural high school teachers in high poverty school districts. This allowed for learning the key perceptions and practices of experienced teachers. The information gained from this study was intended to inform teachers, counselors and school leaders about the opportunities and practices to support anxious students. The analysis of data also found that teachers had limited or non-impactful training in the area of anxiety. Some of the limited training could be reduced through the role of the counselor, as indicated by some of the participants.

The lived experiences of these participants shed light on the subject of addressing students experiencing anxiety. Their input and dedication to finding a way to support anxious students highlights their passion and the ability of teachers to positively support all students. The lessons learned in this process were primarily about the intentional

effort it takes to work with anxious students. Reflecting on this type of effort, the value

of developing a supportive relationship with students became apparent. While research is

a process, the lived experience is a journey and one worth taking.

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APPENDIX A: Email to Potential Participants

My name is Cory Strasser. You are being invited to participate in a research study I am conducting under the guidance of Dr. Candace Raskin in the department of Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato. The purpose of the study is to examine the lived experiences of high school math and language arts teachers as they educate and meet the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety in high-poverty, rural schools.

I am emailing you because your school meets the study's criteria of being both rural and high-poverty. If you are an experienced math or language arts teacher, I am hopeful that you will consider being a participant in this study. An experienced teacher meets the following criteria:
  1) You currently teach math or language arts in a grades 9-12 high school;
  2) You currently possess a Tier 4 teaching license in math or language arts.
  3) You currently have attained tenure status in your district.

If you meet the above criteria and agree to participate in this study, I will invite you to an interview. This interview will be approximately 45 – 60 minutes and will be held at a location where confidentiality can be maintained. This site will be by mutual agreement and may take place via a video conference or at a confidential meeting space secured at a local library or other secure site by mutual agreement. The study is conducted over a two-month period in the 2019-2020 school year.

If you indicate interest by responding to this email, you can expect that I will contact you within the next week. I believe that your lived experience regarding anxious students will support the work you do as a teacher. Please take a moment to review the consent form attached. Upon your verbal acceptance to participate in this study, I will ask you to sign the consent form. Then we will arrange details of the interview process.

IRBNet ID #: 1490137

APPENDIX B: Consent Form

Participant Informed Consent

Dear _____,

My name is Cory Strasser and I am a student at Minnesota State University, Mankato, working on my dissertation to fulfill requirements for a doctorate in educational leadership. You are invited to participate in a research study at Minnesota State University, Mankato. This research is being conducted under the supervision of my advisor, Dr. Candace Raskin, Department of Educational Leadership, who is identified as the principal investigator. I am identified as the student investigator. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of high school math and language arts teachers as they educate and meet the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety in high-poverty, rural schools.

I am inviting your participation because your school meets the study's criteria of being both rural and high-poverty. If you are an experienced math or language arts teacher, I am hopeful that you will consider being a participant in this study. An experienced teacher meets the following criteria:
4) You currently teach math or language arts in a grades 9-12 high school;
5) You currently possess a Tier 4 teaching license in math or language arts.
6) You currently have attained tenure status in your district.

If you meet the criteria and agree to participate in this study, I will invite you to an interview. This interview will be approximately 45 – 60 minutes and will be held at a location where confidentiality can be maintained. This site will be by mutual agreement and may take place via a video conference or at a confidential meeting space secured at a local library or other secure site by mutual agreement.

The interview will be digitally recorded to ensure accuracy. Two devices will be used; a primary device and a secondary device as back-up. A transcription service will be used to transcribe the voice-recorded data collected in this study. The investigators will ensure the protection of your confidentiality and privacy with the transcriptionist involved. The transcript will be used for data analysis and accessible by myself, as the student investigator and Dr. Candace Raskin, the principal investigator.

Prior to analyzing the transcripts (data), I will provide you with a copy of the transcript from your interview for your review. This will give you an opportunity to check the accuracy of your statements and verify that the interview accurately captures your experiences. After analysis of the data, I will share the themes exclusively from your interview developed through the analysis process with you to ensure accuracy. Analysis of the transcripts and development of themes will occur throughout the winter months.

The primary digital recording will be erased by the student investigator following the completion of the transcription process. Consent forms, the secondary recording, investigator's notes, and transcripts will be stored in a secured cabinet for a period of three years at the office of the principal investigator, located at the 7700 France Avenue, Edina Campus of Minnesota State University, Mankato. This information will be destroyed after three years of the completion of the study by the principal investigator. Participation in this research study is voluntary. You can decline to be in this study, stop or withdraw at any time in the process. You may withdraw by telling the principal or student investigator either through email, phone call, or in person that you no longer want to be in the study. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.

The risks you will encounter as a participant in this research can include emotional discomfort or stress in recollecting and then articulating your experiences of working with anxious students. You will be reminded before the interviews begin that, if you feel discomfort, you do not have to answer any questions you don't want to, and/or, you can take a break during the interview at any time. Voice recordings may be a risk for being overheard, potentially compromising your privacy. The student investigator will listen to recordings in a private location, his home office, to maintain privacy of the recordings. There are no known direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study, however, the results of the study may be of value to educators as they strive to support the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety in high-poverty, rural schools. The student and principal investigators will do their best to make sure that the personal information gathered for this study is kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy. If information from this study is published or presented at conferences, your identity, other personal information, and the identity of your school will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms.

If you have any questions later, you are encouraged to contact the principal investigator, Dr. Candace Raskin at Minnesota State University, Mankato at candace.raskin@mnsu.edu or (952) 818-8881 or contact me, the student investigator, Cory Strasser at cory.strasser@mnsu.edu or (507) 215-1257. If you have any questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the Administrator of the Institutional Review Board, at (507) 389-1242.

You have a right to a copy of this consent form and one will be provided to you by the student investigator.

Sign below to indicate your willingness to participate in this research study and to indicate that you are at least 18 years of age.

_____

Signature   Your Name (printed)   Date

APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol

What are the lived experiences of high school math and language arts teachers in high-poverty, rural schools educating and meeting the mental health needs of students affected by anxiety?	
How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools describe or perceive their role in addressing student anxiety?	1. Start by describing experiences or an experience where you worked with a student experiencing anxiety. Describe how you felt and responded to the student. 2. Elaborate more on other experiences you have had working with anxious students. 3. How do you know when a student is anxious? a. What is the difference between an anxious student and a student who has ADHD? 4. What do you feel is your role or responsibility in supporting anxious students? How are you able to respond to anxious students?
How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the role and effectiveness of professional school counselors in addressing students experiencing anxiety?	5. How has the role of the school counselor influenced your experience with anxious students? 6. What is your perception of the effectiveness of school counselors in supporting your experience with anxious students?
How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the effectiveness of their support on student anxiety, in particular, academic anxiety?	7. Tell me how you support anxious students? a. How would you describe the effectiveness of the changes you've made to your teaching?
How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools perceive the impact of students experiencing	8. What effect has your experience with anxious students had on your teaching? What changes do you associate with the experience?

anxiety on their teaching practice?	9. What do you feel is the impact of anxiety on learning for anxious students? 10. How have anxious students performed academically in your classroom? How would you describe their overall academic performance? In your experience what role has performance-based assessments (tests, quizzes, state level assessments, etc.) played in creating anxious students?
How do high school teachers in high-poverty, rural schools working with students experiencing anxiety describe their knowledge and training in order to educate anxious students?	11. Describe how you developed your background knowledge and the training that has helped you educate anxious students? How has this been effective? 12. What has your school done to support you to work with anxious students? What specific trainings have you attended or school-wide training/PD have been implemented? Is you district using an evidence-based SEL program? How has the program been implemented? How have you seen success come from the program?
Conclusion	13. Have you shared all that is significant with reference to the experience? What else would you like to share?

APPENDIX D: Summary of Themes

Main Textural Themes
Textural themes describe the lived experience of being a math or language arts high school teacher meeting the mental health needs of anxious students.

Theme 1: Participants perceive their role.
Horizons: Perceived role: utilize coping mechanisms; be intentional; be an advocate; create a checklist of 'what to do.' Relationship building: know the student; go beyond the classroom; read the room. Balance: support students with academic work; support students with emotional needs. Advisory: dedicate time to connect with students.

Theme 2: Participants perceive the effectiveness of their support.
Horizons: Aspects of the learning environment: routines and expectations; learning extends beyond the academics; positive conversations; acknowledge students; teacher experience matters.

Theme 3: Participants perception of the impact of students experiencing anxiety on their teaching practice.
Horizons: Changes in the classroom: teacher control over the content; student control over the content; time; choice in the assignments and assessments; break down the information. Performance anxiety: participatory active learning; visual schedules create routine; breathing techniques; slower pace through academic content.

Main Structural Themes
Structural themes specified the contexts and situations of the participants experiences of addressing the needs of anxious students.

Theme 4: Participants share their background and training experiences.
Horizons: Recognition of anxiety; personal connections; relationship building; training opportunities.

Theme 5: Role of the counselor
Horizons: Counselors provide training; counselors support teachers; counselors have limitations; and schools need other resources.