

Identifying Stressors of Special Education Teachers:

A Qualitative Phenomenological Approach

by

Clarissa M. McNally

Dissertation Submitted to the Doctoral Program

of the American College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

[December 2020]

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Approved by:

Dissertation Chair: Scott Bailey, Ed.D.

Committee Member: Dawn Hickman, Ed.D.

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## Abstract

Teaching is a profound profession as it impacts the lives of future generations yet remains a profession which induces a great deal of stress. Many educators are ill-equipped to cope with the stressors of the job. In reviewing the literature, few studies can be found addressing the myriad causes of stress for teachers let alone for special education teachers. Some studies have determined there was a gap in evaluative research on stress interventions and improving employees' well-being. A qualitative phenomenological study can fill the gaps in the literature by helping to identify stressors and effective coping strategies for special education teachers based on the experiences of special education teachers. The study could assist administrators and other policymakers and provide appropriate tools to support teachers in distress. Lazarus coping theory and transformational leadership theory helped guide and provide support for the study. The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers and identified supports to reduce stress levels as identified by special education teachers. The following were guiding questions for the study: How do special education teacher defined stress, what were the perceived causes of stress which impacted special education teachers, how do special education teachers sense the impact of stress in daily life, and how do special education teachers in suburban California schools cope with stress? Through in-depth virtual semi-structured interviews and a virtual focus group session, 15 suburban special education teachers answered the research questions. Special education teachers, administrators, and policymakers may benefit from the study as the aim was to minimize stressors by providing effective coping mechanisms to leaders.

*Keywords:* Lazarus Coping Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, Stress, Coping Mechanisms, Special Education

## Dedication

To honor my mother, Dr. Stephanie Canada, who supported me throughout my doctoral journey. It is with her love, encouragement, guidance, and support that I was able to obtain my dream. She raised me to be a strong and independent woman who could achieve anything I set my mind to. I love you with all my heart! You believed in me when I may not have believed in myself. Thank you for being the positive role model in my life and guiding me every step of the way.

## Acknowledgements

Reflecting on the past 3 years, the doctoral journey posed many areas of growth, yet there were many rewarding opportunities. The successful completion of a doctorate is only possible with the ongoing support of family and friends. Many faculty members, friends, and family have played critical roles throughout the journey. I appreciate everyone who has offered words of encouragement, support, and who has shown me grace during times of stress.

To my family—thank you for always providing me with time and space to work on discussions and assignments, even during family events. If it were not for the unconditional love, support, and understanding, the program would not be a reality. John—I appreciate you taking the lead with the children and giving me the time to study, research, and complete various assignments. Madison—your encouragement throughout the process was immense and appreciated. McKenna—your humor made me laugh during times of distress and I thank you.

To my best friend Kristin! The doctoral journey would not be possible without you. It was your encouragement to enroll in the program and the continuous, positive inspiration you provided me throughout the program. Tasheka—my online friend, you supported me throughout the program. Each and every day, calls on Google Duo occurred to motivate each other, work on discussions, and complete homework assignments. When I was discouraged, you were always positive and provided me with the motivation to continue.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The teaching profession is one of the oldest occupations and is often a respected position in society yet causes stress for many special education teachers (Muhammet & Sarigöz, 2018). The main goal of the teaching profession is to develop insights into the goals of students and to direct students toward personal goals (Muhammet & Sarigöz, 2018). Teachers not only have to educate and provide students with engaging academic lessons but are responsible for monitoring classroom behavior, promoting student growth socially, and attending to mental health concerns, which are present and sources of increased stress (Haydon et al., 2018). Resulting from the many duties and expectations placed on teachers, stress may occur and manifest as physical or mental health symptoms. Policymakers and top-level administrators in school districts should examine and understand the causes of stress of special education teachers and put a mechanism in place to support teachers.

Many resources may be available to learn about the causes of stress and coping mechanisms but not specific to special education teachers. The problem persists and further research may provide policymakers and top-level school administration with the knowledge to identify and assist teachers by helping to alleviate or minimize stress levels. The new research, if used by policymakers and administrators, will give specific tools, which can be used by special education teachers to reduce stress. This study has addressed the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers and identified coping mechanisms, which are effective, as determined by a qualitative phenomenological study of teachers in the profession. Chapter 1 is composed of the following topics: background of the study, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, definitions of terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, chapter summary, and a list of

references. To support the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and research questions, the dissertation encompasses a comprehensive literature review, methodology section, research findings/data analysis results, and a comprehensive discussion and conclusion to the study.

### **Background of the Problem**

There are tremendous expenses related to hiring, recruiting, and preparing teachers for the profession, and 40% of teachers are at risk of leaving caused by stress-related issues (Wong et al., 2017). Special education teachers are no exception to the rule. Special education teachers leave the profession because of dissatisfaction, acceptance of better paying jobs, and a lack of administrative support (Cancio et al., 2018). There are increasing demands, workloads, and other environmental factors which contribute to stress and burnout (Haydon et al., 2018).

Job-related stress in the teaching industry affects not only teachers in the United States but in other countries as well. In Malaysia, specifically Kota Bharu, a study was conducted with 580 secondary school teachers, which revealed 34% of teachers stated stress was prevalent in the profession (Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019). The stress of Malaysian teachers was caused by instructional expectations related to grading, teaching, lesson planning, running cocurricular activities, participating in professional development activities, and engaging with the community and parents regularly (Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019). A 2011 survey of over 7,800 teachers revealed the average Malaysian teacher worked between 40 to 80 hours per week, which contributed to stress and increased the risk of burnout (Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019).

Teachers may be unaware of the potential stressors one may encounter before entering the teaching profession, and the educational training leaves individuals ill-equipped to manage stress, which makes coping mechanisms more important (Antoniou et al., 2013). Across the nation, there has been a lack of support for teachers, especially special education; 82% of special

education teachers stated a lack of support in meeting the needs of students with disabilities (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). An understanding of why there is a lack of support in the special education area brings awareness, which may assist in reducing stressors. The research suggested induction programs, meaningful professional development, and strong leadership helped contribute to the reduction of stress levels (Cancio et al., 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Teaching is a demanding profession which poses many professional challenges (Cancio et al., 2018). Stress can affect novice and experienced teachers alike in the academic setting. Teachers are responsible for classroom management, student engagement, lesson planning, implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Section 504 plans, resource management, and student supervision, all of which create a variety of challenges for the classroom teacher (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). The problem is special education teachers are facing increased expectations and stress on the job based on increased workload, lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork, a sentiment of isolation, and minimal collaboration (Cancio et al., 2018). Special education teachers are working hard and exhibit higher levels of stress than general education teachers (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Stress management strategies in the academic setting are not well documented in the literature. This qualitative phenomenological study examined the specific causes of stressors for special education teachers and coping mechanisms which have been effective in the school setting.

Many first-year teachers experience high-stress levels and do not receive adequate support from the administration (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). High-stress levels contribute to 25% to 50% of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years of teaching (Haydon et al., 2018). Not only does stress cause teachers to leave the profession, but stress can affect

physical and emotional well-being. Cancio et al. (2018) found most research to be focused on identifying stressors for teachers with less emphasis on identifying coping mechanisms to help manage stress. Stress impacts the emotional and physical well-being of an individual, influences school climate and job performance, and contributes to burnout.

Stress influences the learning outcomes of students through student engagement and teaching quality (Wong et al., 2017). Focusing on a qualitative phenomenological study filled a gap in the literature by helping to identify effective coping strategies for special education teachers, as identified by special education teachers, and to provide administrators with appropriate tools to assist teachers in distress. The qualitative study may extend the existing research by investigating the role of the Lazarus cognitive model of stress and transformational leadership theory. Specific findings from the study can help to demonstrate how stress impacts special education teachers and the teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. Continual stress may lead special education teachers to mental exhaustion and burnout, and physical symptoms may manifest in the individual (Reiser et al., 2016).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers and to identify support to reduce stress levels as identified by special education teachers. A second purpose of the study was to examine the commonalities in the experiences of special education teachers and to share common meanings and findings regarding stress-coping mechanisms. Teachers enter the teaching profession with unrealistic expectations and are inadequately prepared for the demands of the job (Zimmerman, 2018). Special education teachers have additional demands beyond general education counterparts. Developing and implementing IEPs, progress monitoring IEP goals, lesson

planning, excessive paperwork, student discipline, and professional development create mental exhaustion, which contributes to stress and diminishing overall motivation (Cancio et al., 2018). While all teachers experience some level of increased stress caused by the factors noted above, special education teachers working with students with significant behavioral and emotional problems experience a greater risk for stress and burnout (Wong et al., 2017). Special education teachers who have experienced less stress-related symptoms are more likely to engage in effective classroom practices and have increased job satisfaction/productivity, improved instructional capacity, and a positive impact on student achievement (Cancio et al., 2018).

Greenberg, Brown, and Abenavoli (2016) stated four main reasons causing stress for teachers are school organization, job demands, social and emotional competence, and work resources. Administrators and policymakers can determine ways to streamline special education paperwork, provide administrative/organizational support, and promote social and emotional competence by providing forums outside of school for collegial bonding. This study focused on a suburban city in California with an approximate population of 36,000 residents. The school district population was composed of approximately 7,500 students with 15% of students designated as special education. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by identifying specific stressors for special education teachers and identifying coping strategies to help minimize stress to retain highly qualified special education teachers.

The goal of the study was to strengthen the foundation for further research to address teacher stress and coping mechanisms. Through the data from the study, one can gain an understanding of what caused stress and how teachers handled stress from the teachers' perspective. Policymakers and administrators can use these strategies to help reduce teachers stress levels.

### **Significance of the Study**

The dissertation focuses on the point of view of stress related to special education teachers, specifically how special education teachers cope with stress. The dissertation contributes to the current literature by providing up-to-date perceptions of the causes of stress by special education teachers. Educational leaders and policymakers can support special education teachers through a variety of stressful situations by specifically addressing the unique needs of special education teachers. When site administrators set reasonable expectations for duties, special education teachers are equipped to better serve students. Positive social changes from the study may improve human and social conditions for the betterment of the educational environment for students and staff alike. Changes may occur at the site, district, local, national, and perhaps global levels. Results from the study may lead to an increased awareness and understanding of the unique causes of stress of special education teachers.

Policymakers—district and site leadership—may use the findings from the study to support special education teachers in appropriate ways to help reduce stress levels and increase positive social change. In the 2013-2014 school year, 49 states reported a shortage of hiring special education teachers (Sayman, Chiu, & Lusk, 2018). Resulting from the teacher shortage, districts hired individuals who were not fully credentialed and were given provisional contracts with the agreement the individual would complete the coursework to obtain a full teaching credential (Sayman et al., 2018). Consequently, these teachers may not be prepared to enter the teaching field and work with the student with special needs and may experience additional stress. The study may help policymakers and school administrators to identify potential stressors so support can be in place before teachers experience stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout.

## Research Questions

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the perceived causes of stress special education teachers experienced and identify supports to reduce stress levels as expressed by special education teachers. Stress and frustration cause special education teachers to potentially leave the profession or have increased levels of stress. If the administration identifies perceived stressors for special education teachers and institutes coping mechanisms to reduce and eliminate those stressors, teaching and student learning may be enhanced. Four research questions provided support for the purpose of the study:

**Research Question 1.** How do suburban special education teachers define stress?

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceived causes of stress impacting suburban special education teachers as determined by the special education teachers?

**Research Question 3.** How do suburban special education teachers' stress manifest in daily life?

**Research Question 4.** How do special education teachers in suburban schools cope with stress?

## Theoretical Framework

The challenge of stress and coping can be explored through the Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory and further fostered with the transformational leadership theory. The Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory identifies two processes: cognitive appraisal and coping, as defined by Richard Lazarus, which focus on how individuals manage stress (Folkman et al., 1986). Lazarus focused on a process-oriented approach and viewed the environment and psychological factors during stressful situations (Folkman et al., 1986). Lazarus believed cognitive appraisal occurred when a person considered two major factors majorly contributing to

the person's response to stress (Folkman et al., 1986): first, threatening tendency, and second, assessment of resources to minimize, tolerate, or reduce stress (O'Toole, 2017).

The transformational leadership theory is grounded in the leadership style and the relationship established between the leader and the team (Bărbîntă et al., 2017). Leadership is a skill one possesses, but transformational leaders understand the need to be charismatic, set goals (long and short term), understand how to motivate and inspire the team, and encourage creativity in solving problems (Bărbîntă et al., 2017). Understanding a transformational leadership style provides a foundation for building relationships to assist a leader in providing coping strategies to teachers (White et al., 2017). The research stated techniques which may be used by transformational leaders to support special education teachers.

Stress results from how a person is affected by the environment in which a person lives and whether or not the resources to address the perceived stressors are available to that person (Mitchell, 2015). Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory and transformational leadership theory provide a foundation for identifying coping mechanisms during stressful situations and evidence-based leadership practices to assist employees during these times. Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory provides a framework for identifying stressors and a determination regarding whether or not an individual has the skills to cope with a specific event. A direct correlation between available resources and coping mechanisms ties the theory with practice. Transformational leadership theory values employee input and takes into consideration creative ways to address work environment stress (Folkman et al., 1986). The stated theories align with and address the purpose statement and help to answer the research questions by detailing specific stressors of special education teachers and providing coping mechanism to assist staff during stressful events.

## Definitions of Terms

For this study, the following terms were defined as the terms critical for the comprehension of the paper. The definitions establish a common understanding as one is reading the dissertation. The terms are listed in alphabetical order and not in order of importance.

***Burnout:*** A chronic, psychological syndrome which develops over prolonged exposure to work-related stress (Gluschkoff et al., 2016).

***Coping Mechanisms:*** “Can reduce the effects of stressors by changing one’s emotional state during a stressful situation, or by eliminating or reducing the source of stress” (Cancio et al., 2018, p. 460).

***Emotional Exhaustion:*** A lack of mental resources to deal with emotions; stressors of the external environment exceeding one’s capacity to cope (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017).

***Lazarus’ Cognitive Model of Stress Theory:*** Stress is a relationship between an individual and the environment, appraised by the person as exceeding his or her resources (Folkman et al., 1986).

***Mentoring:*** “As a synoptic and long-term relationship with the individual who supports the professional, academic and personal development of the individual” (Aktas, 2018, p. 2101).

***Mindfulness:*** Rooted in Buddhist philosophy, which centers the individual by paying attention to the present moment with awareness and intention without judgmental attitudes towards oneself (Reiser et al., 2016).

***No Child Left Behind Act:*** The act marked the first time in education to mandate the use of scientific research to inform instructional decisions (Sciuchetti, McKenna, & Flower, 2016).

*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* created a new accountability system for schools to set the

standard for all students to receive a quality education and meet minimum levels of proficiency as determined by standardized assessments (Gonzalez et al., 2017).

***School climate:*** Students', staff's, and parents' experiences in school socially, emotionally, and academically (Dağgöl, 2019).

***Stress:*** Any challenge to homeostasis, or the body's internal sense of balance (Waghachavare et al., 2013). Eustress is good stress, but distress is a negative stress output.

***Transformational Leadership Theory:*** Can inspire followers to change expectations and perceptions and work toward common goals (Liu, 2018). Transformational leaders articulate the vision, work collaboratively with employees, and build relationships to foster a supportive environment.

### **Assumptions**

According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018), "Delimitations require challenging the assumptions of the researchers and openly exposing shortcomings which might have been better tackled" (p. 155). Assumptions are made regarding underlying theories, relationships, the setting of the study, population, data collection, and other pertinent areas for analysis (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). For the operational purposes of this study, the following assumptions were made. The teaching profession is a stress-stimulated profession, which is not managed well by teachers or leadership. The virtual interview sessions were expected to obtain honest and truthful answers from the participants. The virtual focus group session depicted an accurate perspective of a special education teacher in a suburban educational setting. Participant confidentiality throughout the evaluation process was protected at all times. All individuals participating in the study met all of the eligibility criteria before conducting research. There was an assumption participants shared authentic experiences regarding stress, burnout, and the

teaching profession. The results from the study have the potential to provide valuable information to policymakers and administrators to lessen the stress of special education teachers.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Delimitations of a study are the limitations consciously set by the author of the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Having a researcher set the boundaries or limits of the work to achieve objectives is considered a delimitation (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The population selected for this study represented one school district in Southern California. Convenience and purposive sampling were used to select 15 participants for the study, and each represented different socioeconomic, racial, and teaching experiences. Although the sample size was small, the size was manageable to conduct the necessary research in the given timeframe. Teachers were asked to participate in the study on a voluntary basis, and each participant had the option to be part of an individual virtual interview, focus group, or both. Results from the study may not be generalizable to a larger population as the results were exclusive to one school district's special education teachers. The teachers selected were from a former school district where there was access to the special education employees. Some of the knowledge learned by future readers may be applicable to other districts, but the dynamics of the study are focused on one school district in southern California.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of a research study should identify and discuss the background for the analysis of meaning and the implications of the study. Limitations in a study address the potential weaknesses and are factors usually out of the control of various individuals and associated with the research design chosen (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Researchers have an opportunity to peer review and bring awareness of the potential study's problems (Allen,

2017). Addressing the limitations may influence interested readers and influence the interpretation or results of the study (Allen, 2017). For this study, several limitations are indicated as follows:

1. Participant responses in virtual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were subject to the interpretation of the data by others.
2. During the semi-structured interview process, the interviewees answered the questions with a concern for responding the way the interviewee thought others wanted to hear. Social desirability bias may occur when participants answer questions in a way the participant expects may lead to acceptance or being liked (Larson, 2019).
3. Interpretation and observation of participant behavior could be different than what the participant intended.
4. The study was conducted for a short duration of time, and if the study were longer in duration, the results might produce more consistent findings.
5. The subjects for the study were limited to special education teachers in a small suburban city in Southern California.
6. The study may not be able to be generalized to a larger population as the study was representative of a small suburban population.
7. Quantitative design methods attempt to control bias using objective methods, but qualitative methods aim to understand the perspective of a participant (Park & Park, 2016). Acknowledging the potential for confirmation of bias and continually reevaluating impressions and assumptions were critical throughout the research process.

## Chapter Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to identify the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers in a suburban educational setting. Fostering a common understanding between special education teachers, policymakers, and administrators can help to bring substantial change in education by providing leaders with mechanisms to identify and support teachers who are actively experiencing stress. There is often a lack of understanding between the expectations of special education teachers and the role stress plays.

Teaching is a demanding and challenging profession requiring special education teachers to adequately manage multiple responsibilities including classroom management, lesson planning, student behavior, IEPs, parent contacts, and a plethora of other duties outlined by site administrators (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Chronic work stress and emotional exhaustion are responses to burnout, and special education teachers experience moderate to high levels of stress caused by excessive workloads and lack of occupational stress (Sun et al., 2019). Special education teachers experience high levels of unique stress and an even higher attrition rate as compared to general education teachers. This study investigated the perceived causes of stress by special education teachers and may provide policymakers and administrators with coping mechanisms to help minimize such stressors. The Literature Review includes a detailed discussion of the literature research strategy, outlines the theoretical framework, reviews the literature related to this study, and provides a comprehensive summary of the current literature.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Individuals enter the teaching profession for a variety of reasons. According to Landrum et al. (2017), people enter the profession to help children, for personal growth, and to make a difference in society. Other special education teachers enter the profession because of having a special needs child. Self-efficacy, positive teaching experience, perceived ability to teach well, and future goals provide motivation to stay in the profession (Landrum et al., 2017). Some people do not realize teaching is a demanding and stressful profession.

Professionals enter the arena of education wanting to change the world and make an impact on the lives of children. As specified by Landrum et al. (2017), teachers enter the profession to experience personal growth, for attitudes of selflessness and altruism, for job satisfaction, and to make a difference in society. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the perceived causes of stress of suburban special education teachers. Teachers, especially special education teachers, leave the profession because of a variety of reasons including accepting better jobs, earning higher salaries, and seeking job dissatisfaction (Cancio et al., 2018). The administration would benefit by addressing the perceived causes of stress for individuals to retain highly qualified teachers.

There are tremendous expenses related to hiring, recruiting, and preparing teachers for the profession, and 40% of teachers are at risk of leaving (Wong et al., 2017). As teachers enter the profession, school districts often invest in teachers by offering various professional development trainings, district-mandated trainings, and other sources to improve professional practices. Stress, increasing/demanding workloads, insufficient administrative support, and burnout are all factors contributing to teachers' stress levels, but adequate support mechanisms are not provided to reduce the effects (Gonzalez et al., 2017). When teachers leave the

profession, the responsibility of the school district is to set aside monies to adequately train new staff for the school district. A contribution of the study would allow leadership to be able to discover specific stressors of special education teachers and address the concerns early on to improve teacher retention and reduce stress levels. Qualitative phenomenological methods were used for this study while considering coping and transformational leadership theories. Stress, causation, and coping mechanisms are the focus of the literature review. Gaps in the literature are addressed throughout the review. Chapter 2 organizes the literature review into multiple sections with an emphasis on literature search strategies, applicable theories, research literature review, and a conclusion.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Writing a literature review is helpful to the reader and assists with comprehension of current literature focused on a central topic. Examining the implications and findings of the literature review in addition to discussing advantages and disadvantages of various research methods is vital to the research process (Wee & Banister, 2016). The American College of Education (ACE) library was extensively used to search and identify articles to support the literature review. A plan was created to locate relevant peer-reviewed articles, which helped support the research claims. EBSCOhost, ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE, and Google Scholar were used to locate peer-reviewed articles.

The literature review focused on three main areas: stress, special education teachers, and coping mechanisms. Key search terms included, but were not limited to, *stress, special education teachers, the teaching profession, burnout, coping strategies, No Child Left Behind, standardized testing and stress, special education teacher supports, school climate, Hans Selye, mindfulness, meditation, physical activity and stress, primary and secondary appraisal, teacher*

*retention, stress theories, transformational leadership theory, Lazarus's coping theory, and coping theory.* These key terms led to relevant peer-reviewed articles to assist in writing the literature review section.

## **Theoretical Framework**

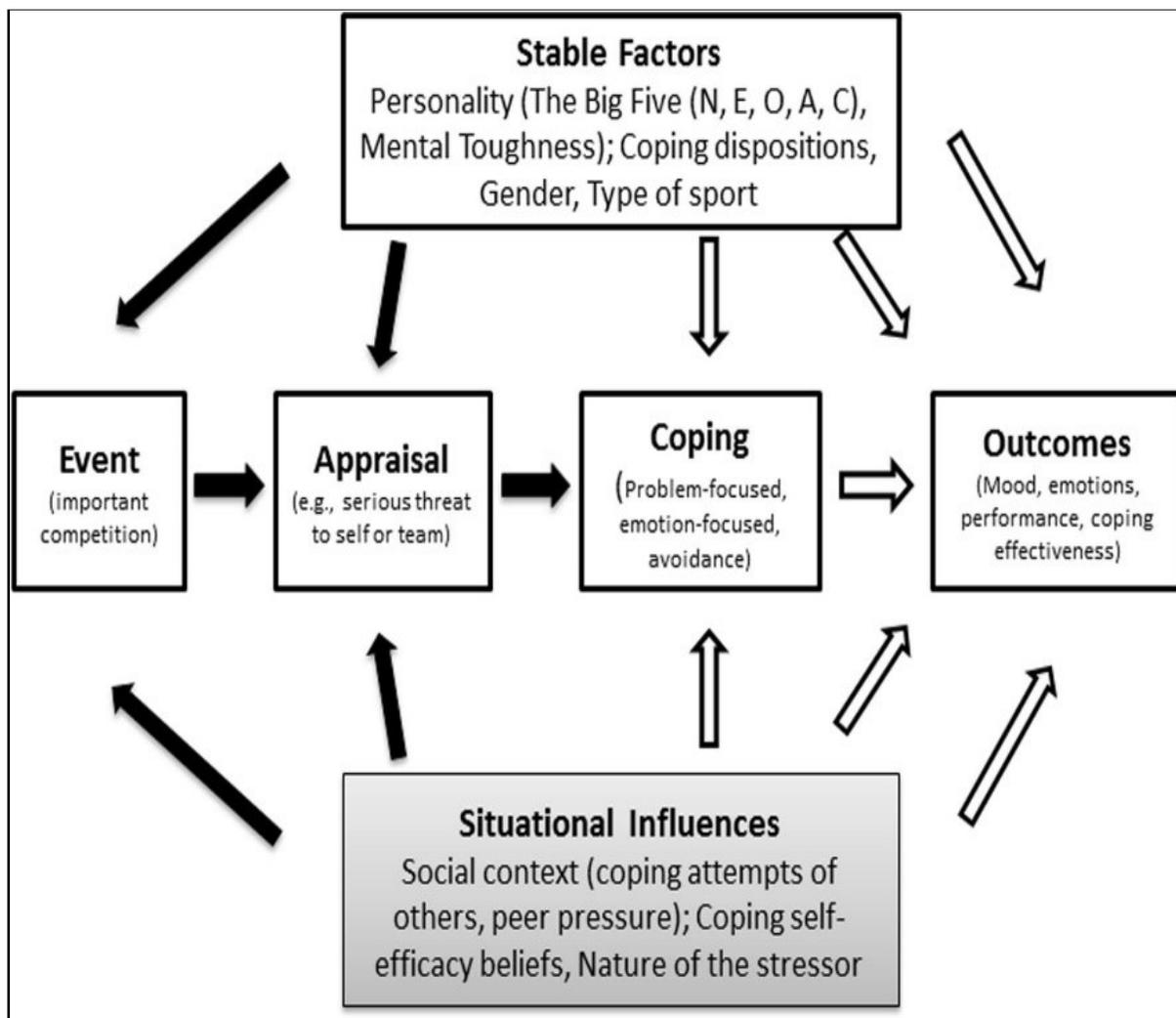
### **Lazarus's Cognitive Model of Stress Theory**

The Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory identified two processes: cognitive appraisal and coping, which focused on how individuals managed stress (Folkman et al., 1986). Lazarus focused on a process-oriented approach and viewed the environment and psychological factors during stress situations. As specified by Lazarus, cognitive appraisal occurs when a person considers two major factors contributing to the response to stress. Threatening tendencies occur first, when an individual assesses a situation to determine whether there is an immediate well-being or safety concern present, and second, when an individual assesses resources to minimize, tolerate, or reduce stress to cope with the event (O'Toole, 2017). The appraisal focuses on the emotions sparked by a given situation, which, in turn, determines how one reacts to a given event. Stress results from the imbalance between the demands placed on an individual and the available coping resources. When demands exceed one's ability to cope, stress arises. Figure 1 depicts how stable and situational factors directly and indirectly impact stress and the coping process.

Special education teachers are able to use the theoretical framework of Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory to appraise a stressful event and determine whether the stressful event or situation poses a physical or life-threatening danger (Lee & Kim, 2018). Primary and secondary appraisals converge to assist the individual to determine whether the situation is irrelevant, harmful, or challenging (Arnold & Walsh, 2015). Once the situation is assessed, then special

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework of How Stable Factors and Situational Factors Can Directly and Indirectly Influence the Stress and Coping Process*



*Note.* An event occurs, where one may appraise the situation and determine whether or not one possesses the appropriate coping mechanisms to handle the situation. Copied from “The Influence of the Social Environment Context in Stress and Coping in Sport,” by C. Kerdijk, J. van der Kamp, and R. Polman, 2016, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, Article 875, Introduction, Figure 1 (<http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/24365/1/The%20Influence%20of%20the%20Social%20Environment%20Context%20in%20Stress%20and%20Coping%20in%20Sport.pdf>).

education teachers can determine the appropriate coping mechanisms to apply. Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory perceives the demands of the stress and whether or not the individual has the resources to adapt in a given situation. This study examines the perceived causes of the stressors of special education teachers and how the Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory method could assist the teachers in the coping process of the perceived stressors. Once administrators and district officials understand the unique causes of stress for special education teachers, then appropriate mechanisms could be provided to assist with reducing the perceived stressors.

Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory aligns with the stated research questions of the study by providing a framework to address stressors. Stress is related to the individual and the circumstances of the situation. Lazarus developed core relational themes for basic emotions; eight are negative, and seven are related to positive emotions (O'Toole, 2017). Such emotions include anger, fright, guilt, anxiety, shame, sadness, envy, jealousy, happiness, love, pride, relief, hope, gratitude, and compassion. Using the Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory coping strategies, special education teachers have the potential to reduce the number of negative emotional expressions. The negative emotions tend to be perceived by individuals as threatening or harmful responses, but the positive emotions add benefits (O'Toole, 2017). Special education teachers who associate positive emotions in the workplace demonstrate less stress (O'Toole, 2017). Special education teachers who associate negative emotions to situations such as individual educational plans (IEPs), lesson planning, student behavior, and other areas experience a higher level of perceived stress (O'Toole, 2017). According to the Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory, the way educators view how demanding professional responsibilities are, especially if there are not proper resources for the individual teacher, results

in symptoms of stress being a likely outcome. Individuals appraise situations regarding threats to well-being in two ways: if there are adequate resources, the situation is seen as an opportunity for growth, and if not, the situation is perceived as stressful (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019).

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

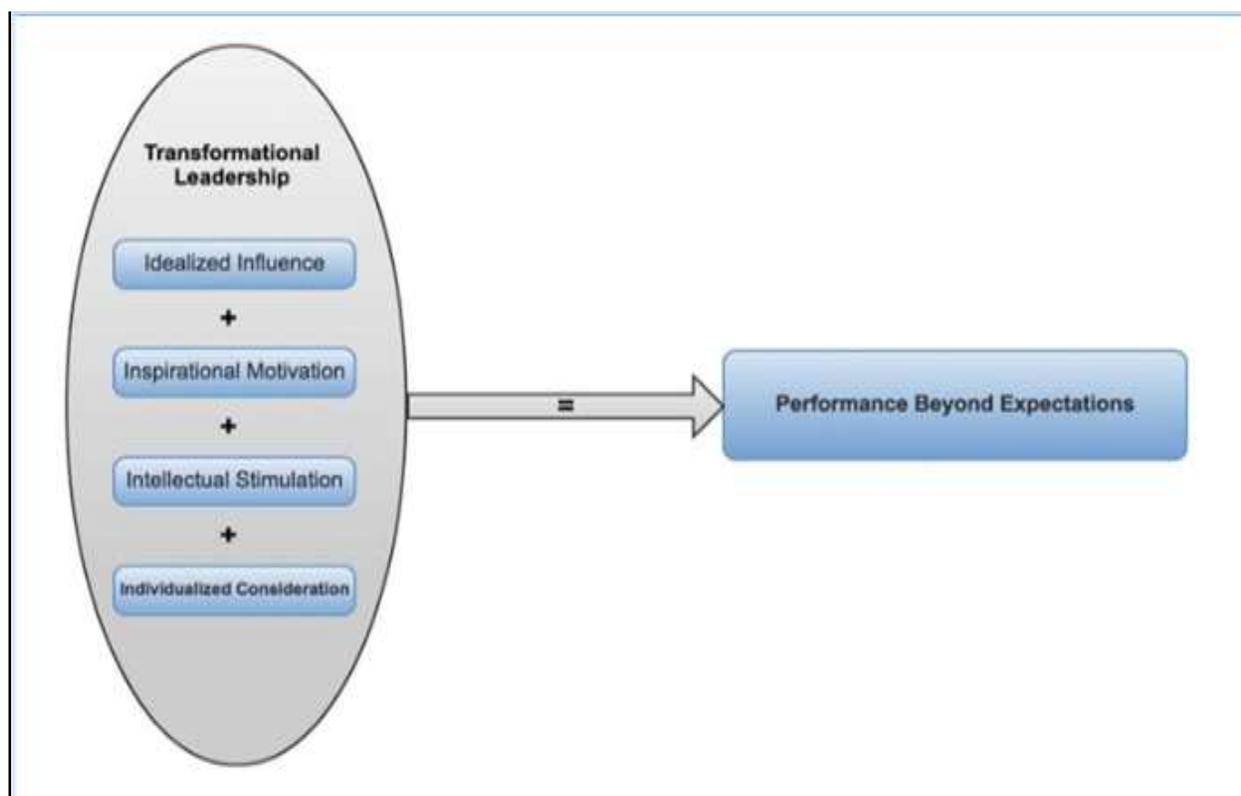
In addition to the Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory, another theory pertaining to addressing the stressors of special education teachers is transformational leadership theory. Bernard Bass and James MacGregor Burns are considered to be the founding fathers of transformational leadership (White et al., 2017). Burns (as cited in White et al., 2017) categorized leadership with two categories: transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is an exchange of rewards, which is contingent upon performance or outcomes (Khan, 2017). Transactional leadership is best described as what occurs between a teacher and a student. For example, if a student performs well on an assignment or a project, the student may be rewarded with a good grade. In contrast, transformational leadership develops the follower and influences and changes the values and beliefs. Transformational leadership demonstrates influence by broadening and elevating goals, thereby fostering the employee to perform beyond expectation (Liu, 2018). Transformational leadership was chosen for this study because the characteristics of transformational leadership theory fostered an environment where special education teachers felt supported, consequently reducing stress.

Transformational leadership theory can create a deeper relationship between the leader of an organization and the team (Bărbînță et al., 2017). Transformational leadership theory, facilitated by the leader, encourages the team members' vision and goals to align with those of the leader. Transformational leadership promotes increased motivation, morale, and performance

in the team by the leader using a variety of mechanisms. Unlike a transactional leader whose relationship is based on punishments and rewards, transformational leaders' personality traits and ability to make change occur through the leader's vision and by challenging team members' goals (Liu, 2018). Figure 2 illustrates the transformational leadership traits helping to move an employee beyond performance expectations.

## Figure 2

*Additive Effect of the Transformational Leadership Model*



*Note.* The figure demonstrates transformational leadership traits which allow employees to perform beyond expectations. From "The Myth of the Additive Effect of the Transformational Leadership Model," by M. A. Alatawi, 2017, p. 22, *Contemporary Management Research*, 13(1), 19-30 (<https://doi.org/10.7903/cmr.16269>).

Transformational leadership theory is grounded in a leadership style, which fosters a positive relationship between the leader and the team (Bărbîntă et al., 2017). Transformational leadership goes beyond charisma by setting long- and short-term goals, understanding how to motivate and inspire the team, and encouraging creativity in solving problems (Bărbîntă et al., 2017). Transformational leaders work collaboratively with special education teachers to build relationships and determine ways to foster growth within the individuals, which minimizes the perceived stress.

Transformational leadership theory is a relational process occurring between the leader and the follower in which the leader works with the follower by modeling, motivating, empowering, and taking into account individual considerations (White et al., 2017). When a transformational leader utilizes these tools, the followers are encouraged to take ownership of the leader's mission and vision. According to White et al. (2017), key transformational leaders include Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Former President Barack Obama.

Burns's theoretical focus was primarily on political leaders; Burns viewed teachers as transforming leaders because teachers facilitated critical thinking and developing individuals (White et al., 2017). Characteristics of a transformational leader include (a) establishes and articulates clear goals, (b) motivates/encourages others, (c) provides recognition and various supports, (d) displays honesty and integrity, and (e) assists others to look beyond self.

Transformational leadership influences education by increasing the motivation of students, thereby increasing student achievement. Special education teachers more frequently leave the profession as some have a sense of less accomplishment when not meeting the academic needs of students (Cancio et al., 2018). Transformational leadership theory, if applied to leaders and educators, could help to increase teacher retention, and reduce stress in the process. According

to Bass (2005), teachers who use transformational leadership theory raise students' levels of awareness, transcend students' self-interest, transform awareness toward the greater good, and alter levels of self-actualization from needs to wants on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Transformational leadership theory works collaboratively with the Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory. In the secondary appraisal process, transformational leaders foster emotion-focused and problem-focused coping mechanisms to create strategies to reduce stress levels (Arnold & Walsh, 2015).

### **Theory Alignment**

Stress results from how a person is affected by the environment in which that person lives and whether or not the resources to address the perceived stressors are available to that person (Mitchell, 2015). Lazarus's cognitive model of stress theory and transformational leadership theory align with the study because there is a foundation for identifying coping mechanisms and stressors during demanding situations and evidence-based leadership practices to assist employees during these times. A direct correlation between an employee's available resources and coping mechanisms bind the theory with practice. Transformational leadership theory values employee input and takes into consideration creative ways to address work-environment stress (Folkman et al., 1986). Both Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory and transformational leadership theory align with the dissertation and address the purpose of the study, which helps answer the stated research questions:

**Research Question 1.** How do suburban special education teachers define stress?

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceived causes of stress impacting suburban special education teachers as determined by the special education teachers?

**Research Question 3.** How do suburban special education teachers' stress manifest in daily life?

**Research Question 4.** How do special education teachers in suburban schools cope with stress?

### **Stress and Causation**

Elizabeth's alarm goes off and Elizabeth is immediately overwhelmed in both personal and professional life. Elizabeth does not have enough time to complete mandated paperwork, needs sleep, and has 23 minds awaiting instruction from the teacher (Buchanan, 2017). The prior scenario represents the daily lives of instructional leaders in classrooms. The situation results in stress and is often inadequately managed resulting in a feeling of frustration, tension, and anxiety. In teaching, stress manifests through an impact on physical health, job satisfaction, and sense of efficacy resulting in burnout and lower student engagement (Haydon et al., 2018). According to Gustems-Carnicer et al. (2019), increased stress levels have impacted 46% of teachers in the United States.

Teachers need to maintain a high level of mental well-being to meet professional and social expectations. Optimal mental health is best described as contentment, happiness, hopes, and optimism, and an individual has the capacity to function and withstand standard pressures of life in order to be productive and effective in society (Schneider-Levi et al., 2017). As attested by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, teachers reported daily stress to physicians and lawyers 46% of the day (Farmer, 2017). The rise in stress levels could be explained by various factors including educational bureaucracy, lack of resources, and increased tasks for teachers thereby negatively impacting the quality of education in schools (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). When teachers are stressed, not only is the health of the individual compromised but teaching

performance could be affected (Farmer, 2017). Recent studies revealed no significant work-related stresses among teachers based on marital status, gender, or academic qualifications (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Stress was primarily related to teacher workload, time constraints, large class size, and growing behavioral issues (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Teachers are the focal point of interactions with students, parents, and other faculty members, especially when the teacher is teaching students with learning difficulties (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018).

Other definitions of stress include an individual's reaction to excessive pressures or demands. These demands cause the largest issue in workplaces globally and impact employees' health and organizational performance (Pignata et al., 2017). Stress increases when the teacher's instructional time is interrupted (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Announcements, passes, individuals entering and exiting a classroom, and other interruptions upset the learning environment and add stress to the teacher.

A nationwide study of instructional leaders to determine the causes of stress among teachers found the top stressors were teaching at-risk students without proper support (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Current research suggests high-stakes testing is one of the top contributing factors to teachers' stress levels (Gonzalez et al., 2017). The results of the nationwide study concluded there is a significant relationship between teacher self-efficacy and stress related to the job (Gonzalez et al., 2017). The accountability system and standardized testing imposed by the federal standards created by No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) contributed to an increased experience of stress. Opponents of NCLB argued high-stakes testing reduced the ability of teachers to educate and instead only allowed time for teachers to assist students in passing a test rather than in thinking critically (Gonzalez et al., 2017).

The passage and implementation of NCLB (2002) marked the first time in education the use of scientific research to inform instructional decisions was mandated (Sciuchetti et al., 2016). NCLB (2002) created a new accountability system for schools, which set the standard for all students to receive a quality education and meet minimum levels of proficiency as determined by standardized assessments (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Politicians and educators could argue creativity had been removed from the curriculum, and the teacher accountability system was at the forefront of education. Recent research has indicated approximately 30% of teachers experienced anxiety related to the test-based accountability system (Reiser et al., 2016). Teachers are self-reporting feelings of stress and negative workforce outcomes. There is no clarity on how the accountability system is affecting teachers at lower primary grades as lower primary teachers do not give the standardized assessments.

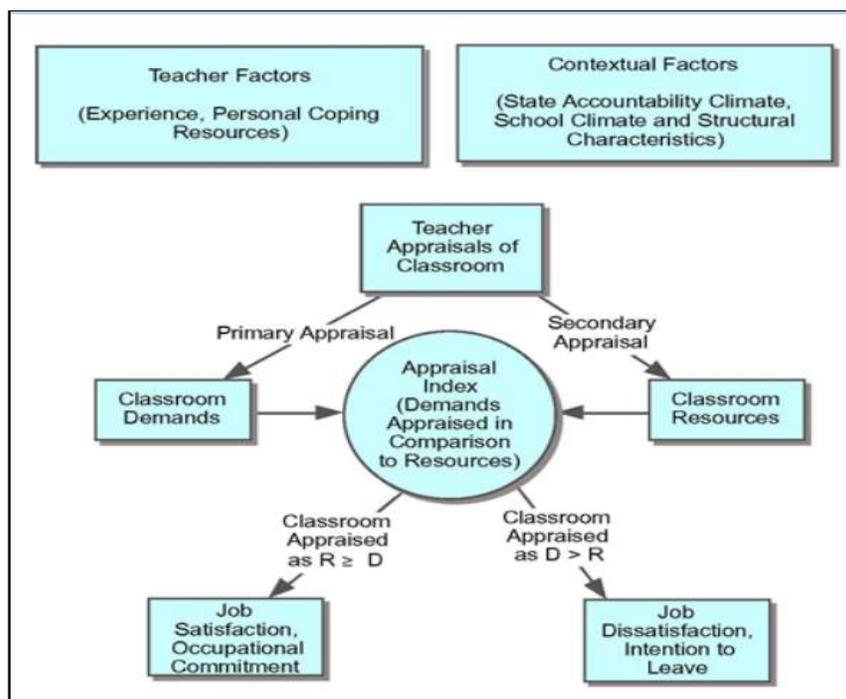
Hans Selye was the first scientist to define the relationship between stress and disease (Tan & Yip, 2018). Selye divided stress response into three phases: initial alarm reaction, stage of resistance, and stage of exhaustion (Tan & Yip, 2018). The syndrome differs from acute stress where there is not the flight-or-flight response, which occurs when facing a perceived threat. Chronic stress, which some teachers experience with prolonged periods of high demands, may lead to exhaustion and negative biological indicators within the body. High blood pressure, lack of sleep, and anxiety are all factors resulting from stress. Teachers who received adequate support were more likely to have a reduced stress level (Cancio et al., 2018).

Many special education teachers choose to enter the profession to make a difference in the lives of children with special needs. Special needs teachers face challenges such as severe student discipline issues, large student caseloads, bureaucratic demands, and insufficient time to deal with lesson plans/grades and to monitor student progress (Cancio et al., 2018). Special

education teachers must heed specific policies at the federal, state, district, and school levels in addition to implementing California State Standards and Response to Intervention to raise student achievement, but such policies place extra pressure on teachers (Haydon et al., 2018). These factors lead to stress and burnout in instructional leaders and contribute to a desire to leave the profession. Figure 3 depicts a representation of how a teacher or administrator assesses a teacher appraisal and stress in the classroom and whether or not there is a tendency to lead to job satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

**Figure 3**

*Assessing Teacher Appraisals and Stress in the Classroom: Review of the Classroom Resources and Demands*



*Note.* Various appraisal mechanism one possesses, will determine the demand on the teacher in the classroom and the overall job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. From “Assessing Teacher Appraisals and Stress in the Classroom: Review of the Classroom Resources and Demands,” by C. J. McCarthy, R. G. Lambert, S. Lineback, P. Fitchett, and P. G. Baddouh, 2016, *Educational Psychology Review*, 28(3), p. 581 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9322-6>).

Cancio et al. (2018) found most research focused on identifying stressors for teachers, but less emphasis was placed upon identifying coping mechanisms to help manage stress. Researchers should investigate strategies to help special education teachers cope with stress-related issues (Cancio et al., 2018). Further studies demonstrated a need to investigate how stress affected student achievement, including outcomes of monitoring IEP goals (Wong et al., 2017).

### **Burnout**

The teaching profession has a high-stress level, and special education teachers who teach children with disabilities experience an even higher level of stress (Capri & Guler, 2018). Special education teachers are at greater risk to experience burnout than general education teachers. Special education teachers have difficulty controlling student behavior and attempting to teach students with various disabilities, which are risk factors for burnout (Capri & Guler, 2018).

Burnout is a chronic psychological syndrome developed over a prolonged exposure to work-related stress (Gluschkoff et al., 2016). Risk factors increase for teachers' mental and physical well-being if stressors are not addressed. One contributor to burnout is an individual's ability to cope in a healthy and effective manner during a stressful situation (Landrum et al., 2017). Gluschkoff et al. (2016) attributed work-stress to an effort-reward imbalance (ERI), which was directly linked to exhaustion and burnout. ERI is caused by nonreciprocity between effort and low reward received. Effort refers to the demands of work such as responsibilities and time pressures where rewards are defined by salary, career opportunity, and job security (Gluschkoff et al., 2016).

The syndrome of burnout includes emotional exhaustion, increased depersonalization, and a loss of personal fulfillment (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). The syndrome is especially true for instructional leaders because of the excessive interactions dealing with other humans (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017). The burnout rate for teachers poses a problem in the educational system because of its impact on the student, the employer, and the employee. Stress may lead to burnout when a teacher is overwhelmed at work and perceives not making a difference in the lives of students. Teachers who express high self-efficacy and report competence in classroom management and other areas have a lower risk of burnout in the profession (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019). Self-efficacy is an individual's judgment of how well that individual can execute an action in various situations. Efficacy is the confidence level of the individual to address a variety of situations with appropriate coping mechanisms.

Personality characteristics contribute to the risk of burnout. Anxiety, nervousness, passivity, introversion, and obsessive thoughts on mistakes can result in feelings of frustration and may lead to burnout (Zaretsky & Katz, 2019). These feelings impact the amount of stress felt by special education teachers. Educators in the profession experienced a higher risk for burnout or emotional exhaustion when burdened with preexisting emotional factors. Studies have found ineffective coping strategies for stress: passive coping, or surface acting where the teacher hides emotions or places an emotional mask to cover true feelings (Landrum et al., 2017). When employees pursue passive coping or surface acting, burnout of teachers may result.

One component of burnout is emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is a lack of mental resources to deal with emotions, which occur and affect the burnout rate of teachers (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017). The exhaustive behavior prevents an educator from fulfilling the requirements of the position and may deplete the resources of an individual. The most prominent

personality characteristic associated with emotional exhaustion is neuroticism (Landrum et al., 2017). Instructional leaders experiencing emotional exhaustion have personality characteristics associated with lower student academic success and being more mentally distant from others (Landrum et al., 2017). Teaching is an emotional labor, which inspires an emotional change in the student's attitude toward learning, studying, and education (Zaretsky & Katz, 2019). Dealing with a degree of problems such as talking during lessons, rude comments, and not paying attention contributes to the emotional exhaustion of teachers in addition to disrupting the process of teaching (Zaretsky & Katz, 2019). Being around emotionally exhausted colleagues adds to the stress levels of other teachers and creates an environment for burnout (Zimmerman, 2018). For teachers, experiencing emotional exhaustion can lead to burnout.

A study of Swedish schoolteachers measured three burnout dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and low professional efficacy (Arvidsson et al., 2016). The results of the study found 15% of teachers experiencing a high burnout rate in two of the three dimensions and 4% in all three dimensions (Arvidsson et al., 2016). Emotional and job demands, leadership, and lack of sleep and time all contributed to burnout. The study only strengthens the notion of teachers needing coping skills and strategies to manage stress (Arvidsson et al., 2016).

Langher et al. (2017) suggested creating a supportive environment and providing relevant professional development to lower feelings of depersonalization and reduce the burnout rate for special education teachers. When employees expressed continual negativity, there was often a contagion from individual to individual. As burnout occurred, many teachers left the profession, resulting in a teacher shortage. A teacher's perception of stress can lead to burnout, but teachers who work with others find support through peers. A teacher should ideally maintain high levels of mental well-being to meet professional and personal obligations.

Six common factors have identified the needs to be addressed to avoid burnout (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017). Burnout often includes frustration, nervousness, depression, mental weariness, and emotional exhaustion. Following are the six factors:

1. Self-acceptance
2. Positive and reciprocal relationships
3. Autonomy in thought and actions
4. Environmental mastery and competence
5. Purpose in life
6. Personal growth and development. (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017, p. 81)

Addressing these factors promotes psychological well-being and has a positive impact on the optimal functioning of the instructional leader (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017).

Poor recovery from stress is associated with burnout. Recovery includes experiences ameliorating negative effects of strain, hence restoring personal resources (Gluschkoff et al., 2016). Sleep is a fundamental component of the recovery process. Detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control are four types of leisure time recovery experiences, which help an individual recuperate from work-related stress. Detachment refers to the mental disengagement from work; relaxation includes activities to relax the mind and body; acquiring new skills and seeking challenging opportunities promote mastery; and controlling leisure activities support the recovery process and reduce the effects of work-related stress (Gluschkoff et al., 2016).

Special education teachers are likely to experience more challenges than general education teachers, and these challenges may include difficult student behavior, distractible students, aggressive/hostile conduct, and pressure from intense parents (Langher et al., 2017). Parents may have unrealistic expectations regarding the achievement of children and express

frustrations toward the instructional leader. Two out of three special education teachers leave the profession for a variety of reasons, including burnout (Langher et al., 2017).

### **Coping Mechanisms**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report recommended social emotional learning, mentoring programs, and mindfulness as methods to improve the overall well-being of teachers (Farmer, 2017). These processes in turn not only improve the well-being of staff but improve the academic outcomes of students. The coping process is a well-recognized part of the stress-response process. Researchers have desired to identify ways in which individuals could improve coping efforts to reduce the effects of a stressful encounter (Wright et al., 2015). Coping mechanisms are the internal and external methods used to react to stress. Effective coping mechanisms have been associated with positive outcomes such as improved physical and mental health and lowering the burnout levels (Wright et al., 2015). In the workplace, effective coping mechanisms are crucial as the organization depends heavily on the ability of the employee to manage the demands of the job (Wright et al., 2015). Administration may not be able to alleviate all stressors in the work environment but teaching employees to have access to strategies is vital to the organization and the individual. According to Wright et al. (2015), many studies have investigated coping with work stress, but little is known about techniques that can enhance the effectiveness of coping in the workplace.

Managing stress symptoms may have positive health benefits and improve the overall mindset of the individual. There are proven methods to help reduce stress levels in the workplace, including receiving adequate sleep, mentorship programs, meditation, physical activities, and peer support. A fundamental part of lowering stress levels is acquiring a sufficient amount of sleep each night. Sleep helps in the recovery process and with physical and mental

well-being (Gluschkoff et al., 2016). A teacher who receives sufficient amounts of sleep experiences a rejuvenated mind and a body and is energized and ready for a new day of work.

School districts help to alleviate stress on teachers when they provide coping mechanisms including mentorship programs. A mentor is defined as a more experienced individual who guides, advises, and facilitates the career development of a less-experienced individual (Schnader et al., 2016). The value of mentorship programs in academia for the novice teacher relate to an experienced faculty member who has mastered effective teaching and passes the information on to the novice teacher (Schnader et al., 2016). The relationship established between the mentor and the mentee is mutually beneficial as the mentor provides the support, fulfillment, personal satisfaction, and a sense of rejuvenation (Schnader et al., 2016).

Novice teachers utilizing mentoring programs receive assistance to help cope with stress, work overload, and the lack of support from direct supervisors (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). Administrators who provide teachers with mentorship opportunities help to ease frustrations, assist with teachers' implementation of district expectations, and strengthen teaching skills (Young, 2018). Teachers receiving mentoring support experience an increase in retention rates, a decreased sense of isolation, an overall improvement in attitude toward teaching, and more insight into solving problems in the classroom (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). Mentoring programs aim to increase the effectiveness of the mentee in the classroom through a variety of positive interactions. Table 1 depicts various types of mentoring programs and types of support, which mentoring can provide an individual.

Implementation of mentorship programs as a strategy can provide support for teachers and reduce the effects of stress. Mentor programs can be a bridge for staff to gain knowledge from veteran teachers who can share expertise (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). When teachers

have time to debrief with a peer/colleague, self-esteem improves; debriefing provides strategies to current problems and allows for an outlet of emotions. Such strategies help to minimize stress and provide a passage for the teacher.

**Table 1**

*Mentoring Characteristics and Outcomes Associated With Leadership Development*

Sources of mentoring	Types/forms of mentoring support	Leadership outcomes for students and mentors
Teachers, coach's faculty members	Psychological and emotional support	Socially responsible leadership capacity
Parents	Support for setting goals and choosing a career path	Leadership identity development
Same age or older peers	Academic subject knowledge support aimed at advancing a student's knowledge relevant to their chosen field	Leadership dispositions and skills
Academic advisors	Role modeling	Generativity
School personnel and student affairs personnel		
Youth development practitioners		
Internship/service-learning supervisors		

*Note.* From "The Role of Mentoring in Leadership Development," by G. Crisp and K. Alvarado-Young, 2018, *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2018(158), p. 44 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20286>).

Mentoring programs have been proven to create a positive effect by supporting teachers. There are more cost-effective programs to support teachers in the field. Buddy programs are cost

effective for school districts and help teachers to be successful because they train special education teachers on school procedures, policies, resources, and answering common questions related to the school or district (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). Buddy mentors cannot be the instructional leaders because the role does not extend to pedagogical learning (Cornelius & Sandmel, 2018). Buddies assist to create better collegial relationships and help an individual feel connected to the school (Cornelius & Sandmel, 2018). The support system is yet another example of what can be implemented to assist special education teachers. While buddies and induction mentors provide support to teachers, minimal special education literature exists on mentoring programs for special education teachers (Cornelius & Sandmel, 2018).

Challenging student behaviors such as academic weakness, violent outbursts, and lack of attention are reasons for the stress levels of teachers to increase, consequently increasing the likelihood of burnout and compassion fatigue for teachers (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018). Mindfulness and prayer have been found to be mutually beneficial to students and teachers as an alternative form with which to address stress (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018). Meditation and mindfulness are rooted in Buddhist philosophy, which centers the individual by paying attention to the present moment with awareness and intention without judgmental attitudes toward self (Reiser et al., 2016). Sharp Donahoo et al. (2018) suggested prayer and mindfulness are effective at reducing stress and fatigue; fewer than 5% of Americans practice mindfulness. Several mindfulness strategies are utilized, including meditation, yoga, and breathing. These techniques may be used in challenging moments to reduce stress, slow the breathing, and lower the heart rate.

Mindfulness intervention studies demonstrate the positive effects of these practices in reducing stress and, if implemented, help to support special education teachers (Vidic & Cherup,

2019). High stress levels are on the rise and are taking a toll on the teaching profession (Reiser et al., 2016). When an individual becomes caught up in the past or in a future moment, mindfulness is an intentional act whereby the individual focuses on breathing, sights, and sounds to refocus on the present moment (Buchanan, 2017). Mindfulness has increased attentiveness and increased job retention; individuals have reported enhanced sleep and regulated emotions (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018). Specifically, teachers demonstrate a higher level of coping ability, stronger personal and professional relationships, and reduced anxiety and perceive the students in a more positive light (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018).

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, defined mindfulness as being aware of the present moment and dwelling in the present (Buchanan, 2017). During mindful activities, an individual is paying attention to the purpose in a specific way, rather than focusing on past regrets or other negative concerns. Practicing mindfulness techniques can be as simple as using and being aware of all five senses—paying attention to what one sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels (Buchanan, 2017). Individuals can practice mindfulness in any situation where various feelings are noticed without passing judgments. Although there might appear to be a conflict with being present when creating a future lesson plan or concerns about past student performance, a mindful teacher focuses on the task at hand (Buchanan, 2017).

There are three main guidelines to assist with the process of meditation. The first step is to find a location and body position, which allows one to relax without falling asleep. The second step is to pay attention to both the inhalation and exhalation during breathing. Finally, the participant should be patient and realize meditation is a skill taking practice (Buchanan,

2017). Experts recommend practicing for 20 to 30 minutes a day, although even 10 minutes a day have been shown to be effective (Buchanan, 2017).

Another alternative coping mechanism for special education teachers is prayer. Prayer has been found to help reduce stress. Sharp Donahoo et al. (2018) believed prayer can enhance mental health, emotional health, and spiritual health, and an individual can gain support and guidance from a higher power. Teachers who work with high-risk students and who have employed prayer have experienced increased resiliency and improvement in personal teaching effectiveness (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018). Teachers can experience an increase in job satisfaction as a result of prayer.

Physical activity is one coping method helping to reduce stress effects in the body. Gumus and Işık (2018) defined physical activity as whole-body movement, which expends energy on a basal level. Gumus and Isik labeled inactivity as the disease of the century because inactivity reduces the quality of life and causes a negative impact on human health. Exercise was a recommended activity for at least five days per week at 30-minute intervals per day. Individuals who do not engage in an active lifestyle have been known to experience physical and mental health problems (Gumus & Işık, 2018).

Physical activity may reduce the impact of stress on the body as there is a connection between physical activity and improved mental health (Chu et al., 2014). Endorphins in the body are elevated by physical activity when released to the bloodstream, resulting in an improved state of mind (Chu et al., 2014). There are well-documented health benefits to physical activity as a remedy for many stress related illnesses (Wood et al., 2018). The lack of physical activity in the workplace is a potential risk factor for sickness (Kinman, 2019); the benefits included

improvements in cardiovascular, metabolic, and musculoskeletal disorders (Sjøgaard et al., 2016).

A strong social support network system plays an intricate role in reducing stress and increasing work satisfaction. Social support helps to reduce the perceived level of threats and individual experiences (Mitchell, 2015). The lack of a social support network increases the likelihood of individuals feeling depressed, having a lack of energy, and being at risk of isolating from others (Mitchell, 2015). Peers have the innate ability to provide emotional support, share resources, and assist in both the personal and professional life of a teacher (Zimmerman, 2018). Social supports have the ability to increase shared resources for the teacher and improve the overall well-being of the employee (Zimmerman, 2018). Social support systems, especially among special education teachers, have been associated with a stronger sense of accomplishment, a decrease in the burnout rate, and improved stress levels (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018).

Inquiry-based intervention models have resulted in positive effects on the burnout rate of teachers and have helped to improve the overall mental well-being of teachers (Schneider-Levi et al., 2017). Teacher burnout occurs as a result of continuous emotional strain and dealing with various problems. Researchers have to determine appropriate coping mechanisms to help teachers minimize or cope with the stress of the job. Participants in Schneider-Levi's et al.'s (2017) qualitative study expressed increased stress resulting from interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and the educational environment in addition to the ideological load of the profession. Throughout the course of the study, once interventions were applied, teacher burnout was reduced as a result of meditation techniques (Schneider-Levi et al., 2017).

Teaching is stressful; the stress may affect teacher actions, decision-making, and job satisfaction (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Sources of stress include but are not limited to student discipline, increasing caseloads, paperwork, meetings, student achievement, and lack of administrative support. Cancio et al. (2018) believed if the appropriate supports were given to special education teachers, stress would be minimized and teacher longevity in the profession would increase. Because 40% of teachers leave the profession, identifying stress triggers and implementing strategies to reduce stress levels is critical (Wong et al., 2017).

Pignata et al. (2017) determined there was a gap in evaluative research on stress interventions and improving employees' well-being. Administrators should understand the circumstances in which a designated intervention would be helpful to the employee and minimize stress levels and increase job satisfaction. Students found difficulty when teachers were impacted by stress, but giving teachers tools, such as mindfulness strategies, promoted peer support and became a promising intervention in the workplace (Reiser et al., 2016).

### **School Climate**

Relevant literature suggested school climates as a key factor, which is a predictor of teacher stress (Saeki et al., 2018). Teachers who work in an environment where administrative support is experienced have the potential to significantly reduce teacher stress levels at school. According to Saeki et al. (2017), staff who perceived a positive school culture experience are more likely to have an increase in job satisfaction and an increase of a positive school climate. Teachers are sensitive to school climates cultivating cynicism, emotional exhaustion, and regret (Zimmerman, 2018), which often results in symptoms of burnout. If teachers are connected to a social network and have shared professional resources and emotional support, the culture can be supportive and promote retention (Zimmerman, 2018). Teacher retention is commonly

associated with school climate as defined by the working conditions, professional environment, and infrastructure (Dahlkamp et al., 2017). Positive school climates are external factors for teacher retention and reduction of stress.

School climate has significantly contributed to teacher burnout (Zimmerman, 2018). Even though many stress factors are out of the control of the leaders, school climate could be improved by the administration. An improved school climate positively impacts and supports teachers. Instructional leaders promote a positive school climate by creating an environment rooted in trust and mutual respect, one recognizing the contributions of others (Zimmerman, 2018). Creating a positive school climate requires an intentional and strategic act on the part of the educational leader. According to Dahlkamp et al. (2017), teachers who received competent support from leadership were in a positive school climate, which led to higher teacher retention rate. Factors influencing climate and teacher retention rates included working conditions, facilities, and professional environment (Dahlkamp et al., 2017). School climate plays a strategic role in the decision of whether a teacher remains at the school or leaves the teaching profession.

Dahlkamp et al. (2017) analyzed prior peer-reviewed studies, which ascertained school climate was a determining factor for teacher retention. The study further claimed, through surveys, the school climate and collegial environment were two main reasons to remain at the school site. Appropriate leadership at the site created a working environment, supportive of teachers, which increased job satisfaction and minimized stress (Dahlkamp et al., 2017). Ansley et al. (2016) noted effective characteristics of school leadership, which included mentors for new teachers, consistent enforcement of policies, teacher autonomy, regular communication and feedback, student behavior support, inclusion in schoolwide decision-making, and allocation of

resources. When school leadership is inadequate in fulfilling leadership practices, teachers may experience higher occupational stress and lower job satisfaction, and teacher efficacy is affected.

As maintained by Haydon et al. (2018), the experience of stress is individualized and unique and depended on the interactions between the teacher's personality, skills, values, and circumstances. School climate and administrative support were key indicators of stress levels experienced by special education teachers. Haydon et al. revealed a lack of administrators' supervision of staff members, lack of understanding of special education policies and laws, and inadequate special education training on the part of administration, which had a negative impact on the overall school climate.

Special education teachers who received support from general education teachers believed the teacher was part of the school community and experienced greater personal accomplishments (Langher et al., 2017). Some states have implemented policies attaching student achievement to annual teacher evaluation, tenure decisions, and pay raises (Reiser et al., 2016). The attachment to teacher evaluation was intended to be an incentive, but many unintended consequences impacted the well-being of the teacher and school environment (Reiser et al., 2016).

Studies have shown promising results in school districts offering mentor-mentee induction programs and lighter caseloads for first-year teachers (Ansley et al., 2016). As a result, there has been a reduction in stress and attrition rates along with an improvement in teacher efficacy (Ansley et al., 2016). These programs helped with the reduction of stress but did not help teachers cope with the stressors on a personal level. The Centers for Disease Control urged school districts to implement comprehensive stress management intervention programs for staff, but these programs are costly and not feasible for a majority of school districts (Ansley et al.,

2016). Coping strategies can be self-taught but require the assistance of professionals to ensure successful implementation.

Transformational leadership (TL) focuses on the principal's organizational capacity, yet TL is not adequate to maintain high-quality teaching and raising student achievement (Mayes & Gethers, 2018). Differentiated leadership styles focusing on the members of the organization, instruction, and performance need to be incorporated (Mayes & Gethers, 2018). Incorporating a blended leadership model, which includes stakeholder collaboration, helps to facilitate a school community to create a purpose, distributes leadership, promotes a climate with positive expectations, and improves the teaching and learning process (Mayes & Gethers, 2018). Schools are expected to perform at high levels, and transformational leaders need to focus on the perceptions of various stakeholders to improve instruction.

### **Chapter Summary**

Literature highlights a high rate of turnover in special education teachers caused by job-related stress and one third of the nation's teachers are at risk of leaving the profession after the first three years (Langher et al., 2017). The number of special education teachers is insufficient when compared to the incoming-student-with-disabilities population (Langher et al., 2017). As Kebbi and Al-Hroub (2018) asserted, stressors cannot be removed from the teaching environment, which is why teachers should learn coping mechanisms to manage stressful events/situations. The literature review discussed the increasing demands placed on special education teachers causing stress and mental exhaustion. Evidence demonstrated the need for a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how administrators and other policymakers could assist special education teachers in achieving work balance and diminishing stress while on the job.

Instructional leaders who regularly experience stress develop increased cholesterol levels, unstable blood pressure, muscle tensions, and other health impairments (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Additional effects of stress could be serious and include depression, absenteeism, fatigue, low motivation, and other psychological problems. Increasing workloads, diverse challenges, lack of job success, and aggressive student behavior are all stress-inducing factors adding to the occupational stress of special education teachers (Langher et al., 2017). A key element was for the administration to identify the causes of stress and provide coping mechanisms to lower stress levels, creating an environment conducive to job satisfaction.

Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory and transformational leadership theory provide a foundational platform for implementing change at the site level. Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory addresses two kinds of appraisals when individuals are faced with a stressful situation. Primary appraisal is when an individual evaluates the stressful encounter and decides whether or not it is life threatening; secondary appraisal assesses what personal environmental resources are available for the individual to respond to the stressful situation (Donald et al., 2017). If a teacher is equipped with appropriate coping mechanisms to use during the event, stress levels remain low. Special education teachers who possess an understanding of Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory would have the tools to self-evaluate and apply the appropriate resources to minimize stress.

Transformational leadership theory emerged as a leadership approach under Burns (Liu, 2018). Transformational leadership theory has been able to inspire followers to change expectations and perceptions and work toward common goals (Liu, 2018). Transformational leaders articulate the vision, work collaboratively with employees, and build relationships to foster a supportive environment.

Bass (2005) described transformational leadership theory as being based on inspiration, charisma, intellectual stimulation, and development orientation. The leadership theory is able to use charisma and other characteristics to provide support for special education teachers. Through the lens of Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory and transformational leadership theory, the study informs administrators and policymakers on effective ways to identify and assist special education teachers with coping strategies.

To fully understand the perceived causes of stress for special education teachers, the reader should understand the definition of stress, coping mechanism, burnout, and the impact school climate plays on creating or minimizing stress. The qualitative phenomenological study is the best approach for determining specific causes of stress for special education teachers. This study promotes leadership to learn and implement strategies to assist employees who experience work-related stress.

The research study helps fill and close the gap of knowledge by providing effective coping strategies for special education teachers and administrators to increase student and teacher engagement. This study can be shared with special education teachers, site administrators, and policy makers, which can help alleviate stress for special education teachers. The methodology is designed to discuss in detail the research design, role of the researcher, research procedures, data collection methods, data analysis, reliability and validity, and ethical procedures related to the study. The first three chapters of the dissertation established the foundation for the study, the chosen method, and a rationale for the purpose and reasoning for the study.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

Teaching is a demanding profession. As discovered in the research, special education teachers demonstrate higher stress levels than mainstream education teachers (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Special education teachers experience stress because of a variety of reasons including lack of administrative support, additional paperwork, compliance issues, increasing work demands, and environmental factors (Haydon et al., 2018). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the perceived causes of stress of suburban special education teachers. This study addressed the following research questions to identify the causes of stress inflicted on special education teachers:

**Research Question 1.** How do suburban special education teachers define stress?

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceived causes of stress impacting suburban special education teachers as determined by the special education teachers?

**Research Question 3.** How do suburban special education teachers' stress manifest in daily life?

**Research Question 4.** How do special education teachers in suburban schools cope with stress?

The qualitative phenomenological approach addresses the meaning of stress and the perceived effects of stress on suburban special education teachers. Phenomenology helps people understand what is taken for granted and how to act tactfully in various situations (Hopkins et al., 2017). Phenomenology studies the direct experiences of individuals and observes the phenomenon of the lived experiences of individuals (Qutoshi, 2018). The methodology views experiences from the first-person perspective and seeks an understanding of a phenomenon. The methodology does not seek to solve a problem but rather to create a better understanding of the

issue at hand through the lived experiences of individuals. A researcher can create an understanding of the phenomenon with an inquiry into the individual or group experience.

Research instruments used to gather the data were virtual semi-structured interviews, virtual focus groups, and a panel of experts. The research methodology chosen for the study was appropriate for the topic as data collection tools supported the qualitative phenomenological approach. At the conclusion of the study, the research and dissertation can add to the body of knowledge in education by providing administrators and policy makers with the perceived stressors for special education teachers and coping mechanisms to alleviate stressors. Leaders may garner an understanding of the perceived causes of stress, and adjustments can be made to provide needed supports for special education teachers. A discussion in detail of the research design, role of the researcher, research procedures, data collection methods, data analysis, reliability and validity, ethical procedures, and a summary is presented in the following chapter.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the perceived causes of stress for special education teachers, as reported by special education teachers. All participants were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview or a focus group. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were protected to ensure trust and mutual respect with each participant (Creswell, 2014). Following the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process ensured participants' rights were protected.

To address the research questions, a phenomenological approach was utilized. The research questions are a key component as the questions informed the design of the research (Fisher & Bloomfield, 2019). A phenomenological study has the potential to create new knowledge and to solve a current problem, thereby adding to the body of knowledge. Qualitative

researchers often decide on a methodology appropriate for the study, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These methodologies elicit responses in an interactive format while building on the interpersonal relationship (Guest et al., 2017). A phenomenological approach allows participants to expand on the responses to adequately capture thoughts and feelings through either a semi-structured interview or focus group. This design allowed an intensive in-depth study on the shared experiences of a group of participants. The study allowed for comparisons, was comprehensive, and created generalizations from the data.

Common characteristics of qualitative research include natural setting, researcher as a key instrument, the use of multiple methods, complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic, participants' multiple perspectives, and a reflexive and holistic account (Creswell, 2014). These characteristics helped the investigator to understand the perceived causes of the stress of special education teachers. The investigator used multiple methods, including interviews and focus groups, to obtain various perspectives. Data collection took place in a natural setting, which was nonstressful for the participants, and the participants had time to reflect on responses. Researchers conduct qualitative research if there is a problem or an issue needing to be explored (Creswell, 2014).

The qualitative research design is appropriate for a dissertation because the study is intended to describe the lived experiences of special education teachers and the perceived causes of stress. Participants shared stories in a forum deemphasizing the power relationship occurring between a participant and a researcher (Creswell, 2014). A phenomenological approach allowed the focus of the research to be centered around detailed conversations with the participants over a prolonged time period. To understand the unique perceived causes of stress for special education teachers, compiling data with a variety of participants and having a focus group to discuss the

common themes occurring from the interview process was critical. Using a phenomenological approach, the data were collected through various methods including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a panel of experts. Phenomenological research focuses on experiences of the participants as what an individual lives through, or experiencing a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). When a researcher understands the perceived causes of stress, those perceptions can help to determine whether there are commonalities to the plight of the special education teacher. To help substantiate the reliability and validity of the study, multiple points of data collection were used, and the findings were supported through data triangulation. Triangulation occurs when there are several analytic approaches to evaluating the same qualitative data (Flick, 2018).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher in this study was one of a researcher-participant. Through the interview process, interactions between the participants and the researcher facilitated deeper levels of questioning and response as the participants answered semi-structured interview questions. As a former assistant principal at a middle and high school and the extended school year principal at an elementary school, the researcher had evaluated the majority of the special education staff, been involved in school initiatives, and attended social events with the participants. These interactions resulted in an open, honest relationship between the researcher and special education staff created with trust and mutual respect. Over the last 2 years, the staff had known the researcher desired to become a principal. The researcher has since accepted a position in another school district in another designated role.

Initially, when beginning the dissertation, there was a potential conflict because the researcher was in the role of a direct supervisor. There was a concern about asking special education teachers to participate in the study because of the researcher's position as the

employer. Interpersonal relationships with the researcher could interfere and participants would not be as open with responses was another concern. Because the researcher left the school district, those legitimate fears were minimized, and participants were more inclined and willing to engage in open responses. One step taken to mitigate any undermining of the data was bracketing. According to Creswell (2014), bracketing was first established by Husserl and was defined as suspending preconceived notions or suspending natural attitudes so the researcher could clearly see the content of the phenomena being investigated. To mitigate personal biases, bracketing was used as part of the research process. Later research suggested bias was impossible for a researcher to separate self from presuppositions with bracketing but making oneself aware of the suppositions was useful. Tufford and Newman (2016) defined bracketing as the researcher's ability to separate experiences when compared to the phenomenon. Bracketing later evolved into a self-reflective process where the researcher confronted the preconceived notions, which were actively being investigated (Nazair, 2016). The researcher employed the use of a research journal to record thoughts and feelings during the research process. Using the bracketing process can minimize the preconceived experiences of the researcher and not influence the results of the study.

## **Research Procedures**

### **Population and Sample Selection**

Convenience and purposive sampling strategies were used to draw a sample of special education teachers from a suburban school district in Southern California. The district of focus was a K-12 unified district servicing approximately 7,500 students from various ethnic backgrounds with 343 certificated staff. The school district gave formal approval to participate in the study pending IRB approval (see Appendix A). Prior to starting the research, school board

approval was necessary to conduct the study in the district. Once selected, the participants understood the research problem or phenomenon the study would address. The sample saved time, money, and the expense of recruiting participants (Creswell, 2014).

At least 15 special education teachers met the designated criteria and participated in the study. Participants needed to meet the following inclusion criteria in order to be invited to participate. Participants were required to have at least 3 years of teaching experience in the special education field, be tenured in the school district, and at the time of the study, be teaching special education classes Grade 1 through Grade 12. Potential participants acknowledged concerns regarding increased job responsibilities, excessive paperwork, and an increased special education student caseload. Increased job responsibilities included but were not limited to teaching multiple subjects, participation in various school or district committees, mandatory trainings, coaching, and club advisors. Excessive paperwork included writing IEPs, addendums, emailing parents regarding student concerns, grades, progress, attending to paperwork mandated by the district office, and grading. Teachers invited to participate in the study possessed a full teaching credential with a focus on students with mild to moderate or moderate to severe disabilities.

The goal of inviting special education teachers who met the criteria and who were asked to participate in the study was to attain 15 participants. The teachers were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, focus group, or both. Participants were selected based on the lived experience of the stress phenomenon as presented in the research questions. Each teacher selected had increased school site responsibilities, increased student caseloads, and excessive paperwork. These stated criteria increased the stress levels of the special education teachers, qualifying the teachers to participate in the study.

The majority of the individuals who were asked to participate in the study were familiar with the individual associated with the study. Mutual respect and trust had been established with the majority of the potential participants. Because there was a recognized relationship recruitment was conducted with potential participants via email or by phone. The person conducting the research was no longer employed by the school district where the study was conducted; the fear of termination, retaliation, or pressure no longer existed. Potential participants were invited to a meeting to discuss the study. Potential participants were informed of the following: purpose of the study, research questions, risks and benefits of the study, confidentiality, informed consent, and an option to discontinue participation at any time. A question-and-answer session ensued at the recruitment meeting to bring clarity to the study and offer participants an opportunity to ask questions. Informed consents were provided, and participants were given a copy to keep.

To safeguard participants' rights, informed consents were obtained prior to the start of the study. Informed consent consisted of a written document, in the participant's primary language, explaining the objective, design, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study and participants' rights. Assurance was provided to participants and acknowledged the participant could discontinue participation at any time. Nondisclosure of the participants' information was strictly adhered to before, during, and after the study. Qualitative research contained detailed descriptions regarding participants in the study; pseudonyms were used to help protect confidentiality (Johnston, 2015). Using pseudonyms protected participants as pseudonyms had meaning to some individuals but not to casual readers of the study. Information collected was stored in a secure, locked area and on a password-encrypted laptop.

## **Instrumentation**

Qualitative data collection brings potential ethical issues resulting from the personal nature of the format (Flick, 2018). One method to help identify the perceived causes of stress for special education teachers was to conduct a virtual, semi-structured interview. The method offered a balance between the flexibility of a semi-structured interview and the focus of a structured ethnographic survey (Kilinç & Firat, 2017). The interview questions were open-ended, clear, and concise, and formatted in a way to avoid bias or leading questions (see Appendix B). Open-ended questions allowed further insights from the interviewee (Yin, 2009).

For this study, the research instruments were developed and validated by a panel of experts. To ensure the validity of the interview questions, three subject matter experts (SME) evaluated the questions for validity in the field. The panel of experts included a retired director of special education with 6 years of experience as director, 16 years as the principal at an orthopedically health impaired school, several years as a special education consultant, and as a former special education teacher; the county school principal having 17 years of experience as a special education teacher, district special education coach, program specialist, alternative dispute resolution, and new teacher induction with the Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) program; and a school psychologist with over 20 years of experience at the site level. These experts were not employed by the school district where the research was conducted and were independent of one another. A table including a summary of feedback is included in Appendix F.

A panel of experts was used to review the semi-structured interview questions and focus group questions (see Appendices C and D). The subject matter experts enhanced the validity and reliability of the study. A synopsis, which discusses recommended changes, from each expert is provided (see Appendix F). An expert can be defined as an individual who has mastered

challenges with increasing levels of difficulty in specific areas of functioning or an individual who is proficient with tasks and knowledgeable in a subject area (Garrett & Mitchell, 2018). Using a panel of experts to evaluate and give input into the surveys and focus group questions increased the validity and reliability of the questions as the experts had mastered challenges in the field with increased levels of difficulty and functioning (Garrett & Mitchell, 2018). A panel of experts assisted in triangulating the data by using multiple sources of information.

An additional data collection method was through focus group sessions on the topic of the current research. The validity and reliability of focus groups increased the credibility of the research (Ngozwana, 2018). A focus group was conducted in a virtual setting and included six participants. It was recorded to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, which was utilized for coding purposes. The focus group was a support structure to the virtual, semi-structured interviews, hence fewer participants were required. Conducting a focus group with special education teachers provided a designated targeted audience in a controlled group discussion arena to gain in-depth qualitative knowledge regarding feelings, experiences, and perceptions on the given topic (İlgaz, 2019). The focus group questions were revised at the completion of the semi-structured interview (see Appendix C). The rationale was to be able to delve deeper into the responses from the semi-structured interview questions. The questions were developed and vetted by the panel of experts to increase reliability and validity.

Focus groups provide different perspectives on a topic and use an interactive discussion format to obtain the information (Flick, 2018). Informed consent was obtained prior to the focus group, and confidentiality and anonymity were protected. Using a focus group setting, as well as semi-structured interviews was advantageous. Information was garnered from nonverbal language and verbal assessment and gain various perspectives on a specific topic.

## Data Collection

Data collection is the process of gathering and measuring information from targeted variables. The data collection assists in answering the research questions. Through the data collection process, any potential barriers or pitfalls which may occur during the research design must be avoided (Duggappa et al., 2016). A plan should then be created to address potential concerns. An example is using two digital recording devices when conducting interviews or focus group sessions. Using two digital devices would ensure if one recording device failed, there would be a backup recording device to capture the information.

When collecting qualitative data, ethical issues may arise. A researcher should be cognizant and responsive to the interpersonal relationships with the participants, which is not necessary for quantitative data analysis (Mertens, 2018). Qualitative data collection involves working closely with the participants and awareness of the participants' cultural norms, values, and beliefs.

Data collection occurred through virtual semi-structured individual interviews, which revealed the participants' perspectives of the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers. Descriptions of the interview process were included in the research and protocols established (Fisher & Bloomfield, 2019). The semi-structured interviews took place in a setting comfortable to the participants. Each participant was greeted to ease any tensions. Interviewees helped determine a time convenient for the interview as interviewees' helping to determine a time may minimize stress for the participant. At the start of the interview, introductions occurred along with an explanation of the purpose of the study. Participants were asked to sit in a comfortable chair, have water accessible, and be in a setting that had adequate lighting to ensure participants were relaxed and comfortable. Participants were designated as Participant A,

Participant B, and Participant C to protect anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals participating in the study. The interviews focused on open-ended questions with the specific content of the questions related to special education teachers' perceptions of stress (see Appendix B). The interviewer asked clarifying questions to achieve more thorough responses. Interview sessions were approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration and were digitally recorded by two devices. Transcripts were created at a later date, and the participants were given an opportunity to review for accuracy. The digital recordings were stored in a secure locked safe with limited access. After all the interviews were completed, the participants were allowed to read the transcripts to ensure accuracy and have the opportunity to add, change, or delete comments to the transcripts.

Virtual focus group sessions occurred in a neutral environment, which was nonthreatening to the participants. An email was sent to all focus group participants to determine a meeting date and time convenient for participants. Participants were asked to sit in a comfortable chair, have access to water, and log onto Google Hangout Meet at a designated time convenient to all. The session began with the purpose of the study, introductions, and clarification of participants' questions regarding the process.

The virtual focus group questions were formulated after all virtual individual semi-structured interview questions were completed. The focus group questions delved deeper into the perceived causes of stress as denoted by the interview participants. A panel of experts vetted the focus group questions to ensure the study remained on topic. Protocols for the focus group included a series of open-ended questions asked by the interviewer; the participants were allowed to answer each question or add any information to the other participants' responses. Discussions followed until the question had been thoroughly exhausted, as determined by the

participants. Clarifying questions were asked as part of the focus group discussion and protocols. Interaction among participants is a fundamental source of data in focus groups and creates a distinction from one-on-one interviews (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). The focus group was digitally recorded by two recorders and transcribed at a later date. Once the data were transcribed, participants were given the transcript to review and make additions, deletions, or corrections. Data was collected and kept on an encrypted, password-protected computer stored in a safe location.

The data was prepared and organized prior to the data being analyzed. Transcripts were printed, researcher notes were accumulated, data analysis software purchased, and any other pertinent documentation was located in one place. There was an initial review and exploration of the data collected. An inductive reasoning approach was used at the end of the data collection process. Preconceptions were limited to allow the theory to emerge from the data (O'Reilly, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

The information received from the semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions represented the bulk of the data needed to be interpreted. The first step in data analysis is to organize the data, conduct a preliminary reading of material, and organize information; the second step is to code data into themes; the final step is to interpret the data (Creswell, 2014). NVivo software was used to store, organize, categorize, and analyze the information from the interview and focus group sessions. Digital files were transcribed in a timely manner, which were then sent to each participant to review for accuracy, or to add, delete, or make changes. Themes occurred based on the frequency of word usage and on participants' similar experiences.

Patton (2002) denoted triangulation as the key to qualitative research because triangulation tends to strengthen the study using multiple data methods. The research questions helped to guide the data analysis process. The interview and focus group interviews were the primary methods used to gather information. Reading and rereading the transcripts helped to understand what was stated by the participants. The interviews and focus group interviews were transcribed and grouped by themes and coded appropriately using NVivo software. The data was analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of what the participants reported. By reading and reread the transcripts from the interviews and focus group sessions helped to ensure an accurate interpretation of the data; the digital recordings were listened to many times.

Creswell's (2014) 6-step model (see Figure 4) was used to help interpret and analyze the data:

Step 1: Organize and prepare data

Step 2: Read the data, make generalizations about the data

Step 3: Begin analysis coding process

Step 4: Use coding process to develop description of participants

Step 5: Determine how themes and description will be represented in narrative

Step 6: Make meaning of the data. (p. 45)

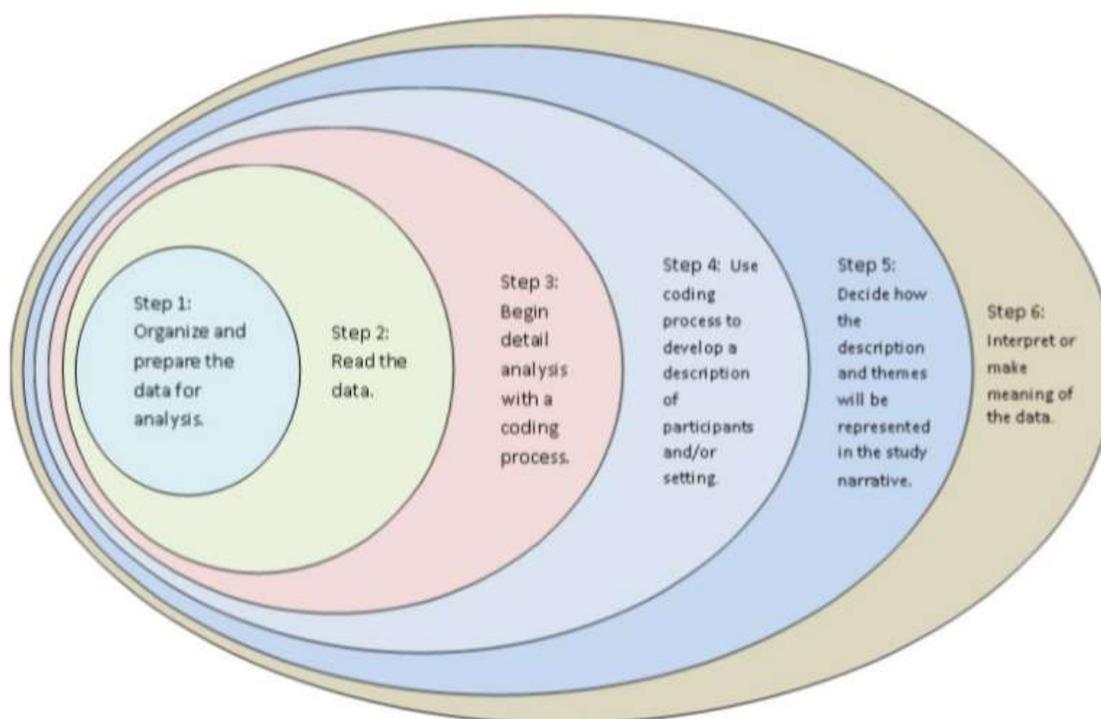
The data analysis process continually moved between data collection and analysis to verified the interpretation of the data (Fisher & Bloomfield, 2019).

Coding began at the start of the data collection process, and an open coding process was used. The data collected from the interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed to identify themes and meanings. This method helped to break down or fracture the data into

smaller segments (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). Analysis occurred by repeatedly listening to the interview tapes and rereading the transcripts to decipher units of meaning.

#### Figure 4

*Creswell's Model for Qualitative Data Analysis*



*Note.* The figure depicts the stages for organizing, reading, analyzing, coding, and interpreting the data in a qualitative study. From *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3rd ed.), by J. W. Creswell, 2009, p. 45. Sage.

After the interviews were transcribed, notes were documented of what participants stated, how the participant stated a response, and the frequency with which the themes were noted. Next, selective codes were used to organize the information into conceptual categories. The units of meanings to form themes clustered the information. The goal of the analysis process was to interpret meanings associated with the phenomenon of stress. Themes became evident,

and the themes were compared to the research questions. Finally, axial coding was used to help arrive at a summary of the information providing meaning to the data (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). The axial coding identified relationships existing between the open codes and making the data meaningful. A summary of the findings included the themes present during the analysis process. Participants were given an opportunity to reflect, review, and give input into the data, and to provide a brief reflection on the results. The reflection allowed the participants to review the themes and verify the accuracy of individual statements.

The thematic analysis helped to develop thematic categories and code the elements by using software programs such as NVivo. Thematic analysis allowed for the coding of textual materials to themes (Byrne, 2017b). Conceptual development and indexing of the materials assisted in the coding process. NVivo was used to provide analysis of the interview and focus group sessions. NVivo was the tool used to facilitate in categorizing and classifying data by assigning themes and attributes.

Byrne (2017a) thought reading through all of the transcript materials and watching and listening to the digital recording and visual material created a thorough understanding of the information. During the preliminary method, there should be a systematic approach to reviewing all the data sources (Byrne, 2017a). Analyzing the data required one to sort the materials into categories by establishing patterns in the data. Using computer programs assisted with the establishment of these themes and categories. Using the software minimized the subjective nature of the study and helped to increase validity and reliability.

### **Reliability and Validity**

When conducting a study with a phenomenological approach, individuals should find contentment in the results of the study and thoroughly understand the findings may only be

applicable to similar cases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In a phenomenological study, the study is constructed in a manner ensuring validity (external validity/internal validity) and reliability and making sure every attempt was made. Reliability of the data refers to the consistency of the results and validity addresses the accuracy. The validity of a phenomenological study can be improved when a researcher uses multiple sources of evidence to validate the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Two data collection points including semi-structured interviews and a focus groups, to collect data. Triangulation of the data occurred when multiple methods and data sources were used to validate the findings of the study (Flick, 2018).

Validity may be defined as how accurately the data represent the participants' reality of the phenomena being studied and how accurately the information was interpreted (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A method called member checking was used to increase the validity of the research. A transcript of each interview and focus group session, then had the participants read the document for authenticity. The method allowed each participant to make corrections, additions, or deletions to the oral statements. To maximize internal and external validity, a process called code-recode procedure was used. Data were analyzed and then reanalyzed at a later time to verify the results. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), to ensure validity researchers should employ various methods routinely including peer reviews, triangulation, external audits, and member checking. A majority of the stated methods were employed during the analysis process. A panel of experts reviewed the interview and focus group questions and validated the reliability and validity of each question. Those experts assisted the research process by focusing the question to help the study remain on target.

To increase reliability a link should be demonstrated between the interview and focus group questions and the research questions for the study. Aligning the questions increased the

reliability of the study. Implementing purposive and convenience sampling ensured participants met the study requirements. Participants previewed and gave input into the codes and themes determined by the software program (NVivo). These factors increased the reliability and validity of the data provided. The panel of experts provided consistency of the interview and focus group questions and helped to ensure the questions addressed the purpose of the study, which was the unique stress to special education teachers.

Transferability, dependability, and confirmability were the three final components helping to provide reliability and validity to the study. Qualitative research generally addresses local results with no inherent transferability (Flick, 2018). Transferability was applied to the study during the interview process as interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Other researchers may be able to use the interview questions for future studies, but the transferability of conclusions may result in different findings (Flick, 2018).

Dependability in a qualitative study is evolving and cannot be completely understood as a single moment in time (Given, 2008). The research context is open to change and variation as part of the dependability process, which provides transparency and relevance (Given, 2008). For this study, dependability was established through the data collection process and through the analysis of the information.

Confirmability relates to the interpretation of participants' responses to ensure an accurate representation of data is provided (Given, 2008). Two main goals of confirmability exist: to understand from the perspective of the research participant and to understand the meaning people give to experiences (Given, 2008). To ensure confirmability, an audit trail was used to detail the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data. The

confirmability process allowed thoughts to be written down, to give a rationale for why codes were merged, and to explain the meaning of the themes.

### **Ethical Procedures**

This study involved human research participants, and the IRB from American College of Education (ACE) approved the study through the IRB process. The IRB determined there was no physical or psychological threat to the well-being of the participants, and ethical precautions took place to protect participants. Conducting research required an individual to be cognizant of moral and ethical issues arising during the data collection process (Duggappa et al., 2016). Ethical consideration placed significance on the protection of participants' rights. Participants' rights refer to autonomy, confidentiality, self-determination, fair treatment, protection from harm, and the right to privacy (Duggappa et al., 2016). Obtaining informed consent and following the institutional review process ensured participants' rights were protected before, during, and after the research process. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the anonymity of participants' names and places of employment. Prior to conducting research, each volunteer received a thorough overview of the study including a consent form (see Appendix E).

### **Chapter Summary**

Special education teachers are at risk of having higher stress levels than general education teachers. The symptoms of stress can manifest as anxiety, anger, burnout, attrition, frustration, and a plethora of other emotional experiences (Haydon et al., 2018). This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to help special education teachers understand the triggers of stress through the lived experience. To support the study, a phenomenological methodology was the best method to use because this method allowed for in-depth conversations with participants.

The methodology section described the procedures used during the research process. The following elements were elaborated on including the role of the researcher, research procedures, instruments, data collection, data analysis, reliability and validity, and ethical considerations. The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explain the causes of stress for special education teachers. The data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a panel of experts were used to decipher and provide findings. The following section includes a detailed analysis of the data collection process. A summary of the findings, emerging themes, and a conclusion are also included.

## Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers and to identify support to reduce stress levels as identified by special education teachers. A second purpose of the study was to examine the commonalities in the experiences of special education teachers and to share common meanings and findings regarding stress-coping mechanisms. Teachers working in schools with challenging students are subject to stressful working conditions, which can affect motivation and job satisfaction (Rahmati et al., 2018). Special education teachers have many duties, expectations, and legal compliance obligations. Leadership and policy makers should understand the unique perceived causes of stress for special education teachers and identify coping mechanisms to assist with stress levels. This qualitative study focused primarily on the causes of stress and coping mechanisms as perceived by special education teachers.

The study was conducted in a suburban K-12 school district in Los Angeles County, California. Special education teachers from the district participated in virtual interviews and one virtual focus group session. Of the 22 special education teachers invited to participate, 15 joined the study for the virtual interview portion, and six of the 15 participated in the virtual focus group session. The 15 participants included one elementary special education teacher, four middle school special education teachers, and 10 high school special education teachers. The participants had been teaching between 3 and 20 years.

All special education teachers invited to participate in the study were required to meet the following inclusion criteria.

- Participants were required to have at least three years of teaching experience in the special education field.

- Participants were tenured in the school district.
- Participants had recently taught special education classes Grades 1 through 12.

Participants acknowledged concerns regarding increased job responsibilities, excessive paperwork, and increased student caseload. Special education teachers were required to possess a full teaching credential with a focus on students with mild to moderate or moderate to severe disabilities. To better understand the multiple causes of stress, four research questions were utilized:

**Research Question 1.** How do suburban special education teachers define stress?

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceived causes of stress impacting suburban special education teachers as determined by the special education teachers?

**Research Question 3.** How do suburban special education teachers' stress manifest in daily life?

**Research Question 4.** How do special education teachers in suburban schools cope with stress?

The data collection process incorporated the data analysis and information on data security, confidentiality, themes, and codes using quotes from participants, with a conclusion derived from the data. Reliability and validity included a discussion on the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research process. The summary recaps the answers to the research questions and provides a transition to the next section.

### **Data Collection**

The original research design required participants to meet face-to-face to conduct the semi-structured interview and focus group session to gain perspectives on the perceived causes of stress unique to special education teachers. The structure of the research design had the

participant choose a setting of choice and sit in a comfortable chair, with water and adequate lighting to create a relaxing environment. Open-ended questions were asked, and clarifying questions helped to delve deeper into the topic. Interviews were scheduled to be approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration and to be digitally recorded by two digital devices and then stored on an encrypted laptop in a safe. Transcripts were then created, and the participants were given ample opportunity to review for accuracy and delete or add additional comments if necessary.

COVID-19 emerged in December 2019 and spread rapidly to China, South Korea, Japan, and ultimately worldwide (Dong et al., 2020). With the outbreak of COVID-19 in California, Govern Gavin Newsom issued a State of Emergency virtually closing schools, issuing a stay-at-home order, and instituting a 6-foot social distancing between individuals (State of California, 2020). The state of emergency alarmed many people, and the initial data collection process required a change.

In order to avoid concerns by the participants of coming into contact with other individuals and potentially spreading COVID-19, the research design deviated from the original plan. Face-to-face interviews and the focus group were altered to a virtual setting using a variety of internet applications to create a safe protocol for the participants. To collect the data, internet applications included FaceTime and Google Hangout Meet. These forums were designed to be convenient for the participants, and the virtual interviews and focus group were conducted at a time and place accessible to and comfortable for the participants. Participants could choose the internet application to use, a location of choice, and a convenient time to conduct the session.

The risks and benefits were discussed with the participants, the purpose of the study, explained the research questions, and obtained informed consent before beginning the data collection process. Details of the study were discussed with each participant by phone. A

consent form was emailed to each participant to complete. Participants signed and returned the informed consent. Every participant was given a signed copy of the form via email. Beginning Monday, March 9, 2020, and concluding on Wednesday, March 25, 2020, 15 virtual interviews were convened. Interviews were approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length.

In the initial planning session, the focus group was to be conducted in a face-to-face setting in a relaxing and comfortable environment. The COVID-19 pandemic mandated a change in the research methodology. An email was sent to all potential participants requesting the best day and time to conduct a virtual focus group using Google Hangout Meet. Wednesday, March 25, was the day on which at least six participants could participate in the virtual focus group forum. Each participant in the virtual focus group selected a convenient location and setting. The Google Hangout Meet lasted approximately 58 minutes and delved deeper into the questions asked in the virtual interview sessions. The focus group session followed the same procedures and protocols as the individual virtual semi-structured interviews.

On completion of the virtual interviews as referenced by Appendix B, and focus group session as referenced by Appendix C, a transcription was created of each digital recording. Each participant was given an electronic copy of the interview or focus group transcript to ensure the conversation was captured accurately. Participants had an opportunity to add, delete, or clarify comments denoted in the transcript. All participants approved the transcriptions verbally as being accurate and representing the thoughts and opinions expressed in the session.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

An inductive approach was used for data analysis and purchased an academic license to use the NVivo software to code the data and develop themes. All data from the transcriptions of the interviews and focus group were uploaded into the program and sorted by initial preset codes

based on the four research questions. Themes were identified from the interviews and supported by quotes from the interview transcripts.

A generalized set of concerns regarding the stressors of special education teachers was based on a leader's previous experience as an administrator overseeing the special education department. The stressors included additional adults in the classroom, difficult students, a lack of collaboration with general education teachers, the IEP process, and mandates from outside the classroom, including city, state, federal, and district. Other concerns included issues with parents, additional responsibilities at the site, the tone set by school culture, higher stress times during the year, and a lack of support from administration. During the course of the study, tables were created based on the prevalent concerns from the participants interviewed, which in some cases differed from the original suppositions. The collected information from the tables then established the themes that were pursued in the study.

Acquiring the data occurred daily and usually consisted of contact with participants through email and phone calls, uploading the data to the program and transcribing the interviews and focus group sessions. Once uploaded, the data were sorted and consolidated into the codes supporting the major themes. The transcripts were reviewed numerous times to synthesize the data important in reaching the conclusions established by the study.

One critical component of the data collection process was ensuring confidentiality and securing the data. Data were collected through two digital recording devices kept in a locked safe. All transcriptions were kept in a transcription file on a password-encrypted laptop with limited access. When the computer was not in use, the technology was stored in a locked safe. To ensure participant confidentiality, each individual was given a pseudonym, Participant 1, 2, 3,

4, and so forth. The participant aliases were only revealed to designated individuals as the data were analyzed.

### **Participant Characteristics**

A small percentage of special education teachers in the rural school district in Los Angeles County participated in the study. Of the 15 participants, two were male and 13 were female. All participants were required to have a bachelor's degree and 60% had a master's degree. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 3 to 20 years. The majority of the participants, 67%, were high school special education teachers, 27% middle school, and 6% in the elementary setting. Of the 15 special education teachers, 87% possessed a mild to a moderate teaching credential, while 20% possessed a moderate to severe credential. One teacher possessed both a mild to moderate and moderate to severe credential. All participants maintained a special education caseload with a minimum of 25 students. Table 2 represents the characteristics of the participants with a breakdown in years of service to teaching.

Table 2

*Participant Characteristics*

Characteristics	Approximate % of included participants
Gender	
Female	80%
Male	20%
Years of service	
1 to 5 years	20%
6 to 10 years	14%
11 to 15 years	33%
16 to 20 years	33%
Grade level taught	
Elementary	6%
Middle school	27%
High school	67%
Education level	
Bachelor's	100%
Master's	60%
Credential type	
Mild to moderate	87%
Moderate to severe	20%*

\*One teacher possesses both credentials.

## Results

Data were collected through virtual semi-structured interviews and one focus group session. The data were disaggregated, and themes were formed from the results of each research question. During some of the semi-structured interviews, a 5-point Likert scale was utilized to further discern the impact of the research questions on the participants responses. Participants were asked to rate experiences with 1 (*not at all stressful*), 2 (*slightly stressful*), 3 (*somewhat stressful*), 4 (*very stressful*), and 5 (*extremely stressful*). Originally the Likert scale was intended to be helpful in grading participants' answers to the primary questions used during the virtual

interviews. The participants did not utilize the scale as expected as participants either did not grade a response at all or would use more than one number. For example, when asked if having additional adults in the room was stressful, one participant stated that having an instructional aide in the room was a 2 but having a nurse in the room was a 4. Due to the disparity of the responses and the lack of responses, the Likert scale number was not included as it did not appear to be significant to the findings. The following results were garnered from the research questions.

### **Research Question 1: How Do Suburban Special Education Teachers Define Stress?**

Research Question 1 addressed the definition of stress as perceived by suburban special education teachers. All 15 participants were asked to give a definition of stress. Each participant provided an interpretation of stress and what it meant and how it impacted the work environment. Pignata et al. (2017) defined stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them, and it is one of the largest issues in workplaces globally, impacting on worker health and organizational performance adversely” (p. 1). The comments reported by each participant were supported by the definition of stress noted above. Most participants responded by describing causes of stress rather than giving a definition of stress when answering Research Question 1. Throughout the interviews, participants' emotions were documented, which included multifactorial sources of frustration, a feeling of being overwhelmed, and also irritation.

The initial information regarding the participants' definition of stress was generated by the semi-structured interviews and uploaded to NVivo. Table 3 tabulates the participants' responses from the semi-structured interviews. Valuable insights were gained from the

participants' comments regarding the definition of stress. The comments were then utilized to determine the themes established by Research Question 1.

**Table 3**

*Coding of by Participant Responses Regarding Definition of Stress*

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Lack of time			X		X							X			X	26%
Feeling overwhelmed						X	X	X			X					26%
Meeting expectations	X	X														13%
Frustration				X												6%
Impacts health														X		6%
Unable to separate work from home													X			6%
Not prepared									X							6%
Do not have one										X						6%

*Note.* Participant responses are abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

As previously stated, an inductive approach was used to create themes based on the codes generated from the data collection. Three main themes emerged regarding how special education teachers defined stress: a lack of time causing stress, not meeting their own or other expectations, and a feeling of being overwhelmed. The data indicated three predominant themes based on 10 of the 15 participants' definitions of stress, while the five remaining participants' responses were categorized as other, as shown in Table 4. The five remaining participants' definitions were not able to be classified into a theme as the definitions were unique to the individual.

**Table 4***The Three Recurring Themes to Define Stress Based Upon Participant Responses*

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Lack of time			X		X							X			X	27%
Meeting expectations	X	X														13%
Feeling overwhelmed						X	X	X			X					27%

*Note.* Themes are abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

***Theme 1: Lack of Time***

Four participants described a lack of time as a contributing factor in defining stress levels. Participant 3 expressed “feeling pressure to meet the different needs of students and case managing and not having enough time or resources to do so in a school day.” Participant 5 expressed a similar definition of stress stating it as “an emotion one feels when one does not have the resources and time to accomplish the things one needs to get done in the course of their workday.” Participant 12 stated,

Every minute of my workday, haha! I define stress as the feeling you get when there is so much to do and not enough time to do it. When I have to decide what part of my job has to be let to tend to other pressing matters.

Participant 15 defined stress as follows:

The outcome of too many responsibilities being put on a person and not enough time to complete all these responsibilities. Too many things for special education teachers that are required to do. Not enough time in the day. I have had to learn that I cannot get

everything done in the day, which has helped my stress levels to decrease. I also learn that if I know that I am doing my best that I can, it is ok and it is on them...I was more worried about making people happy, which caused a lot of stress, but now you have better ways to cope with it. I just know it is part of the job that comes with experience.

### ***Theme 2: Meeting Expectations***

Two of the participants mentioned meeting expectations as a contributing factor toward defining stress. Participant 1 defined stress only as “a fear of not meeting expectation.”

Participant 2 further defined stress as

a combination of worry and pressure. When one puts pressure on themselves or receives pressure from someone else to perform at a certain level. The person begins to worry about not meeting the expected level of performance and thus causes stress.

### ***Theme 3: Being Overwhelmed***

Of the participants, 27% defined an element of stress as being overwhelmed. Participant 4 stated, “On the job, I guess I would say it is feeling frustrated about things with no recourse. Frustration comes from having things dictated to you with no discussion; more and more things are coming from a top-down perspective.” Participant 7 reported,

Stress is the inability or ability to realize a person is becoming frustrated beyond their ability, overwhelmed, anxious, and need to step away because they may or may not be able to initially handle what is occurring due to the overwhelming circumstances that are occurring.

Participant 6 stated,

My definition of stress is when I have many different issues pressing me at one time, getting pulled in many different directions and trying to keep up with deadlines such as holding IEPs before their due date. Stress is obviously when I feel overwhelmed.

A final comment toward defining stress was derived from Participant 8, who stated, “Stress is a physical and emotional response of overwhelm.”

### **Research Question 2: What Are the Perceived Causes of Stress Impacting Suburban Special Education Teachers as Determined by the Special Education Teachers?**

The research data indicated the impact of a number of additional stressors on special education teachers. Included in the comments from the participants were additional adults in the rooms, difficult student behaviors, collaborating with general education teachers, parent involvement with the IEP process, high-profile parents and expectations, mandates, responsibilities at the site, and the administration. The comments are tabulated in Table 5.

The responses to the interview questions provided the data to create the different codes tabulated in Table 5. In reading and re-reading the interviews, four major themes emerged regarding the perceived stressors for special education teachers. The data indicated the primary challenges increasing stress included mandated meetings (40%), high-profile parents/expectations/IEP process (47%), difficult student behaviors (47%), and lack of administrative support/consistency (60%).

**Table 5***Coding of Participant Responses Regarding the Causes of Stress*

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Lack of administrative support/ consistency	X	X			X	X		X		X	X	X	X			60%
Difficult student behaviors	X	X	X			X	X	X	X							47%
High profile parents/ expectations/IEP process					X	X	X		X		X	X			X	47%
Mandated meetings				X			X	X		X	X	X				40%
Additional adults			X	X	X			X					X			33%
General education teachers	X								X			X		X	X	33%
Site responsibilities					X		X				X	X				27%

*Note.* Codes were abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

The predominant theme at 60% was lack of administrative support and consistency. Increased stress was reported due to micromanaging of the special education department, the lack of knowledge regarding the needs of the special education in general, and a lack of consistency with mandated policies or procedures. Finally, a lack of consistent communication increased the stress levels of the participants.

Forty-seven percent of the participants reported high-profile parents with unrealistic expectations presenting a major cause of stress. These parents often brought advocates or attorneys to IEP meetings, which increased stress levels. The parents often required frequent

communication on a regular basis, which was unrealistic given teacher caseload and work responsibilities, and therefore increased stress levels for the teacher.

The researcher originally assumed difficult student behavior would be a causative factor for increased levels of stress. While 47% of special education teachers indicated difficult student behavior as a cause of increased stress, as shown on Table 6, the data revealed a different explanation for the stress. When analyzing the data, a determination made by a teachers' report of increased stress had to do with the need to change the teacher's instructional strategies to meet the needs of difficult students rather than blaming the student for disability related behavior.

Table 6

*The Four Recurring Themes of Causes of Stress Based Upon Participant Responses*

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Lack of administrative support/consistency	X	X			X	X		X		X	X	X	X			60%
Difficult student behavior	X	X	X			X	X	X	X							47%
High profile parents/expectations/IEP process					X	X	X		X		X	X			X	47%
Mandated meetings				X			X	X		X	X	X				40%

*Note.* Themes are abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

Special education teachers also reported mandated meetings as a cause of increased stress. A variety of reasons emerged as to why mandated meetings increase teachers' stress

levels. The stress from mandated meetings included managing multiple meetings, compliance with deadlines associated with meetings, and a perceived waste of limited time with attending meetings not applicable to the special education department.

***Theme 1: Lack of Administrative Support/Consistency***

Administrative support for special education teachers has been a crucial component to forming positive relationships between leadership and teachers. Special education teachers need consistency in both support and direction. When special education teachers do not perceive receiving support from leadership or maintaining a level of consistency, stress is added. Nine of the 15 participants expressed concerns related to the theme of support. There were a number of sources of stress for the participants who expressed a lack of support from administration, which helped to identify support as one of the main themes. Participant 7 believed, “not in a negative way, but I feel admin creates more stress because when I deal with them, it typically involves more work. And the more work I have, the more stress level goes up.” Participant 1 stated,

It is stressful when leadership does not support or undermine behavior modifications. It is extremely stressful when general education teachers are not held accountable for implementing behavior interventions or that there are different standards of what is acceptable in the special education class compared to the general education class.

Participant 5 had a slightly different perspective:

It has been very stressful dealing with the district administration lately. They have been making decisions (curriculum, para-educators) without speaking to the case carriers/education specialists at the school level. In the past, we would have conversations about changing curriculum and opportunities to review and choose new curricula as a group. Now, the district administration makes the decisions, and we have

to live with it. It is extremely stressful when we are using a successful curriculum (students are making good progress, and the administration changes it). It would reduce stress if the administration would talk to teachers and give us a chance to compare and give feedback before changing curricula.

Some of the special education teachers believed various administrators were not up to date regarding special education laws and instructional strategies. Both are necessary to support special education teachers appropriately. Some teachers thought there was a level of micro-managing adding to the teachers' stress levels by not giving special education teachers autonomy within the department. Participant 11 responded as follows:

The stress is usually due to one of the site administrators having a lack of knowledge /understanding of special education and the needs of students. They tend to give blanket directives with little consideration of the complexities of our special education students, especially those with behavior or emotional disabilities. There are seldom areas of grey with that particular administrator. They tend to micromanage and tend to argue with staff when staff asks for clarification on directives that contradict an initial directive.

Participant 11 paused and continued, "They tend to add to my levels of stress. Lack of consistent communication, lack of follow up on directives that have been given that then change."

Furthering the point, Participant 8 stated,

I know kind of in this work I work with the most severe students, and it is more rare to find administrators that have credentials in that area. And so, one thing um, it's tough when expectations are set upon us without spending some more time in the room and really seeing what that means when this expectation is set.

Another colleague, Participant 12, added, “Administration adds to stress because some admin micro-manages the special education department, so we are bombarded with emails about procedures, and oftentimes the email is unclear or contradictory to what we have been previously told.” Participant 12 added later in the focus group,

So one thing that I think kind of is frustrating to me about leadership is, if, if you’re a case carrier who gets your IEPs affirmed, you are in compliance with dates, you, um, service your kids on your caseload, and there’s not complaints coming in, and so you’re doing your job, and that’s known, it’s really, it adds way more stress when administration and other people mind of micro-manage it. I don’t have time to sit here and tell you every single thing I am doing.

Further, in the focus group, Participant 12 expressed frustration with administration:

I am going to piggyback on what Participant 3 stated. At one point, administration had asked us to basically report teachers who weren’t coming to IEPs...and that also like added stress because as a special education teacher, you have to work pretty closely with these general education teachers, um, for our students to be able to, um, do their best. And, if we’re being put in a position where we have to tell on our colleagues, I feel like that puts, you know, a big elephant in the room, in the relationship between me and the general education teacher.

Participant 10, who was at another site, expressed similar concerns:

Sometimes you have what the general administrator tells you is different from what the special education administrator tells you, and you are like, which one of you is my bigger boss? And generally, the special education is my bigger boss, but sometimes there are

onsite things that they all have their meeting, and they all hash it out, and someone eventually has answer comes out.

Participant 13 described stress in the following manner:

I have been stressed when leadership is not honest or professional in handling certain situations. I have been frustrated when leadership is not consistent in policies. I have been frustrated when I feel certain leadership doesn't even know the answer to the question I am asking. I have been frustrated when certain teachers are treated differently.

After a pause, Participant 13 continued, "Some administrators I feel comfortable going into their office and venting and asking for help. Other administrators, I have no respect for and question their ability causing me stress."

In addition to the interviews, during the focus group session, participants were asked to share the top three stressors of special education teachers. Some of the concerns mimicked the themes of the first research question and others did not. Participant 12 began the discussion by stating,

I think that the top three things, I would say number 1, dealing with unrealistic parents, or . . . really demanding...which kind of falls into the next thing which is just the multiple hats you have to wear . . . in the job because one minute you are teaching, one minute you're case carrying, one minute you're dealing with a behavior issue, one minute you're trying to help somebody learn. I mean, you just have to constantly be changing your approach with everything...Those are my top two, I know you said three, but I can't remember my third one was.

Participant 8 jumped in to piggyback on what Participant 12 stated:

I'll echo the switching hats, that's definitely top . . . Two, a fear of litigious consequences. I'm doing what I can to make sure that I and the district is not going to get sued. Um, and then instructional assistants, I have as many adults in the room as students. I'm teaching a class of students and a class of aides.

Instructional aides and other adults added to stress at times as the special education teacher had to manage behaviors. Participant 7 jumped into the conversation and said,

I think para educators, for the most part, there's a huge group. They are wonderful but some of them that are difficult make life very difficult. And, . . .it does create stress because you can't really, like I said before, you can't really do anything about it...deadlines, I would say. I have absolutely abhorred. High maintenance parents like Participant 12 said, or maybe that was Participant 13, but high maintenance parents make it very difficult.

Participant 12 remembered her third point, forgotten earlier:

It's general education teachers who [are] unwilling to make accommodations for students because they don't think that the student really is a disability. And you find that a lot with what I call invisible disabilities. So that's our kids with emotional disturbance or ADD. And I feel like the teachers just complain, well they don't pay attention—if they just tried harder. Well, they're not coming to school. Well, those are directly related to their disability and the teachers because they can't see that the student is struggling with reading or something like that, they just feel like it is a made-up thing, and they are kind of biased towards the students. And that stresses me out because then I feel like I need to work even harder with that student to make sure the student is successful because they

don't feel like they are getting a fair shot in their class with their general education teacher.

Participant 15 was the final participant in the focus group to comment on the question:

I would say my top one is just that I think somebody already said it, just the unrealistic expectations of a special education teacher, um including case carrying, reaching, and just everything that involves IEP and all that, there's just not enough time in the day to get everything done. So that's number one.

### ***Theme 2: Difficult Student Behaviors***

Initially, the research coded students with difficult behaviors as being a main stressor for a special education teacher assuming the behaviors were the cause of increasing the teacher's stress. On reviewing the data, new insight was gained into the topic, and found the stress of difficult student behaviors related more to the teacher being challenged by how to provide the best educational setting for each student. Seven of the 15 participants in the semi-structured interviews voiced a number of different perceptions of the stress related to difficult student behaviors. Participant 6 stated,

Interaction with difficult students happens multiple times a day. The most common issue is a student that is not doing any work and is unmotivated. The challenge here is trying to find a way to motivate the student to complete the work. I feel my stress level with difficult students is low. It's not stressful; it's just more a challenge to find a way to motivate a student who is not completing their work.

Participant 9 stated, "Difficult can mean so many things to so many different situations. I have students that have more involvement, complex needs, so that makes my job to teach them more challenging." Participant 9's educational background included behavioral analysis, which

contributed to the teacher's success in building relationships with students and working with students. Participant 8 stated,

My class is full of students that are medically fragile, and what is "normal" to me could be very stressful for another teacher. I don't have any particularly difficult students this year. I don't get stressed by difficult students, I make sure to put in a lot of work to build relationships with those students, and it helps throughout the year.

Participant 1 was immersed in working with "difficult" students to help bring about student success. Participant 1 was specifically drawn to the group of students defined as difficult. Participant 1 stated,

I interact with what other teachers label difficult students daily. Many of the special education students are extremely apathetic about school (for a variety of reasons, home, history, or academic failure). These students require a lot of interaction, redirection, motivation, and enthusiasm on the part of the teacher.

Participant 3 found students "usually act up when they are to actually complete any work independently." Or according to Participant 2, "High stress is when the prepared lesson is too advanced for these students. They will act out understandably because they cannot follow the material. Low stress is when the prepared lesson allows for modifications."

As noted, not all of the participants perceived difficult students in the same way. The perceptions of stress related to difficult students varied in significant ways. Participant 7 noted, "I do not see students as being difficult. I believe they accept any support they are given. Their parents usually handle issues with students. Students are not the issue, nor have they been difficult until their parents intervene." Participant 5 felt stress in the following situation:

Students may come to school/class tardy on a regular basis. Students come to class without their homework assignment; students fail to follow classroom rules or school rules; students bully other students; students do not participate in classroom activities.”

Participant 5 found these behaviors very stressful. Another teacher viewed interactions with difficult students on her caseload but not in her class to cause added stress. Participant 12 stated,

There are a lot of issues that arise with my caseload because a teacher did not handle a situation correctly. For example, they embarrassed a student in front of the class by being sarcastic or calling them out. Or I have student who do not do well with unstructured time, so when a teacher does not have good classroom management, it causes issues. My students are not always super motivated, so when a teacher allows them to sit and do nothing and doesn't try alternative ways to getting them to show mastery of the content, it is frustrating.

Regarding difficult students, Participant 15 contributed,

Defiance 3-4 times a week and no parental support. They do not know how to act. Their defiance is their survival. It causes stress in particular because I feel bad that they are acting out. They don't have a family member to feed them dinner, give them love, and to be present with them.

Employing modifications allowed for a student to attain success on an assignment and inappropriate behaviors could be minimized.

### ***Theme 3: High Profile Parents/Expectations/IEP Process***

Another theme regarding the causes of stress for special education teachers was the situation with high-profile parents. Issues with unrealistic expectations and challenges around the IEP process led to 47% of the participants noting the theme in some manner. Those high-

profile parents who brought attorneys or advocates to IEP meetings and requested services beyond the offer of free appropriate public education (FAPE) were a significant cause of stress to the participants. In response, some of the teachers reported trying to establish positive relationships with parents to offset stressors. Participant 9 asserted,

I try to keep the stress level low by being responsive and proactive when dealing with parents. I have had a good relationship with most parents during my teaching career. I think they know I have the best interest of their child in mind and see me as an ally, not an enemy.

When parents ask and ask and ask for things that are beyond FAPE, it can be very stressful. Some parents can be very demanding, putting a lot of pressure on the case carrier to do all the communication on their behalf. It hasn't happened much, but every year I have at least one parent that is demanding and litigious. They either enlist the help of an advocate or lawyer. This can get stressful, depending on what they are asking for. In the cases in which parents are asking for additional supports that aren't LRE or FAPE, it can cause an extra strain on the entire team.

Unrealistic expectations of parents and parent concerns are two factors adding stress to Participant 15, a middle school special education teacher:

I have been blessed with people being supportive in IEPs. We offer what is needed for the student, but parents push for things that aren't needed, and that causes stress. It is stressful when you are in a meeting with a parent and have written a good IEP, but the parent is finding anything to tear it apart, which is stressful.

Another teacher, Participant 11, mimicked a similar sentiment stating, "Unrealistic expectations of parents and advocates of both their student as well as the case carrier" add to the stress. "It is

hard to interact with parents that do not understand their student's disability. Often parents see their children as an extension of themselves and if their student does not correctly reflect their self-image, there can be problems," Participant 5 expressed.

A parent who brought advocates or attorneys to IEP meetings created additional stressors for special education teachers. Participant 9 also contributed the "presence of lawyers or advocates contributes to high-stress levels." Participant 6 provided additional insight:

A high-stress level meeting is obviously when a parent is upset regarding something and when they also bring an advocate to the meeting. What I have found is that the more you communicate with a parent on a regular basis and they build trust with you, the IEP process runs much smoother.

Participant 7 interjected,

High stress level would be equivalent to attorneys, advocates, director of special education, a tape-recorded meeting, and additional requests made by parents prior to the meeting being held. For example, I have had one student with over 25 goals per student, that equals stress. Due to the fact that 25 goals for a student in a general education classroom are difficult to monitor.

Participant 12 contributed to the theme by stating,

Advocates being involved, or a meeting with a student with a lot of services such as WRAP. Most of my meetings directly involve the special education director, and she mostly runs the meetings and helps with the notes. Helping with notes in high-profile meetings is incredibly helpful. However, there are some administrators who I would not trust to complete my notes as I do not feel that they know what to document.

In addition to the data from the semi-structured interviews, the focus group session also revealed support for the four main themes. Participant 13 brought up the 25 goals that were requested by the parent of one of the colleague's student:

When we talk about parents that they have such unrealistic expectations, like with Participant 7 is saying that one of her kids has 25 goals, that might fall back into the leadership too and what Participant 8 said, why are we always so afraid that we are going to get sued and so instead of just simply saying we're setting them up. There is no way a student is just going to reach 25 goals, is that where leadership needs to step in, then, is that when the district needs to support us more. Because, um I mean, we've lost any common sense sometimes with some of these kids.

The participant was visibly frustrated as she expressed her concerns regarding unrealistic expectations from the parents. The overall tone was, at times, case carriers and leadership gave in to the demands of parents as they were afraid of getting caught in a lawsuit for violation of due process rights.

#### ***Theme 4: Mandated Meetings***

Forty percent of the special education teachers in the study noted mandated meetings as one of the factors contributing to stress. Increased stress levels were reported due to special education teachers being mandated to attend several meetings per month with not all meetings applying to the needs of special education. Also noted were ineffective communication, the number of meetings, and timelines associated with the meetings. Participant 4 stated,

All staff meetings are often not applicable to me and my population and so sometimes I'm sitting there thinking about what I need to be doing like writing IEPs. Department meetings are more relevant. PLCs currently are with a small group teaching and the same

population, so they are the most relevant to me. The problem with PLCs is that admin often sits in with their own agenda making it more difficult for the teachers to feel some autonomy. We are required to attend some sort of meeting each week. One is site staff, one to two are department meetings, and one to two are PLC meetings.

Participant 11 explained,

PLCs are twice a month, data-driven collaboration, staff meetings once monthly, and one department meeting. PLCs can be a little more stressful because of the ineffective communication from our department chairs regarding the information about what should be accomplished during these meetings and what exactly our goal is.

Participant 12 stated,

It is stressful trying to juggle all of the meetings and keep track of them, as they are all from different organizations. IEP meetings are annual, but many of my students have them quarterly. I also attend monthly workability meetings. I go to departments which are usually every other week. I go to staff meetings and PBIS meetings twice a month. I am required to attend two conferences a year for workability, where we have our business meetings. I also attend LPA meetings, and that is required every other month.

Participant 7 expressed frustration with meetings and compliance regarding timelines for each session.

The district mandates all meetings are in compliance and on time, which is fine; however, the federal government states that all meetings are affirmed and attested within 48 hours, which is difficult. Not all parents agree to the IEPs or sign them. That makes it difficult. This month alone, I had eight IEPs. They all have to be postponed, and I will need to have them prior to the end of the school year. This will be stressful going back to school,

knowing that I will need to have these meetings along with all the other meetings scheduled prior to the end of the school year.

During the conversation, the teacher was visually frustrated with the process, and believed a better way to streamline the process might help to alleviate some stress. Participant 10 noted, “But it does help us all to meet with people and to have all those meeting mandates. Sometimes, I can only speak for myself, like if we had less meetings, maybe we would have more time to prep and especially on the elementary school level.”

Not all special education teachers viewed meetings as stressful. Participant 8 stated, Every week we have a meeting for various topics (staff meeting, PLC, focus groups, departments, etc.). They are part of our professional day, and our attendance is expected. The weekly meetings are not stressful and actually help to build the collaborative workspace that our staff and students need.

### **Research Question 3: How Do Suburban Special Education Teachers Feel the Impact of Stress in Daily Life?**

In the semi-structured interviews, the participants responded to Research Question 3 with a number of different perspectives. Some participants noted different school cultures as contributing to increased stress in daily life. Other participants reported becoming quiet or silent while others reported sensing a change in facial expression. Changes in emotional ability were noted with irritability, whining, or crying and a lack of focus. Disengagement, apathy in regard to daily instructional practices, and weight gain were the final responses. The responses to the interview questions provided the data to create the different codes tabulated in Table 7.

Table 7

*The Codes of How Teachers Feel the Impact of Stress Based Upon Participant Responses*

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Become quiet or silent		X		X				X			X		X		X	40%
School culture				X				X	X					X	X	33%
Facial appearance						X				X			X		X	27%
Disengagement			X						X							13%
Apathy				X												6%
Irritability												X				6%
Lack of focus							X									6%
Weight gain					X											6%
Whine or cry	X															6%

*Note.* The codes are abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

Based on the coding tabulations, four major themes regarding the impact of stress emerged. These included school culture (33%), becoming quiet or silent (40%), facial appearance (27%) and disengagement (13%). Quotes were used from the semi-structured interviews to support each theme in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*The Four Recurring Themes of How Teachers Feel the Impact of Stress Based Upon Participant Responses*

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Become quiet or silent		X		X				X			X		X		X	40%
School culture				X				X	X					X	X	33%
Facial appearance						X				X			X		X	27%
Disengagement			X						X							13%

*Note.* Themes are abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

### ***Theme 1: Become Quiet or Silent***

Distancing oneself and remaining quiet were the reactions some special education teachers had in response to stress. Forty percent of participants became quiet or silent when they felt stress. Participants 2 and 4 both observed how being stressed caused others to comment about being a little more quiet than normal. Participant 4 reported, “I guess I stay silent except with the people I trust.” Engaging with trusted colleagues was one way participants dealt with stress, which was effective for the participants. When Participant 11 became upset or stressed, “I become silent and only speak with trusted colleagues to vent.”

Participant 15 noticed that “when stressed, I get more quiet unless I know you really well. My close workers know when I am upset because I talk to them. I can also become very emotional.” Remaining quiet assisted some participants with stress; in addition, Participant 11 “tends to isolate, put on my headphones while working in a common workspace or walk out of

the room. At work, I am more likely to tell people to back off when they are adding to my level of stress.” Participant 8 was

known as being bubbly and cheery, even singing and dancing my way through the day.

When I am stressed, my physical presentation calms down, and people can tell when I am not “myself.” Like I said, over the years I have become more practiced at leaving stress outside the classroom for the sake of the students and staff, but I also use it as a teachable moment to model for our students that it is OK to be worried or stressed and give them coping skills.

### ***Theme 2: School Culture***

Principals play an intricate role in developing the culture of a school. The school climate may either contribute or ease tensions felt by staff. School culture is a combination of values, attitudes, norms, traditions, and behaviors (Dinsdale, 2017). Leadership helps to set a tone which is either toxic, indifferent, or focused on growth (Dinsdale, 2017). School culture was one way special education teachers felt the impact of stress while at work. Regarding school culture, Participant 14 expressed,

Working in a school environment that has a positive culture minimizes stress levels. Our school is a school inclusive of students with special needs. The county has been on the campus for a few years, but this is the first year they have included deaf and hard (DHH) of hearing students. They opened their classes to let my students mainstream for art, math, computers, and PE. Many of the staff have been amazing treating the DHH students as equal.

Participant 15 stated,

Overall, our student's cultural environment is very understanding and supportive of students in special education. I feel very supported as a special education teacher in our administration. Overall, the school environment is a small percentage, 5%, that is not accepting to special education students in the classroom. This may be viewpoint of general education teachers.

At the same site, another teacher, Participant 5, expressed,

Most of the teachers are extremely professional in relation to their special education students. They follow the accommodations and modifications that are stated in the IEPs to the letter. They work with their special education students when they need extra help and time. The administration is very understanding of the needs of special education students. They work with them and their parents to alleviate the circumstances that resulted in the disciplinary situation.

Not all schools within the district experienced the same level of inclusion. Another special education teacher, Participant 4 stated,

I would say my school culture as a whole is very oriented toward general education students. There is a lot of emphasis on the A-G requirements, sports, IB, and AP. We also lack electives for students across the spectrum, and especially for our students on a certificate of completion track. There are many general education teachers, though, who are very welcoming of our students and really work with us. We have a chapter of Best Buddies International, which has been a great way to promote a culture of inclusion.

An educational specialist at the same school, Participant 6, noted,

I feel that our school's cultural environment regarding our special education program is not good. I feel that our school places too much of an emphasis on other programs, and our special education program is always an afterthought. Our students and teachers, in my opinion, are not a priority at the school. Other academic programs such as IB and AP appear to be far more important to our school, in my opinion.

Both of those comments may be demoralizing to employees, students, parents, and play a role in the contribution of stressors for special education teachers.

From another perspective, Participant 8 commented regarding the culture of the special education department:

[It] is quite different and stands out from the general education population for many reasons. One, most of the students within special education are either Hispanic or Black; they are from foster care, group homes, have had run-ins with the law, are from low social-economic backgrounds, and or struggle with their disabilities.

A divergent perspective came from Participant 9, who was relatively new to the school district. Participant 9 only spoke from the OI/OHI program perspective, which was a unique program. The school culture at the schools Participant 9 had worked at was "accepting of our students and their needs. The district has a positive outlook on inclusion and is working hard to help make it meaningful for all students and train the relevant staff." Dinsdale (2017) stated, "It is important that school leaders understand the crucial role that they play in developing a culture that maximizes student and staff success and minimizes stress for these same groups" (p. 42).

### ***Theme 3: Facial Appearance***

Twenty-seven percent of the participants had a difficult time hiding emotions, and stressors became evident on the teachers' faces. Participant 10 recognized the following:

To be honest, I feel I handle stress extremely well. I feel I internalize my stress and do not take it out on others. The only way people do know I am stressed is I will typically have a scowl on my face because I am thinking. I mean, I have a lot more gray hair on me than I did when I started. Um, probably just like if I have a frown face or just kind of like a stoic face more than normal. Sometimes I don't even know it. What's up, are you ok? I'm like, oh, yeah, I'm fine. I always say I'm fine. I'm fine. Don't worry about me. Even if I am not fine or whatever, just because I don't want you in my business.

Participant 15, a female, recognized, "I am not very good at hiding my emotions. My face usually tells how I am feeling." Participant 10 stated, "Probably just like if I have a frown face or just kind of like a stoic face more than normal. Sometimes I don't even know it."

### ***Theme 4: Disengagement***

Thirteen percent of the participants disengaged at some level regarding stress. "I tend to give very short answers," stated Participant 3. Participant 9 used "disengagement with the "fun" things happening on campus. Emails become short and to the point when I am more direct with people who I feel are not doing their part to be an effective part of the IEP team." Participant 12 mentioned, "I become short with people, I stop joking around, and sometimes I cry in my car and have been caught in the parking lot."

While these major themes have been reflected by some of the participants, other participants expressed other ways which stress played a role. Sixty percent of the participants reported other unique ways stress had an impact on daily life. Participant 1 stated, "I tend to

whine more or cry,” while stress impacted other teachers’ levels by making it hard to maintain enthusiasm for teaching. Participant 5 was impacted by stress resulting in

doing less curriculum planning and having less patience when I interact with my students. It has also been very difficult for me to completely relax for many years. It is stressful to always have to take care of someone. I also have thyroid disease and take a daily pill. When it is not prescribed correctly, I gain weight. That is the worst stressor for me. Weight gain makes me depressed, and depression causes me to stop doing all nonessential activities.”

### ***Other Ways Special Education Teachers Felt the Impact of Stress***

In addition to the responses from the semi-structured interviews, six of the 15 participants involved in the virtual focus group session also commented regarding the impact of stress. Participants were asked to elaborate on how special education teachers felt the impact of stress on daily life. The majority of the focus group participants’ responses did not fit into the themes developed from the interviews. Information relevant to the impact of stress on daily life was included. Participant 3 of the focus group described the impact of stress:

It’s definitely disorganization; I feel like I’m because I’m doing a million things at once, it takes me longer to do things, because I don’t get to finish anything, it feels like...and then I always bring work home, and I always feel like, . . .whatever got started at work, I need to finish at home. So, most of my afternoons, I am working on something at home.

Participant 8 of the focus group described the following:

When I am stressed, I definitely bring it home in the form of distraction. I get overwhelmed, and then I kind of shut down because I don’t even know where to start, then nothing gets done. So, sort of that sense of [being] overwhelm[ed] and distracted

and not really being, I'm not, I'm not mentally present in my home if I am mentally still at work even though I am physically here.

Participant 7 of the focus group felt the impact of stress and stated,

I stay at work late. I feel like the stress when I have it before I come home I like to just stay at work late and get it all out or what I think I am getting out at work and then come home but then I come home and do continuous work most nights. But I notice when I get home, I'll like to do anything but work...So, stress kind of deals, I think my stress is doing things, anything other than the actual work I need to do at hand.

Participant 12 followed up Participant 7's response:

I was just going to say I feel like sometimes there is so much to do that it is kind of hard to know where to start. And so while I might be like, OK, I am working on an IEP and trying to finish and like affirming that and doing all that but then I remember like, "oh I needed to call this kid in," do that then, so I stop what I am doing, and I call the kid in but while I am talking to the kid I then like I get a phone call or a text about another issue that is happening. So, I feel like I am not really present with any of the one thing that I am trying to do because there's constantly so many balls in the air.

#### **Research Question 4: How Do Teachers in Suburban Schools Cope With Stress?**

In the semi-structured interviews, the participants responded to Research Question 4 by discussing ways to cope with stress. Codes were then developed and tabulated based on the responses provided by the participants. Coding of the responses to the interview questions provided the data to create Table 9. Participants discussed spending time with family while colleagues and friends assisted with decreasing stress levels. Several participants lowered stress levels through spirituality and mindfulness activities. Other participants required quiet time,

while some participants used alcohol as a coping mechanism. Exercise assisted with stress relief according to several participants. Finally, smoking was noted as a stress relief as well as focusing on a positive attitude and dealing with the situation.

**Table 9**

*The Coding for Coping Mechanisms Based Upon Participant Responses*

Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Spending time w/ friends or colleagues	X						X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	67%
Spending time w/ family						X			X		X	X			X	33%
Exercise			X		X	X	X		X		X	X		X	X	60%
Spirituality/ mindful		X		X	X		X	X	X	X						47%
Alcohol				X		X	X					X				27%
Listen to music	X	X							X							20%
Quiet time			X			X		X								20%
Focus on a positive attitude				X												6%
Just deal with it					X											6%
Smoking	X															6%

*Note.* Codes were abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

Based on the coding tabulations, six major themes regarding coping mechanisms emerged. These included spending time with friends or colleagues (67%), spirituality or mindfulness (47%), exercising (60%), spending time with family (33%), having quiet time

(20%), and drinking alcohol (27%). Quotes were used from the semi-structured interviews to support each theme in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*The Six Recurring Themes for Coping Mechanisms Based Upon Participant Responses*

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	%
Spending time w /friends or colleagues	X						X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	67%
Spending time w /family						X			X		X	X			X	33%
Exercise			X		X	X	X		X		X	X		X	X	60%
Spirituality /mindful		X		X	X		X	X	X	X						47%
Alcohol				X		X	X					X				27%
Quiet time			X			X		X								20%

*Note.* Themes are abbreviated with the approximate percentages based on 15 participants.

### ***Theme 1: Spending Time With Friends or Colleagues***

In meeting with each of the participants in the semi-structured interviews, evidence was found on the amount of time spent with friends and colleagues being seen as an effective method of coping with stress. Many participants expressed the importance of spending time with these friends and colleagues which gave participants a chance to vent and gain validation by others. Of participant responses, 67% indicated a need to be among friends and colleagues in order to relieve stress.

Participant 1 spent time with friends as a way to manage stress, while Participant 9 talked with trusted colleagues at work. Participant 7 likes

to meet in my class with colleagues at lunch; it is nice to talk to them about whatever is going on within the day. We meet once weekly on Tuesdays in my room, and we DO NOT talk about anything school-related during that lunch date, we only talk about personal things, I usually look forward to that day.

Similar to Participant 7, Participant 15

will have lunch with my co-workers to help with stress. I try to take 40 minutes to eat with someone; it helps to break up the day. I speak with my department chair, who has more experience or been there longer can help me look at it a different way.

Further in the discussion, the participant commented at times struggling to talk about personal things, it was easier to discuss the school day.

Participant 8 was “very lucky to have a best friend in another part of the state with the same job as me who we can vent to each other about our work woes.” Participant 9 contributed by stating, “I talk to trusted colleagues at work.” The data from the semi-structured interviews supported the theme of friends providing a time to vent and discussing strategies with colleagues helped alleviate stress. Throughout the school day, Participant 10 appreciated the communication with colleagues to help destress:

Finding, having like you know, every teacher probably have that one person either in their grade level or that you are close with on campus that you can just, oh my god, today was just blah, blah, blah. Or today, you know what this happened. Or did you see this email? Someone you can just kind of go back and forth with. So, just getting it off your

chest cause otherwise you are just holding it in the whole time, and you are just going to make it worse.

Participant 11 referred to “talking with their friends about what is causing them stress.”

Participant 12 had similar thoughts stating, “Being able to vent with friends that are colleagues and talking to supportive staff or administration.” Participant 14 noted, “Venting to my inner circle of friends, removing myself from the situation if possible and ask to speak to leadership when ready is a way I cope with stress.”

Gathering data from the focus group provided further insights into the theme of spending time with friends and colleagues as a means to reduce stress. Participant 13 of the focus group joined the discussion and stated, “I sometimes have to walk it through them, and I respect my inner group will tell me if I am wrong or I need to readjust or something, so that’s one and whether that's effective or not I don’t know but I do it.?”

Participant 12 elaborated on Participant 13’s comments in the focus group regarding friends:

Sometimes you can just vent, and everybody can say, yeah, this is dumb, or yeah, this is awesome. And sometimes just not even to talk about work and you can come in and say, “I really can’t talk about work right now, so we need to find something else to talk about.” So, I think that that support system of friends at work and outside of work are really important.

### ***Theme 2: Spending Time With Family***

Spending time with family was another theme emerging from the semi-structured interviews. Participant 7 stated, “I also have an awesome family, a husband who is the best listener and have an extended family of cousins who are like my sisters.” When communicating with family, it helped her to de-stress and refocus on teaching. Participant 8 stated, being

“ridiculously in love with my significant other and also close with my parents and spend fair amounts of quality time with them.” Participant 10 found tremendous relief with his family.

You know, just being with the family. Being home with my kids and kind of trying to find time to like to do positive things with the family. So alright, let’s go to the park, but today was a rough day, so maybe I don’t want to go outside or be doing, but let’s go play this, or my kids has soccer practice or baseball practice. I just go and help coach baseball practice, and it kind of takes my mind off of it. Let’s just go out to eat. I don’t care if the kids are going to be a pain in the butt at the restaurant. Like, let’s just get out of the house and just be our normal.... So it’s just kind of, again, even though I say stress is kind of something that breaks from the cycle sometimes dealing with the stress is also breaking from your monotony of your whatever you are doing.

Participants 11 and 12 also enjoyed family time. The mother of Participant 15 was a former special education teacher. Participant 15 said,

I will also talk to my mom, who taught special education for 40 years. She is a huge help and can explain or look at it in a different way. Remind me to focus on the other thing in your life and special education and work is not the only thing. Also reminds me to leave things at work and not get upset at home.

### ***Theme 3: Exercise***

Sixty percent of the participants in the semi-structured interviews referred to exercise as a coping mechanism for stress. Participant 5 “has a husky named Shadow. I walk her at least four times a week. This is the only exercise that I get. Of course, now that we are all sheltered in place, I walk her six times a week.” Participant 5 recently lost her father, for whom she had been caretaking, and now invests additional time with her animal to bond and alleviate stress.

Participant 6 noted that he “deals with stress with exercise and some down time, which does include relaxing with some alcohol.” The participant also expressed doing regimen exercises and using his football coaching as an outlet for his stress. Participant 7 stated, “I do not have a specific routine; I like to walk either before or after school.”

Participant 9 is an avid CrossFit participant. CrossFit is a regimen, which is part of Participant 9’s daily life; in order to handle stress, this participant works out. Prior to school, she attends a CrossFit session to begin each day. Working out was stated by Participants 11 and 12, but there was no specific mention of the type of exercise they do, except “taking a walk.” Finally, Participant 15 enjoys spin class. She stated, “I work out I do Spin.”

#### ***Theme 4: Spirituality/Mindfulness***

Spirituality is one’s relationship with a higher power and is connected to a broader meaning for life and self-awareness (Debnam et al., 2018). Debnam et al. (2018) suggested the benefit of spirituality is an elevated mood and optimal stress-management. Coping mechanisms for spirituality include mindfulness, meditation, and prayer. Some participants referenced mindfulness as a coping mechanism for alleviating stress symptoms. Mindfulness “is a state of consciousness reached by individuals intentionally and nonjudgmentally attending to the current moment” (Rahmati et al., 2018). Those who practice mindfulness may focus on breathing, living in the moment, or meditating. Seven participants referenced spirituality and mindfulness as coping mechanisms to address stress as stated during the semi-structured interviews. In the study, 47% of the participants referenced using some form of spirituality and mindfulness as a coping mechanism in addressing stress.

“Prayer is, by far, the best coping mechanism. I talk to God daily through prayer. When I am feeling stress, I meditate on the word of God, and it brings peace to my soul,” stated

Participant 2. Participant 5 prays with the rosary when walking her dog to address stress.

Mindfulness and meditation were briefly mentioned by Participants 4, 9, and 10 as a coping mechanism, but details were not given on how it was specifically utilized. “Breathing for short periods of time when I feel I need a break” is also another strategy used by Participant 9.

Participant 10 believed he should do yoga as a coping mechanism but has not used the strategy to date. During the interview, Participant 8 stated using meditation as a way to cope:

I am a visual person; I have developed a way of packing away my negative emotions into my memory until I get home, and I can unpack the boxes. I give emotions a color, a smell, a sound, anything to help the process. I also try to see myself how others in the room see me and that my students deserve the best I can give them.

Participant 8 was descriptive and detailed in meditation style, which provided solace during stressful situations.

Only one participant in the focus group commented on using meditation or spirituality to reduce stress. Participant 8 stated,

And then having kind of like that clear divide like we were talking about even if I am processing it, I’ll make sure that I don’t enter the doorway of my house, you know, without processing it, like packaging it up. I have little meditations that I do where I visualize my stress, and I put it in a box, and I’ll deal with it later. That helps to kind of be present when is what I need to do.

### ***Theme 5: Alcohol***

Four participants suggested the use of alcohol in a social setting as a way to cope with the stress of being a special education teacher. Participant 7 enjoys drinking wine. Participant 7’s husband goes with Participant 7 to wineries as a way to de-stress. “Exercise, family time,

alcohol and friends” was a way for Participant 12 to cope with daily stressors. A glass of wine, Participant 4, suggested, was a way to cope with stress. “I deal with stress with exercise and some downtime which does include relaxing with some alcohol,” stated Participant 6. These participants did not report abusing alcohol but used alcohol occasionally to alleviate the stress of work and usually enjoyed alcohol with a family member or colleague. One comment from the focus group was from Participant 13 who stated, “Friday night happy hours, I’ll be honest we got to get that stress out, and that’s when we all go.”

### ***Theme 6: Quiet Time***

Three participants managed stress by engaging in quiet time, which equated to 20% of the coping strategies. Participant 8 stated, “I am an extroverted introvert, meaning I can ‘turn on’ my social tendencies when I am at work, but I absolutely need to recharge alone. My brain needs quiet time to unpack and process the day.” Participant 6 needed “a mandatory 10-minute window for myself where I try and sit outside in the sun by myself to just try and decompress by myself. I find this to be extremely helpful.” Quiet time looked different for each individual. Participant 3 needed quiet time before the family arrived at home.

### ***Additional Items: Not Designated as Themes***

While six main themes emerged from the data, it is critical to mention other coping mechanisms only mentioned once but not statistically significant. Participant 1 mentioned using coloring, smoking, and listening to music as a stress reliever. Two other participants, Participants 2 and 9, listened to music as the “run-around-campus to get work done.” To cope with stress, Participant 2 selects “an easier review activity” for the students to cope with stress during the day. “Gardening and watching TV” were two additional strategies Participant 4 used

to manage stress. Participant 4 also “tries to remember to have a positive attitude and remember it is all about the students.” Participant 5 stated,

I guess chocolate is my drug of choice. However, I have to be careful of how much of it I eat. It makes me pack on the fat. I cannot eat chocolate ice cream before bed, or I will wake up feeling fatter, and that makes my stress go up more.

Participant 5’s ultimate philosophy was,

I don’t have any coping mechanisms for alleviating stress, I just deal with it. This too, shall pass is a favorite quote. I have always taken care of others, even when I was young. It is just a way of life.

“My brain needs quiet time to unpack and process the day. I enjoy being out in nature, reading, watching TV, crafting, listening to podcasts, playing with my dog and cat,” stated Participant 8. Participant 6 indicated, “Sometimes it’s just vegging out on the couch. Or eating something that is not really good for me. So, I am not the best coping mechanism. Sometimes it is just vegging out and telling the wife, “Hey, today was a kind of a long day, let us just go out and eat.”

Sleeping is one method Participant 11 used to cope with stress while Participant 14 goes “to Disneyland with my family and friends, I walk, talk, de-stress, and make happy memories. I escape into Hulu Disney Plus and Facebook.” Finally, Participant 15 “watches The Bachelor.”

In assimilating the data from the semi-structured interviews and focus group participants, the themes generated reflected the diverse means special education teachers utilize to define and cope with the stress of teaching students with disabilities. The population of students with whom special education teachers work differs from the student population of the general education teachers. The physical and emotional disabilities of the special education students are more

severe and require more attention and energy from the teacher. Special education teachers have added responsibilities for compliance regarding the IEP process and for all timelines associated with the process contributing to increased stress levels.

To further support the findings of the study, numerous methods were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. A field-test and thematic analysis were methods used to increase the reliability and validity of the results. The methodology used is described in detail to support the validity of the assertions from the dissertation.

### **Reliability and Validity**

After obtaining IRB approval from the American College of Education (ACE), the interview question protocols were created and vetted, requiring participants to answer open-ended questions. Using a virtual interview approach allowed a relationship to develop with the participants, creating an environment where participants were at ease and thoroughly answered all questions. To maintain consistency in the interview technique, the same individual facilitated the virtual interviews and focus group sessions to have a sense of mutual understanding and consistent questioning.

A field test was a critical component to ensure a successful interview and focus group session. Two familiar peers were chosen to assist by field-testing the questions. The peers met the research criteria, and the field testers were able to provide relevant feedback and suggestions to the protocol. Field-testing the questions increased the validity of the research instrument. Practice sessions provided experience in questioning strategies, which increased credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. After the field test, transferability, credibility, and dependability increased.

## **Credibility**

The credibility of the data was established prior to the transferability, dependability, and confirmability in order to determine the trustworthiness of the data. For the study, credibility was established through the triangulation of data and member checking. Multiple data points were used in the study, including 15 virtual interviews, one virtual focus group consisting of six participants, and a panel of experts to validate all interview questions. On completion of the virtual interview and focus group, each participant received a transcript to review for accuracy. Participants were given 5 days to review the material but could request additional time if needed. Member checking contributed to the credibility as participants could add, delete, or make changes to the verbal statement.

## **Transferability**

Transferability of the data was established when a thematic analysis of the findings was conducted. Through the thematic analysis, there became a familiarity with the data, assigned preliminary codes, identified themes, reviewed the themes, named the themes, and produced a report based on the data. Using thematic analysis helped to increase the transferability of the study to other studies of a similar context, population, and time. Cancio et al. (2018) conducted a similar study and arrived at similar conclusions. “The purpose of that study was to explore the sources of stress and to identify coping strategies special education teachers use to deal with this stress” (Cancio et al., 2018, p. 472). The study indicated stress interfered with the quality of work, but coping strategies helped to manage stress. Coping strategies special education teachers used included support by family and friends, listening to music, exercise, and yoga (Cancio et al., 2018). Participants in the study used alcohol, but alcohol tended to increase stress levels. Validation with another study increased the validity and reliability of the study.

**Dependability**

Dependability was established when the results remained stable over time. Other researchers should be able to conduct a similar study and achieve similar results. To increase the dependability of the research, an independent audit of the data was conducted by having another individual analyze the data and arrive at similar conclusions.

**Confirmability**

To increase the confirmability of the research, the data was continually checked and rechecked for accuracy. There were multiple readings of all transcripts and repeated reviews of the digital recordings. An audit trail was conducted to help establish confirmability, which included written details of the data collection process, the data analysis process, and the interpretation of the data. A record was kept regarding thoughts about the coding process and rationale for explaining themes.

**Summary**

The aim of the study was to gain a deeper insight into the perceived causes of the stress of special education teachers. Emergent themes developed based on the responses from participants in the individual virtual interviews and the virtual focus group session. The data were represented in the form of tables, and exact participant quotes were used from transcripts to validate each emergent theme under the appropriate research question. Research Question 1 found three recurring themes to define stress as perceived by special education teachers: lack of time, meeting expectations, and feeling overwhelmed. Research Question 2 uncovered four themes to respond to the question, including mandated meetings, high-profile parents/expectations/IEP process, difficult students, and lack of administrative support/consistency. Research Question 3 discovered three themes on how special education

teachers felt the impact of stress, which included school climate, becoming quiet or silent, facial appearance, and disengagement. The final research question provided insight through six themes: spending time with friends or colleagues, spending time with family, exercise, spirituality/mindfulness, alcohol, and quiet time. The dissertation concludes with the discussion and findings from Chapter 4. Included in the discussion are detailed descriptions of results, interpretations, and outcomes. Limitations and recommendations of the study, as well as implications for leadership, are presented and explained.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers and to identify support to reduce stress levels as identified by special education teachers. A second purpose of the study was to examine the commonalities in the experiences of special education teachers and to share common meanings and findings regarding stress-coping mechanisms. Special education teachers experienced increased levels of stress due to excessive paperwork, mandated compliance issues, increased workload, and a lack of support by administration. Stress symptoms manifest both physically and emotionally (Haydon et al., 2018). Teachers who experience high stress levels and do not have adequate coping mechanisms are at risk of leaving the profession (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). Four research questions provided data to support the purpose of the study:

**Research Question 1.** How do suburban special education teachers define stress?

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceived causes of stress impacting suburban special education teachers as determined by the special education teachers?

**Research Question 3.** How do suburban special education teachers' stress manifest in daily life?

**Research Question 4.** How do special education teachers in suburban schools cope with stress?

### Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

The qualitative phenomenological study identified the stressors of special education teachers and stress coping mechanisms. Data were collected through virtual semi-structured interviews and one virtual focus group session. Questions were vetted by a panel of experts, which produced an increase in the validity of the data and allowed for triangulation of the data

more accurately. Each data point collected contributed to the knowledge of the study and the understanding of the causes of the stress of special education teachers and coping mechanisms. The findings of the study demonstrated participants coped with stress in a variety of ways. Through the data from the participants' lived experiences, common themes emerged, and the results were detailed and referenced by each research question.

### **Research Question 1: How Do Suburban Special Education Teachers Define Stress?**

According to Tan and Yip (2018), Hans Selye has been known as the father of stress research and has defined stress as a “nonspecific response of the body to any demand” (p. 170). Special education teachers placed a different emphasis when defining stress. In analyzing the data regarding teachers’ definition of stress, the data revealed participants did not provide a specific definition for stress, rather participants attempted to define stress through the actions causing stress.

Two main themes emerged from the data: 27% of teachers reported a lack of time and the other 27% reported being overwhelmed. Four of the 15 special education teachers expressed a lack of time as a vital characteristic in defining stress. Contributing factors of stress were noted in the literature by Gumus and Işık (2018) and Cancio et al. (2018) who substantiated both a lack of time and special education teachers needing resources to cope with stress.

Four of the 15 participants defined a characteristic of stress as a feeling of being overwhelmed. Special education teachers who participated in the virtual interviews noted having many demands including increased workload, progress monitoring, lesson planning, managing student behavior, writing, and revising IEPs, grading, educational testing of students, and mandated scheduling meetings with associated timelines. When there was inadequate time to complete tasks, a sense of being overwhelmed occurred. Pignata et al. (2017) validated

participants' definition by reporting stress as a reaction to excessive pressures or demands, thus creating an environment of being overwhelmed and stressed.

The findings indicated teachers perceived the definition of stress based on the causes of stress instead of defining the term. The data contribute to the body of knowledge as other special education teachers and leadership may benefit by being able to identify the causes of stress and apply effective coping mechanisms.

### **Research Question 2: What Are the Perceived Causes of Stress Impacting Suburban Special Education Teachers as Determined by the Special Education Teachers?**

A nationwide study of instructional leaders to determine the causes of stress among teachers found the top stressors were teaching at-risk students without proper support (Gonzalez et al., 2017). The data from the virtual semi-structured interviews and focus group session found mandated meetings, high-profile parents with unrealistic expectations, and the IEP process, and a lack of administrative support and consistency, site responsibilities, collaborating with general education teachers, managing additional adults in the classroom, and mandated meetings with timelines were identified as contributing factors of stress by participants. Similar studies indicate the primary teacher stress factors as workload, time constraints, large class size, student behavioral issues, high-stakes testing, lack of resources, increased tasks, and educational bureaucracy (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Gumus & Işık, 2018; Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018).

The main contributing factor drawn from the data regarding teachers' stress was the lack of administrative support and inconsistency in applying policies and procedures. A first step for administrators is creating an awareness of stressors and causes and recognizing when interventions are needed (Clement, 2017). Administrators should strive to build trusting relationships with employees to understand and know when teachers are going through tough

times. Sixty percent of the participants expressed concerns regarding how administrators added to special education teacher stress levels. Participants in the study believed the micromanaging by administrators contributed significantly to stress level by making decisions regarding changes in curriculum without being part of the process. Special education teachers expressed a need for more autonomy within the department. Inconsistent communication and opposing directives from administrative staff contributed to increased stress levels. Participants reported increased frustration toward administrative staff due to a lack of knowledge regarding special education laws, practices, and methodology.

Research Question 2 can be addressed from a theoretical framework perspective such as transformational leadership. Leaders are in a position to address the concerns identified by participants in the study. Administrations utilizing transformational leaders may be in a better position to support special education teachers. Transformational leadership theory can create a deeper relationship between the leader of an organization and the team (Bărbîntă et al., 2017). Transformational leaders' key characteristics include relationship building, being visionary, being motivational, and being collaborative. School districts embracing transformational leadership theory could potentially address a primary stressor for special education teachers. These leaders have the ability to provide autonomy to the special education department and achieve goals through collaborative efforts. Haydon et al. (2018) believed administrators may also be a positive factor in providing support for teachers and a protective factor against teacher stress. Administrators who mitigate stress are knowledgeable about special education, are collaborative leaders, trustful, set a clear mission and vision, communicate, and have empathy (Haydon et al., 2018).

The findings of this study indicated that 47% of participants attributed an increased level of stress to difficult students. Challenging student behaviors were noted as a reason for the stress levels of teachers to increase and contribute to burnout (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018). Despite the literature, the data from the interviews and focus group suggested teacher stress was not due to the behavior of the students but rather because of the challenge of creating an appropriate educational plan for the student's individual needs. Leaders who are knowledgeable about appropriate methodologies to modify student behavior may assist special education teachers. Education specialists expressed concerns regarding leadership listening more to the special education teachers about best practices.

The three major themes related to special education teachers were developed from the data collection process and included a lack of administrative support and consistency toward policy and procedures (60%), interactions with high-profile parents with unrealistic expectations and involvement in the IEP process (47%), and addressing difficult student behavior (47%). The findings indicated a need for leadership to collaborate with special education teachers to alleviate stress.

Lazarus's cognitive model of stress theory is identified by two processes: cognitive appraisal and coping (Folkman et al., 1986). The Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory methodology can be generalized to a larger population and utilized by special education teachers and leaders to appraise and determine appropriate coping mechanisms. Teachers appraise a situation by determining if there is a threatening tendency and then whether or not the teacher possesses the resources to handle the situation (O'Toole, 2017). The Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory also emphasized individuals experiencing stress differently based on the resources the individual possesses. One suggestion for leadership is to conduct professional development

on stress and coping mechanisms. Staff who are knowledgeable about identifying stressors may be able to implement coping mechanisms early, prior to stress leading to burnout.

### **Research Question 3: How Do Suburban Special Education Teachers Feel the Impact of Stress in Daily Life?**

According to Kebbi and Al-Hroub (2018), teachers may be affected by the impact of stress as demonstrated by teachers' actions, decision-making, and job satisfaction. The data revealed a number of ways special education teachers felt the impact of stress. Participants in the virtual semi-structured interviews and focus group session identified the impact of stress as the following: becoming quiet or silent, school culture, facial appearance, disengagement, irritability, lack of focus, weight gain, and whining or crying. Participants received feedback from family and colleagues regarding becoming less interactive when under stress, resulting in appearing quiet and silent. Furthermore, feedback was given regarding a change in facial appearance with a scowling or frowning face associated with increased levels of stress. The primary themes emerging were becoming quiet or silent (40%), school culture (33%), and a change in facial appearance (27%).

School culture has the potential to impact professionals in a positive or a negative way. A positive school culture is "conducive to professional satisfaction, effectiveness, morale, and creating an environment that maximizes student learning and fosters collegiality and collaboration" (Teasley, 2017, p. 4). Negative school culture may lead to distrust and lower expectations, and teachers become resistant to collaboration. Some participants noted a disparity in the special education programs versus the general education programs. The school's focus was on higher achieving students rather than on students with disabilities creating a negative school culture for students in special education with increased levels of stress for the teachers.

School culture is the one area where leadership can have a direct impact on decreasing the impact of stress on special education teachers by engaging and recognizing the contribution of special education students and teachers. Transformational leaders help create a positive vision for their school by being inclusive of the diverse population of students (Liu, 2018).

#### **Research Question 4: How Do Special Education Teachers in Suburban Schools Cope With Stress?**

Similar studies recommend socioemotional learning, mentoring programs, mindfulness activities, acquiring sufficient amounts of sleep, physical activity, and having a social support network as being effective ways to cope with stress (Farmer, 2017; Gluschkoff et al., 2016; Gumus & Işik, 2018; Mitchell, 2015). Effective coping mechanisms generated by the data from the virtual semi-structured interviews and the focus group corroborated these findings with participants' use of physical activities and mindfulness activities, and teachers having a strong social support network. In addition, the participants' support mechanisms included spending time with family, colleagues, and friends. These support mechanisms provided participants with an opportunity to vent or focus on other positive aspects of life. As expected, the findings revealed 15 participants using some sort of coping strategy to handle work-induced stress. Coping strategies noted by participants included engaging in physical activities such as exercising; spending time with family, friends, and colleagues; listening to music; drinking alcohol; practicing mindfulness and prayer; having a positive attitude; and quiet time.

According to Wright et al. (2015), effective coping mechanisms are crucial in the workplace as organizations depend on an employee's ability to manage the various demands of the job. Gluschkoff et al. (2016) reported proven methods to reduce stress levels in the workplace included individuals gaining adequate nightly sleep, meditation, physical activity,

peer support, and mentorship programs. The findings from the studies corroborated the findings from the data collected during the semi-structured interviews and focus group. Specifically, the participants noted in the semi-structured interviews how mindfulness activities, physical activities, and having a strong social support network were effective methods of reducing stress.

Twenty-seven percent of participants used alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress. Participants attending happy hours with friends and colleagues had reduced stress levels. The participants' idea that the use of alcohol was a good coping mechanism was challenged in a peer-reviewed article suggesting alcohol increases stress levels (Cancio et al., 2018). Researching the impact of alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress revealed little significant data or research articles; therefore, a gap of knowledge exists. Additional studies are required to determine the positive or negative effects associated with alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Stressors cannot be eliminated from the school environment and teachers must learn strategies and techniques to manage stress (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Sixty-seven percent of participants attributed spending time with friends, and colleagues as an effective coping mechanism. The data from the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups reflected participants' use of the strategy with creating time to gather during the lunch hour to talk, vent, and debrief. Having conversations with friends and coworkers allowed participants time to discuss ideas, gain a different perspective about a situation, or discuss other positive topics. Social support networks are an effective method for teachers to cope with stress, especially for those colleagues of educators who are in the special education department (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018). Cancio et al. (2018) described feeling supported by family and friends as the most commonly used adaptive coping strategy.

Research conducted by Clement (2017) suggested teachers having a strong network of trusted colleagues to assist with stress by having discussions and asking for help. Haydon et al. (2018) found peer interaction and support cited the most as being a protective factor for stress. Colleagues who did simple acts such as offering assistance, being willing to collaborate, possessing a positive attitude, and being supportive of each other made stress more manageable (Haydon et al., 2018). Social events are another way in which colleagues can build relationships and supportive networks.

Based on the data from the virtual semi-structured interviews and focus group, a number of coping mechanisms have been identified to assist special education teachers with how to manage stress. Cancio et al. (2018) identified the causes of stress, but less emphasis has been placed on the coping mechanisms with which to manage stress. Special education teachers who do not possess effective coping mechanisms and who experience stress over a longer period of time are susceptible to burnout.

The resultant data from Research Question 1 presented three themes for defining stress: a lack of time, feeling overwhelmed, and not meeting expectations. Research Question 2 determined a lack of administrative support and consistency, difficult student behavior, high-profile parents with unrealistic expectations, the IEP process and mandated meetings significantly contributed to stress levels of special education teachers in the study. Research Question 3 gave the participants an opportunity to describe the personal impacts of stress as becoming quiet or silent, a change in facial appearance, and becoming disengaged as indicators of the impact of stress on participants. Finally, for Research Question 4, the participants in the study reported spending time with friends, colleagues, and family as effective ways to destress. In addition, exercising, practicing spirituality or mindfulness activities, drinking alcohol, and

having quiet time were most effective coping mechanisms for the group. Findings were derived from the study, but it is crucial to note the potential limitations of the study.

### **Limitations**

A qualitative research methodology used purposeful questions and selection of the participants. The study may have been strengthened if quantitative methods had been used in conjunction with the qualitative research. Quantitative methods provide concrete evidence, which is not subjective, whereas the design of qualitative research is strictly subjective. Every effort to minimize bias and report the information as presented by each participant. All recordings were listened to and each transcript was read multiple times to ensure the information was accurately reported. A possible limitation of the study was created by the potential bias of an individual being an administrator in the district where the study was being conducted and who previously oversaw the special education department. All of the participants of the study had previously been supervised by the administrator, which could potentially lead to a bias in the study. The concern was the responses from the participants may have been different if there had not been a prior relationship as a direct supervisor. The concern may be ameliorated by the fact the administrator was no longer working in the district and did not have the potential to negatively impact the participants' employment. Another limitation with a potential for bias for the study was all participants having a relationship with one another as all participants worked in the same district and attended the same special education meetings.

An additional limitation to the study was using only 15 teachers from one suburban school district in Southern California. The small sample size limited the available responses used to create data. Expanding the pool of research participants to include a variety of surrounding school districts with a more significant comparison of the commonalities of the data

would be possible. A larger sample size could enhance the reproducibility of the data in the study. Expanding the sample size to include general education teachers would allow for a comparison of the stressors of special education teachers versus general education teachers and to determine if stressors and coping mechanisms were similar.

Another limitation was the short length of the study, which occurred over 19 days. Extending the range of the research over the course of the school year would allow a variety of perspectives across a longer time frame. Other findings may emerge if participants were interviewed at different intervals over the course of the year. Stress levels vary depending on the time of year (beginning or end), the number of initial IEPs, and the number of transitional IEPs to a different school setting, which usually occurs at the end of the year. An extended study would allow the results to be generalized to a larger population of special education teachers.

A final limitation may be the demographics of the school district used in the study. Surrounding school districts are not as socioeconomically advantaged as the school district utilized. Special education departments in other districts may have a disproportionate number of students who display more severe disabilities or require more discipline. Therefore, the school district utilized for the study may have skewed the results of the data.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study examined the effects of stress on special education teachers and coping mechanisms as defined by the participants in a small suburban school district in Los Angeles, California. Recommendations were determined by the findings from the data generated from the participants' virtual semi-structured interviews and focus group and took into account the potential limitations of the study. Recommendations for future studies should address expanding the size of the sample to include more than 15 participants. Expanding the sample size allows

additional participants to share lived experiences about the perceived causes of stress of special education teachers and coping mechanisms deemed effective. Other qualitative instruments such as questionnaires, observations, and journaling should be added to delve deeper into the lived experience. A mixed methods study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative measures could create more depth of data for the study. Future studies should include wider socioeconomic demographics of the involved school districts. The perceived stressors of special education teachers may present differently in an urban or rural school district.

In addition, special education teachers are affected by different degrees of stress at various times of the year. Should the study be extended to cover at least one year, there would be an impact on the results. Similarities and differences may become prominent depending on the time of year during which the study was conducted. Participants in the study should be interviewed at least three times over the year to determine if perceived stressors and coping mechanisms have changed.

Another recommendation is to conduct the study in an area where there is no past history of employment in the school district to eliminate the potential for bias. Following these recommendations should increase the validity and reliability of the data. Consistent results should be easier to reproduce by extending the study with these recommendations.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings from the virtual semi-structured interviews, focus group session, and the literature review, recommendations were made for special education teachers, leadership, and policy makers. Recommendations evolved from both the feedback from the participants and the information garnered from the literature review. Special education teachers expressed a need to be part of the decision-making process through a collaborative approach. Some special

education teachers noted experiencing increased stress from administrators who micromanaged the team.

In response to participants' concerns, leadership should provide a regular forum where special education teachers can meet with peers, mentors, and administration to discuss stressors and effective coping mechanisms. Sessions should be voluntary, scheduled bimonthly and in a location with a more relaxed environment. These meetings would be nonevaluative and designed to assist special education teachers by listening, providing mentorships if needed, and being solution oriented. The administration should host an off-campus schoolwide social event quarterly to allow for teachers to gather in a setting other than academic. The research in this study suggests that having a strong social network helps to alleviate stress and is an effective coping mechanism.

Leadership should also provide teachers with opportunities for professional growth, which would assist teachers in identifying stressors, coping mechanisms, and the latest trends in special education. Understanding the current pedagogies in the field could lead to a reduction of stress and provide additional coping mechanisms. Teachers are lifelong learners and promoting a growth mindset toward professional development may alleviate stress as teachers are able to collaborate with peers and gain insights from the current trends in the field.

Educational institutions should aspire to hire transformational leaders to lead the charge in supporting special education teachers to form positive interpersonal relationships and build trust. Transformational leaders who implement evidence-based leadership practices support employees during stressful events and the day-to-day challenges of special education teachers. Transformational leaders provide the needed support for special education teachers, thus increasing the retention rates and potentially eliminating the need to replace and train new

special education teachers. Working with transformational leaders could apply to the general education population of teachers as well.

### **Implications for Leadership**

An important role for leadership is recognizing the concerns expressed in the study. Both a lack of consistency and a lack of administrative support were noted as contributing factors toward increased stress levels for special education teachers. Utilizing both transformational leadership theory and Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory), which work well together, can assist leadership by helping to identify stressors and coping mechanisms. Transformational leaders are charismatic, inspirational, and collaborative relationship builders, and motivate others toward a collective vision. Transformational leadership theory is a relational process between the administration and teachers, which empowers employees to work toward a common goal.

Transformational leaders build a level of trust and allow the members to make strategic errors and provide the team with autonomy. Transformational leadership theory is grounded in a style that fosters a relationship between the leader and the team. Transformational leaders who have built positive relationships with special education teachers may assist team members by identifying specific emotions. Once the feeling is identified, the leader may then help to identify effective coping mechanisms to de-escalate a situation. Transformational leaders may assist in building positive emotions in the workplace, thereby lessening the negative emotions that lead to stress.

Lazarus cognitive model of stress theory assists leadership by identifying two processes for individuals to manage stress: cognitive appraisal and ability to cope. Both are process-oriented approaches as to how an individual views a stressful situation. Cognitive appraisal occurs first when an individual determines whether or not the situation is threatening or presents

a safety concern (O'Toole, 2017). Once the initial determination has been made, a self-assessment determines whether the individual possesses adequate resources to cope with the event. Stress occurs when demands exceed a person's ability to cope. Individuals appraise each situation differently, and what is perceived as a stressor for one, may not be for another. Individuals' appraisal of a situation is based on different factors, including coping skills, time-lapse, experiences, personality, and situational demands (Prem et al., 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The study investigated the perceived causes of stress for special education teachers and the coping mechanisms to address the stress. The analysis focused on identifying the main causes of stress for special education teachers in a small suburban school district and what coping mechanisms teachers utilized to alleviate stress. Most of the special education teachers identified spending time with friends, colleagues, and family (67%) as the major way to cope with stress. Exercise and practicing spirituality and mindfulness activities (60%) assisted special education teachers with stress relief. Having instructional leaders and policy makers become more knowledgeable regarding the causes of stress and effective coping mechanisms would help to relieve the burden of stress for special education teachers.

Leadership and policy makers would benefit from recognizing the unique stressors of special education teachers and the need for additional support. Becoming educated regarding how to minimize stress by understanding the policies, procedures, and instructional strategies used by special education teachers can lead to limiting stress and fostering the development of all students. The conclusions reached by from the study can be generalized to all teachers affected by stress and are not limited to special education teachers.

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Appendix A. Formal Approval to Conduct Research

**Claremont Unified School District**



*Inspiring Students of Today. Leaders of Tomorrow!*

170 West San Jose Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711-5285  
(909) 398-0609 ext. 70202 FAX (909) 621-0180  
<http://www.cusd.claremont.edu>

District Superintendent



Board of Education



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January 13, 2020

RE: Identifying Stressors of Special Education Teachers: A Qualitative Phenomenological Approach

Dear Mrs. McNally,

Please let this letter act as confirmation of approval to conduct your research in Claremont Unified School District. We look forward to hearing the results of your study and how our own teachers might benefit from your findings.

Sincerely,



## Appendix B. Semi-structured Interview Protocol Questions for Suburban Special Education

### Teachers

1. Describe your educational background.
2. How many years have you worked in the district and specifically at the current site?
3. Discuss your school's cultural environment.
4. Why did you choose to become a special education teacher?
5. Describe your special education responsibilities at the site.
6. What does a typical school day look like?
7. What is your definition of stress?
8. How many IEP meetings did you attend during your last school year?

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level of IEP meetings:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

How many of those IEP meeting would you rate a 4 or 5 on the five-point scale?

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level. How can leadership assist with the stress level concerning IEP meetings?

9. Instructional Assistants, Behavioral Assistants, Health Assistants including LVN's), please list the type and number of assistants who have been assigned to your class.

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level in dealing with those assistants:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level. How can leadership assist with the stress level concerning interactions with the group of employees?

10. School administrators: please list the type and number of administrators which you have regular interaction with.

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level in dealing with those administrators:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level.

11. Parents: please list the type and number of interactions with parents on a daily/weekly basis.

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level in dealing with parents:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level. How can leadership assist with the stress level concerning interactions with parents?

12. Collaborating with General Education Teachers: please list the type and number of interactions collaborating with general education teachers on a daily/weekly basis).

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level in dealing with general education teachers:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level. How can leadership assist with the stress level concerning interactions collaboration with general education teachers?

13. Federal, State, County district and site mandates play a role in the level of stress experienced by special education teachers; how does various mandates affect your stress level? Meeting Mandates: please list the type and number of mandated meetings on a weekly basis.

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level in dealing with mandated meetings:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level. How can leadership assist with the stress level concerning mandated meetings?

14. Difficult students: please list the type and number of interactions with difficult students on a daily/weekly basis.

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level in dealing with difficult students:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level. How can leadership assist with the stress level concerning interactions with difficult students?

15. How does your stress level affect your teaching ability/responsibilities?

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level of your teaching ability and responsibilities:

1-not at all stressful 2-slightly stressful 3-somewhat stressful 4-very stressful 5-extremely stressful

16. Discuss any factors which have caused stress and were not considered.

17. How do you deal with the stress?

18. Are there specific times of the year or day which are more stressful than others, explain?

What is usually the cause of those times?

19. Does school administration add to or help to alleviate your stress levels? Please explain.

20. How can others visually see the effects of your stress? (students, parents, colleagues and/or administrators)

21. What coping mechanisms have you found to be effective in alleviating or minimizing stress while at work?

22. Are there any additional thoughts which I have not touched on which you would like me to understand about special education teachers and the perceived cause of stress?

## Appendix C. Focus Group Interview Protocol Questions for Suburban Special Education

### Teachers

The focus group questions were written at the completion of the semi-structured interview. The rationale for researcher was to delve deeper into the responses from the semi-structured interview questions. The questions were developed by the researcher and vetted by a panel of experts to increase the reliability and validity.

How many IEP meetings did you attend during your last school year?

1. How do special education teachers' feel the impact of stress in daily life? (RQ3)
2. How can leadership assist with coping mechanisms and minimize the stress of special education teachers? (RQ4)
3. What are effective ways to cope with stress? At work? At home? (RQ4)
4. What do you feel are the perceived causes of stress impacting special education teachers? (RQ2)
5. School administrators are a key individual on campus, how does administration add or alleviate your stress level as a special education teacher? (RQ2)
6. How stressful are IEP meetings and how do IEP meetings contribute to the stress level? (RQ2)
7. Instructional Assistants, Behavioral Assistants, Health Assistants including LVN's are a key component in special education, how do these individuals contribute to your stress level? (RQ2)
8. Parents are a critical component in the special education process, how do parents contribute to your stress level? (RQ2)
9. Oftentimes, special education teachers should collaborate with general education teachers, does the collaboration contribute or ease stress levels? (RQ2)

10. Federal, state, county, district and site mandates play a role in the levels of stress experienced by special education teachers, how is your stress level affected by these?  
(RQ2)
11. Students with severe behavioral issues may be present in special education classes, how does dealing with these students add to teacher stress level? (RQ2)
12. Does your stress level affect your teaching ability and responsibilities, explain? (RQ3)
13. Are there any additional thoughts which I have not touched on which you would like me to understand about special education teachers and the perceived cause of stress?

## Appendix D. Subject Matter Experts Email

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## Dissertation--Panel of Experts

 **Clarissa M. McNally** <cscanada13@hotmail.com> 

8/18/2019 12:51 PM

To: [REDACTED]

[Save all attachments](#)



Good Afternoon,

Thank you for agreeing to be my panel of experts for my dissertation. I will be conducting a phenomenological qualitative study on the causes of stress for special education teachers. When using a qualitative approach, it is imperative that I provide a level of reliability and validity to my research. This is where you come in! I have attached my survey questions for the semi-structured interview that I will be using. I need your expertise to evaluate the questions to ensure that I am addressing and asking the appropriate questions to truly understand the perceived causes of stress for special education teachers. My research will be centered around three questions:

1. How do suburban special education teachers define stress?
2. How does stress impact special education teachers?
3. What are the causes of stress impacting special education teachers?

Please take your time and review all the questions and provide input. I have attached a rubric to help you guide the evaluation of the questions. Additions/deletions and comments are truly appreciated as this will help define and answer to the above stated questions. If you have any questions, please feel free to email or call me at [REDACTED]. Again, thank you for being part of this process.

Sent from [Mail](#) for Windows 10

## Appendix E. Informed Consent

**Prospective Research Participant:** Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

### Project Information

**Project Title:** Identifying Stressors for Special Education Teachers: A Qualitative Phenomenological Approach

**Researcher:** Clarissa M. McNally

**Organization:** American College of Education

**Email:** ccanada13@hotmail.com

**Researcher's Faculty Member:** Scott Bailey

**Organization and Position:** American College of Education, Professor

**Email:** Scott.Bailey@ace.edu

### Introduction

I am Clarissa McNally, and I am a doctoral candidate student at American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Scott Bailey. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them then.

### Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study which will assist with understanding the causes of stress for special education teachers in a suburban area. This qualitative phenomenological study will examine the commonalities in the experiences of special education teachers.

### Research Design and Procedures

The study will use a qualitative methodology and phenomenological research design. Research results will be disseminated to specific participants within one year of the study. The study will comprise 15 participants, randomly selected, who will participate in the study. The study will involve interviews and/or focus groups to be conducted at sites most convenient for participants. After completion of the research, a debrief session will occur to conduct follow up information.

### Participant Selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as a special education teacher who can contribute much to the knowledge base, which meets the criteria for

this study. Participant selection criteria: special education teacher with at least three years of experience, currently employed and working in secondary education.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions and you do not have to participate. If you select to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

### **Procedures**

We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview and/or focus group. The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of stressors for special education teachers. The interview and focus group sessions will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy.

### **Duration**

The interview/focus group portion of the research study will require approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. If you are selected to participate in the interview portion, the time expected will be a maximum of 90. If you are chosen to be a focus group member, the time allotted for will be 60 minutes at a location and time convenient for the participant. A follow-up debriefing session will take if clarification is needed.

### **Risks**

The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you do not wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

### **Benefits**

While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about the causes of stress for special education teachers.

### **Confidentiality**

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the research. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation, which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information.

### **Sharing the Results**

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Participation is voluntary. At any time you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so without repercussions.

**Questions About the Study**

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact me at [ccanada13@hotmail.com](mailto:ccanada13@hotmail.com). This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, email [IRB@ace.edu](mailto:IRB@ace.edu).

**Certificate of Consent**

I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

I have accurately read or witnessed the accurate reading of the assent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm the individual has freely given assent.

Print or type name of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of faculty member: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.**

## Appendix F. SME Feedback

**Feedback from SME #1**

Your questions are fine, but I would approach it a little differently. Here are my thoughts and you can see if the changes fit the study:

1. For 1 thru 7, I would just be interested in their education and credentials, their years in education and special education, and the number of years the individual has taught in the special education field.
2. I would consider providing a clinically accepted definition of “stress” rather than have the teachers give their definition. With the accepted definition everyone is giving their response to the same concept.
3. You ask them to describe the factors which provide their stress (8 and 9) and then you ask them to respond to factors which may cause stress (11 to 21). I would consider just giving specific factors which may cause stress and use a 1 to 5 scale for them to rate how stressful those factors have been.

For example, for factors which may cause stress;

1. The IEP:

How many IEP meetings did you attend during your last school year?

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level of those IEP meetings:

no stress 1 2 3 4 5 very stressful

How many of those IEP meeting would you rate a 4 or 5 on the five-point scale?

Please list the factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level.

2. Instructional Assistants, Behavioral Assistants, Health Assistants (including LVN's)

Please list the type and number of assistants who have been assigned to your class.

On a 5-point scale, rate the typical stress level in dealing with those assistants:

no stress 1 2 3 4 5 very stressful

Please list specific factors which contributed to a high stress level and/or factors which contributed to a low stress level.

Continue with factors of school administration, parents, collaborating with teachers, meeting mandates, and perhaps dealing with difficult students. At the end, you may ask them to discuss any factors which have caused stress and were not considered.

### **Feedback from SME #2**

SME #2 chose to use a validation rubric for expert panel and rated a 4 (exceeds expectations) on all categories including: clarity, wordiness, negative working, overlapping responses, balance, use of jargon, appropriateness of responses listed, use of technical language, application to praxis, and relationship to problem. No areas were noted as not acceptable, below expectation, or meets expectations. When a clarifying email asked for specific verbiage to improve the interview questions, the SME stated the questions were thorough and addressed the research questions.

### **Feedback from, SME #3**

SME #3 stated the questions flowed and progressed in a logical manner. One suggestion was to give the participants a common definition of stress as there will be consistency and create continuity between all participants.