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Stressors of Special Education Teachers Working With Autistic Students With Behavioral Challenges

Malisa Anderson
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Malisa Anderson

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Stressors of Special Education Teachers Working With Autistic Students With
Behavioral Challenges

by

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MA, Concordia of Portland, 2016

MA, Liberty University, 2015

BS, Fayetteville State University, 2011

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Human and Social Services

Walden University

May 2021

Abstract

In special education there are disabilities and health concerns teachers have to keep at the forefront when working with autistic students. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain knowledge and understanding regarding special education teachers' perceptions of the stressors they experience when interacting with students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and who also have behavioral challenges. This study was grounded in transactional theory. Six participants were included, and semi-structured interviews were conducted via social media calls and phone calls. The following themes emerged: Participants believed that autistic students, while having behavior challenges, were capable of calming themselves, adhering to social norms, and achieving high academically. Participants also perceived that these students caused direct and indirect stressors of which they sought strategies, support, and training. Future research should be expanded to include more school districts in different states. The implications of teacher stress related to the work demands of supporting and instructing students with autism manifest itself in high turnover rates, missed work because of health issues, veteran teachers leaving the profession, and students not being served educationally or in some cases even harmed. This study was limited to one school district in one area of the Southern United States. The findings in this research may provide some insight for positive change with regard to these implications: lower teacher stress levels, lower turnover rates for schools, less absenteeism, veteran teachers choosing to stay in the profession longer, a higher level of instruction in special needs classrooms.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to give all honor and glory to God, who has kept me throughout this amazing journey. “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13, KJV)

I dedicate this study to my children, Diamond and Aj, who are my heart and soul. Always know that you can accomplish all of your goals and dreams as long as you believe, work hard and keep God first. And last but not least, to my mother Manuela and sister Melody, I love you. You all have always been my inspiration and I thank you for always supporting me. May God continue to bless and shine in your lives.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teacher stress is often a result of different factors, which may include individual, environmental, and coping factors (Foley & Murphy, 2015). One type of stressor in the classroom, student disruptive behavior, is associated with higher stress levels in special education teachers (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Compared to other occupational stressors, teacher stress is more associated with mental health challenges and difficulties (Schonfeld et al., 2017). For instance, teachers who worked extensively with students who exhibited disruptive behavior experienced stress and burnout (Schonfeld et al., 2017). Stress management among teachers is important to minimize negative outcomes that can affect their job performance (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). These challenges can include, but are not limited to, property decimation, physical animosity, self-damage, and tantrums and can become significant obstructions to social and instructive advancement (Paquette & Rieg, 2016). Such behaviors also put children at risk of rejection and confinement from social, educational, family, and community activities (Haydon et al., 2018).

According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020), North Carolina had intelligence quotient data available for 89.2% of children identified with ASD. Of those children, 30.3% had an intellectual disability in 2019. Boys were more likely to be identified with ASD than girls (CDC, 2019). White and Black children were more likely to be identified with ASD than Hispanic children (CDC, 2019). Hispanic children were less likely to be identified with ASD than White or Black children (CDC,

2019). This may reflect cultural and/or socioeconomic differences, such as delayed or lack of access to services, as compared to other groups in North Carolina (CDC, 2019).

Background of the Problem

According to the United States Census Bureau, for the 2019–2020 school year there were 18 elite public schools in Lee County, North Carolina serving 12,073 students. Lee County, North Carolina public schools have a diversity score of 0.62, which is higher than the North Carolina average of 0.46 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The minority enrollment is 59% (majority Hispanic), and the student–teacher ratio is 15:1 (Ballotpedia, 2019). According to Autism Society of North Carolina (2019), the CDC reported that the prevalence rate of ASD in 2017 was 1 in 68, a 30% increase since 2012 when it was 1 in 88.

Given these challenges, the role of the special education teacher becomes more imperative. In special education, there are several disabilities and health concerns teachers have to be mindful of when working with autistic students. These concerns can cause stress and anxiety for teachers because individual and classroom safety is always a concern (Haydon et al., 2018). Role conflicts may be hard to reconcile. Role overload is another factor for special education teachers when the workload is more than time permits (Haydon et al., 2018). Role ambiguity is generated when teachers are not sure of what do to in certain situations or expectations are not clearly understood (Haydon et al., 2018). An example of this would be how to follow action plans when a student experiences health concerns on a regular basis. Interpersonal anxieties or stressors that

are created by other staff members, as well as lack of social support from other teachers or special education staff, can also cause stress and anxiety.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore special education teachers' perceptions of the stressors that are associated with instructing children with ASD who have behavioral challenges. There were several studies related to this topic but none focused on the perceptions of special education teachers working with children with behavior challenges and ASD. Also, the studies that were related to this topic were mixed methods, were lacking a diverse sample, and did not include urban area perceptions of special education teachers. Therefore, there was a gap in the literature that the current study addressed with a qualitative approach.

Significance

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain knowledge and understanding regarding special education teachers' perceptions of the stressors when working with ASD students who have behavioral challenges. Interviews with special education teachers were conducted to understand what these teachers feel, think, and believe about working with ASD students with behavior challenges despite the lack of proven effectiveness toward enhancing social skills for students (see Katz et al., 2016). As occupational stress in schools continues to increase, it is important to recognize more fully the sources of occupational stressors for teachers working with students with ASD (Greenberg et al., 2016). Although researchers have studied the effects of occupational stressors on school teachers and other school officials (Katz et al., 2016), limited research

addressed the effects of occupational stress on special education teachers working with ASD students with behavior challenges (Greenberg et al., 2016). Like other areas of education, special education is subject to occupational stressors that may negatively impact special education teachers (Brunsting et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study will be grounded in transactional theory. Lazarus and Folkman (1987) wrote the seminal work on transactional theory with contributions from Cox (1978). The word *transaction* denotes that stress related to an individual's occupational duties is not necessarily a product of the work environment or an expression of an individual's reactions to the work environment (Cox, 1978). Stress reflects a combination of motives, values, and beliefs regarding a work environment whose characteristics may pose harm, threats, or challenges to the individual as a result of being in that environment (Lazarus, 1990). Transactional theory suggests that stress is the direct product of a transaction between an individual and their environment, which may tax their resources and threaten their well-being (McLeskey et al., 2014). Stress can be positive or negative for a person. Positive pressure (eustress) causes people to adjust to their surroundings, create adapting abilities, and increment their attention to issue zones (McLeskey et al., 2014). Negative pressure surpasses their adapting capacities, strains their physical and mental frameworks, and can result in physical as well as mental issues (McLeskey et al., 2014). Stress discernment is unique to each person. However, a more recent description of this theoretical model suggests a better pathway that may explain the cause of the underlying

psychological and physiological mechanisms that underpin the process and experience of stress (Haydon et al., 2018).

Any part of the workplace can be seen as a stressor by the assessing person. However, the individual examination of requests and capacities can be impacted by various variables, including character, situational requests, adapting aptitudes, pervious encounters, time pass, and any present pressure state effectively experienced (Prem et al., 2016). One multidisciplinary survey indicated that stressors apply their influence through how an individual sees and assesses them (Ganster & Rosen, 2013).

According to the transactional theory, the experience of workplace stress is associated with exposure to workplace scenarios and a person's appraisal of a difficulty in coping (McLeskey et al., 2014). This experience is typically joined by endeavors to adapt to the fundamental issues and by changes in mental working, conduct, and capacity (McLeskey et al., 2014). To recognize these external and internal elements of workplace stress, Carton and Fruchart (2014) outlined another modified transactional theory. This theory represented the sources of the stressor; the perceptions of those stressors in relation to the person's ability to cope; the recognition of stress arising, including perceived ability to cope; the consequences of coping; and the general feedback that occurs during this process (Carton & Fruchart, 2014).

Research Questions

The follow research questions (RQs) were addressed in this study:

RQ1: What are perceptions of special education educators concerning occupational stressors while working with students who have ASD and behavioral challenges?

RQ2: Which coping strategies are most often utilized by teachers working with students with autism who have behavior challenges?

Nature of the Study

The goal of this study is to address how teachers experience stressors when working with students who are autistic with behavioral challenges. I sought to understand the human experience; therefore, a qualitative design was appropriate (see Patton, 2015). A qualitative approach provides a platform for learning about the experiences of those who have experienced the phenomenon as explained by the individuals' words (Patton, 2015). I selected special education teachers working with children with ASD with behavior challenges because these participants would have the most knowledge and information to provide. Each participant was required to have a minimum of 1 year of experience.

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the special education teachers working with autistic students with behavioral challenges (see Higgs et al., 2012). Phenomenological research encourages the respondents to describe personal experiences as a means of learning the essence of a particular phenomenon (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Participants were asked to answer open-ended interview questions in a semistructured format. IRB approval and informed consent were obtained prior to the interviews. Each

interview was recorded and transcribed prior to coded analysis. Participants had the option to review the transcript once completed. The data were analyzed to identify recurring themes.

I recruited eight to 13 participants to participate in semistructured interviews conducted in person or by other means such as social media calls. Because this was a qualitative study, fewer participants were interviewed to obtain a deep, rich understanding of their perceptions. Calls of any sort are a means of connecting with a population that is geographically dispersed, and can support a researcher in gathering more data from a broader population.

Open-ended interview questions were used to collect rich, in-depth data from the participants. To be mindful of epoche and avoid influencing the data gathered, I took notes to allow me to explore my personal thoughts and feelings related to the study. I engaged in peer debriefing to discuss objectivity and gain insights from an outside party. I was mindful of how the subject matter related to my personal experiences and beliefs to avoid thrusting my ideas onto the participants.

I had interest in the outcome of this study because I am a special education teacher working with autistic students with behavioral challenges in Lee County, North Carolina. I was mindful and acknowledged my presumptions and biases as they became known. I enlisted the support of peers to participate in debriefing to manage my bias. I also submitted the transcripts of the interviews to the respondents and offered them an opportunity to make additional comments.

Assumptions, Challenges, and Barriers

The study was affected by factors that limited its findings. The major challenge of the study was the unwillingness of teachers to share some of the problems related to their experiences in classrooms due to the fear of retaliation. Other challenges were the confidentiality and privacy of teachers and staff members. Teacher assistants, students, and people who did not work closely with ASD students with behavior challenges or had worked less than 1 year in the special education sector were not considered for participation in this study. Data from participants were kept secret and were not disclosed to any third party. All participants in this study were handled with care and caution to ensure that they felt safe and comfortable to contribute to the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the stressors associated with instructing children with ASD and behavioral challenges. Teachers who experience prolonged periods of stress can develop mild to serious health problems as well as burn-out (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Although teacher stress level has been a concern among educational policymakers nationally and internationally, there was little research addressing teachers' perceptions of stressors in their environments. Research on the level of perceived stress among special education (SPED) teachers was scarce. There is minimal research on the stress level of teachers who work with students with ASD who have behavior problems. Because of this scarcity, research on stress in the work-place was reviewed as well as research on teachers from mainstream education and SPED. Research on how teachers cope with stress was also

reviewed as well as the secondary effects of teachers being under stress along with policy recommendations on how to lower teacher stress and increase work satisfaction.

The implications of teacher stress related to the work demands of supporting and instructing students with autism manifest in high turnover rates, missed work because of health issues, veteran teachers leaving the profession, and students not being served educationally or in some cases even harmed (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Chapter 2 includes a description of the theoretical framework, which was transactional theory. The literature reviews begin with an explanation of the different components of transactional theory related to stress. Peer-reviewed literature is reviewed in accordance with each part of the transactional theory, followed by a summary of the chapter.

Theoretical Foundation

The transactional stress theory was the basis of this study. Lazarus (1987) wrote the seminal work on transactional theory with major contributions from Cox (1978) and Folkman (1987). Transactional theory suggests that stress is the direct product of a transaction between an individual and their environment, which may tax their resources and threaten their well-being (McLeskey et al., 2014). Stress can be positive or negative for a person. Positive pressure (eustress) causes people to adjust to their surroundings, create adapting abilities, and increment their attention to issue zones. Negative pressure surpasses their adapting capacities, strains their physical and mental frameworks, and can result in physical as well as mental issues (McLeskey et al., 2014). Stress discernment is unique to each person. However, a more recent description of this theoretical model suggests a better pathway that may explain the cause of the underlying psychological and

physiological mechanisms that underpin the overall process and experience of stress (Haydon et al., 2018).

The word *transaction* denotes that stress related to an individual's occupational duties is not necessarily a product of the work environment or an expression of an individual's reactions to the work environment (Cox, 1978). Stress does not occur automatically. It is developed by the effect of the transformations that occur in an individual's environment (Aydin & Kaya, 2016). Stress reflects a combination of motives, values, and beliefs regarding a work environment whose characteristics may pose harm, threats, or challenges to the individual as a result of them being in that environment (Lazarus, 1990). Cox and Griffiths (2010) integrated structural aspects of process-oriented approaches to stress and described them in terms of five fundamental components:

- Antecedent factors: exposure to both the classical hazards of work and those inherent in the design and management of work and work organizations (psychosocial hazards).
- Cognitive processes that give rise to the emotional experience of stress deriving from the employee's perceptions of the demands placed on them, their ability to cope with those demands, their needs, and the support that they receive both at work and outside of work.
- The psychological, behavioral, and physiological correlates of the emotional experience of stress, some of which represent attempts at coping.

- The wider or secondary effects of stress that may be expressed in terms of ill health and poor social and organizational behavior, which have implications for the employee's organization, family, and social situation.
- Feedback from the wider environment partly reflecting the success or otherwise of coping. This, in a sense, completes a cycle of activity that establishes the stress process as something that is ongoing.

Transactional theory is based on the mechanism by which exposure to the work environment in terms of a person's life experience of demands, control, and social support drive the manifestation of stress experienced by the individual (Cox & Griffiths, 2010). Transactional theory also describes the individual's reactions to stress; their attempts at coping with stress; and the effects on their health, behavior, and others in their environment based on the level of the individual's cognitive appraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1987; Lazarus, 1990).

Cognitive appraisal is associated with negative emotional experiences of stress by the individual. Cognitive appraisal is also related to attempts by the individual to cope, and with psychological, behavioral, and physiological changes in the individual experiencing stress in a work environment (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986). The processes involved in cognitive appraisal demonstrate both feedforward and feedback as well as the interactions of different parts of the individual's environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). This system is complicated and unstable as well as being a total paradigm shift away from the conventional linear mechanistic system as described by other theories on stress. Cognitive appraisal finds its origins in the work of Folkman and Lazarus (1984)

who focused on the clinical psychology at the individual level. This model was further developed by Cox and his colleagues and continues to evolve today.

The first development of transactional theory as it relates to cognitive appraisal of the individual was an emphasis on the individual's perception of happenings and events in their environment (Cox, 1980; Lazarus, 1990). Individuals tend to ignore data from the environment as the determinant of the work-related stress and their overall health. The second development involved the appraisal process of the individual's ability to meet the demands of their work environment (Cox, 1980; Lazarus, 1990). The individual's ability to meet such demands might change with tiredness, illness, or age (Cox, 1980; Lazarus, 1990). Situations at work might become stressful as a result of the person being tired due to long working hours or personal problems at home. Interactions at work may be stressful to the individual who is ill or because they are aging and their skill set is changing. Lazarus (1990) explained that;

Making explicit the role played by individual ability in the appraisal process opens up the possibility of linking stress concerns to organizational functions such as selection, training, and employee support. Furthermore, the concern for issues of "individual ability" has acted as a Trojan horse for introducing related concepts such as emotional intelligence, stress resistance, and resilience into our consideration of work-related stress. (p. 23)

The third development was the discovery that if individual demands and abilities were equal, then underdemand and overdemand may cause the individual to experience stress (Lazarus, 1990). Cox (1980) examined repetitive and monotonous work practices that

should cause little stress on the individual. Cox then looked at the effects on individual health. It was clear to Cox that low-demand work could negatively impact the health of an individual based on the level of stress the individual experiences from work interactions with colleagues.

The fourth development was to examine the important functional nuances in relation to cognitive appraisal as it drove the individual's needs and requirement for demands to be seen as important to the individual (Cox, 1980). Lastly, Cox (1980) examined how stress appraisal affected practical risk management at the organizational level:

First, it was necessary to position the work-related stress process within a traditional health and safety framework and, second, it was necessary to develop a psychosocial taxonomy of stressors to facilitate risk assessment. It was necessary to draw out from the research on work-related stress and the conceptualization of stress, a set of process principles for applying psychosocial risk management. (p. 30)

The most significant hurdle of the transactional stress theory is that it is difficult to operationalize in environments such as a classroom with students who have ASD. The drawbacks of measuring work-related stress using transactional theory can be observed in a study to define a case of work-related stress (Cox et al., 2006). This case study had the goal of identifying a definition for work-related stress for use in a large-scale national study. Cox et al. (2006) stated "this study's objective was the assimilation of the views of

national-level experts from eight broadly defined stakeholder groups that hold a vested interest in policy and research developments as they relate to work-related stress (p. 7).

This study included employers, unions, doctors, psychologists, and sociologists as well as legal professionals, government officials, and other policy makers. Cox et al. identified the following themes related to elements of a transactional case definition of stress:

- The declared experience of work-related stress.
- Evidence of unreasonable exposure to psychosocial hazards associated with work.
- Evidence of psychological ill-health (anxiety and depression) of equivalence to clinical morbidity.
- Changes in work behavior (absence) or presentation to a health professional for stress-related symptoms.
- The Work-Related Stress: A Theoretical Perspective 47 absence of negative affectivity.

The authors of this study concluded that the case-study definition did reflect the transactional nature of the stress process and was an accurate translation for the development of an assessment tool to be used in future large-scale research studies on work-related stress (Cox, Griffith & Houdmont, 2006). But the complexity of the study highlighted the fact that measuring work-related stress was difficult to accomplish in an efficient and expedient manner while at the same time remaining true to transactional theory (Cox, Griffith & Houdmont, 2006).

Theories describing work-related stress are classified into the early stimulus and response-based models and the later contemporary models that involve psychological responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Transactional theory of stress finds itself in the contemporary family and is identified as a process theory (Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1990). Transactional models of stress have proven through research to provide the best account of the experiences of work-related stress despite its challenges in regard to measurements and constructs in different environments (Lazarus, 1990; Folkman, 2013). Transactional theory may provide us with a lens to examine the experiences and coping mechanisms of students who are attempting to meet the needs of students with ASD. As such, the experience of workplace stress according to the transactional theory, is associated with exposure to particular workplace scenarios, and a person's appraisal of a difficulty in coping. This experience is typically joined by endeavors to adapt to the fundamental issues and by changes in mental working, conduct and capacity (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). In order to recognize these external and internal elements or workplace stress, (Carton, A., Fruchart, E. (2014) outlined another modified transactional theory. This theory represented the sources of the stressor, the perceptions of those stressors in relation to his/her ability to cope, the recognition of stress arising, including perceived ability to cope, the consequences of coping, and all general feedback that occurs during this process.

Researchers do not agree on a concrete definition of stress and find it hard to pin down a clear picture of the cause of work-related stress. The transactional model of stress will provide us with a somewhat solid framework through which we can examine teacher

stress for those that work with ASD student with behavior problems. The studies that follow in this section are related to tractional models of stress. They are organized into the following categories: antecedent factors; cognitive processes; psychological, behavioral, and physiological correlates; secondary effects of stress; and environmental feedback. Within each section studies will be presented and placed into the wider context of stress experienced by teachers as they serve students diagnosed with ASD.

Antecedent Factors

Antecedent factors comprise an individual's exposure to both the normal hazards of work as well as those inherent in the design and management of work and the overall organization (Cox & Griffith, 1995). These factors include psychosocial hazards that are common in any organization. The perceived expectation of parents, administrative demands, factors related to student outcomes, and the anxiety of possibly being fired from their job have a huge impact on teachers having stress (Aydin & Kaya, 2016). According to Boshoff, Potgieter, and Elis (2018) other antecedent factors of stress could be unsatisfactory working conditions, workload, pupil behavior and attitudes, lack of promotional prospects, and poor colleague relationships. Furthermore, teachers experiencing stress may develop health problems and/or experience burn out leading to a negative impact on students (Aydin & Kaya, 2016). Teacher efficacy might also decrease as a result of a teacher being under prolonged stress (Aydin & Kaya, 2016). Other antecedent factors may include perceived administrative support, monetary security, occupational problems and the behavior of the students (Aydin & Kaya, 2016). Hanson

(2013) argues that teacher efficacy is imperative and that educators need to believe that they are doing a good job and effectively providing learning opportunities to students. This he stated would lower levels of perceived stress. The researcher further posited that when teachers feel job satisfaction, they are more engaged, which in return amplifies student achievement (Hanson, 2013). The researcher concluded that it is imperative that teachers find ways to deal with stress by developing resilience toward factors in their environment that may be contributing to their level of stress such as being optimistic and flexible.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik, (2015) argue that “supportive school environments and positive social relations with parents, colleagues, and the school leadership are also predictive of teachers’ job satisfaction and motivation to stay in the profession whereas time pressure and discipline problems are predictive of lower levels of job satisfaction” (p. 182). The researchers went on to attribute job dissatisfaction as a major antecedent factor of stress that can lead to burnout in teachers.

Accountability may also be a source of stress on teachers. Berryhill, Linney, and Fromewick (2009) examined the relationships between burnout and teachers’ perceptions of the state accountability system specifically their role in improving student outcomes. Most states require that students having ASD have access to grade-level standards and take standardized assessments the same as their peers (Berryhill, J.; Linney, J.; Fromewick, 2009). These researchers examined the relationship between teacher efficacy and burn out caused by stress. The researcher found:

In terms of self-efficacy, teachers had few concerns about personal factors, such as their own pedagogical capabilities, but often believed that situational, student-related factors (e.g., home conditions) played a role. In the context of accountability policies, efficacy has a new twist, as task attainment is evaluated not by teachers' direct performance but rather indirectly via their students' test scores. Teachers' lack of efficacy may represent their relieving stress by absolving themselves from responsibility for student outcomes, a typical outcome among those who implement policies (Berryhill, J.; Linney, J.; Fromewick, 2009, p. 9)

The researchers recommended that teachers should have stress-reduction interventions such as awareness and training. This would require more professional development that would help teachers avoid burn-out. Further it was recommended that teachers should have more of an opportunity to interact with policy makers both at the state and local levels (Berryhill, J.; Linney, J.; Fromewick, 2009).

Another major challenge of the special education teacher is classroom discipline according to Scott, (2017). Classrooms that include students with special needs can present the worst discipline issues encountered in schools (Scott, 2017). The special education co-teacher is often used as the classroom disciplinarian. Scott (2017) goes on to say that the challenge for special education teachers will be not so much how to implement classroom management as how to convince an untrained teacher to engage in these effective practices. As a general rule, it makes sense to consider the structure of a classroom management system in consideration of the lowest common denominator

(Scott, 2017). “That is, teachers must consider the degree of management necessary to maintain success in the most challenging students and use that as a guideline for a class wide management plan (Scott, 2017, p.98). Since the special education teacher is presented with the problem of providing quality instruction in the classroom while being the designated disciplinarian, training on how to integrate both is necessary in order to help teacher cope with stress levels.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik, (2015) concluded that age was a major antecedent factor regarding stress. The researchers found that a teachers age was the biggest determinate of their coping strategy. Younger teachers in this study experienced a heavy workload compared to their older peers. In addition to this high work load they possessed high career ambitions. The main strategy of the young teachers was to work long hours in order to get as prepared to teach as they possible could (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Young teachers reported being tired and exhausted as a result of these long work hours. However, they also reported effectively coping with perceived stress by taking vacations, going out with friends, and relaxing on the weekends. The researchers did not contact young teachers who had already left the profession to gien their perceptions.

Middle-aged teachers also high ambitions and worked long hours. In this age group, the weekends and the vacations were not sufficient for recovery, and teachers reported severe exhaustion and psychosomatic reactions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Unlike the younger teachers who avoided sick leave, the middle-aged teachers used their sick leave and took days off from work as a coping strategy. Some middle-aged teachers

studied began thinking about working part time and using their retirement or taking an early retirement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

Older teachers, or the senior group as the researchers called them, were not able to work long hours and could not sustain a heavy work load (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). These teachers had a lower overall level of ambitions and worked fewer hours to prepare for lessons (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). They used time after school to wine down, exercise, relax and work on hobbies. However, they still reported high levels of exhaustion and burnout. In addition to reducing the amount of work done to prepare to teach, they also used sick leave as a survival strategy(Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Teachers in this group sought opportunities to work part time on a lower salary, reduce workload by taking on less responsibility, took disability pensions, or retired from the profession all together. These teachers reported feeling burnout, depressed mood, and health problems associated with prolonged stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

The results of the research of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) are important to this study because the age of teachers interviewed could be a major determinate in regard to how they treat students with ASD who have behavior problems. Coping strategies such as missed work by veteran teachers, may have a negative impact on students being able to be successful in the SPED setting. Additionally, veteran teachers who possess a wealth of knowledge my leave to profession early cause there to be a vacuum in certain situations. Age as an antecedent factor may be the most important predictor of teacher stress and the way that they cope in order to be effective and support students.

Teacher leadership may be an antecedent factor that can add to an already stressed out educator (Kililinc, A. C.; Cemaloglu, N.; Savas, 2015). While conducting research into teacher leadership and the role it plays in causing additional stress, Kililinc et al. (2015) noted that there was a positive relationship between teachers who had leadership responsibilities and their level of stress compared to teachers that didn't. This would seem to support the research that points to workload as a major antecedent factor in the level of teacher stress. Kililinc et al., defined teacher leadership as “displaying leadership behaviors inside and outside of the classroom and participating in the process of creating a learning-focused culture in school; colleagues motivating one another; and the development, implementation, and evaluation of high-quality teaching practices” (p. 3). Teacher leaders play a vital role in the school by mentorship and helping to increase the level of teacher professionalism. Many of these teachers are also charged with serving students who have ASD and behavior problems either directly or indirectly. Their role in the organization is also linked to helping to lower the stress of other teachers. The possibility that these individuals may be also under stress could compound the problem of teacher stress organizationally.

Cognitive Processes

Teaching is argued to be one of the most stressful occupations in many countries (Burak & Atabek, 2019). This stress in teachers can lead them to career dissatisfaction, depression and rising attrition rates as a result of how teachers process their unique situations cognitively. Cognitive processes cause the individual to experience stress from their perception of their environment and the demands placed on them. These processes

also describe the individual's ability to cope with work related demands, their needs, and the support that they receive from colleagues and family (Cox & Griffith, 1995). Aydin and Kaya (2016) noted in their research that "it is observed that among methods of coping with stress, most preferred ones are spending time with beloved ones, looking things at bright side and creating an environment" (p.6). According to Boshoff,

Potgieter, and Ellis (2018) "Job demands that are perceived by teachers as a threat to their psychological or physical well-being, have long been known to lead to negative affective experiences, such as frustration and anxiety" (p. 34). The researchers go on to say that "this could ultimately cause burnout, emotional exhaustion and have been reported to contribute desistence rates of more than 30%" (p.15) If not addressed, stress my become a disabling problem that can have a negative impact on teachers' job satisfaction and on teachers' overall effectiveness with learners (Boshoff et al., 2018).

The way teachers process stress cognitively can lead to mental distress which is a predictor of career dissatisfaction (Burak & Atabek, 2019). Burak & Atabek found "a strong positive relationship between severity of depression and perceived stress level while career satisfaction was weakly and negatively associated with both severity of depression and perceived stress level" (p.45) Teachers who are perceived to be hard working and empathetic are more likely to experience stress and depression (Donahoo et al., 2018).

Coping are necessary particularly in regard to special education teachers according to Cancio et al. (2018). Special education teaches are faced with increasingly large case-loads, a lack of clarity in their job descriptions, a lack of support from

administration, excessive paper, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and minimal to no collaboration with their colleagues (Cancio et al., 2018). These factors, when taken together by themselves or in any combination caused stress and made teachers more likely to leave the profession all together. However, according to Cancio et al. (2018), “when teachers were provided with enough instructional support to ensure high teaching quality and student engagement, as well as emotional support to monitor students’ long-term progress, they were more likely to experience reduced work- related stress Burnout” (p.34) These authors further concluded that teachers who had access to coping mechanisms had reduced negative response to stressors in their environment. These cognitive processes or mechanisms changed the teachers emotional state during stressful situations. In additions to normal methods of active coping such as exercise, meditation, free-time activities this study showed that a support network of educators, particularly where mentoring is involved, can provide a cognitive coping mechanism by which new teachers cope effectively with stress (Cancio et al., 2018). Cancio et al., surmised; In the analysis of coping strategies, this study found that listening to music and feeling supported by family and friends were the most commonly used adaptive coping strategies. Dancing was the only strategy identified that statistically predicted lower stress. Other coping strategies including counseling, eating, use of prescription medication, use of alcohol, and use of recreational drugs, predicted an increase in stress. Interestingly, eating was associated with increased stress for two groups of teachers: experienced teachers and teachers from self-contained classrooms. Perhaps the experienced teachers are no longer able to balance the long hours that their heavy

workload requires with other more adaptive leisurely activities, such as exercise, yoga, etc. (p.50)

Being a member of a professional organization of teachers who also served students with special needs was also reported to have a positive impact on teacher stress levels. Special educators who view themselves as stress-free are more likely to engage in effective classroom practices, experience greater job satisfaction, improve their instructional capacity, and positively impact student achievement. Cancio et al. (2018) recommend that district and school administrators need to provide staff development on how to deal with stress in the workplace and actively monitor teachers particularly those who serve students with special needs such as ASD to ensure they are not experiencing high levels of stress.

The final cognitive process that will be examined through the literature is teacher attitudes toward SPED environment. Full inclusion is the current trend in education where students who have identified learning disabilities are placed in classes with their mainstream peers. Galaterou and Antoniou (2017) sought to “identify teachers’ existing attitudes with respect to inclusive education, to detect the factors affecting them” (p. 644). The researchers found that there was not relationship between the inclusion environment and the levels of teacher stress. Teacher opinions toward the inclusion environment was marginally positive. Teachers recognized the benefit of the inclusion environment and had an overall positive attitude (Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017). These authors failed to find any evidence of a negative attitude causing additional stress in teachers as a result of the inclusion model of education. However, Galaterou and Antoniou did find this; the

stress caused by ‘the impact of the profession in personal life’ was also associated with less positive attitudes. Teachers who fail to separate their personal life from their professional life appear to present difficulties in managing demanding situations generally in everyday work. By extension, the psychological damage might contribute to their ability to effectively implement the integration policy. Therefore, they are negatively disposed to it (p. 654). This discovery is telling in that teachers who seek to lower their stress levels in their personal life by participating in hobbies, exercising, spending time with family, etc, are feeling the intrusion of work and causing their stress levels to go even higher.

Psychological, Behavioral, and Physiological Correlates

Stress is a physiological and psychological reaction of an individual toward him/herself and external environment as a result of being affected by involved environment and working conditions (Aydin & Kaya, 2016). Psychological, behavioral, and physiological correlates of the emotional experience of stress deal with an individual’s ability to cope in the work environment, their actions in the work environment as it relates to dealing with stress, and their overall health is the focus of the literature presented in this section. According to Avic Bozgeyikli, and Kesici (2017) “Although the concept of stress that has become an inseparable part of everyday life is a subject which is studied excessively in the psychology literature, there is no consensus among researchers about how to define it.” (p.2) Despite the difficulty these researchers observed in defining stress they believed that psychological of the individual played a fundamental role in shaping the relationships established by individuals in their work

environment (Avci et al., 2017). Here, psychological needs refer to the psychological factors necessary for healthy development arising from the nature of humanity. This includes the emotional reactions that occur as a result of an individual's interaction with other people in the organization (Avci et al., 2017). Some organizations effectively meet the individual's need for satisfaction; however, other organizations and situations in the context of society or a classroom may be non-supportive by questioning and individual's decisions. In this context stress is caused by the need for satisfaction (Avci et al., 2017).

The researchers continue;

Satisfying the need for autonomy, which is a need based on individual's power to reveal himself/herself, allows individual to be more relaxed and less stressful.

Teachers are in a social interaction with the students and the parents in the working environments by the nature of the teaching profession. Failure to satisfy the dominance needs, meaning to influence, control and manage the others and to influence the tendency of a group in this interaction process, naturally leads them to have more stress. On the other hand, the need for the success of the psychological needs is one of the basic psychological needs that affect the individual in many respects compared to others and that positively affect the other needs and actions by satisfaction (Avci et al., 2017, p. 4)

Different personality traits of individuals in an organization or environment naturally affect the degree to which they are affected by stress (Avci et al., 2017). Personality traits are varying among teachers the degree to which and individual teacher will be affected will also vary. This is supported by Eichinger (2000) who argues that "teachers' age,

marital status, tenure, gender, teaching experience, physical condition of the class, teacher's personality, students' personal and social characteristics, rapport with administrators and students' parents, the context, grade level of teaching, family concerns, financial status, variation in curriculum are not all but some of the factors contributing to the level of stress and its symptoms" (p.77). The authors posit, "stress that teachers will experience during the education and training process performed with students in a social environment may cause them to give more negative reactions to their surroundings." (Avci et al., 2017, p. 4) This can have an overall negative effect on the classroom environment and have an adverse effect on students with ASD. These students thrive in a stable and routine environment free from conflict and confusion (Berkovits et al., 2017).

Kerr and Brown, (2016) conducted a qualitative study collaboratively with 19 special educators to learn about their emotional practice through the emotional labor framework. Emotional labor refers to the management of emotional expression in the workplace (Kerr & Brown, 2016). The following research question guided the Kerr & Brown (2016) study: "How and why do special educators describe their work as stressful? How do special educators perceive their emotional labor? What, if any, are the implications of emotional labor theory for special educators?" (Kerr & Brown, 2016, p.144) The researchers used structured interviews to collect data from their participants. The researchers discovered three key themes that emerged describing special educators' perceptions of the stress in their work as well as their views on how emotional labor may pertain to their daily practice. "Special educators defined these ideas as: (a) surviving the

profession, (b) acting as survival, and (c) establishing an emotional language.” (Kerr & Brown, 2016, p.146) Teacher efficacy was mentioned indirectly in many of the teachers responses; most notably here:

In order to be a teacher, I think in this day and age you have to be positive, optimistic, encouraging—sometimes you have to encourage yourself. “You know what? You can do this. You can get through this day. You can get through this moment.” Sometimes it’s moment to moment, sometimes it’s minute to minute, sometimes it’s hour to hour, and sometimes it’s day to day (Kerr & Brown, 2016, p.147)

Twenty-five veteran special education teachers participated in this study. Of their responses over half directly or indirectly had to do with self-efficacy. They never used the term self-efficacy; however, it can be implied in several of they’re responses. This study was conducted in one school district. When reading the description of the setting in which the study took place one can’t help but note the issues in which the teachers themselves could not control. The school would seem to be under staffed and overcrowded. Several of the participants reported having to jump from classroom to classroom (Pellegrino et al., 2015). The setting in which this study was conducted was not ideal as described by the researchers and the teachers themselves. The concern here is transferability of the findings.

Mindfulness and prayer may be the answer to lowering teacher stress levels (Donahoo et al., 2018). In a 2018 study, Danhoo et al., discovered that mindfulness and prayer had a positive effect on stress reduction and a reduction in what they called

compassion fatigue. Surprisingly, Danhoo et al. also found that support from colleagues and mentoring had no significant effect on the lowering of stress levels. This is contrary to what has been found in other studies presented here (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Kerr & Brown, 2016; Pülschen & Pülschen, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). However, it should be noted that this study had a very small sample size and was limited to one area of the country (Donahoo et al., 2018).

Stress can lead to internal conflicts that vary dramatically depending on the individual according to Kebbi (2018). Individuals experiencing prolonged stress at the work-place tend to develop unstable blood pressure, increased levels of cholesterol, muscle tension, and numerous other health issues (Kebbi, 2018). Stress is an external condition or event that affects the body and mind in a negative way. Kebbi also pointed out that the psychological problems impacted teachers negatively as well. The effects of job-related stress caused problems with depression, low performance, motivation, absenteeism, and fatigue. In many cases these psychological problems led to the resignation of the individual (Kebbi, 2018).

The negative effects of prolonged stress on teacher self-efficacy is mentioned throughout the sections of this chapter. Teacher efficacy will be discussed in detailed in this section as a psychological effect. In a review of research on teacher self-efficacy, Ross (1998) reported that higher teacher self-efficacy has been associated with a range of beneficial teaching practices. These include setting more ambitious goals for oneself and one's students, selecting instructional strategies likely to improve student development, experimenting with new instructional programs in the classroom, and involving parents in

student activities (Corona et al., 2017). More recent research has suggested that teachers with high self-efficacy provide more support to students and create a more positive classroom environment (Corona et al., 2017). Today's research is mainly focused on ways to increase teacher self-efficacy in pre-service teachers and to lower teacher attrition (Ninković & Knežević Florić, 2018; Siwatu, 2011; Townend & Brown, 2016; Yoo, 2016; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Many studies have examined how professional development impact teacher self-efficacy (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Corona et al., 2017; Papi, 2018; Scheer et al., 2015; Yoo, 2016). Zee & Koomen, (2016) conducted a far-reaching study that brought together 40 years of teacher self-efficacy research in order to explore the consequences of teacher self-efficacy for the quality of classroom processes, students' academic adjustment, and teachers' psychological well-being. They found 165 articles that they deemed to qualify for inclusion in their analysis. The researchers suggest that teacher self-efficacy shows positive links with students' academic adjustment, patterns of teacher behavior and practices related to classroom quality, and factors underlying teachers' psychological well-being, including personal accomplishment, job satisfaction, and commitment (Zee & Koomen, 2016). All of these factors according to the researchers contributed to teacher self-efficacy.

Almeida, Jameson, Riesen, & McDonnell, (2016) believe that rural preservice teachers have a higher sense of self efficacy than urban preservice teachers with regard to technology usage. They used survey methodology to examine teacher's self-efficacy regarding technology usage. They found that the main factor that influenced preservice

teacher self-efficacy was where they were trained and not how they were trained. The researchers indicated that this was a significant relationship (Almeida et al., 2016).

Song, (2016) found that the overall self-efficacy of preservice regular education teachers was higher than the overall self-efficacy of preservice special education teachers. While Song (2016) also found that there was a strong relationship between perceived preparation and self-efficacy the difference between efficacy of regular education preservice teachers and special education preservice teachers was striking. The researcher offered no explanation for this difference.

Ruppar, Neeper, and Dalsen, (2016) studied special education teachers' perceptions of preparedness to implement recommended practices for students with severe disabilities. To examine these 130 teachers took a survey. The main body of the survey consisted of three brief vignettes, which described students who would typically be considered to have severe disabilities. A list of 10 recommended practices followed each vignette that were specific to the student, and survey respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt prepared to use each practice (Ruppar et al., 2016). An independent samples t-test was used to analyze the data collected from the participants. The researchers found that participants who had degrees and certifications in special education felt the most prepared to develop individual education plans and perform other compliance paperwork but felt least prepared to service student academically. They state that "the 11 highest rated items across vignettes related to management duties, such as developing IEPs, creating behavior plans, monitoring progress, and collaboration (Ruppar et al., 2016k p.280)." This study highlights what

special education teachers feel they are prepared to do and what they are least prepared to do. The study was sent to 6000 teachers and only 130 responses could be used. This would constitute a low response rate. However, the results of the study are informative here. Teacher self-efficacy is related to preparedness or the perception of being prepared. The teachers in this study help define exactly what they feel they are prepared to do.

Secondary Effects

The wider effects of stress which may manifest itself in the lower quality of life for an individual such as ill health, poor social and negative organizational behavior. These secondary effects could also negatively impact the organization as a whole, family members, and social situations with parents, students, and other stakeholders (Cox & Griffith, 1995) Boshoff et al. (2018) concluded in their research that workload, poor colleague relationships, professional degradation and time/recourse difficulties were some of the secondary effects experienced by teachers under job related stress. Teachers who experience the most stress tend to be those who are less tolerant of their students and who have poorer relationships with students who they perceive as challenging (Braunlewenshon, 2016). This could be a salient point when considering interactions with teachers and students who have ASD. These students tend to have problems adjusting to and achieving within the school context (Braun-lewenshon, 2016) Braun-lewenshon goes on to say that, “teachers suffering from high stress levels harbor more negative emotions toward their students than their colleagues with less stress, and those emotions invariably impair their ability to extend to their students the support they need.” (p.46) A major side effect of teachers being under stress is depression. Burak & Atabek (2019) caution that

depression is a serious illness and letting depressed individuals practice the teaching profession may produce more serious problems for children as well as the teacher themselves. This is particularly true with students who have been diagnosed with ASD. This may contribute to SPED teachers leaving the profession early causing a teacher shortage.

According to Vittek, (2015), there is a severe shortage of special education teachers in this country, which has increased over the last decade. Vittek wrote a critical review of the literature on special education teacher attrition and retention. “Given the gap between the number of special education teachers available and the number of jobs to be filled increases each year, a critical examination of the literature is imperative in determining factors relating to both attrition and retention.” (Vittek, 2015, p.1) The author listed job satisfaction, administrative support, mentoring and induction programs as the main factors that determined if special education teacher stayed in the profession or left the profession before 5 years of service (Vittek, 2015). The reasons teachers leave special education jobs were poor job satisfaction, stress, overworked, lack of support from administration. The researcher elaborated on job satisfaction to include the feeling of accomplishment in regard to helping student improve (Vittek, 2015).

Teachers who work with children who have experience traumatic events such as the loss of a parent, neglect, or abuse are susceptible to secondary traumatic stress according to Donahoo, Siegrist, and Garrett-wright, (2018). This has a stronger than average chance of leading to a major secondary side effect of prolonged stress called burnout which has been discuss earlier in this chapter. Platsidou and Agaliotis, (2008)

defined burnout as, a syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion or feelings of being overextended and exhausted by work, depersonalization such as negative, cynical attitudes toward the students, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment as the result of negative evaluation of performance and achievement in the job.

Platsidou and Agalioti examined burnout and job satisfaction as it relates to teachers who work with special needs children. To do this they use a job satisfaction inventory on 411 Greek teaches. The researchers found that these special education teachers did not experience high levels of burnout as compared to their mainstream education counterparts (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008). This study would seem to contradict research already presented in this chapter. However, the researchers posit; “special education teachers have a relatively independent role within schools, especially in terms of professional decision-making, which minimizes the frictions with the school principal” (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008, p.72). This discovery confirms what other researchers have found; that teachers who have control over decision making are normally happier in their positions (Baron-Cohen et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2014; Kerr & Brown, 2016; Miller, 2002). Platsidou and Agaliotis (2008) also noted that special education teachers where more satisfied with their pay level then their mainstream education peers.

Teacher burnout is a major issue in special education because of the emotionally demanding work context. Langher, Caputo, & Ricci, (2017) explored the potential role of perceived support for reduction of burnout in a sample of 276 special education teachers working in secondary schools. Participants were given the Maslach Burnout Inventory -

Educators Survey and a scale on the perceived collaboration and support from general education teachers. To explore the association between perceived support and each burnout measure considered a correlation analysis was performed. In order to check the robustness of our empirical findings, multilevel regression models were used controlling for several variables (Langher et al., 2017). According to Langher et al., emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, since the lack of collegial support is conceived as the main cause for teacher burnout in special education (Langher et al., 2017). However, collegial collaboration and support lead to higher feeling of acceptance, job success and participation (Langher et al., 2017). The results of multilevel regression analyses suggest the potential role of perceived support for reducing two burnout measures, by lowering emotional exhaustion and improving personal accomplishment (Langher et al., 2017). Teacher professional development (in terms of in-service training), seemed to represent an important key factor for preventing teacher de-personalization according to Langher et al., (2017). It also led to better job satisfaction and less emotional exhaustion. Female teachers reported a higher level of emotional exhaustion than male teachers. Also, teachers who worked in urban areas reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion despite in-service training (Langher et al., 2017). Teacher self-efficacy runs like a thread through this study. The common theme of all the factors seems to be that the teachers are not confident they can be successful. This leads to emotional exhaustion, and feelings of not being supported.

Teacher stress could undermine the effective implementation of strategies to improve student behavior such as positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS)

according to Herman, Hickmon-rosa, and Reinke (2018). These researchers found that although SPED teachers experienced high levels of stress, they seem to be less stressed than their regular education counterparts. This would support the findings of Platsidou and Agalotis (2008). Also, Herman, Hickmon-rose, and Reinke (2018), concluded that teacher stress did impact the implementation of PBIS in the classroom. They found that... the Stressed/Low Coping teacher profile was associated with the worst student outcomes including lower student adaptive behaviors and math achievement and higher disruptive behaviors compared with the other classes on nearly all comparisons. These findings support the contention that teacher stress and coping may have an impact not only on teacher well-being but also on the students in their classrooms (p. 96).

The researchers further concluded that teacher stress was closely related to the effective implementation of PBIS (Herman et al., 2018). They also found that there was a close relationship between teacher stress and teacher burnout as has been found in other studies. Ineffective instruction and a lack of effective implementation are two of the major secondary side effects of stress in special education teachers because it has a direct negative impact on students with special needs such as with ASD. Herman et al. (2018) recommend, “investing resources in supporting teacher adaptation, both by equipping them with coping skills and by providing more environmental supports, may improve not only their well-being but also the well-being and functioning of students in their class” (p. 97). Future research, according to Herman et al., should explore if classroom management interventions move teachers into more adaptive stress and coping situations.

Because teacher stress can be professionally debilitating, teachers who perceive stress by classroom behaviors of students fail to implement proper interventions effectively (Herman et al., 2018). It is also likely that teacher's relationships with these students and the development of a positive classroom climate that fosters student engagement in learning is undermined (Herman et al., 2018).

Pülschen and Pülschen (2015) examined how preparation for collaborative classes and professional development could lower the amount of stress perceived by SPED teachers. The professional development studied was called acceptance and commitment training (ACT). During initial assessment that researchers noted that the participants were mainly hesitant and uncooperative as a result of high levels of stress. The researchers found that ACT training was effective at lowering the amount of stress experienced by these teachers and recommended a commitment by schools to more training and development to prevent burnout and depression in teachers. This is particularly true in regard to teachers in a co-teaching environment where often times roles can be undefined and blurred. Preparation and training such as ACT may help prevent the secondary negative effects that teachers under stress have on students.

Environmental Feedback

Feedback from the wider organization can give the individual an idea if their ability to cope with stress has been successful or otherwise. This cycle of feedback from the environment establishes tractional processes as something which is ongoing and fluid (Cox & Griffith, 1995) Some teachers, however, may not be equipped to accept feedback from their environment. Braun-lewensohn (20016) concluded in his study that “by

accepting the situation as is and looking at the bright side of it by positive interpretation one could gain strength and thus react with less anxiety” (p. 80). Skaalvik and Skaalvik, (2015) examined evaluative judgements, either positive or negative, that teachers make regarding their one job satisfaction based on feedback from their environment. The researchers gathered 30 participants, both retired and working teachers, for one on one interviews. Teachers in this study stated that their primary source of job satisfaction was working with children. They stated that the actual process of teaching, and seeing their pupils learn and develop was a source of job satisfaction. Therefore, job satisfaction was primarily related to the intrinsic rewards of teaching (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). The teachers in this study judged the feedback from their environment as positive when their students were successful in learning which lead to satisfaction and reduced stress. In this study as with others presented in this chapter, teacher perceptions of their environmental feedback were a major driving force of the conclusion reached by researchers.

Stress can be addressed as an environmental feedback process based on the relationship between the individual and the environment, the belief that whether the person shows a sign of stress will be revealed only after making an assessment comes to the forefront. While a person perceives stress in the same situation, another person does not perceive it. This situation reveals the importance of individual differences. According to this model, person’s perception is effective in the formation of stress rather than the threats from the environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Eichinger, (2000) examined job stress and satisfaction of special educators by gender and by social role orientation. Eichinger went beyond biological gender and

examined job stress and satisfaction relative to one's social role orientation within their organization or environment. This researcher examined 89 female and 43 male special education teachers in Southern California, with a range of 1 to 19 years and an average of 5.6 years of experience in special education. Eichinger found that females teachers reported higher levels of stress with SPED students than male teachers. Females, according to Eichinger, were more likely to leave the teaching profession altogether. It should be noted here that the male participant sample in this study was only half the size of the female sample which may lead to a skewing of the results. Eichinger further concluded; examining the teachers' social role orientation relative to job stress and satisfaction, several differences became apparent. For the female special educators, those who were undifferentiated on the job expressed the highest stress levels and the lowest satisfaction levels, while those who were balanced expressed the lowest stress levels and the highest satisfaction levels on twelve of the six analyses which showed significant differences. (p. 406)

When female teachers are placed in the same environment as male teachers they may experience what occurs within that environment differently because of differences in the way the environment reacts to them which speaks to their social role. This could play a major role in regard to the level of real and perceived stressors individual teachers are subjected to.

Further contributing to the environmental factors that cause stress, Mohanthy (2018) researched how a teacher's organizational role contributed to their level of stress.

One's role is defined "as a set of functions an individual performs in response to the expectation of significant members of social system or organization and his own expectations about the position he occupies in a social system" (Mohanity, 2018, p. 14). Mohanity defined organizational role as the expectations of others, which includes the "role occupant, the superior (or boss), the direct reports (or subordinates), the peers, and in some cases, customers, suppliers, partners, team members, and process owners" (p.14). Role stress occurs as a result of the role occupant not being able to live up to the demands of the environment or in this case the organization (Mohanity, 2018). Teachers who worked for private schools experienced higher levels of organizational stress than teachers who worked for public schools, Mohanity found. Mohanity went on to conclude; Expectation from parents, public, and authority was responsible for creating more organizational stress among the private secondary school teachers. Adjustment to the complicated organization has become a required quality for the employee in the present scenario. Role stress cannot be detached from any organization in the present day of globalized world. In case of academic institutions, the role stress was somehow less compared to nonacademic organizations. Privatization has invited more role stress in the organization; hence, we have to face it with our dynamic thoughts and adjustment techniques (p.19).

It is possible that teachers who work with ASD students that have behavior problems in a private school setting could experience more stress than their public-school counterparts. The negative effects on these students might be magnified as a result.

It is also important that teachers recognize the symptoms of burnout (Hanson, 2013). When teachers feel hopeless and are too overwhelmed, they must admit that they are approaching burnout, and try to do something to fix the problem (Hanson, 2013). Attending professional development sessions, receiving a reduced schedule, working with a mentor, prioritizing, finding balance, and goal-setting are all effective strategies in helping educators to cope with stress (Hanson, 2013). Interventions to decrease the demands placed on a teacher are crucial in preventing burnout. Developing long and short-term goals, and eliminating goals that are too unrealistic to achieve, are effective in relieving the feeling of being too overwhelmed (Hanson, 2013). If teachers work at finding strategies to reduce the stress that they are feeling, they are more likely to stay in the profession long term.

Summary

Teaching is a demanding and challenging profession especially given the fact that teachers have a range of responsibilities such as classroom management, lesson planning, class preparation, student evaluation and resource management. Moreover, teachers are the focal center of interactions with parents, their own and other students, and other faculty members especially when teaching students with learning difficulties (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). When the needs of the job become too much to handle, there is an escalation of stress in teachers (Hanson, 2013). An educator can feel as though there are too many demands and not enough time to meet them. Course overload, paperwork, government and division initiatives, and extra-curricular activities can all increase the attrition of a teacher (Hanson, 2013). Teacher health, performance, and job satisfaction

are all negatively affected by a challenging workload. Furthermore, a varied course load, especially when not in a teacher's area of specialization, can lead to increased stress, which many teachers experience. Students who have ASD require extra attention, resources and time compared to regular students particularly those who have behavior problems. Because of this, special education teachers spend more time communicating classroom instructions. Schools are complicated organizations and effective communications between administration and the classroom teacher is paramount. It is essential for administrative staff in any school to identify the causes of stress and be serious-minded in their search for coping strategies that will lower teachers' stress levels in order to attain a relaxing work environment. Several solutions to this were presented in this chapter including; prayer, mindfulness, peer support, professional development, relaxations, exercise, support groups, relief of organizational stressors, lighter work load, and more autonomy in making decisions.

Research suggests that special education teachers exhibit higher levels of stress than mainstream education teachers. The major elements of work-related stress have been divided into 3 categories of research that has been conducted over the past 60 years. Environmental, psychological and biological phenomena are the most important factors in the field of work related stress (Pülschen & Pülschen, 2015). These factors have led to many unique views regarding stress from researchers who specialize in this area. As a result of these factors teachers show less self-efficacy, leave the profession, are less cooperative, become depressed, experience health issues, have poor relationships with

their students, are less effective classroom instructors, and fail to implement initiatives successfully.

Further, female teachers tend to experience stress more than their male peers. Teachers who teach in private schools experience stress at a higher level than teachers who work in public schools. Younger teachers are overall just as stressed as middle-aged and older veteran teachers, but they tend to cope with stress in a manner that has little impact on students. While middle-aged and older teachers tend to miss work and take early retirement to deal with prolonged stress. Attitude also plays a role in the amount of stress teachers experience, how they cope and overall work satisfaction. Teachers' work satisfaction can be significant because it impacts teacher performance in the classroom, achievement, and interest. The negative effects of work-related stress can be very serious. It may include psychological problems, depression, low performance and motivation, absenteeism, or fatigue culminating in eventual resignation from the job (Sadeghi & Sa, 2016).

Researchers recommended lower class sizes, less of the workload, more professional development opportunities to teach teachers how to recognize the signs of stress, professional development to teach teachers how to cope with stress in a healthy manner, more classroom autonomy, constant monitoring for signs of stress, and spending time with policy makers so that their voices can be heard (Kebbi, 2018). While the link between social supports and teacher stress is evident in the literature, there are, however, mixed results in regard to social supports actually reducing teacher stress. Some studies report that social supports can influence teacher stress levels, including the extreme

manifestation of stress, burnout (Supports et al., 2017). The literature was also vague in regard to who experience stress at a higher level; special education teachers or mainstream teachers. There was not significant different that was found in several studies presented here. Researchers also could not agree on a solid definition of stress. Finally, the accountability system has caused stress levels to increase among all teachers. There is evidence that links accountability to high levels of stress in students and colors environmental feedback in a negative light (von der Embse, N; Sandilos, L; Pendergast, L; Mankin, 2016). The research presented in this chapter can best be summed up by the findings of Galaterou and Antoniou (2017); the relationship of stress caused by ‘too much time spent on some children’ could also be justified. The lack of specialized educational personnel support, significantly burdens the teacher who has to devote increased time in order to include a student with special needs. Overcrowded classrooms are highly connected to the above statement for which the state is responsible.

Overcrowded classes hinder the educational work, when the teacher is forced to follow the average student and ‘the need for adherence to the program leaves no room for individualized instruction, constituting another source of stress. In general, we observe that the lack of support from the state on special educators and support

staff, as well as for technical equipment and infrastructure are obstacles to the implementation of the inclusion process (p. 654).

Although stress is a normal part of life, for all the reasons and factors presented in this chapter teachers as particularly at risk of being stressed out to the point of failing to serve our most vulnerable students. The perceptions of these teachers may shed some

light on how policy makers can better assist them in doing one of the most important jobs in our society, the education of our young.

The role of the special education teacher becomes more imperative over the years particularly with the advent of state mandated assessments. Working within special education there are an array of disabilities and health concerns teachers have to keep at the forefront when working with autistic students. These concerns can cause stress and anxiety for teachers as individual and classroom safety is always a concern. Role conflicts also may produce probabilities that may be hard to reconcile or satisfy. Role overload is another factor for special education teachers when the workload is more than time permits. Role ambiguity is generated when teachers are not sure of what do to in certain situations or expectations are not clearly understood, Haydon et al. (2018). For example, how to follow actions plans when a student experiences health concerns on a regular basis. Interpersonal anxieties or stressors that are created by other staff members. Lack of social support from other teachers or special education staff can further cause stress and anxiety. Teachers are key in an effective system of education and their effective performance is the vital to the successful running of the system and student learning(Eichinger, 2000). Job-related stress perceived by teachers can adversely affect their performance (Eichinger, 2000).

Finally, professional development directed at reducing teacher stress is scattered throughout the literature presented here (Anderson, 2015; Haydon et al., 2018; Kerr & Brown, 2016; Supports et al., 2017). Professional development is one potential way to buffer against the effects of teacher job stress is to provide teachers with additional

supports and skills. High quality professional development (PD) can result in positive changes in preschool teachers' instruction and improved outcomes for young children (Sandilos et al., 2018). However, the PD experiences provided to teachers in schools and center-based settings vary widely in structure and quality (Sandilos et al., 2018). The variability and inconsistent quality of teacher PD spawned a large body of research exploring effective and systematic methods for providing additional training to teachers (Sandilos et al., 2018). Concurrently, the mounting evidence that teacher–child interactions are a vital aspect of early childhood programming has resulted in the creation of PD interventions that target interaction quality in preschools. Initial outcomes from PD interventions aimed to improve teacher–child relationships indicate that teachers can change the way they interact with students through the use of observations and feedback (Sandilos et al., 2018).

The literature in this chapter have outlined that prolonged teacher stress is a major contributing factor to a loss of teacher self-efficacy, burnout, psychological problems, physiological problems and early exit from the profession. It also manifests itself in missed work days, low levels to ineffective instruction in the classroom, and negative learning outcomes in regard to students. Teacher stress contributes to a shortage of qualified teachers working with our move veritable students. Students with ASD bring a special set of challenges to the classroom. The way teachers interact, and approach stress levels caused by these challenges needs to be studied thoroughly and understood. The voices of these teachers is noticeably absent from the literature as they are not present in

this review. This study may shed some light on how teachers tasked with educating students with ASD experience and deal with stress so that improvements can be made for all.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore special education teachers' perceptions of the stressors associated with instructing children with ASD who have behavioral challenges. A qualitative case study was conducted to gain an understanding of special education teachers' perceptions of the stressors when working with ASD students who have behavioral challenges. In this chapter, the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, and trustworthiness are discussed as they related to the case study methodology.

Research Design and Rationale

Two RQs guided this study:

RQ1: What are perceptions of special education educators concerning occupational stressors while working with students who have ASD and behavioral challenges?

RQ2: Which coping strategies are most often utilized by teachers working with students with autism who have behavior challenges?

This study addressed how teachers experience stressors when working with students who are autistic with behavioral challenges as well as what these teachers do to cope with their stress. A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because it provided a platform for learning about the experiences of those who had experienced the phenomenon as explained by the individuals in their own words (see Patton, 2015). These individuals were selected because they had the knowledge needed to answer the RQs.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was as a nonparticipant observer. I had an interest in the outcome of this study because I am a special education teacher working with autistic students with behavioral challenges. I needed to be mindful and acknowledge my presumptions and biases as they became known. As the instrument of research, I ensured that I did not contribute to researcher bias by using member checking and keeping a reflective researcher journal. I also enlisted the support of peers to participate in debriefing to manage my bias. I submitted the transcripts of the interviews to the respondents and offered them an opportunity to make additional comments.

It was important for me to conduct the study with integrity and in an ethical manner to avoid diminishing its credibility. I was careful when conducting and transcribing the interviews and making decisions about coding and organizing the comments of the participants. I did not hold any position of authority over any of the participants in this study. Further, I was not related to any of the participants. My relationship to each of the participants was of a professional nature.

Methodology

Teachers who service students with ASD were the target population for this study. The sampling strategy was purposeful. A case study approach was used to gain an indepth understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Higgs et al., 2012). Phenomenological research encourages the respondents to describe personal experiences as a means of learning about a particular phenomenon (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Participant Selection Logic

Hatch (2002) recommended a sample size of five to 25 participants. A larger sample size equates to less detail according to Hatch, which is why a lesser amount of participants were sought out for this study. A case study provides an in-depth analysis and detailed description of the research phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007; Hatch, 2002). Stake (2005) noted that a multiple case study is designed with more concern for representation, and too small of a sample is difficult to defend. Balance and variety are important in a multiple case study because the opportunity to learn takes priority (Stake, 2005). The balance between breadth and depth was considered when selecting the number of participants to participate in the current study; the fewer the participants involved in the study, the more time that can be spent with each one (Hatch, 2002). Purposive sampling was used in this study because I desired to select participants who were a good match for the research purpose. In a purposive sample, participants are selected based on their ability to provide a large amount of data to propose answers to the stated research questions that guide the study (Hatch, 2002). The following individuals were sought to participate in this study:

- Special education teachers working directly with autism students with behavioral challenges in Lee County, North Carolina.
- Related service staff (speech, occupational therapists) in Lee County, North Carolina school systems who work directly with autism students with behavioral challenges.

- Exceptional Children's Chair to understand procedures for integrating new students in Lee County, North Carolina.
- Participants with at least 1 year of experience in education.

To recruit these individuals, I accessed the webpages of all schools located in Lee County, North Carolina. I then contacted individuals via email and followed up with a phone call. I continued to reach out to identified candidates using email and phone calls until the required number of participants was reached. For this study there were six participants. I then set up interview times with the participants.

Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument that was employed in this study was one-on-one interviews with participants who could provide information to answer the research questions. Participants were asked to answer open-ended interview questions in a semistructured format. IRB approval and informed consent were obtained.

In-depth one-on-one interviews encouraged participants to talk about their everyday experiences with students who have ASD and behavior issues. I kept the participants on topic by using an interview guide. I prepared a list of questions to be asked with each participant based on the research questions and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. In-depth interviews conducted in this manner are suitable for data collection in a variety of research methodologies including the case study (Blaikie, 1991; Creswell, 2007; Given, 2008; Vogt, 2005). All interviews were conducted via social media platforms such as Google and Facebook. The audio from each interview was recorded for later transcription and coding.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I recruited a maximum of 12 participants for in-depth one-on-one interviews conducted using social media platforms such as Google or Facebook. This was a means of connecting with a population that was geographically dispersed. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for coding procedures and thematic analysis. Participants had the option to review transcript once it was prepared. The data were analyzed to identify recurring themes.

Open ended interview questions will be used to collect rich, in-depth data from the participants. In order to be mindful of bias and avoid influencing the data gathered, I will participate in writing memos, notes which free flow and allow the researcher to explore his or her personal thoughts and feelings as they relate to the research subject matter. I shall engage in peer debriefing, connecting with a peer to discuss objectivity and gain insights from an outside party. I will also maintain a reflective research journal in order to keep my opinions bracketed. In doing this I shall be mindful of how the research subject matter relates to my personal experiences and beliefs in order to avoid inadvertently thrusting my ideas onto the participants. Each participant in this study will go through a process called member checking in which they will have to opportunity to approve the transcript of their interview.

Recruitment

Recruiting participants for the study was based on the invitation with the school channel being used to request the sample population to engage in the research. A recruitment letter (Appendix B) was emailed to each participant. I will follow up each

email with a phone call. Potential candidates for this study will be identified using the websites of each school in the Lee County, NC area. Once potential candidates for the study have been identified, I will set up a time for the one on one interview to be conducted. At the beginning of each interview the participant will be given an informed consent letter to read and sign. Before the start of the one on one interviews each participant will be given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I will be transparent and open about the study, what I plan to do with the data, and how I will protect their anonymity.

Data Collection

Collecting data for qualitative research means interacting with real-world situations and the people who are in them (Yin, 2013). This all is part of the field setting for a research study. Yin (2013) posits that “the variety of field settings adds to the numerous important and interesting human events that can become the subject of qualitative studies” (p.109). Data will be collected through one on one semistructured interviews with key stakeholders. These interviews will all be recorded via video chat for transcription later. Google hangouts and Facebook will be employed for the video chat using my personal laptop. The study employed specific procedures complying with the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Analysis Plan

After transcription all data will be uploaded into NVivo qualitative software for coding. While coding, I will keep a copy the research questions, conceptual framework,

and purpose of the study to remain focused on coding decisions (Saldana, 2009). In addition, I will keep in mind the following questions while coding: What are people doing, what are they trying to accomplish and how, what means or strategies are they using, how do participants talk about/characterize/understand what is going on, what assumptions are being made, what do I see going on here, what am I learning from the notes, why did I include them, and what strikes me (Saldana, 2009). Because multiple participants will be a part of this study, I will complete one participant's data first and progressed to the next participant's data.

Once identified as codes I will then combine thematically codes into categories. A code is an abbreviation for the more important category yet to be discovered (Saldana, 2009). Codes are essence capturing and important aspects of the research story, but when grouped together according to similarity, they facilitate the development of categories (Saldana, 2009). To generate categories, I will use pattern coding (a second cycle coding method), which will group coded data based on similarities after initial coding takes place. Pattern coding pulls together a lot of material into a more meaningful unit of analysis and will be used to develop themes from the data (Saldana, 2009). I will review the descriptive codes, assess their commonalties, and assign them a pattern code.

After looking inward at categories, the next step will be to take a step back and look for connections among categories; this is known as searching for themes or looking for relationships among relationships (Hatch, 2002). In this step, broad elements will be identified for the purpose of making connections (Hatch, 2002). The connections will repeat patterns in the data and link different parts of the data (Hatch, 2002). The

categories will be used to develop statements that describe a major theme (Saldana, 2009).

Emergent themes will be established by looking for relationships among the relationships by identifying relating patterns in the data. Once the themes that exist among the categories were identified, they will be analyzed for co-occurrence and uniqueness. For meticulous analysis, a visual matrix will be created and used to compare themes. The matrix will also aid in developing a framework for the findings of the study.

A master outline will be created to organize the completed analysis in a logical manner (Hatch, 2002). The master outline will bring closure to the analyses (Hatch, 2002). The outline will be helpful in organizing information and statements from the interviews. The information that will be gathered from the responses in the interviews will act as evidence for the results of the study. For this reason, it will be essential for information to be organized appropriately. Qualitative software, NVivo, will be used in order to aid me with this process.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Various measures were taken to ensure the study was trustworthy, to demonstrate true findings according to participants' perceptions, and to ensure the research can be repeated in the future if necessary (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2003). Trustworthiness is an important concept in qualitative research because it allows researchers to demonstrate the care employed during the carrying out of the study to ensure that the research is worthy of being a scholarly work. In qualitative research there are a set of parallel criteria that ensure the trustworthiness of the research study as a whole (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In

their seminal work in the 1985, Lincoln and Guba substituted reliability and validity with the parallel concept of “trustworthiness,” containing four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Within these were specific methodological strategies for demonstrating qualitative rigor, such as the audit trail, member checks, categorizing or confirming results with participants, and peer debriefing are going to be used in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the trustworthiness of qualitative data is often questioned because the validity must be addressed in a different manner than in the case of naturalistic work, several measures were taken to avoid any issues that could compromise the validity of the study (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). To ensure that the results of this study are valid I will employ two member checks. In the first member check each participant in this study will have an opportunity to approve the transcript of their interview. In the second member check each participant will be presented with the categories and themes identified in this study as asked if they believe that their experiences are accurately portrayed. Credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility will also be addressed in this study using audio recording from the interviews that I code by using NVivo qualitative software. All recordings will directly correspond with transcriptions of what the person says.

Transferability

Transferability is another element that is critical in research since it ensures that each part of a study can be applied to a similar setting. In other words, the findings or research approach can be replicated by other scholars (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I will lay out the procedure and research instruments in such a way that others can attempt to collect data in similar conditions. Transferability refers to the extent to which the consumer of the research can apply the finding to different situations or generalize the findings of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By incorporating all data into the NVivo software an audit trail can be easily followed. Identified themes will be accompanied with the participants own words transcribed from the interview as well as a sound recording of the participants voice.

In addition to the audit trail, I will provide a thick rich description of the setting in which the study will take place. I will also describe each participant while maintaining their anonymity. There will be a description of the beliefs of each participant as well as who they are situated within the greater context of their environment.

Dependability

The dependability of the study refers to repeating the study under the same context, using the same methods and participants, and getting the same results (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). To make certain the study is dependable, the research process that I follow will be reported in detail, and the write-up will be able to act as a model if one needs or desires to repeat the study (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). I will describe in full detail what will be planned and executed regarding the research design and data

collection and analysis. A rich, thick description will be necessary to give the readers an adequate understanding on the phenomenon explained; this will enable other researchers and readers to compare instances and make associations between the research findings and their own experiences (Guba, 1981). Boundaries of the study will also be expressed to the audience; it will be made clear how many individuals participated in the study, descriptions about participants will be provided, and data collection techniques will be explained thoroughly in addition to the number and length of data collection sessions and period of time over which the data will be collected.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, I will link the recordings of in-depth interviews with the actual transcribed responses of the participants. To confirm that the transcription is an accurate record of the participant's words I will also provide an audio file along with the transcriptions. Within the NVivo software, I will be able to not only read the transcript of each interview, but I will also be able to hear the participant say each word in exactly the way they said it in the interview. Findings will, to the greatest extent possible, reflect the perceptions of the participants and not reflect the feelings and beliefs of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing an audio and written transcript I will be able to ensure this is the case. Furthermore, by ensuring dependability and confirmability in this manner I will create a clear audit trail from what the participant said to what the transcript reads and the code assigned to it. This will also ensure that a peer reviewer can follow the audit trail with few problems (Creswell, 2007).

Ethical Procedures

I followed the outlined guidelines for research in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). The core principles of the guidelines that were informed consent, assessment of risks and benefits, and selection of participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). The privacy of the participants in the study were protected, and participants were treated with great respect. The procedures followed in the study were taken into serious consideration and outlined by experts in the research field (Hatch, 2002; Stake 1995). Furthermore, all participants were treated fairly and equally (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978).

I did not begin any research until approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Walden University. Participants will be made aware of the study by email. Prior to participation the study, participants will be made aware of the purpose and the full extent of the research. Participants will also be told that their participation is voluntary and will sign consent forms to participate. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and sent to participants accordingly for member checking of accuracy (Hatch, 2002; Stake, 1995). To further ensure privacy of participants and educational institutions, pseudonyms will be used in the study. After the data is analyzed it will be saved in a secure location for 3 years after the study, and then destroyed by deleting it from my hard drive. All data will be kept on my personal laptop which is password protected. The data will further be imported into NVivo software which also has

password capability. This will provide an extra layer of security. Finally, the laptop containing the data will be locked away in my personal desk when not in use.

Summary

Research questions proposed in this study will be answered using case study methodology. Participants who possess the knowledge to answer these questions will be recruited using purposeful sampling. A list of interview questions will be developed to conduct one on one in-depth interviews. The data will be collected using social media platforms and analyzed using qualitative software as a tool for coding. Several strategies will be employed to ensure trustworthiness. In the next chapter the results of the study will be presented.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of the stressors that are associated with special education teachers who instruct children with ASD and have behavioral challenges. The central question that guided this study was the following: What are perceptions of special education educators concerning occupational stressors while working with students who have ASD and behavioral challenges? The second research questions posed was the following: Which coping strategies are most often utilized by teachers working with students with autism who have behavior challenges? In this chapter the results of qualitative data analysis are presented. The setting of the study is described followed by demographics of the participants, the data collection process, and the data analysis process. The evidence of trustworthiness is also discussed. Lastly, a summary of the results is presented.

Setting

The participants were special education teachers working directly with autism students with behavioral challenges in Lee County, North Carolina. Some participants were assigned to implement related service such as speech and occupational therapy within Lee County. These participants answered open-ended questions regarding their experiences with autistic students. During the time of these interviews, the district was adjusting to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. The entire country was immersed in a pandemic that had been going on for 8 months with no end in sight. Part of Lee County school district had gone to on-line learning with students staying home. Teachers were having to adjust to delivering instruction remotely. Further, Lee County schools were issuing notices of massive changes in policy regarding how and when to report to work and how to interact with other individuals while inside school facilities. Approximately 240,000 Americans had died of COVID-19 at this point in my data collection. About 3,000 Americans died each day. Everyone was encouraged to wear masks to help prevent the spread of the virus. The economy was suffering as well, and the Lee County schools were bracing for the impact of possible defunding of programs. Teachers were encouraged to find students and get them to log on for online learning because of attendance guidelines set by the state. On top of this was the national presidential election that took place during the time data were being collected for this study, which deeply divided the country. The federal government was in the process of debating whether direct payments to individuals would help mitigate the negative effects that pandemic was having on the economy. Protests were occurring because of the results of the election and

because of perceived racial injustices from events that happened in the summer of the same year. It was a tremulous time, and these events may have impacted the perceptions of the participants in this study. The stress of the participants from outside sources as well as their uncertainty regarding their futures may have affected the outcome of this study.

Demographics

A total of six participants were interviewed in this study. All of the participants were female. All participants had at least 5 years of experience in education working with autistic students. The youngest participant was 35 years old while the oldest was 50 years old. As a group, the participants seemed positive and hopeful for the future of education. Each of the participants communicated a care for their students and a desire to see them be successful. However, their experiences and the way these six individuals cope with stress were very different.

Sorbet

Sorbet is a 44-year-old woman who chose teaching as a second career. She began teaching mainstream classes when she first got into education. However, 4 years ago she began working with autistic students. She stated that “special education is a whole different ball game because you do have some different roles and different paperwork for special education.” Sorbet believes that more supports need to be put in place for teachers who work with special education students who have behavior problems. She noted that autistic students in particular require a lot of time both instructionally and administratively.

Sapphire

Sapphire is a 43-year-old woman who has been working with autistic students for 6 years. She has also provided in-class support for a wide range of special education students in the mainstream environment for 5 years. Her best friend's mother was a special education teacher. Sapphire says that she knew that she wanted to be a teacher. She said "I enjoyed doing training and learning things during training sessions and I would be in charge of trainings." Because of this she decided to make a career change. Sapphire thought that teaching would be a good thing for her, so she took on a teacher's assistant job at Floyd Knight Schools, which specializes in working with students who receive special services.

Ivory

Ivory is 36 years old and has been teaching special education for 13 years. She started out in preschool and kindergarten and then moved onto self-contained crosscategorical classes where she serviced kindergarten through fifth-grade students in the same room. After this experience she moved on to middle school for 2 years, but recently she has been servicing autistic students at the high school level and teaching virtual classes. Ivory stated that she did not find a job teaching special education but rather "it found me." She stated that she needed a job fresh out of college. She was grateful that a school took a chance on her 13 years ago, and she has been doing it ever since. She was happy to receive the extra money for working with students with autism as well as the other benefits she received for being a special education teacher.

Meredith

Meredith is 38 years old. She graduated from Meredith College in 2011 with a master's degrees in the art of special education. She has a teacher's certification that licenses her to teach kindergarten through fifth grade. The reason Meredith went into special education is that she saw a need for early intervention with special needs students ages 1 to 8 years old. She believes that in this window it is possible to fill in any skills deficits. Meredith stated;

I guess the reason why I've stayed in the younger that early Elementary in pre-k it's just really the understanding of the 0-8 window if you fill in those gaps early and countless research has shown for every dollar spent in early intervention and EC Pre-K you say what 20 down the road so really just hang in the lower functional skills to be able to succeed because we want everybody are you froze I can't see because I want everybody to be reach their fullest potential and be functional members of society.

Raven

Raven is a 50-year-old speech language pathologist who has worked with autistic students for the past 7 years. Before this she worked directly in the classroom with autistic students in the Bahamas for an additional 7 years. Raven has been in education for a total of 25 years. She switched from mainstream education to special education because a member of her family has autism. She is very passionate about ensuring that autistic students receive a quality education.

Angelica

Angelica is 36 years old and has been working with special education students for 11 years in the public school setting. She worked one-on-one with autistic students and those with physical disabilities when she served as a certified nurse's assistant. She has also worked with adults with physical disabilities. Angelica has a lot of empathy for students with special needs and works to ensure a safe environment for them to learn in. She believes in discipline and de-elevation techniques to help her autistic students calm down when they become irritated or angry.

Data Collection

The primary data collection instrument that was employed for this study was that of one-on-one interviews of key stakeholders. Six participants provided information that was used to answer the research questions proposed. Participants were requested to answer open-ended interview questions in a semi-structured format. In order to be mindful of bias and avoid influencing the data gathered, I used journaling in order to bracket myself. A recruitment letter (Appendix B) was emailed to each participant. Follow up by a phone call. The interviews were all recorded via video chat for transcription later. Google hangouts and Facebook were employed for the video chat using a personal laptop. Each participant was interviewed one time and the interviews took less than 50 minutes in duration. There were no variations in data collection from the plan presented in the methodology section of this study. No aside from conducting this study amidst a global pandemic there were no other unusual circumstances encountered during the collection of

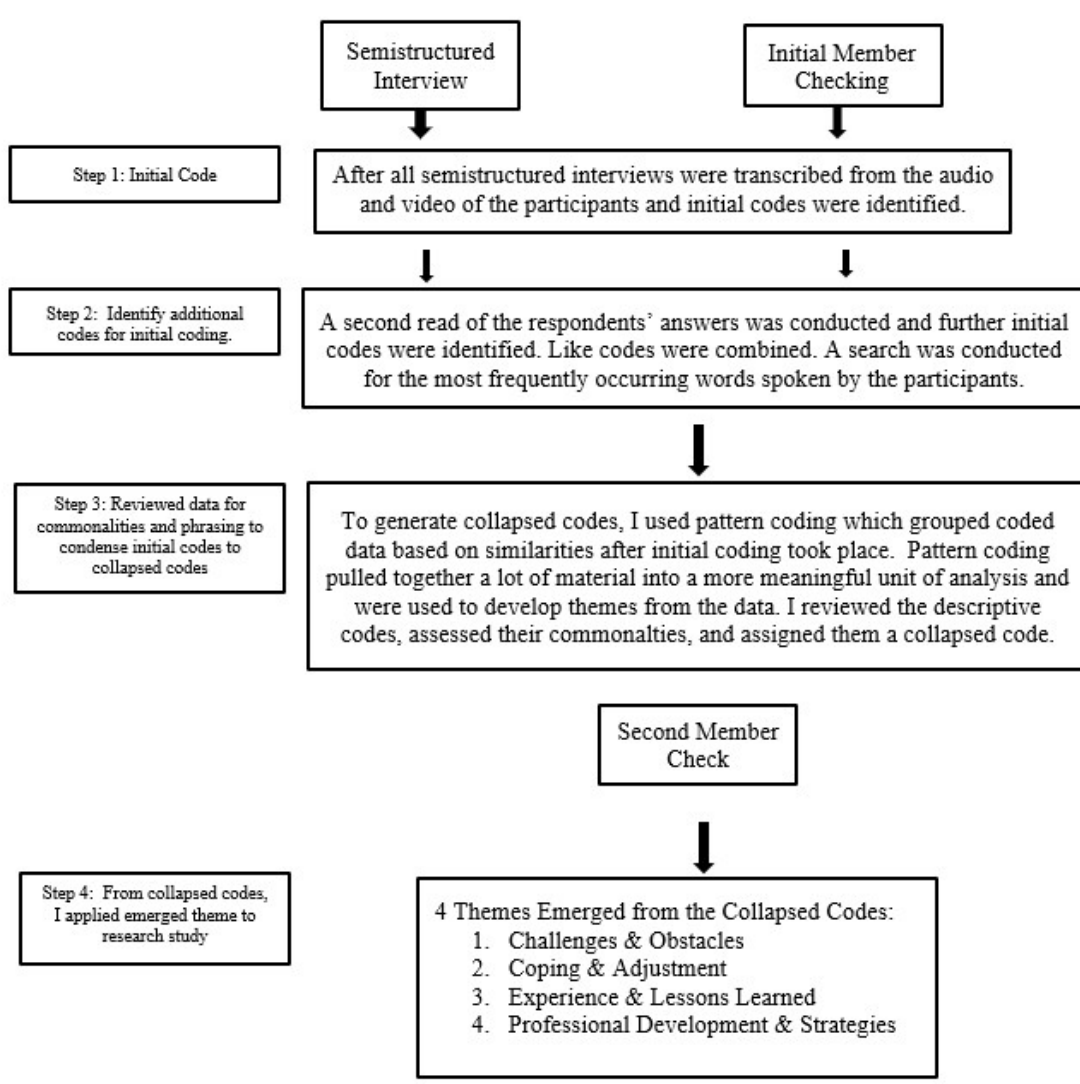
people doing, what are they trying to accomplish and how, what means, or strategies are they using, how do participants talk about/characterize/understand what is going on, what assumptions are being made, what do I see going on here, what am I learning from the notes, why did I include them, and what strikes me (Saldana, 2009).

Codes were identified and then grouped into like categories. A code is an abbreviation for the more important category yet to be discovered (Saldana, 2009). Codes are essence capturing and important aspects of the research story, but when grouped together according to similarity, they facilitate the development of categories (Saldana, 2009). To generate categories, pattern coding was used which led to grouped coded data based on similarities after initial coding took place. Pattern coding pulls together a lot of material into a more meaningful unit of analysis and was used to develop themes from the data (Saldana, 2009).

After looking inward at categories, the next step was to take a step back and look for connections among categories; this is known as searching for themes or looking for relationships among relationships (Hatch, 2002). In this step, broad elements were identified for the purpose of making connections (Hatch, 2002). The connections were repeated patterns in the data and linked different parts of the data (Hatch, 2002). The categories were used to develop statements that describe a major theme (Saldana, 2009).

Figure 2

Coding Process



Emergent themes were established by looking for relationships among the relationships by identifying repeating patterns in the data. Once the themes that exist among the categories were identified, they were analyzed for co-occurrence and uniqueness. As a result of the data analysis the following four themes were identified:

challenges and obstacles, coping and adjustment, experience and lessons learned, and professional development and strategies.

Table 1

Themes and Supporting Codes

| Themes | Supporting collapsed codes |
|---|--|
| Challenges and obstacles | Paperwork Administration Behavior Coping Stress Help Management Support Time Parents |
| Coping and adjustment | Upset Stress Understand Relax Bad Information |
| Experience and lessons learned | Classroom Parents Confidence Fight De-elevate |
| Professional development and strategies | Training Unknown Important Nothing |

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Various measures were taken to ensure the study was trustworthy, to demonstrate true findings according to participants' perceptions, and to ensure the research can be repeated in the future if necessary (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2003). Trustworthiness is an important concept in qualitative research because it allows researchers to demonstrate the care employed during the carrying out of the study to ensure that the research is worthy of being a scholarly work. In qualitative research there are a set of parallel criteria that ensure the trustworthiness of the research study as a whole (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In their seminal work in the 1985, Lincoln and Guba substituted reliability and validity with the parallel concept of "trustworthiness," containing four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Within these were specific methodological strategies for demonstrating qualitative rigor, such as the audit trail, member checks, categorizing or confirming results with participants, and peer debriefing are going to be used in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure that the results of this study are credibility member checking was used. Each participant in this study had an opportunity to approve the transcript of their interview. In a second additional member check each participant had an opportunity to review the categories and themes identified in this study after analysis. The participants were then asked if they believe that their experiences are accurately portrayed. Each of the six participants in this study agreed that their experiences were

accurately portrayed. Credibility was also addressed in this study using audio and video recording from the interviews that were coded using NVivo qualitative software. All recordings directly correspond with transcriptions of what the person said.

Transferability

To address transferability, the procedure and research instruments were clearly described in such a way that others can attempt to collect data in similar conditions. Transferability refers to the extent to which the consumer of the research can apply the finding to different situations or generalize the findings of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By incorporating all data into the NVivo software an audit trail was generated and can be easily followed. Identified themes were accompanied with the participants own words transcribed from the interview as well as a sound recording of the participants voice.

In addition to the audit trail, a thick rich description of the setting in which the study took place was provided. Each participant was also described while maintaining their anonymity. There was a description of the beliefs of each participant as well as who they are situated within the greater context of their environment.

Dependability

To make certain the study was dependable, the research process that was followed was reported in detail, and the write-up is able to act as a model if one needs or desires to repeat the study (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). The plan and execution regarding the research design and data collection and analysis was described in detail. A rich, thick description was necessary to give the readers an adequate understanding of the

phenomenon explained; they also enable other researchers and readers to compare instances and make associations between the research findings and their own experiences (Guba, 1981). Boundaries of the study were also expressed to the audience; it was made clear how many individuals participated in the study ($n = 6$), descriptions about participants were provided, and data collection techniques were explained thoroughly.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, the recordings of in-depth interviews were linked with the actual transcribed responses of the participants. To confirm that the transcription is an accurate record of the participant's words, an audio file along with the transcriptions is available. Within the NVivo software, I was able to not only read the transcript of each interview, but I was also able to hear the participant say each word in exactly the way they said it in the interview. Findings were, to the greatest extent possible, a reflection of the perceptions of the participants and not the reflection of the feelings and beliefs of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, by ensuring dependability and confirmability in this manner I was able to create a clear audit trail from what the participant said to what the transcript reads, and the code assigned to it. This was also to ensure that a peer reviewer could follow the audit trail with few problems (Creswell, 2007).

Results

The results of the study will be presented in relation to the research questions. The research questions will be answered by presenting the perceptions of each participant.

Then the themes tied to each research question and their supporting codes will be discussed.

Research Question 1

What are perceptions of special education educators concerning occupational stressors while working with students who have ASD and behavioral challenges? The participants in this study held a wide range of perceptions in regard to occupational stressors while working with autistic students with behavioral challenges. The stories that the participants chose to recount revealed their perceptions of their students in this regard.

Sapphire noted that some children would be verbally abusive and call her names. Some students were also physically abusive. These students would bite, hit, scratch, punch, and kick. She recalls:

One of my children that has autism... he was stepping on the back of his classmate's feet while we were walking. I asked him to stop and I asked him to give himself some room. So, you know, he wouldn't be stepping on his friends feet and he became agitated and punched me in the face. Then he ran into the hallway and ran in the corner. He immediately knew that what he did was wrong and that's why he ran out and ran into a corner after I cleared the area, I called for our crisis team.

Sapphire stated that the student and her had a conversation after this episode and she explained to him that she was sorry he felt embarrassed when she told him to stop. She stated that the student was able to calm himself down while in the corner. One strategy that Sapphire consistently uses is to remove students from stressful situations. This intern

helps with her stress. She believes that the main challenge is when students are having meltdowns such as the one from the story she recounted. Sapphire believes that no two autistic students are alike in regard to their challenges. She posits, “so it’s hard to base information off of just, you know, certain kids because every child’s going to act different and you never know it’s kind of, you know, predict some things but some things you just can’t predict.”

Angelica stated that she felt overwhelmed, like she didn’t matter and wanted to quit. She stated that COVID-19 was stressful. Added to this was the “triggers” her students would have. She recalled one in particular:

he had a lot of triggers and one of his triggers was loud noises. In this particular special education classroom, we had another student that would yell just to talk when he became frustrated. He was a loud talker, and this was a trigger for the other student. When the other student would be upset and yelling it would trigger the other student. So, both of them would be triggered and upset. They would both become physically and verbally aggressive. Throwing items and just very difficult to calm down. At that time, I was able to calm him down but that is not always the case when it comes to students that are behaviorally impaired or have special education special issues

Angelica’s approach to the task of educating autistic students was rooted in her belief that they have the ability to learn and develop social skills. She spent a lot of time discussing things that she has done to help her students adapt socially. She stated:

I had to kind of teach him things like not the not picking your nose giving people a chance and actually listening to the teachers directions instead of just you know saying I don't understand. We kind of made sure that all of his stuff got all of his information in writing and verbal format and within the classroom I had the time to teach him skills of how to work with others to see automatically assumed that everybody didn't like him, or everybody didn't understand him. He was our top student in my English II class, so it was good to see a different perspective of autism as opposed to kind of I guess the traditional look of the kind of OCD and everything having to be in order so yeah it was it was definitely something different than I had it had before.

Angelica believes that students with autism who have behavior difficulties can reach a level of high achievement with a curriculum that is "written for real life students." She states that sometimes she encounters requirements that not realistic for the typical autistic student.

Meredith's perception of students with autism and behavior problems is colored by her experience with individuals who exhibited high achievement. She recalled one example:

I was working in a program with Meredith College student teaching. I had a student named Cary and he really brought home for me the range of the spectrum. He had very very very low social skills, but he was reading on like a third-grade level...and so to work on those lower social skills we made out a token reward system for him to work on social skills and practice initiation and interacting with other peers his age. Then he

would get to do something that he enjoy doing. His favorite thing in the world for that token reward system was M&Ms or Goldfish crackers and with him it was all about balancing the equation and thankfully we had a teacher whose husband was an engineer and actually was able to help us out with that because balancing Chemical Equations on an engineering level is kind of past the scope of pre-K but that was his token reward system he would work on tying his shoe and sitting to participate in group and social interactions and then that was what he worked for was getting to do the chemical equations. Meredith believes that she can be effective in educating students with autism. She believes that with a behavior plan these students can behave appropriately while achieving at a high level.

Raven deals with a lack of support from the family of autistic students. She laments:

The family doesn't provide the follow-through, they don't follow through on strategies when the child is in their care. that transfer in school from school to home, so you find it that you're in the situation where you have to reach each strategy in each session because they're not I transferred and administration because there's a lack of support in that most administrator not even aware because they don't even take it upon themselves to come and observe behavior patterns.

Her feeling is that if there could be a stronger coordination and partnership between the school and home, behavior issues with autistic students could be kept to a minimum. She

also feels that administration could do more to support the entire special education program. She stated:

I think that most districts that I have worked in are kind of not very effective in that they tend to view special education as a one entity rather than many disciplines. I feel that the district views special education as a one size fits all. So, you might be dealing with the behavioral child or emotional child, but they don't see the difference in strategy overall. They expect teachers to handle each child in the same manner regardless of their disability. They do not provide education or resources to teachers to train them on how to handle students with various disabilities. Each autistic student is individual and behaves very differently than another. They have different triggers as well as different coping mechanisms.

Districts do not see that or understand that. From her rhetoric it is clear that Meredith believes that "one size" does not fit all in that districts should look at the differences within and between students who receive special services. Her perception of autistic students can be viewed through this lens.

Sorbet worries about keeping her autistic students safe during meltdowns. She believes that she is effective during these episodes at getting the student settled. However, she no longer works with autistic students because of the stressors of their misbehavior. She recalled:

I moved into a gen ed classroom because the stress was so impacting my life that it was like too much stress...the main stressors in that classroom was that I was physically assaulted on a daily basis. One of the parents didn't want to work with me...

the other parent did but didn't really know how to because she had to work ... I feel like there's some [stress] especially when you're dealing with elementary kids. These parents believe that their child is going to graduate high school... graduate college but it is extra hard when you have a child with special needs. Her perception of students with autism that she has dealt with in her career and the stress that they have cause her is best relayed by her experiences with them and the different solutions that worked in the classroom:

I think really every child with autism is different, what works for them is different and with so for many of them what works today might not work tomorrow. Finding a good solution with a backup solution maybe you have two or three solutions is the key. For kids that have special needs in your classroom, finding solutions that work effectively is important. It is also important to learn the triggers.... they aren't always the same.... learning the good triggers and how to avoid as many crises as possible is important.

Themes Related to Research Question 1

The themes in this section are tied to the perceptions of stressors caused by students with behavior problems who are also autistic. Some of the supporting trends in the data indirectly cause stress related to the research question such as paperwork. All of the trends and themes in this section support research questions one (RQ1).

Challenges and Obstacles

Each participant encountered certain challenges and obstacles while trying to effectively educate autistic student who have behavior problems. These challenges and

obstacles colored their perceptions of these students as well as informed their experiences. They are not presented in order of most frequent occurrence in a noncontextual word search of the responses. The challenges and obstacles are presented here in order of occurrence in the trend of responses related to, for example, paperwork. The participant may not have mentioned the word paperwork but instead discussed paperwork as a challenge. This applies to other codes as well.

Paperwork. The participants in this study believed that the paperwork involved with special education presented an obstacle. Three of the participants stated that it caused stress. Sorbet complained:

the paperwork is overwhelming. I know someone who actually had a student transferred to us to their department and actually had someone who did the paperwork for them. I mean just too much on their plates there is not enough time in the day to do everything that is required and to meet all the state and district deadlines at the same time.

Angelica also pointed to paperwork as a challenge as well as a source of stress. She added:

It was a lot of paperwork that had to be done because no one is prepared for a crisis such as Covid 19. We did not have clear guidelines or a protocol to follow. I was worried about my safety and the safety of others. We have Facebook groups that we have support groups for just easy teachers that's how bad it is at this time.

Administration. According to participants administration can be a source of stress as well. Sorbet noted:

Do they? I mean I think they do. I feel like for instances my administrator at my old school you're not you can in trouble for talking to the district because she wanted to keep everything within the school, and she didn't want the district to know if it was a problem and so I do think they could be more helpful, but I think it really depends on the administrators that you work for.

Raven agreed and pointed to a lack of administrative support as well as family support.

Behavior. This word was one of the most frequently occurring words in the responses from the participants. It was always used to describe the behavior of the students in a negative way. It was exclusively used in the recounting of bad experiences dealing with autistic students. There are actions in response to bad experiences was also coded under behavior. This did not include any strategies they used to cope with student behavior. Overall, the behavior of the participants was professional and kept the safety of the autistic child in mind even as they were being attacked and/or verbally assaulted.

Coping. For this study the word coping referred to what teachers do to cope with student behavior both at school and who they relax after work. The participants all commented on what they do to stay relaxed at work as well. All six participants discussed removing themselves from stressful situations in some form. They needed time to cool off and gather themselves or "reboot." The participants found it harder to cope with stressors from work in their personal life because of the restrictions of COVID-19.

Stress. The word stress was one of the most used words in the study. This was expected. All participants discussed what their stressors were and how they coped with the stressors. Stress was only used in a positive context by one of the participants

referring to the need to get better in their position by using stress as a motivator. Every other context surrounding the word stress was negative.

Help. Sapphire believes that teachers need help and should not be left to figure things out. Indeed, every participant discussed help in the form of support, mentoring, or additional resources. Sapphire stated it best by saying the following:

I really think that it would help to have more discussion about the actual characteristics and behaviors of the children that have the disability so that way we can research and learn more coping mechanisms and learn more ways to make the classroom more adaptable so that they feel comfortable and we can create different spaces so that they can get their frustrations out in a safe way and maybe not as disruptive to the classroom. I just feel like we concentrate a lot on the teaching and learning for the student when I think we need to learn we need to focus to on what the student can teach us about their disability and you know their behaviors and things so that that way we can adapt because we all know if the students in I mean if they're having a meltdown they're not learning anything so until we can address the behavior we can't get to the learning point portion of it.

Management. The word management was used in the context of all the tasks that have to be performed by special education teachers outside of teaching students. This included managing their caseloads, preparing for meetings, and doing paperwork.

According to Sorbet:

I think they're not realistic. I think that in an ideal world they're great, but I feel like when you put in 45 students on a caseload or even 15 students on a caseload

if you are dealing with significant behaviors. I feel it is too much and I feel like they really need to reduce those numbers in the ratio to give teachers the full effectiveness to actually reach the children who need it and I think having qualified staff is the biggest issue.

Support. The participants all communicated the need for support, not just from their administration, but from their peers, specialists, and the parents in order to educate students with autism and behavior problems. Five of the participants reported feeling alone and sought out guidance and support from their peers. Four participants reported that they did not feel supported by administration. Three of the participants stated that they didn't get support from the parents of the students.

Time. The participants were very deliberated in regard to how they spent their time both at home and at school. They pointed to the fact that paper work, meetings, and other requirements took time away from preparing for student learning. One hundred percent of the participants

Parents. Raven pointed to a lack of support from the family. She recalled: The family doesn't provide the follow-through, they don't follow through on strategies when the child is in their care. that transfer in school from school to home, so you find it that you're in the situation where you have to reach each strategy in each session because they're not I transferred and administration because there's a lack of support in that most administrator not even aware because they don't even take it upon themselves to come and observe behavior patterns.

Experience and Lessons Learned

This theme was related to the recounting of stories by the participants about their experiences with autistic students who have behavior problems and what they and learned from those experiences. These experiences inform how they view autistic students and their perceptions of how they deal with stress caused by their misbehavior.

Classroom. The participants used this word frequently to discuss what they have experienced and how they manage behavior in their classroom environments. One hundred percent of the participants in this study looked for ways to maintain a safe, orderly, and effective classroom environment based on their responses to the questions asked of them. The discussed their experiences in the classroom and what they got from the experiences as lessons going forward.

Confidence. Participants expressed that through the experience of dealing with students during meltdowns they gained confidence and began to try different techniques to address the varied behaviors of autistic students. Participants were afraid of what they did not know, however them gained confidence from training, talking with other professionals, and venting to administration. With greater confidence they were better able to cope with adverse situations in the classroom.

Fight. Many students with autism who have behavior problems are physically and virtually aggressive. This word was used frequently to characterized actions the students would take during episode in which they became physically aggressive. One hundred percent of the stories that the participants recounted involved a male student lashing out because of certain triggers that the participant was previously aware of.

De-elevate. The participants were all professionals who know how to de-elevate their student's behavior when they would lash out. The term de-elevation was only used once by a participant. However, all methods that the participants used to calm their students down were grouped under this code. One hundred percent of the participants used some type of de-elevation technique. Each of them discussed an assortment of techniques that they used in their past experiences to calm students down.

Research Question 2

Which coping strategies are most often utilized by teachers working with students with autism who have behavior challenges? The participants in this study spoke of coping strategies as if they were second nature to them. Each one of the participants discussed de-elevation techniques. Most of them implemented a reward system. These individuals also discussed coping skills that they used to deal with the stress of educating students with autism who have behavior challenges. Only one of the participants left the special education environment. The others remained holding on to the belief that they can make a difference even when students are verbally and physically aggressive.

Angelica recalls that there was a student that was verbally aggressive and physically aggressive to her. She stated:

so, I would get on his level when he would have his moment. He would get on the floor so I would sit on the floor with him and begin trying to have a conversation with him to calm him down. I would just stay on the floor with him until he was able to have a conversation and all of his aggression would pretty much just go down to a certain level.

Sapphire admitted that it was hard to cope with the stress of working with students who are autistic and have behavior problems. She advised:

but it does help if you try to leave school at school ...that's not always the case because things come up and can't be helped and you have to take some things home and work on some things at home.... but if you can kind of make it, you know, try to get it done before you leave the school buildingto leave it at school. Because that way when you get home shut it off so that that way you can concentrate on other things in your life instead of all about work.

Sapphire went on to say that in her first year of teaching she did a lot and would work late hours. She would take work home. She became overwhelmed with it all, "but as time went on, I think I have figured out a good balance where I don't take as much home I mean if I have to do something at home I will but, especially on the weekends, I try to on Friday.... leave it and then start fresh on Monday."

In regard to coping with student behavior at school Sapphire relays on professional development. She stated:

Of course, we usually have professional development ... they recommend different online webinars for us to attend ... we have meetings like monthly meetings to discuss things within the EC Department ... of course we have emails and different newsletters that go out to inform us of up-to-date changes or anything this new any new kind of procedures that we might be following or things like that.

Sapphire says that the COVID-19 virus has changed the way she receives professional development. She doesn't believe it is as effective. She also doesn't believe that her coping strategies in her personal life are as effective. She posited:

Honestly there's really not effective because you can't really go out and eat ... I can't really call you as a home girl and say let's go eat somewhere because then you have to worry about getting sick from Covid 19.... being around people causes more stress.... you can't go out; you can't travel at least overseas anyway safely so honestly doing the things that I used to in order to cope is not possible. It's more stressful to risk my life because of Covid 19. So not I just shut down and turn my laptop off turn everything off and just say forget it which is not healthy but that's the best I can do right now honestly.

It helps Ivory to vent to administration. She doesn't hesitate to let them know what is on her mind. She said:

I am quick to text my content-area grade level administrator and say, 'off the Record' and kind of vent ... then I will get back on the record and get information that would help me to move forward. I remove my personal feelings and actually look at myself. I look at how whatever I'm upset about impacted my ability to do my job and then take it from there ... once I learned that particular strategy my stress went down quite a bit ... when your stress levels are high and you're feeling stressed out because you are upset about something that happened don't let it affect you and your personal life.

Ivory tries to keep her personal life separate from her work life. Her philosophy is to leave it all at work. During work hours she takes regular time outs. She states, “I have to literally close my computer and walk down the street to the stop sign and come back and then it’s kind of like a mind reset that I have to do.” In addition to being expressive she also tries to be reflective. She recalled her efforts: “I could probably do a better job of really stepping back and reflecting and deal with stressors.... I try to meet with colleagues, mentors, coaches ... talk about ... main concerns...it’s helpful.”

Raven has had success redirecting and distracting her students when they act out. She has also removed students from the environment. She has, at times, removed herself from the environment in order to regroup. She states that networking with other professionals in the field and brainstorming ideas is another way she copes. She went on: I mean learning how to handle my emotions when I become overwhelmed with being a special educator. Learning how to take a time out, learning how to deescalate my own emotions and working through my personal feelings that may affect how I may perceive an autistic student with behavioral challenges.

Themes Related to Research Question 2

The following themes are related to the second research question which examines how the participants coped with stressors caused by the misbehavior of their autistic students. It was found that not only do the participants have coping strategies at school, but they also use coping strategies at work in order to stay calm and professional. Participants also used training and knowledge to help them feel more confident and cope with their students in a manner they kept everyone safe and learning.

Coping and Adjustment

Participants used strategies to cope and adjust to crisis situations as well as the demands of their positions. They all stated that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, their ability to cope and adjust was hindered particularly at home. These participants made and attempt to “leave work at work.” But factors that were beyond their control would not allow them to.

Upset. This word was used by all participants to describe their student’s behavior as well as the triggers that caused their behaviors. The word was never used by the participants to describe themselves. Although certain triggers upset their students at times all participants worked to de-elevate their students behavior quickly during these episodes.

Understand. This word was used in part to describe the reaction of administration to the obstacles faced by the participants as they attempt to work with autistic students who also have behavior issues. The word was also used to describe the student’s reaction to strategies employed by the participants themselves.

Relax. The goal of coping and adjustment for the participants was to relax based on their responses. They all used different variations of this word; however, they were all combined into the code relax. Not only did the participants seek relaxation at home but they also discussed coping techniques they used to relax at work. The participants all believed that it was important to stay as calm as possible while at work around students. Three of the participants pointed to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic an obstacle to being able to relax in their off time. With restaurants closed or at half capacity, movie

theaters not up and running, and not being able to travel abroad these participants “shut down” or just stayed home and watched TV while stressing out about the virus. They all three pointed to their coping in this manner as “not good.”

Bad. This word was frequently used to describe situations and was never assigned to a particular student during the participants recollection of past events. The participants pointed to situations being bad and their responses being bad but never a student being bad. The word bad was also used by three participants to describe things dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in relations to them coping with stressors at work.

Information. This word was used exclusively in the context of empowering the participants to better education students with autism. All participants believed that if they possessed the information needed in regard to new techniques and strategies they could better cope with aggressive behavior from their students as well as encourage them in areas of strength.

Professional Development and Strategies

In the area of professional development all the participants felt there needed to be more. It needed to be targeted in relevant to them in their opinions. Three of the participants felt that professional development was now even less effective because it was all virtual because of the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. These participants sought out training unofficially by talking to peers and administrators.

Training. The participants each believed that training was the key to continually improve their effectiveness educating students with autism who have behavior problems. Surprisingly, they also believed to a person that this will help them to better cope with

stressors in the classroom. In this context the participants seemed to experience the most stress when situations got out of control. Their ability to quickly calm students down was a source of coping for them according to their recollections. Four of the participants believed that training was inadequate and wanted more targeted trainings to their areas of specialization. These four felt that districts held a “one size fits all” mentality in regard to special education.

Unknown. All the participants were very aware of what they did not know. In their positions they sought to understand areas in which they were ignorant. They studied their students according to their answers to the questions in one-on-one interviews. They all agreed each student is different and possessed different triggers to their behavior. Three of the participants discussed how they routinely sought different rewards for their students when they achieved socially or academically in their class.

Important. This word was used frequently to highlight the value of learning new strategies in the context of professional development. The word was also used by three participants to highlight how to implement certain strategies they have learned in the past. Participants each understood the value of lifelong learning and being able to adjust to changing situations. The word important came through in their dialog in this regard.

Nothing. Four of the participants made the statement “there is nothing” with regard to training in specific areas in order to cope with student misbehavior in the classroom. This word best describes all six of their opinions in regard to professional development focused on working with autistic students who have behavior problems. Therefore, the participants were left on their own to cope.

Summary

In this chapter the results of the study were presented. The study was guided by two research questions. The first research question asked: What are perceptions of special education educators concerning occupational stressors while working with students who have ASD and behavioral challenges? The participants in this study held a wide range of perceptions in regard to occupational stressors while working with autistic students with behavioral challenges. They believed that autistic students, while having behavior challenges, were capable of calming themselves down, adhere to social norms, and achieve high academically. They also perceived that these students caused direct and indirect stressors of which they sought strategies, support, and training.

The second research question that guided this study was: Which coping strategies are most often utilized by teachers working with students with autism who have behavior challenges? One hundred percent of the participants reported using cool down techniques to mitigate student behavior as well as manage their own behavior. These participants wanted training, information, and understanding as they attempted to cope with crisis situations. It was found that not only do the participants have coping strategies at school, but they also use coping strategies at work in order to stay calm, relaxed, and professional. They removed students from the environment when something in that environment would trigger their behavior. They reported also removing themselves from the environment. In the next chapter these findings will be discussed, conclusions will be drawn based on the review of literature, and recommendations will be made.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain knowledge and understanding regarding special education teachers' perceptions of the stressors when working with ASD students who have behavioral challenges and the ways in which they coped with perceived stressors. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because it provided a platform for learning about the experiences of those who have experienced the phenomenon as explained in the individuals' own words (see Patton, 2015). The current study included six special education teachers who participated in semistructured interviews conducted via social media calls and phone calls. Because this was a qualitative study, fewer participants were interviewed to obtain a deep, richer understanding of their perceptions. In this chapter the findings of the study are discussed and recommendations for future research are presented.

Interpretation of the Findings

The first research question that guided this study was the following: What are the perceptions of special education teachers concerning occupational stressors while working with students who have ASD and behavioral challenges? The stories that the participants chose to recount revealed their perceptions of their students in this regard. Angelica stated that she felt overwhelmed, like she did not matter and wanted to quit: "When the one student would be upset and yelling it would trigger the other student. So, both of them would be triggered and upset. They would both become physically and verbally aggressive." Overall, the behavior of the participants was professional and kept the safety of the autistic child in mind even as they were being attacked and/or verbally

assaulted. Participants all seemed to possess empathy and patience with the students when they had episodes. Participants each had a toolkit of strategies to deal with crisis events in their classrooms. However, each participant had a unique approach.

Angelica's approach to the task of educating autistic students was rooted in her belief that they have the ability to learn and develop social skills. Angelica believes that students with autism who have behavior difficulties can reach a level of high achievement with a curriculum that is "written for real life students." She stated that sometimes she encounters requirements that not realistic for the typical autistic student. However, Meredith's approach was influenced by her experience with individuals who exhibited high achievement:

I had a student named Cary and he really brought home for me the range of the spectrum. He had very very very low social skills, but he was reading on like a third-grade level...and so to work on those lower social skills we made out a token reward system for him to work on social skills and practice initiation and interacting with other peers his age.

Meredith believes that she can be effective in educating students with autism. She believes that with a behavior plan these students can behave appropriately while achieving at a high level.

Raven's approach is influenced by her perception that many times the family is not supportive of the school. She stated

The family doesn't provide the follow-through, they don't follow through on strategies when the child is in their care that transfer in school from school to

home, so you find it that you're in the situation where you have to reach each strategies in each session because they're not I transferred and administration because there's a lack of support in that most administrator not even aware because they don't even take it upon themselves to come and observe behavior patterns.

Sorbet, on the other hand, worries about keeping her autistic students safe during meltdowns. She believes that she is effective during these episodes at getting the student settled. Her perception of students with autism whom she has dealt with in her career and the stress that they have caused her is best relayed by her experiences with them and the different solutions that worked in the classroom.

Each participant encountered challenges and obstacles while trying to educate autistic students who have behavior problems. These challenges and obstacles influenced their perceptions of these students and informed their experiences. The participants believed that the paperwork involved with special education presented an obstacle. Three of the participants stated that it caused stress.

The second research question that guided this study was the following: Which coping strategies are most often utilized by teachers working with students with autism who have behavior challenges? The participants in this study spoke of coping strategies as if they were second nature to them. Each of the participants discussed de-elevation techniques.

Sapphire admitted that it was hard to cope with the stress of working with students who are autistic and have behavior problems. She advised but it does help if

you try to leave school at school ...that's not always the case because things come up and can't be helped and you have to take some things home and work on some things at home.... but if you can kind of make it, you know, try to get it done before you leave the school buildingto leave it at school. Because that way when you get home shut it off so that that way you can concentrate on other things in your life instead of all about work.

Sapphire says that the COVID-19 virus has changed the way special education teachers receive professional development. She does not believe it is as effective. She also does not believe that her coping strategies in her personal life are effective.

Ivory tries to keep her personal life separate from her work life. Her philosophy is to leave it all at work. During work hours she takes regular time-outs to calm down and remain professional. She, like the other participants, seeks out help and someone to talk to about issues she is having with students in the classroom.

Raven has had success redirecting and distracting her students when they act out. She has also removed students from the environment. She has, at times, removed herself from the environment to regroup. She stated that networking with other professionals in the field and brainstorming ideas is another way she copes. She noted "I mean learning how to handle my emotions when I become overwhelmed with being a special educator." Participants used strategies to cope with and adjust to crisis situations as well as the demands of their positions. They all stated that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, their ability to cope and adjust was hindered particularly at home.

These participants made an attempt to “leave work at work.” Based on participants’ responses, the goal of coping and adjusting was to relax. They all used different variations of this word; however, they were all combined into the code relax. Not only did the participants seek relaxation at home but they also discussed coping techniques they used to relax at work. The participants all believed that it was important to stay as calm as possible while at work around students. Three of the participants pointed to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as an obstacle to being able to relax in their off time. The participants each believed that training was the key to continually improve their effectiveness in educating students with autism who have behavior problems.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to one school district in one area of the South United States. There were only six participants in this study, one of whom provided auxiliary services for students and did not have any students in the classroom during the study. All the participants were female educators. The study was conducted during a global pandemic, which may have affected the responses of the participants regarding their ability to cope with stressors at home. The study was a case study, which is a qualitative approach that limits generalizability.

Recommendations

The first recommendation for future research is to conduct a mixed-methods study using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This would enable a more thorough understanding of the stressors of teachers who service autistic students that also have behaviors and how they cope. This could be accomplished by sending a survey to a

broader number of participants regarding their experiences with autistic students. Then, based on survey responses, teachers who have overall positive experiences could be interviewed as well as teachers who have an overall negative experience with these students in the classroom. The resulting data could then be analyzed and compared.

Future research should be expanded to include more school districts in different states. This would better enable more varied responses and perceptions. This could be accomplished by simply including participants from different school districts. The same number of participants could be selected from each district and the data could be analyzed qualitatively.

Further, the selection of participants should be a randomized sample instead of purposeful sampling. This could be accomplished by identifying a larger number of teachers who fit the criterion from different areas of the country and then randomly choosing teachers to take part in the study. The sample should be as large as possible.

In future research both male and female participants should be interviewed and observed in order to get a fuller view of the experiences of teachers who service autistic students with behavior issues. This could be accomplished by through a purposeful sample.

A broader sampling of stakeholders should be interviewed in future studies. The friends and spouses of teachers who services autistic students with behavior problems should be included as secondary participants in future studies. This could be accomplished by using a rolling sample. Secondary participants would be identified through the primary participants themselves. The broader the number of participants in

each case, the better the view of the coping strategies that teachers use and its overall effectiveness.

Teaching methods in regard to autistic students should also be examined in future research in light of the fact that all participant teachers requested professional development. This could be accomplished by simply focusing on the everyday instruction that takes place in the teacher's classrooms. Teachers could be studied and recommendations for the types of professional development could be developed.

Implications

The implications of teacher stress related to the work demands of supporting and instructing students with autism manifest itself in high turnover rates, missed work because of health issues, veteran teachers leaving the profession, and students not being served educationally or in some cases even harmed. In this section the theoretical, empirical, and methodological implications will be explored.

Theoretical Implications

This study was grounded in transactional theory. Lazarus (1987) wrote the seminal work on transactional theory with contributions from Cox (1978) and Folkman (1987). The word *transaction* denotes that stress related to an individual's occupational duties is not necessarily a product of the work environment or an expression of an individual's reactions to the work environment (Cox, 1978). Rather, stress reflects a combination of motives, values, and beliefs regarding a work environment whose characteristics may pose harm, threats, or challenges to the individual as a result of being in that environment (Lazarus, 1990). Transactional theory suggests that stress is the direct

product of a transaction between an individual and their environment which may tax their resources and thus threaten their well-being (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). The participants in this study recalled being hit, kicked, punched, spit on and cursed at. They sought to stabilize their environments quickly during crisis situation by removing the student from the situation and calming them down. They further sought to keep the environment stable by being proactive using different strategies such as a token economy or other rewards for good behavior. They also taught their ASD student social skills. However, not all the stressors exhibited by the participants would be considered negative.

Positive pressure (eustress) causes people to adjust to their surroundings, create adapting abilities, and increment their attention to issue zones. Negative pressure surpasses their adapting capacities, strains, and uniform their physical and mental frameworks, and can result in physical as well as mental issues (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). The participants in this study did recount eustress in that they wanted to do a good job and were passionate about working with their students.

Empirical Implications

Antecedent factors comprise an individual's exposure to both the normal hazards of work as well as those inherent in the design and management of work and the overall organization (Cox & Griffith, 1995). The antecedent factors for the participants in this study were the misbehavior of the students and the lack of training and support they perceived from administration and the student's families. The perceived expectation of parents, administrative demands, factors related to student outcomes, and the anxiety of possibly being fired from their job have a huge impact on teachers having stress (Aydin

& Kaya, 2016). The participants each argued in their responses that they would prefer to work in a more supportive environment.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik, (2015) argue that “supportive school environments and positive social relations with parents, colleagues, and the school leadership are also predictive of teachers’ job satisfaction and motivation to stay in the profession whereas time pressure and discipline problems are predictive of lower levels of job satisfaction” (p. 182). This conclusion was expected and aligns with the perceptions of the teachers. But even in the face of obstacles at work and lower levels of job satisfaction they attempted to “leave work at work” and spend time with family.

Aydin and Kaya (2016) noted in their research that “it is observed that among methods of coping with stress, most preferred ones are spending time with beloved ones, looking at things on the bright side and creating an environment” (p.6). This was made harder by the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic which upset their routines in their personal lives. The pandemic also interfered with their ability to create a calming environment at home in which they could escape from the demands of the job.

Potgieter, and Ellis (2018) concluded that, “Job demands that are perceived by teachers as a threat to their psychological or physical well-being, have long been known to lead to negative affective experiences, such as frustration and anxiety” (p. 34). The researchers go on to say that this could ultimately cause burnout and emotional exhaustion. Sorbet left the special education classroom for the general education classroom for such a reason. However, of the six participants in this study, she was the only one who left special education. The other participants did not discuss burn out as a

problem. Surprisingly, they seemed to have a determined attitude and a strong sense of efficacy. Song, (2016) found that the overall self-efficacy of preservice regular education teachers was higher than the overall self-efficacy of preservice special education teachers. They were self-reflective and looked for help when they felt that they needed it. This form of coping, may be the key to why they did not speak of burn out. Platisdou and Agalioti (2008), examined burnout and job satisfaction as it relates to teachers who work with special needs children. The researchers wrote that teacher burnout is a major issue in special education because of the emotionally demanding work context and teachers who are unable to cope (Platisdou & Agalioti, 2008).

Coping is necessary, particularly in regard to special education teachers according to Cancio et al. (2018). Special education teachers are faced with increasingly large caseloads, a lack of clarity in their job descriptions, a lack of support from administration, excessive paper, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and minimal to no collaboration with their colleagues (Cancio et al., 2018). Large case-loads and paperwork was a concern that each of the participants shared in their responses to the questions. They also commented on the lack of training and support via collaboration that was present on their campuses. Each of them sought out colleagues and administration to talk to or vent to and get advice. The coping strategies were used for self-preservation in order to prevent long term stress from setting in and possibly causing health problems. Stress can lead to internal conflicts that vary dramatically depending on the individual according to Kebbi (2018). Individuals experiencing prolonged stress at the work-place tend to develop

unstable blood pressure, increased levels of cholesterol, muscle tension, and numerous other health issues (Kebbi, 2018).

Ruppar, Neeper, and Dalsen, (2016) studied special education teachers' perceptions of preparedness to implement recommended practices for students with severe disabilities. The researchers found that the more prepared the teacher perceived the were the more successful they would be. The participants in this study lamented that they need training that was targeted at their special needs. They sought out more strategies to deal with their students when they are in crisis.

Finally according to Vittek, (2015), there is a severe shortage of special education teachers in this country, which has increased over the last decade. Only one of the participants in this study left the special education classroom. Sorbet decided to teach in the general education environment have six years in special education. She noted that it was because of the added stressor and paperwork.

Methodological Implications

The method of qualitative case study was used to gain a knowledge and understanding regarding special education teachers' perceptions of the stressors when working with ASD students who have behavioral challenges. The role of the researcher for this study was as a nonparticipant observer. The sampling strategy employed was purposeful sampling. The primary data collection instrument that was used for this study is that of one-on-one interviews of key stakeholders who can provide information that was used to answers the research questions proposed. Participants were requested to answer open-ended interview questions in a semi-structured format.

Looking back on the data collection process, a better effort should have been made to gain clarification in regard to the deeper meaning of some of the comments made by participants. These comments required more context that could only be provided by the researcher. A second round of interviews or a focus group interview would have given a better picture of what the participant was trying to actually say in a few cases.

Participants had a tendency to rant about their perceptions of their students for minutes without pausing. In order to not break their concentration while providing their perception the long rants were allowed. Transcription of these rants were difficult at times which led to challenges in coding.

The data collection process also required that digital media be used. Wifi connections were sometimes a challenge as well as being able to clearly understand with the participant what was being said. This also created a challenge in forming a relationship with some participants in order to get them to open up and be more transparent.

Conclusion

Despite being physically and verbally assaulted on occasion each of the participants in this study maintained a positive perception of students with autism who had behavior issues. This word behavior was one of the most frequently occurring words in the responses from the participants. It was always used to describe the behavior of the students in a negative way. It was exclusively used in the recounting of bad experiences dealing with autistic students. When students exhibited bad behavior each of the participants implemented de-escalation strategies to maintain a safe learning environment for the students. The participants also reported that they attempted to “leave work at

work.” The participants all commented on what they do to stay relaxed. All six participants discussed removing themselves from stressful situations in some form. They needed time to cool off and gather themselves or “reboot.” The participants found it harder to cope with stressors from work in their personal life because of the restrictions of COVID-19.

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