**A SURVEY APPROACH TO EFFECTS OF WORK RELATED STRESS AMONG
SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS**

by

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Teacher stress studies suggest that teacher stress has become progressively heightened. Researchers have acknowledged that teachers are stressed, and in turn, there has been an increase in burnout and turnover within the field. Seemingly, even with the magnitude of attention dedicated to preventing occupational stress, the prevalence is growing. In response, this study aimed to understand special education teachers and the stressors within their occupation. This study used a questionnaire using a Likert scale and opened ended questions to gain a better understanding of the stressors and overall well-being of special education teachers. The mixed methods approach allowed for a comprehensive look at 45 K-12 special education teachers within four school districts in Western Pennsylvania. The data was collected from April to May of 2018 and used the themes: (a) working conditions, (b) professional responsibilities, (c) student needs, and (d) student behavior to categorize the data. Data suggested that the working conditions and professional responsibilities provided the most stressors for special education teachers. The questionnaire also provided insight on an individual's inability to differentiate between types of stressors. The implications of these findings for future research, professional development, and wellness education are discussed within this study.

Keywords: special education, teachers, occupational stress, mixed methods

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The term stress possesses many different meanings. Selye (1985) identified stress as, "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand, whether it is caused by, or results in, pleasant or unpleasant conditions. Stress as such is all-inclusive, embodying both the positive and negative aspects of these concepts" (p.359). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described stress as a "sort of connection between a person and the environment such that when the person perceives a situation as taxing, it results in physical and emotional reaction" (p. 359). Stress is a part of every person's sphere of life; whether it be in the work place, home, or interpersonal relationships.

All jobs cause stress to some degree and the phenomenon is becoming a growing concern globally. Work scenarios related to the human services, specifically teaching, share many stressors that are inherent in other work-related fields, but also present other unique factors. Teaching requires intense involvement within the lives of others, which requires empathetic responding and caring commitment. Teaching students is not only an emotionally strenuous and challenging job, but a teacher's work encompasses the tensions of students, parents, and the community (Tahseen, 2015).

Tahseen (2015) provides input on a survey of teachers' work-related stress. The European Trade Union Committee for Education conducted the survey in 27 countries in Europe and found that teachers have some of the highest levels of work-related stress when compared to other professions. Banahatti (2016) discussed the hypothesis that teachers who work in special education settings (M=56.47%) have a much higher stress rate than those within a general education setting (M=43.82%). Fimian and Blanton (1986) explored stress and burnout among 36 first-year special education teachers in a rural region of North Carolina. The results indicated

that it took less than one year in the field for teachers to feel significantly worse about their career outlook. The severity of the stress phenomenon is well documented with several serious negative consequences that include job dissatisfaction and turnover, poor physical and psychological health, poor inter- and intrapersonal relationships, and burnout within the field (Banahatti, 2016; Qusar, 2011; & Tahseen, 2015). Subsequently, teachers are leaving the field of special education. PDE (2018) recognizes this trend in their recent archival data that presents the declining rate of teacher certifications from 2015 to 2018. The present-day environment and prevalence of special education teachers' stress indicate the significance and necessity for a study to determine the factors relating to stress and work-life balance, in order to assist practitioners and researchers to concentrate on detection and prevention.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The negative consequences that teachers experience as a result of stress suggest the importance of seeking solutions to manage their stress. Despite the high percentage of administrators and educators who are aware of both the problem of stress and stress-induced burnout within the field of education, research has not been sufficient in explaining the relationships between stressors and other factors within the field of special education. If administrators and educators are able to predict stress within the field, then there could be preventive measures to avert it. Specifically, Banahatti (2016), Qusar (2011), and Tahseen (2015), investigated the different aspects of work related stress among educators in public settings, however very few factors were considered. Understanding the stressors within the role of a special education teacher is limited. This study targets to help fill these gaps.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following questions:

RQ1. What kinds of stressors do special education teachers experience?

RQ2. What factors of the special education teacher role best predict stress?

RQ3. Why do special education teachers experience occupational stress in the work place?

Definition of Terms

As defined by the U.S. Bureau of Labor (2015), special education teachers are individuals that work with students who have a wide variety of learning, mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. They adapt general education curriculum and teach various subjects, such as math, reading, writing, and life skills, to students with mild and moderate disabilities. This definition of special educator's role will be used. In addition, other roles will be noted that include: providing differentiated instruction, attending professional development, communicating effectively with IEP teams, and all other duties as expected by each individual school district. The following are important terms that will be used within the research study:

Burnout occurs when special education teachers experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment as a result of long term stress (Radford, 2017).

Disability, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "is a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions."

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) are related services and special education that have been provided at public expense to meet the standards of the State education agency;

include an appropriate school setting in the State involved and provided in conformity with the IEP (Lusk, 2015).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) are developed to students with disabilities who need specifically tailored plan to help them access their education (Radford, 2017).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team is required by IDEA to convene at least once annually to "determine whether the annual goals for the child are being achieved. The IEP team must also revise the IEP when needed, to address any lack of progress. The IEP team's primary responsibility is to make educated decisions about the individuals well-being and future goals.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)(1990), is a federal mandate that sets the precedence for the required education that schools must provide for individuals with disabilities and prevents discrimination (Radford, 2017).

Job Stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope (Chen, 2016). Within stress literature, job stress is used interchangeably with *occupational stress*.

Under IDEA, *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)* means a student is educated with the student's non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. This includes the right to participate in all of the regular education curriculum with all students (Beebe & Nishimura, 2016).

Likert-scales use fixed choice responses formats to measure apptitudes or opinions (McLeod, 2008).

Special education, defined by IDEA, means specifically designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.

Qualitative Research, is primarily exploratory. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations (Slevitch, 2011).

Quantitative Research is used to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics (Slevitch, 2011).

Overview of Method

A mixed methodology will be used to address the research questions within the study. Creswell & Creswell (2018) discuss that mixed methodology research includes both qualitative and quantitative data in order to make theoretical assumptions.

The research design will involve a Likert-scale survey for data collection and open-ended questions. There are 128 survey questions and three of them are open ended. The sample will consist of current K-12 special educators within the Western Pennsylvania region in rural, urban, and suburban school districts. The purpose of the questionnaire will be to determine major stressors and factors within the workplace. The open-ended questions will help to understand the specific parts of the special educator's role that predict stress.

Delimitations

This study utilized the survey "Teacher Stress and Wellbeing Survey" developed by Griffith University, The Queensland College of Teachers, and the Independent Education Union (2015). This survey was chosen because it best fit the research questions for this pertinent study. The original format of the survey was issued using a database through Griffith University. This format was converted to a different online format utilizing SurveyGizmo©. Using SurveyGizmo© allowed for the participants to take the survey at their own convenience.

Additionally, demographic changes were made to the survey to better fit the region of Western Pennsylvania. This included the grade levels and types of classrooms as this differs in Australia. Lastly, to gain a more comprehensive viewpoint of stressors within the workplace, three open-ended questions were developed by the researcher committee and approved by Nicole Mahoney, administrative officer at the Australian College of Educators. To view the communication between the researcher and Nicole Mahoney, go to Appendix B. The open-ended questions allowed for teachers to express in more detail their views of stress within their current role as a special educator.

Limitations and Assumptions

Within the present research there are limitations due to the nature of the self-report methodology. Method bias is a concern within the study. Due to potential repercussions within their school district, educators may feel a sense of pressure to not answer the questionnaire. Secondly, the sample size of the study is small and is restricted to only four school districts, therefore the results cannot be widely generalized. Only four schools were used due to convenience. Assumptions can also be made about the current study. These assumptions include:

1. Participants of the survey are current special education teachers (K-12) in Pennsylvania.
2. Participants are employed by one of the four districts who provided consent for employees to participate in the study.
3. All of the participants provided credible information when completing the survey.

Summary

This study sets forth to determine the occupational stress factors related to special education teachers. The conceptual framework for this study has been developed based on the investigations of occupational stress and special education teachers by researchers within the field.

This study is presented in five chapters. The first chapter presents an overview of the study. The second chapter contains a review of relevant literature addressing special education history, occupational stress, and stress among special education teachers. Chapter three contains a comprehensive, detailed explanation of the methodology that will be used to direct the research protocol. Chapter four presents the analysis of the findings collected while chapter five includes the conclusions drawn from the analysis and implications for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990), when developed, was tasked with creating a definition for 'special education'. Special education can be defined as, "specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability" ("What is Special Education," 2017). Special Education services are to be provided at no cost to a student's parents until a state-mandated age. Once the student reaches that age, the student is eligible for services under ADA, not IDEA. Within Pennsylvania, the school district is responsible for services until the age of 21. Under IDEA, there are fourteen different recognized disability categories: (1) Autism Spectrum Disorders, (2) intellectual disability, (3) multiple disabilities, (4) traumatic brain injury (TBI), (5) speech/language impairments, (6) visual impairments, (7) hearing impairments, (8) deaf-blindness, (9) deafness, (10) developmental delay, (11) emotional disturbance, (12) specific learning disability, (13) orthopedic impairment, and (14) other health impairments. In order to be deemed eligible for special education services, IDEA states that a student's disability must adversely affect the individual's academic and/or overall educational performance. Eligibility is then defined and determined through a process of evaluations by all participants that are included within the individual's education and health practices. When disabilities are not visible, it can be a challenge to diagnose. To eliminate any difficulties in identification, IDEA mandated the "child find" obligation. This requires states and school districts to "identify, locate, and evaluate children with disabilities residing within their boundaries" (Radford, 2017, p.108). Once a child has been found eligible for special education services, IDEA requires the child to be reevaluated every three years. Individuals with intellectual disabilities are reevaluated every two years.

Special Education Criteria

After a child goes through a series of interventions to help with academic deficits and continues to have limited progress, that child will be recommended for evaluation. The evaluation is completed by a school psychologist and will look at a number of different criteria, including the child's IQ. Once the school psychologist reviews the test results, a decision will be made in regard to special education services. If the child is not eligible, he/she will remain within the general education classroom and continue to receive interventions by the teacher. When a child has been deemed eligible for special education services, there are specific requirements that must be followed to ensure that he/she is receiving the best evidence-based education practices.

First, the school psychologist must write up an evaluation report (ER) and share it with the child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). team. This will then give the special education teacher the appropriate background information to begin writing the IEP. The IEP is constructed by the IEP team, which consists of the student, family, and educational experts, including the child's general education teacher. The IEP is a legal-binding document that includes a written statement of the student's present levels, progress in the general curriculum, annual goals, related services, and a description about how the student is making progress towards the annual goals. The IEP team must meet at least annually to modify the IEP.

The IEP team has many important roles in terms of the student's education. The IEP needs to be put together in a way that recognizes the child's disability and allows the child access to Free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The IEP team must design an IEP that meets the results of the parents' concerns and the most recent evaluation. If the team disagrees with any given part of the IEP, including the evaluator's recommendations, they do not need to implement them. The team, however, does need to consider the student's academic,

developmental, and functional needs, and how their disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education setting. Once the IEP team has developed the IEP and all parties are in agreement, the IEP will then need to be revisited annually to decide, based on frequent data collection, if the child is making progress towards the annual goals. If the student shows a lack in progress, the IEP team will then revise the IEP to meet the needs of the student. The IEP team meetings allow for all parties involved, including the parents, to come together to discuss progress and what outcomes are expected.

As stated previously, related services are a substantial part of the IEP. The related services are added to the IEP to help the student overcome the challenges posed by the disability. Services can include, but are not limited to, transportation, psychological counseling, social work, speech and language pathology services, and physical, occupational, and recreational therapy. These services are available to the student at the expense of the school district. Related services help to hold the school district accountable for providing the student with the disability a FAPE. Annually, during the IEP meeting, if the IEP team does not find the related services to be providing the student with support, they can be changed or eliminated in order to help meet the goals of the student (Radford, 2017).

Role of Special Education Teacher

The nature of special education has changed considerably over the past several decades. As a result, the special educators in today's classrooms are unique and play a critical role in the proper education for students with exceptionalities. Special educators are unique because they are required to play multiple roles in the educational environment. The educators must be able to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously in order to increase the likelihood of success for their students. Special educators are responsible for the educational needs of a diverse population and

can include a wide range of disabilities. Each child is different and requires different services, modifications, and accommodations to meet his/her least restrictive environment (LRE) and receive FAPE (AASAP, 2006). The fourteen different disability categories, as discussed, are defined in IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Each school has different classrooms that serve different functions for students and the severity of their disability. Schools must offer a continuum of services from typical and inclusive to most restrictive or separated from the regular education classroom (IDEA and Continuum of Services, 2017). The different classrooms allow for the student to be placed in their least restrictive environment and he/she is provided with opportunities that allow him/her to reach his/her goals. The continuum of services is as follows:

| Regular Education Classroom | Resource Room | Special Classes | Homehound Services | Hospitals and Institutions |

Figure 1. Continuum of services.

The child will fluidly go through each step as needed and determined by the IEP team. First, the child will be placed in the regular education classroom. If the child is unable to be successful within this setting, the child will go to the next placement. This step-by-step process will happen until the child is in the LRE that is fitting for them.

As mentioned, special education can be vast and cover a wide spread. There are many different classroom settings that can describe special education including: (a) inclusive, (b) self-contained, (c) learning support and not limited to (d) life skills. Each setting will have many similarities and differences pertaining to the role of the teacher. Table 1 helps identify three

different types of classrooms and the role that the special educator plays within each of the different classroom settings.

Table 1

Role of Special Educator in Classroom

Type of Classroom	Description of Classroom	Role of Special Educator
Self-contained	Working with a certain number of individuals with special needs in a special education setting.	Curriculum development Parent conferences Pre-and post-testing using group standardized testing Monitoring the IEP, modifications and accommodations Progress reports Evaluation IEP Team
Inclusion	An inclusion class is a mainstream class with a population of children with and without disabilities. The classroom will consist of a general education teacher and a special education may come in and co-teach.	Curriculum development Student assistance Parent conferences Pre-and post-testing using group standardized testing Evaluation process IEP Team Developing and monitoring the IEP, modifications and accommodations
Self-contained, private school	Working with a certain number of more pervasive students in a special education setting.	Working closely with related service providers, especially vocational and transition specialist if in the secondary level Parent conferences Monitoring the IEP, modifications and accommodations Evaluation process Pre-and post-testing Curriculum development Implementing behavior plans

Each classroom serves a different purpose. Although the descriptions are quite similar in appearance, there will always be a variety of situations that require practical decisions and relevant suggestions. Each role of the special education teacher will require more than the suggested Table 1 descriptions.

When taking a closer look at a specific job details that are posted by a school district for applying candidates, the list includes a multitude of different functions that the special education teacher will complete on a daily basis. The following list is a job description for a special education teacher in a rural, mid-size school district:

1. Develop IEP for each student

2. Develop appropriate lesson plans consistent with IEP goals and objectives, following a consistent format.

3. Teach subject matter, utilizing the course of study adopted by the Board of Education, correlated with other appropriate learning activities.

4. Develop lesson plans, adapt curriculum to meet individual's student needs, and utilize effective teaching techniques in translating lessons plans into productive student learning experiences.

5. Utilize computers and technological classroom support equipment for student instruction, as well as to improve teacher knowledge in this area.

6. Control the storage/use of district property; make minor adjustments and request repairs as required.

7. Maintain classroom organization and discipline.

8. Establish and maintain standards of student behavior needed to achieve a functional learning atmosphere.

9. Provide and maintain a safe and supervised environment in the classroom and on the school grounds.

10. Administer and score norm reference tests, and interpret standardized norm-referenced tests in determining eligibility for special education services and providing diagnostic information for education programming. District will train teachers to administer required tests.

11. Observe, record, analyze, and summarize the behavior of students referred for evaluation or otherwise indicated as requiring such, in the regular classroom setting and other

12. Devise and utilize techniques which accurately measure student progress.

13. Develop/adapt, administer, score, and interpret curriculum-based assessments in making education program decisions.

14. Evaluate student's academic and personal growth keeping appropriate records, and prepare progress reports.

15. Communicate with parents through conferences and other means discussing academic and personal progress; interpret school programs.

16. Communicate and cooperate with other professional staff in academic and personal growth areas.

17. Demonstrate IEP and staff team leadership capabilities.

18. Demonstrate professional ethics.

19. Conform to District policies, including attendance, and evaluations.

20. Supervise, meet with, and plan for Teaching Assistants (para-educators).

21. Maintain professional competence through in-service education academics provided by the district and through self-selected professional growth activities.

22. Understand parent and student rights and maintain parents' and student's rights to confidentiality.

23. Attendance must be adequate to acceptably perform listed job functions. (GCSD, 2016).

This district's employment description provides insight to the daily expectations of the special education teacher. By understanding the laws that govern special education, it is possible to consider why the district's employment description is lengthy and often times vague, due to the true nature and the depth of each of the criteria presented. The laws that have been signed by Congress are the origin of the role that special educator's must fulfill.

Stress

Stress can affect a person in every part of his/her life. Stress can be present in the home, work, or within interpersonal relationships. Montgomery and Rupp (2005), define stress as "a particular interaction between the person and the environment, appraised or evaluated by the person as being taxing or exceeding his or her personal resources, and, as a consequence, disrupting his or her daily routines" (p.461). Stress for each individual is complex in itself. Stress can be considered an equilibrium state between the individual and responses to environmental demands, then stressors may be defined as events requiring more than usual adaptive responses from the body. Stressors are most commonly associated with a variety of different personal, social, and physical events (Fimian, 1982). The human body does not have the capacity to differentiate between various types of stress (Wangberg, 1982). Moreover, teachers should be aware of some of the symptoms of stress.

Stress symptoms vary between individuals. The stages of stress are directly related to the symptoms of stress. Stress can be portrayed in one of three ways: attitude, physical well-being, or performance. Although stress is most commonly known for its negative force, it is an integral part of life. Reaction to various stressors is directly correlated to the affects stress has on individuals.

Since 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) has collected data using the "Stress in America Survey" and has examined how stress affects the health and wellbeing of adults. In 2015, the overall stress levels increased from 2014, ranging adults in the "extreme" category. From 2007-2015 the survey has consistently found that 65% of adults feel that the second biggest stressor to money is their job (APA, 2017).

Occupational Stress

Job stress, also referred to as occupational stress, is "the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope" (Chen, 2016, p.579). It was found in a nationwide sample of people at different occupational levels that tension increases with rank and with income. Although job stress has been studied for people of different occupations like nursing, accountants, IT professionals, and business executives, there have not been substantial studies for teachers in different regions and grade levels across the world (Parihar & Mahmood, 2016). Gallup (2014), stated that nearly 46% of teachers report high stress during the school year. In 1998, a study of 412 Chinese secondary school teaches in Hong Kong reported that stress is prevalent and suggested strategies to lower stress levels. Later, 291 high school teachers were surveyed, and they reported salary, status, perceived role, and the school climate to be important to job stressors (Parihar & Mahmood, 2016). Qusar (2011) surveyed 720 teachers randomly

selected from schools in eight districts within the Kashmir Valley. The results indicated that age, qualifications, experience, and marital status all affect occupational stress. Parihar and Mahmood (2016) found classroom management and instructional demands were the most stressful aspects for 444 secondary school teachers in Barbados.

The literature also provides support that an individual's personality characteristics influence the degree to which he or she seeks social support when confronted by a stressful event. Stress is not exclusive to any situational or personal characteristics, but can be found in the interactions between one another. Through the use of successful coping strategies, these situations can be less demanding (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that a teacher's personality will also affect different responses to job stress. By creating effective professional development and incorporating training and reflective practices, the school district can help teachers implement effective strategies to cope with the stressors of their job.

A study in India recognized that "the occupational factors that cause stress are fatigue due to long hours of teaching, heavy workloads, overcrowded classrooms, less salary, and clerical work" (Tahseen, 2015, p.361). In Pakistan, in another work-related questionnaire that surveyed 33 government colleges of elementary teachers, 23% of the teachers rated themselves as having a moderately high level of stress. The top stressors included poor teaching environments, the limited educational background, lack of proficiency in English, and over-crowded class sizes (Tahseen, 2015).

Similarly, a study conducted by Mammina (2018), measured the levels of stress, burnout, and coping abilities of 121 teachers at elementary schools. Almost all of the teachers (93%) reported high levels of stress, while only 7% categorized as being "well-adjusted".

Causes and Consequences of Teacher Stress

Teacher stress has a multitude of direct consequences, that include teachers' physical health and well-being. According to a national survey, 46% of teachers report high daily stress during the school year. This is the highest rate of daily stress among all occupational groups, tied with nurses, and higher than physicians, at 45%. Less than one-third of K-12 teachers report currently feeling engaged in their job and engagement drops significantly during the first few years of teaching. Lack of engagement may be associated with low retention rates among new teachers (Greenberg, Brown & Abenavoli, 2016).

Teachers' psychological stress also affects their physical health. In a study of high school teachers, 46% of teachers were diagnosed with excessive daytime sleepiness and 51% with poor sleep quality, compromising health, quality of life, and teaching performance (Gallup, 2014). Chronic work stress and exhaustion among teachers has a direct reflection with atypical daily patterns or physiological stress reactivity. McLean & Connor (2015) suggest that elementary school teachers, who have greater stress and show more symptoms of depression, create classroom environments that are less conducive to learning, which in turn leads to poor academic performance among children. Gallup (2009) completed a survey of over 78,000 students in grades 5-12 in 160 schools showed that higher teacher engagement in their jobs predicted higher student engagement, which in turn predicated higher student achievement outcomes. The findings above supported the need to reduce stress and improve teacher well-being and performance. Figure 2 shows a theoretical construct developed by Greenberg, Brown, and Abenavoli (2016) to show how the federal, state, district and school policy play a role in the stress of teachers and the consequences thereafter. The theoretical framework below (Figure 2) shows how the policies that rule special education are playing a direct role on the source of

teacher stress and leading to multiple consequences including high turnover, health and lack of well-being and low student achievement. The current education climate has created a culture of burnout and stress (TeachThought, 2017).
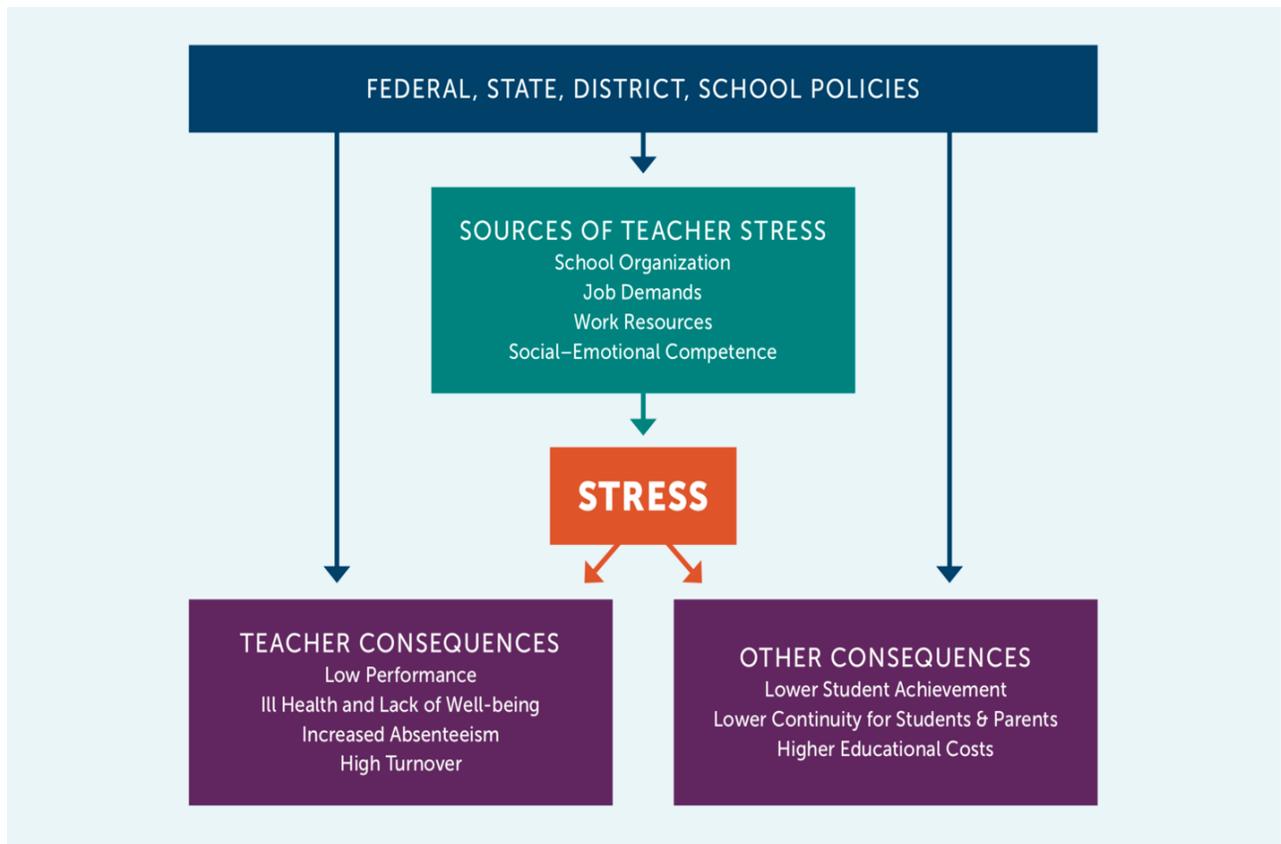
Figure 2. *Causes and consequences of teacher stress.*

The attrition, or "burn-out," rate for special education teachers is extremely high compared to most other professions. Fifty percent of special education teachers leave their jobs within five years. Half of those who make it past five years will leave within 10 years. This equates to 75% turnover rate every ten years (Marvel, Kyter, Peltola, Strizek, Morton & Rowland, 2007). Educators have been voicing concerns about higher burnout rates in special education compared to general education since 1990 (National Association of State Directors of

Special Education, 1990). Kaufhold, Alverez, and Arnold (2006) discuss that retention of special education teachers in Texas schools as well as around the nation. Recent studies show that the main component of stress was frustration due to lack of materials for special education teachers. Several studies examined burnout in special education teachers found that increased expectations for inclusive instruction, the changes in newly mandated behavioral intervention plans and the increasing paperwork load on special education teachers increased the risk of burnout. Burnout appears to be directly related to the degree of stress within a person's occupation and personal life (Dixon, Shaw, & Bensky, 1980).

An examination of the Teacher Certifications and Shortages as presented by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) provides an in-depth report of teacher certification and projections within Pennsylvania from 2014 to 2018. During the 2017-2018 school year, PDE discovered that the top area for subject shortage areas was special education PK-12 with 375 position shortages. In 2016-2017 the state shortage was within special education. In 2017-2018 this is not only a state, but national shortage. Counties undergoing the highest number of emergency certification in 2017 were Philadelphia with 2,095 and Alleghany with 342. When looking at trends in education majors since 2010, it has been reported that there has been a 39.9% decrease. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were 6,027 new full and part-time teachers and in 2016-2017, only 5,412. In the past three years the highest reason classroom teachers left their positions was due to termination or resignation. The trends of the data from 2014 to 2018 create an urgency for answers on why this is happening within the special education field (PDE, 2018).

Teachers are not the only ones who suffer when stress is at hand. Research is suggesting that student's academic achievement is also affected by teacher stress. Sparks (2017), discusses

research conducted in the Netherlands following 143 beginning teachers. Those who showed higher levels of stress displayed fewer effective teaching strategies including clear instruction, effective classroom management and creation of a safe and stimulating classroom environment. Gallup's 2014 State of America's Schools Report, reported that out of 600,000 students in grades 5-12, 45% of students did not feel engaged, and the rate of disengagement increased with grade level. The report concluded that teachers have the biggest influence on student engagement (Granata, 2014).

Special education teachers have unique reasons for leaving the field. These include inadequate support for special needs students, lack of understanding from general education staff, and amount of individual education plans and related paperwork (Futernick, 2007; Inman & Marlow, 2004). Billingsley (2004) states, "Efforts to reduce attrition should be based on understanding of factors that contribute to special educators' decisions to leave the field" (Billingsley, 2004, p.39).

Conclusion

Current research provides insight about teachers both internationally and nationally and the stressors that come with the criteria of the job. While the stressors for typical children shed some light on the special education arena, little is known about the specific impact of stress in the special education classroom (Garwood et al, 2018). Despite the existing research, many questions remain concerning the various factors of the job requirements for special education teachers causing job stress. The research suggests the need for careful examination of job stress, specifically in the special education setting. As students with disabilities are an important part of public schooling, it is important for teachers to be as effective and prepared as possible for the various teaching demands. It is important for the education community to continue to find ways

to support special educators in order to promote positive work place environments, positive educational experiences for students, and alleviate burnout within the field (Williams & Dikes, 2015). To reinforce the need for support within the special education setting, this study set forth to determine the factors of stress and stress-reducing strategies needing to be addressed.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Occupational stress has been shown to have many negative and adverse effects on special education teachers, and has ultimately led to low levels of retention within the field. Evidence suggests that teachers are working longer hours in order to meet obligations and are experiencing increased workloads, both of which are unsustainable long term (Timms, Graham & Cottrell, 2007). As a result, teachers may be at risk of poor physical and mental health, as well as reduced well-being and career satisfaction (Timms et al., 2007). Furthermore, current knowledge is limited in identifying the specific experiences of occupational stress for special education teachers during their career. The research aims to understand the stressors that teachers are facing and find solutions.

Theoretical Framework

Research has shown that there is a multitude of connections to stress, including personal and organizational factors. These factors include lack of administrative support, psychological strain, poor intra- and interpersonal relationships, job demands, and job decision latitude (Kornatovska, 2014; Husain, Gulzar, Ageel & Rana, 2016; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). In turn, these factors lead to high levels of stress in the workplace. Although stress has been studied in a number of different countries, professions, and different levels of school personnel, research of occupational stress among special education teachers is very limited.

Because occupational stress has been studied for more than twenty years in a variety of occupations, the literature presents a well-developed conceptualization of occupational stress. While there is a large body of knowledge on occupational stress, little is known about stress relating to special education providers. Only one known pilot study is the starting point for

research into stress and special education teachers (Griffith University, 2015). This study is utilized to expand upon this previous research, examining special education teachers' occupational stress within a different region, a different population of teachers, and an investigation of potential stress factors. The method in which data was collected and analyzed is disseminated in the following chapter.

Research Design

A mixed methods study using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods was used to address the research questions. The research questions are as follows:

1. What kinds of stressors do special education teachers experience?

2. What factors of the special education teacher role best predict stress?

3. Why do special education teachers experience occupational stress in the work place?

Upon approval from the Slippery Rock University Institutional Review Board (IRB), the mixed methodology research was conducted (see Appendix F). In the first phase of the study, a research design relying on a questionnaire was employed to investigate the kinds of stressors that special education teachers face. Next, open-ended questions within the questionnaire were used to determine the organizational and job characteristics that influence job satisfaction and stressors within the role of a special educator.

Participants. The participants for this study were special education teachers within public schools in Western Pennsylvania covering Allegheny, Butler, and Westmoreland counties. Selecting a sample in this area provides the opportunity to collect information from a variety of different school districts. The area provides diverse subjects from districts comprised of various socioeconomic status and differences in student population and geographical size. For example, the median household income of the districts ranges from $33,073 to $63,099. Student

population fluctuated as well, with one district serving 1,921 students, while another serves 4,110 students. The names of the districts are not included to protect the confidentiality of the participants. See Table 2 for school district demographics from the 2015-2016 school year.

Table 2

School District Demographics 2015-2016 School Year

	Median Household Income	Total Students	Students with IEPs	Free or Reduced Lunch
School #1	$61,741	1979	369	533
School #2	$80,070	3252	325	216
School #3	$47,900	3645	594	1332
School #4	$71,204	3813	515	850

The targeted participants for this study were the teachers within the four school districts surveyed. This sample is considered both purposive and convenience. The sample is purposive as the researcher selected the specific population of special education teachers. Districts were selected based on researcher access and asked for permission to participate. The researcher had made the assumption that a district's refusal to participate was not likely to be indicative of greater or lesser level of occupational stress in special education teachers, so selecting another organization within the region did not skew results. To conduct this survey, the districts provided the researcher with their special education teachers e-mail addresses. Once all of the special education teachers' email addresses were collected, the questionnaire was distributed via email to each teacher. Only special education teachers within the participating districts received the questionnaire. Teacher's emails were kept on a secure password protected laptop and were not tied to the data collection.

Measures. Data was collected using a modified version of the "Teacher Stress and Wellbeing Survey" developed by Griffith University, The Queensland College of Teachers and the Independent Education Union (2015). The survey was an electronic version and developed using SurveyGizmo©. SurveyGizmo© was selected for convenience and simplicity for the participant. SurveyGizmo© also allowed for both qualitative and quantitative measures to be used. The survey's original form used a different database. Permission was granted to use a different website generator. This questionnaire included a Likert-type response questions and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions allowed for the special education teacher to expand on contributing factors and provide more information if desired. Simple changes were made to the survey's demographic information to correspond to the types of special educators within the sample. These included adding K-12 grade levels and the best descriptors for the type of special education classroom that the teacher currently practices in (See Appendix A). Permission to use and adapt the survey was credited by Nicole Mahoney, administrative officer at the Australian College of Educators through email (See Appendix B).

Procedures for data collection. Before beginning subject recruitment, IRB approval was obtained. To begin, the researcher sent an email to special education or pupil services directors within the surrounding districts to obtain permission to complete the research within their schools (See Appendix C). Once appropriate documentation had been signed and returned (See Appendix E), the school districts provided the teachers email addresses to the researcher. The researcher then disseminated the survey via email to the special education teachers (See Appendix D). The researcher sent out the survey to the participants to allow for the teachers to feel less pressure and complete the survey in confidence without conflict from their acting supervisor. Once participants opened the email, consent was needed in order to continue. If they

did not wish to participate, they simply exited the survey. Participants had the option of stopping

the survey at any time if they felt uncomfortable, as well. The survey remained open for four

weeks. During the second week, a follow up email was sent to the special educators reminding

them to complete the survey (See Appendix F). The follow-up email was sent to all participants,

as the research process was voluntary and anonymous. Upon providing consent, participants

were made aware that SurveyGizmo© used their information as a number identifier. All of the

data was stored on the SurveyGizmo© database. After four weeks the survey closed. Upon

completion, all of the survey data were analyzed. All of the data will be stored for five. After five

years, the data will be erased from the researcher's computer. After five years, a written notice

will be completed and sent to SurveyGizmo© to erase all data obtained through the database.

Once completed, no data can be recovered.

Every participant received the same survey and all of the survey questions remained in

the same order. Each survey began with seven demographic questions about the participant, the

classification of their classroom, and career during the 2017-2018 school year. The demographic

information and classroom information allows the researcher to understand the type of

population that the teachers are working with. Understanding the demographic information is

equally important to compare to other current data trends. The next 105 questions were Likert-

type questions and were broken into six categories: (a) my stress experience; (b) how I feel; (c)

social and emotional skills; (d) managing emotions; (e) how I feel at work; and (f) well-being at

school. The last three questions were open-ended questions to gain qualitative data. The

qualitative data focused on the teacher's stressors within their role as a special educator. This

section of the survey allowed for the teachers to write about their opinion and how stress has

been involved within their occupation. For analysis of the qualitative data, the researcher utilized

priori coding. Priori codes are created beforehand and applied to the text (Blair, 2015). The coding themes were derived from Teacher Stress: Causes, Stages and Effects (Robinson, 1989) and described as the four basic sources of professional stressors among teachers. The themes include (a) working conditions, (b) professional responsibilities, (c) student-teacher situations, and (d) student discipline.

Ethical Considerations

Yin (2009) describes the importance of following specific guidelines in order to protect the human subjects used within research. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Slippery Rock University reviewed the research proposal and looked for areas of weaknesses that could in turn be subjective for the human subjects within the research. Some of the measures that the IRB looks at specifically include, but are not limited to, how the researcher will ensure confidentiality guidelines regarding informed consent, communicating the intended purpose with the participants, and upholding to ethical reasoning. Approval of the IRB ensured that all human subjects were protected before the research began.

Due to the survey being sent to participants within school districts, there was a possibility that participants may feel a sense of pressure to answer a specific way to impress their supervisors. To alleviate this problem, it was sent electronically to provide access at any time. All information was stored through SurveyGizmo© and the researcher's computer. Access is only granted to the data on SurveyGizmo© through the use of a username and password and the data was stored on a password protected computer. Any information that was stored on the computer will be deleted after five years. All information obtained through SurveyGizmo© will be deleted after five years.

Survey Data

The likert-based scales were analyzed quanitiatively to summarize how well the participant agrees or disagress with a statement. Likert-type scales use fixed choice responses formats to measure appitudes or opinions (McLeod, 2008). Trochim and Donnelly (2007) stated that in a Likert-scale, participants are asked to rate each of their responses on a scale. They stated that there are different possibilities for the response scales such as 1 to 5 and 1 to 0, which are odd-numbered scales that have middle value. On the other hand, Trochim and Donnelly (2007) stated that:

It is also possible to use a forced-choice response scale with an even number of responses and no middle neutral or undecided choice. In this situation, respondents are forced to decide whether they lean more toward the "agree" or "disgree" end of the scale for each item (p.137).

In this study, special education teachers were asked to respond to a series of statement related to each question by indicating whether they:

a) Strong Agree

b) Agree

c) Neutral

d) Disgree

e) Strongly Disagree

The original survey used two scales. The researcher kept with the original format. The second scale asked the special education teachers to respond using:

a) Often

b) Sometimes

c) Never

SurveyGizmo© displayed the data and the researcher analyzed the frequencies for each question responses. In order to determine the frequency of specific responses, analysis of the questions were measured using mean quantities and percentages. The means were calculated for each of the survey questions. A degree of abritrariness was awarded to each set of categories:-

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Never	Sometimes	Always
1	2	3

and then produced an 'average score'- a numerical indicator for the sample of:-

$$\frac{1x1 \quad + \quad 2x13 + \quad 3x9 \quad + \quad 4x9 \quad + \quad 5x2}{n = \text{total number of participants}} = 2.94$$

$$\frac{1x4 \quad + \quad 2x29 + \quad 3x7}{n = \text{total number of participants}} = 2.07$$

The data was gathered, organized, and interpreted when the survey timeline had been completed.

Next, open-ended questions were analyzed. The open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative methods for coding of open–ended responses (Yin, 2014). Open ended questions allow the participant to respond in their own words. According to Fink (1995), open-

ended questions seek to explore the qualitative, in-depth aspects of a particular topic, and participants' responses may be useful because they often yield quotable material. The survey instrument (Appendix A) in this study included open-ended questions that allowed the special education teachers to add their own interpretations of stress in the work place. The researcher conducted data analysis for each of the quantitative questions, which included coding, theme development and the interrelationship of analysis of qualitative data and descriptive analysis of quantitative data. The transformation of data included counting codes and counting themes by using the procedure described by Cresswell and Plano Clark (2007, p. 138). Four categories emerged from the data collection: (a) working conditions, (b) professional responsibilities, (c) student needs and (d) student behavior.

Triangulation

In order to under special education teacher stressors in the workplace, it was necessary to use a survey with both a likert-scale and open-ended questions. By using multiple sources that support one another and directly address each other's findings triangulation promotes validity. (Richards & Morse, 2007). To provide supporting evidence from multiple sources, this study compared previous research on the topic as mentioned within the literature review. The material for the study can then be compared to published results in order to confirm the results of this study. Secondly, the adaptation of a previously published survey helped support validity within the study. These instruments provided sources for the triangulation of the data that allowed the researcher to get valid findings and results about the topic under study.

Summary

The methodology, as outlined here, describes for the readers important components of the study, such as its purpose, research questions and theoretical framework. The purpose of this

study was to determine the factors that cause stress for special education teachers and why this has become an issue within the Western Pennsylvania region. The data was composed of a questionnaire including Likert-Scale and open-ended questions. The data collected was in the form of frequencies and average scores and was analyzed to determine the most common responses. Thematic coding was used to find themes across the open-ended survey questions. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the participant demographics, data collected, result of the study, and further implications.

Chapter 4

Findings

Work stress is often the reason given by teachers for either leaving their current positions in favor of other teaching assignments, or leaving the field of education altogether. Research has shown that it is very costly to replace such teachers and a shortage of teachers in the field makes it hard to replace. The purpose of this research study was to understand the specific pressures that cause stress and the factors that best predict stress within the role of a current special education teacher. The research questions, as stated above, were used to develop the framework for data collection. The data discussed below was collected through the use of a Likert-scale survey and open-ended questions. An analysis of this data collection is presented in this chapter.

Response Rate of the Survey Research

An important issue in survey-based research is how to obtain satisfactory response rates. Response rate is defined as the result of dividing the number of people who were interviewed or surveyed by the total number of people in the sample who were eligible to participate but declined to participate in the study. Kiesler and Sproull (1986) and Parker (1992) stated that the average response rate for email and online surveys is about 65%. Some argue that a 50% response rate is considered adequate (Gay & Airasian, 2003) and a 70% response rate is considered to be recommended and acceptable (Rae & Parker, 1992). Out of those approved, 80% (four schools) agreed to participate in the research. From these four schools, 45 special education teachers participated in the survey for an average response rate of 75.6%. Of the 45 participants, 33 completed the survey in its entirety.

Demographic Data

The survey instrument contained questions intended to produce specific demographic data about the special education teachers within each of the participating school districts. These questions included questions about gender, age, marital status, how long they have been a special education teacher, stage of career, grade level currently teaching, and type of classroom currently teaching. Tables two through seven show the results. Not all of the participants opted to answer all of the demographic information. The questions specific to demographics were optional to answer. The questionnaires were completed from April to May 2018.

The first question asked individuals to classify their age. Results indicated that 57.7% of the population represented were individuals currently ages 31-40 (see Table 3).

Table 3

Age of Participants

Age	Frequency	Percent
20-30	9	20.0%
31-40	26	57.7%
41-50	7	15.5%
51-60	2	4.4%
61 and older	1	2.2%

The survey asked the respondents to identify their marital status and gender. The results showed that 92.7% of the population who took the survey were female (see Table 4) and the majority of the participants are married (see Table 5).

Table 4

Gender of Participants

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	3	7.3%
Female	38	92.7%

Table 5

Marital Status of Participants

Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
Single	6	14.6%
Married	33	88.6%
Divorced/Separated	2	4.9%

The survey asked the participants to identify how many years they had been a special education teacher. This information does not include the total number of years as an educator, but instead only accounts for the years within special education. Eighteen educators, representing 45% of the participating sample, had been in special education for 9 or fewer years. Seventeen educators, representing 42.5% of the responding population, had been in special education for 10

years or more. Only five educators, representing only 12.5% of the total population, had been in education for over 20 years (see Figure 3).

Years Teaching in Special Edication

Legend: ■ 0 to 9 ■ 10 to 19 ■ 20 to 29 ■ 30 to 39 ■ 40 or more
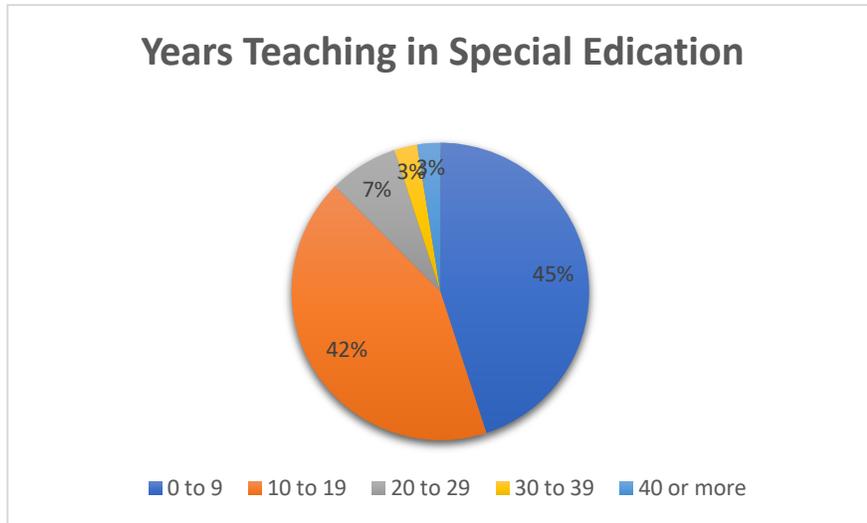
Figure 3. *Years teaching in special education.*

Next, teachers described which stage they are in their overall career. Sixteen participants, representing 38.1% of all respondents, were in the early stage of their career, while twenty-two participants, representing 52.4% of all respondents were in the mid stage of their career (see Table 6).

Table 6

Stage of Career

Stage of Career	Frequency	Percent
Early	16	38.1%
Mid	22	52.4%
Late	3	7.1%
N/A	1	2.4%

Next, the researcher sought to understand the grade level taught by the individuals participating the survey. Most individuals taught multiple grade levels. The "other", which represented 4.8% of the population, had the option to write in. These participants taught one grade level, yet their caseloads represented multiple grade levels. For example, one participant stated that they taught ninth grade, but their case load covered grades nine to twelve. The majority of the participants taught grades fourth, fifth, sixth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth (see Table 7).

Table 7

Grade Levels Taught

Grade Levels Taught	Frequency
Kindergarten-Third	35
Fourth-Sixth	47
Seventh-Eighth	21
Ninth-Twelfth	59
Post-Secondary	2
Other	2

Respondents were asked to identify the type of classroom that best describes their work environment. Learning support classrooms accounted for 35.7% of the total population. Ten participants, accounting for 23.8% of the total population described their classroom as pull

out/push in. The category described as other wrote in that their classrooms were classified as emotional support or life skills. This accounted for 14.3% of the population (see Table 8).

Table 8

Type of Classroom

Type of Classroom	Frequency	Percent
Learning Support	15	35.7%
Autistic Support	4	9.5%
Inclusive Classroom	6	14.3%
Self-Contained Classroom	1	2.4%
Pull Out/Push In	10	23.8%
Other	6	14.3%

The educators' demographic data may be summarized as follows: 45 educators responded to the survey instrument, the highest number of respondents had been a special educator for less than 19 years and are in the early to mid-stage of their career (90.5%), the participants teach across multiple grade levels, and the highest number of respondents reported teaching in a learning support classroom (35.7%) and the lowest number taught in a self-contained classroom.

Survey Data

Questionnaires were sent electronically to special education teachers in four school districts. After signing the consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the study, the special education teachers completed the questionnaire. The participants were identified as

special education teachers within the school districts. The following are the most prominent themes from the survey collection.

The original framework of the survey categorized the questions into seven headings including: (a) my stress experience; (b) how I feel; (c) social and emotional skills; (d) managing emotions; (e) how I feel at work; (f) well-being at school; and (g) physical well-being. The researcher adopted headings of the original instrument for the use in the current research. The following sections discuss the frequency and means from the current sample of participants. Each question in the category is represented below. The question numbers on the graphs (Q1) represent the questions as listed in the survey. To review the questions in its entirety, refer to Appendix A. Questions of significance will be discussed below each category.

My Stress Experience
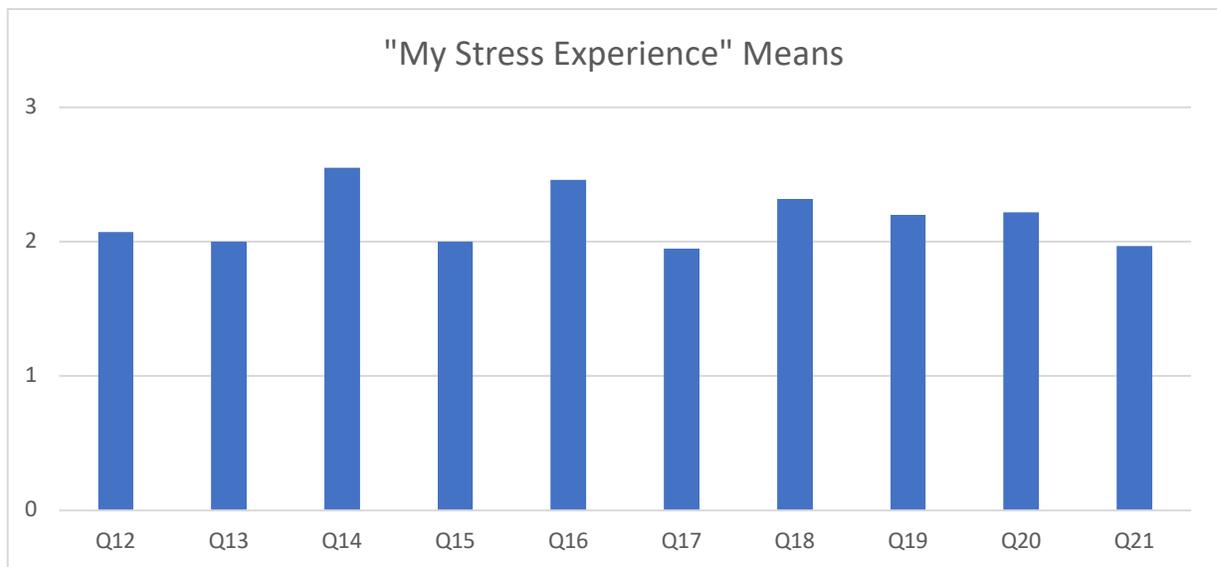
Figure 4. *My stress experience.*

"My stress experience", pertains to the participant's overall stress experience. When asked, "How often have you felt nervous and stressed?", the average score on a three point scale

was 2.07. This provides insight on the level of stress that the teachers are experiencing within this sample. Participants suggested that they sometimes (M=2.0 out of three) felt that they were unable to control the important things in their life. Later, participants were asked, "How often have you found that you could not cope with all of these things that you had to do?". The average response from the sample was 1.75 out of three. This includes both the participants professional and personal life. Lastly, 77% of participants sometimes felt angered by things that were out of their control while many of the participants felt that things were going their way (M=2.46 out of a three-point scale).

How I Feel
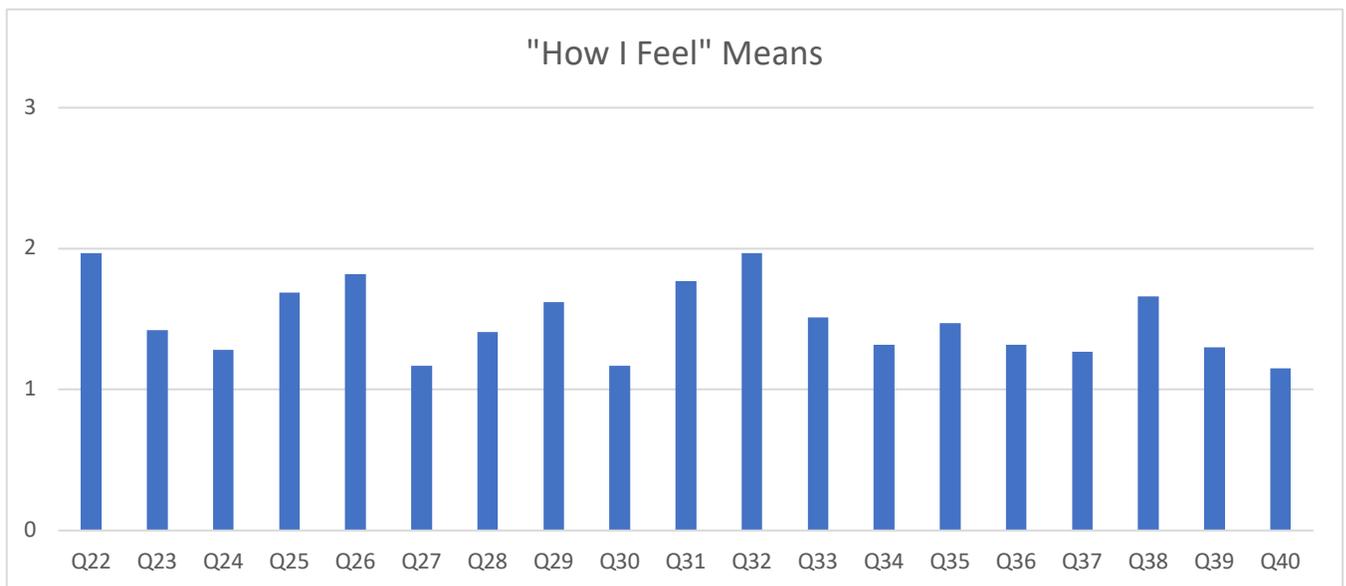
Figure 5. *How I feel means.*

The category "how I feel" included questions regarding how individuals feel overall in their daily life. Referring to question 22 in the above graph, 82% of participants indicated that they found it hard to wind down after work. Only 27% (M=1.82 out of three) of participants indicated that they never over-react to situations. Similarly, 70% of individuals reported

themselves as getting agitated in the last week and 61.4% have felt touchy some or most of the time (M=1.66). Within participants free time, 72.5% of participants stated that they felt it was difficult to relax. Participants experienced low levels of dryness of mouth (M=1.42 out of three) and trembling in the hands (M=1.17) out of three. Although the participants are experiencing stress symptoms, they reported that they are still able to become enthusiastic about something and felt worth as a person. Lastly, in reference to question 21 above, the special education teachers reported an average of 1.97 on a three point scale to feeling that difficulties were piling up so high that they could not overcome them. Although the participants are experiencing stress symptoms, they reported that they are still able to become enthusiastic about something and felt worth as a person. Lastly, participants felt they could still overcome their challenges regardless of their stress.

My Social and Emotional Skills

The third category included participants social and emotional skills. The special education teacher reported that they always (M=2.91out of three) try to teach well while at school. In regard to their emotions, on average out of a three-point scale, 2.5 of the participants stated they understand their moods and feelings. Of the participants, an average of 1.53 out of three believed that they can only sometimes identify and name the emotions that they feel. Similarly, 42.2% of participants stated that they sometimes can identify other emotions of feeling angry or upset before they even begin to speak. When the participants take on conflict with a parent, colleague or friend, an average of 2.44 out of three believe that they know how to appropriately disagree without starting a fight or an argument. The participants self-report that they are always (M=2.80 out of three) able to work well with others and enjoy being around backgrounds that are different than theirs (M=2.47 out of three).
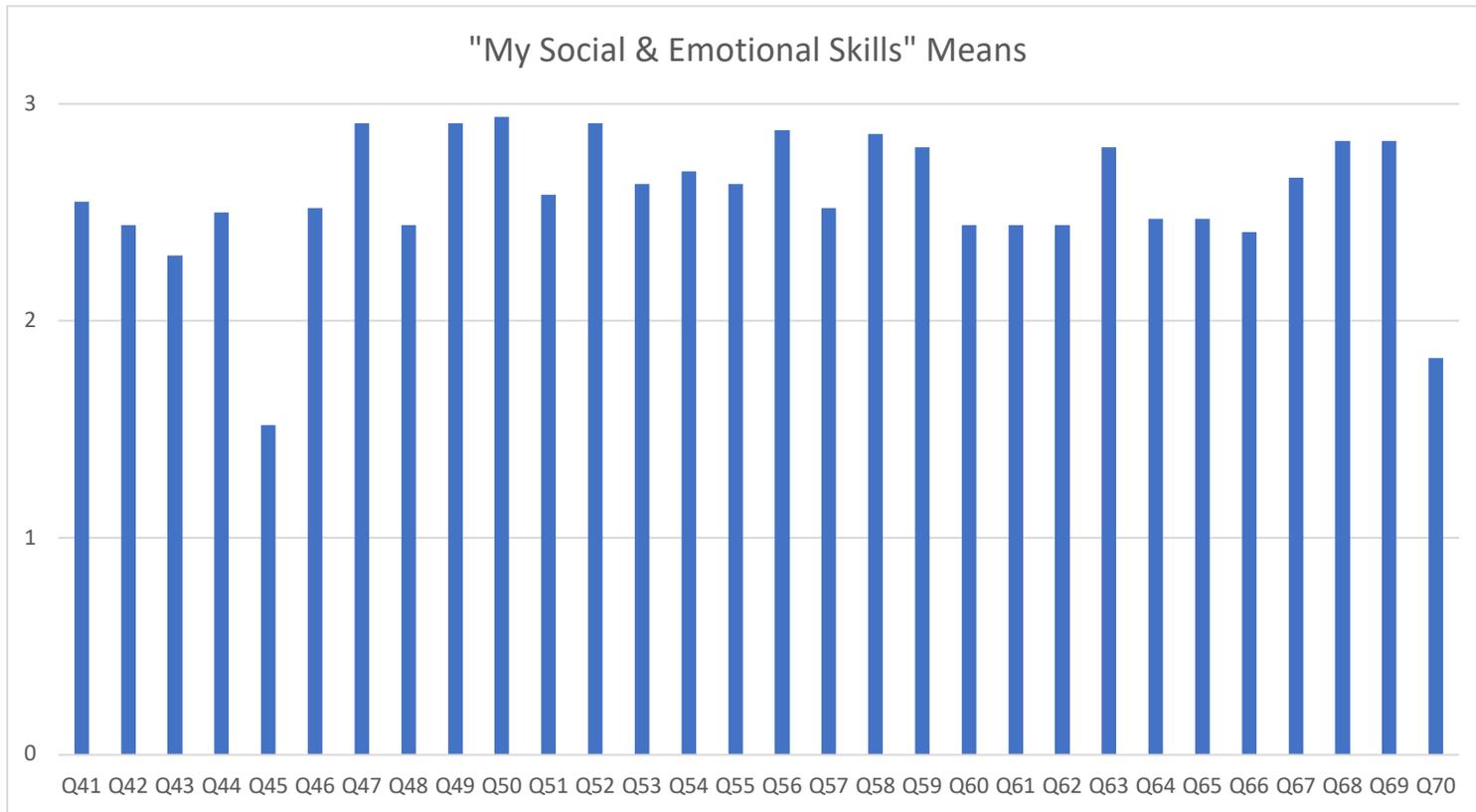
Figure 6. *My social and emotional skills means.*

Managing Emotions
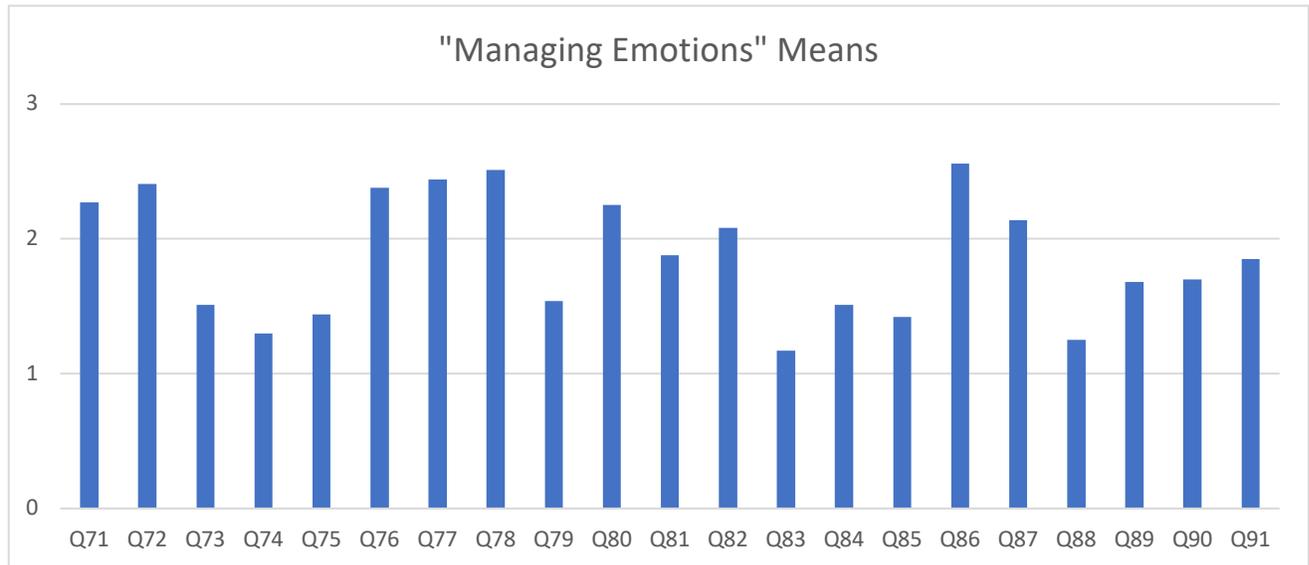
Figure 7. *Managing emotions means.*

The next category discusses how participants manage their emotions in their daily lives. Specifically looking at stress, participants declared that 69.4% of the time they cannot say no to a task even if they know it will cause them stress. When stress arises, 72.2% of participants stated that only sometimes they are clear about their feelings (M=2.27out of three) and 58% of participants reported only sometimes paying attention to how they feel (M=2.41 out of three). Fifty percent of participants always feel out of control and overwhelmed by the tasks at hand. When participants do feel upset, only 25.7% acknowledge this feeling and act upon it. In turn, 92.1% of teachers stated that when they are upset, they have difficulty getting work done and 100% of teachers (M=3.0 out of three) acknowledged that they cannot focus on anything other than emotions at that time.

How I Feel At Work

"How I Feel at Work" Means
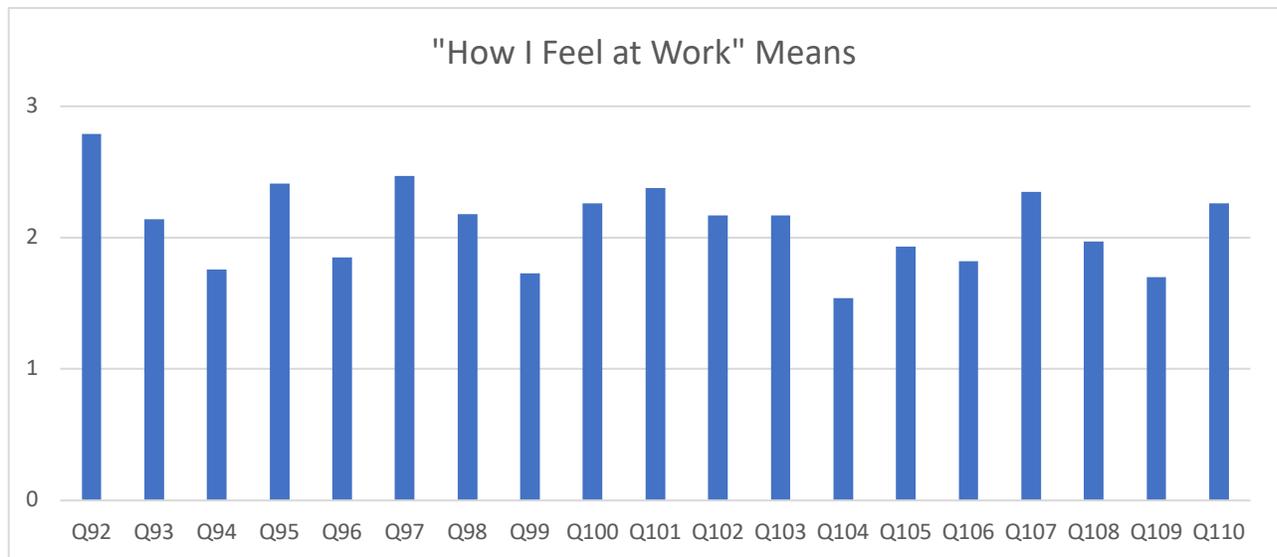
Figure 8. *How I feel at work means.*

Participants examined how they feel at work within the next section of the survey. During school hours, an average of 2.79 on a 3-point scale the participants expressed feeling tired. Of the thirty-two respondents, twenty-two declared that they often think "I can't take this anymore" and 12 have considered leaving their current role due to stress or dissatisfaction. At the end of each day, on a scale of 3, the average response to feeling worn out was 2.47. The average response when asking the participants if they felt worn out at the end of the day was 2.18 on a three-point scale. Furthermore, 47.1% of participants stated that they disagree that their role is clearly defined.

Well-being At School
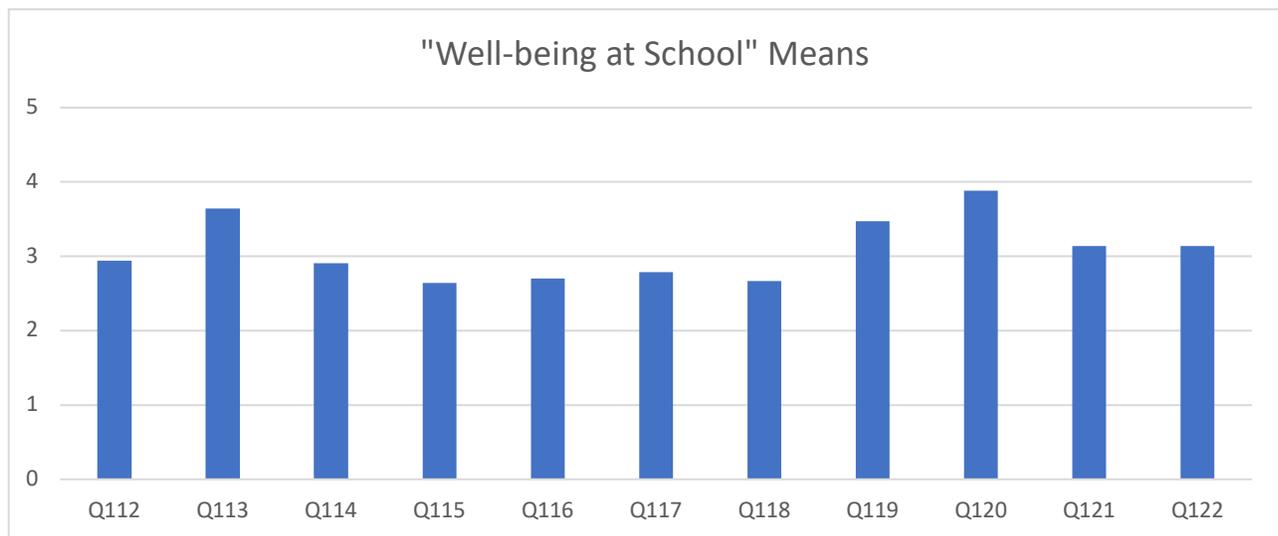
Figure 9. *Well-being at school means.*

Teachers well-being at school is discussed below. The scale used for this section of the survey is 5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3- neutral, 2-disgree and 1-strongly disagree. The special education teachers suggested that only 2.95 agreed with the statement that their students are motivated to learn. Of the population, 3.64 on a five-point scale agreed that a lot of their students exhibit challenging behaviors. Another added factor to the stress as stated by 55.9% of respondents is the insufficient planning time allotted each day and unreasonable workloads. The results indicated that the special education teachers are provided with opportunities to work collaboratively with their colleagues (M=2.67 out five) and feel encouraged to continually improve their teaching skills (M=3.47 out of five). Teachers also reported that they can easily seek advice from others at school if they choice too (M=3.88 out of five). Differing, teachers

revealed that they feel emotionally exhausted about going to work (M=3.14 out of five) and often feel frustrated when thinking about solving problems while at work (M=3.14 out of five).

Physical Well-Being
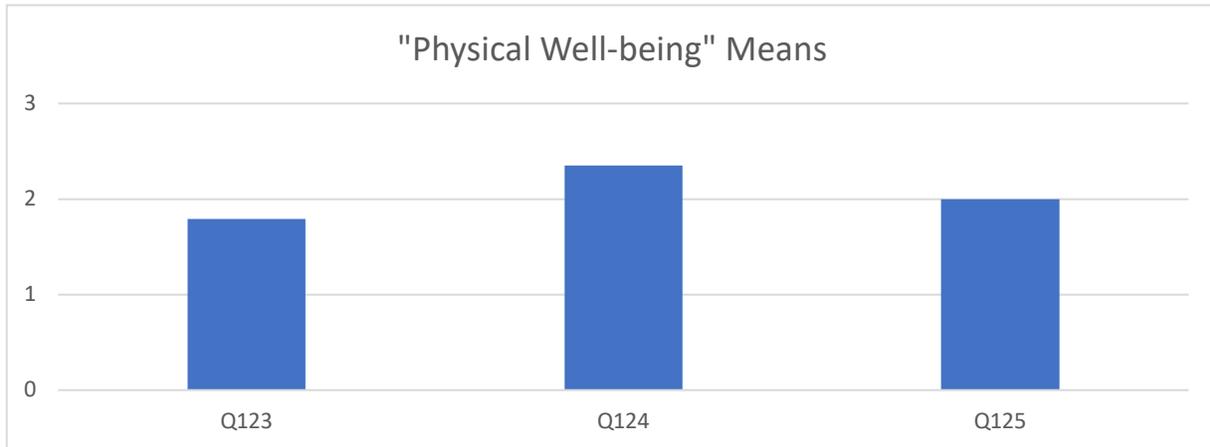
Figure 10. *Physical well-being means.*

Finally, teachers discussed their physical well-being. When participants were asked how often they have exercised in the last week, only 23.5% of the population surveyed said that they worked out very often. Of the population surveyed, 2.35 on a three-point scale responded eating at least one healthy meal in the past week. Only 4 of the total participants reported that they have slept "well" at least once within the past week.

In summary, 97.5% of special education teachers categorized themselves as feeling nervous or stressed sometimes or often. With that, 69.4% of participants declared that they cannot say no to a task, even if they know it will cause them stress. When experiencing stress, 63.9% reported that they never or sometimes think before they act. Of the respondents, twenty-two stated that they often think "I can't take this anymore" and 38.7% have considered leaving their current role due to stress or dissatisfaction. Outside of the workplace when participants have free time, 72% agreed that they find it hard to relax to some degree. Special education teachers are also struggling with their eating, sleep and exercise habits. Up to 50% of the

participants responded that within the last week they have sometimes eaten healthy and sometimes exercised. Of the total sample, only 11.8% reported as sleeping well at least once in the past week. The data implies that the special education teachers are stressed within their current role. Table 9 provides a visual of the intrinsic and extrinsic stressors that the special education teachers are facing daily within their occupation.

Table 9

Stressors in Special Education Teachers

Intrinsic Stressors	Physically tired
	Insufficient problem-solving skills
	Enthusiasm
	Inability to wind down
	Lack of feeling in
	control
	Emotionally exhausted
	Unhealthy
	Having initiative
	Understanding other points of view
Extrinsic Stressors	Work loads
	Planning time
	Motivating students
	Administrative support
	Challenging behavior
	Unclear teaching role

Open-Ended Questions

Upon completion of analyzing the data, four themes emerged from the 2 open-ended questions of the online survey. The qualitative themes are (a) working conditions; (b) professional responsibilities; (c) student needs and (d) managing student behavior. Once these

themes were identified from the data, responses to the survey open-ended questions were reviewed again to code statements belonging to these themes. In doing so, the researcher immersed the responses and explored many potential categorizations of meaning suggested by the data. The open-ended questions provided a greater understanding of the stressors that special education teachers face in the work place. Table 10 shows the thematic categories used to organize the qualitative themes.

Table 10

Thematic Categories

Qualitative Measure	Working Conditions	Professional Responsibilities	Student Needs	Managing Student Behavior
Survey Open-Ended Questions	60	40	19	11

Working conditions. This theme emerged as the one that occurs across most of the respondent's experience with stress. Working conditions was the most frequent theme with 60 occurrences. In this study, the special education teachers reported that the top areas in their working conditions that related to stress included (a) full time teaching schedule; (b) paperwork deadlines; (c) planning for multiple grade levels; and (d) forced inclusion. They voiced concern and a need for smaller caseloads, better communication with administration and staff, and more planning time. The special education teaches also indicated that yearly the administration adds duties beyond their job description and expectations are unclear or vague. As evidenced by the open-ended survey questions, special education teachers believe that their multiple roles can be identified as red flags for stress in their job description. One special education teacher affirmed,

Taking on other roles that are not in my job description [causes stress]. I am a counselor for scheduling and a security guard that ensures safety of students from intruders.

The extrinsic variables within the working environment add to the stress that the special education teachers are experiencing. For example, teachers expressed that time management is a concern. Many express that they cannot find time to complete all of the necessary tasks needed daily. For example, one special education stated,

Time management is my biggest stress factor. While I have a schedule with my students, it can always change due to their needs. Some days it feels as though you do not stop and other days you get some time to catch up.

Professional responsibilities. Teachers noted that within their job description, their professional responsibilities provided the second greatest area of stress. Examples of the professional responsibilities include relationships with parents, staff, and administration, planning lessons and curriculum, navigating co-teaching, and observations. The top sub categories that emerged from professional responsibilities included working with other colleagues and administrators, preparing for state standard exams, working with parents, and IEP compliance. One special education teacher stated,

Being a full-time teacher and completing all of the tasks that go along with the job can be very difficult. Compliance with paperwork and deadlines, coordinating with other colleagues and advocating for parents who cannot verbalize for themselves take so much of my time and cause a great deal of stress.

Similarly, teachers expressed that working relationships can be difficult with all of the different personalities and teaching styles. This takes into account working on committee and co-

teaching. Although it is their professional responsibility to collaborate, many identified that time and collaboration cannot be found throughout the day. Teachers expressed that although they are continuously pushed to become better teachers, the administration offers little support. One teacher reported, "The upper management and supervisors are not supporting me within the classroom." The feeling of unappreciated, expendable and lack of support creates stress for the special education teachers.

Student needs. A teacher's primary responsibility is the work they complete with students. However, student needs are a strenuous task for teachers. Teachers reported that the greatest struggles within their job description pertaining to student needs are (a) motivation; (b) wearing multiple hats; and (c) accommodating to all of the student needs. The students that the teachers are working with come from many different backgrounds and fall into different disability categories. This being said, the students need differentiated instruction and accommodations to meet their diverse needs. A special education teacher responded, "My main contributing factors to stress are the severity of disability in the same classroom and attending to the varying needs of all students all while trying my best."

Student behavior. Managing student behavior was the last of the themes to derive from the data collection. The participants discussed that the stressors that align with managing student behavior include finding appropriate positive and negative reinforcement, challenging behavior and managing student behavior. A special education teacher noted, "Managing student behavior (specifically students with emotional disturbance) while attending to other students is difficult. The behavior seems to always take over the classroom leaving the other students without proper instruction."

Coping skills. The last open-ended question asked teachers who are not currently experiencing stress in their current position, to explain the precautions that they are taking. The researcher's goal of this question was to understand corrective action that teachers are taking to help develop further implications for teachers who are experiencing stress within their role. One special education teacher stated,

> I always tell myself that only so much can be accomplished in a given day, it will eventually be completed. I prioritize what needs completed first and constantly make to do lists and write everything down on a calendar. It really helps!

As this question pertained specifically to individuals who have low stress or no stress, there was a low response rate. Figure 11 below signifies the different ways that special education teachers are alleviating stress.
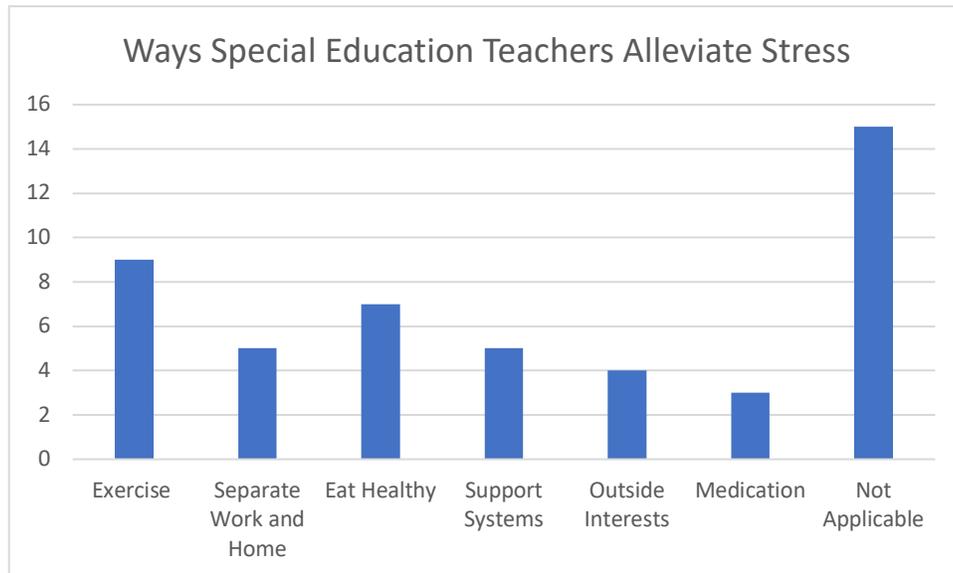
Figure 11. *Ways special education teachers alleviate stress.*

Special education teachers reported that the best ways that they have found to alleviate stress is to exercise and eat health. Similarly, the teachers stated that having outside interests,

separating work and home life and having a support system will help to support you as a teacher. Lastly, some teachers did mention that the use of medications has helped them to alleviate stress.

Summary

The insights gained by this research study will contribute to the lack of data in existence regarding the stressors within the special educator role. This will assist educational leaders, in all levels, in making decisions regarding district change. Chapter 5 will provide an interpretation of the data and conclusions. Findings were presented in a manner that extends the knowledge base contained within the accompanying literature view. In addition, suggestions for policy, practice, and further research was discussed.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

The researcher hopes this study will contribute towards scholarship that assists educational leaders and special education teachers to develop ways in which to alleviate or cope with the stressors within their occupation. This research study used analysis of Likert-scale questionnaire and open-ended questions to determine the current stressors of special education teachers relating to stress. The findings collected provided a deeper understanding of the areas where special education teachers experience stress and how it affects them both personally and professionally. Although the outcomes were complex and have several different variables to consider, the information collected is meant to serve as resource to teachers, administration, and school systems. Appreciating these factors and supporting special education teacher stress levels can also have an impact on students. In addition, the employees and administration would benefit from additional professional development in multiple different areas relating to the findings of the survey.

Summary of the Study

Many school districts face the challenge of increasing teacher shortages, teacher burn out and turnover. The need for special education teachers to stay within the field for longer than five years is growing rapidly. As Pennsylvania seeks to find change for this dilemma, they must understand the underlying causes. This trend will continue to have a tremendous effect on schools, teachers and students. This is crucial in a time where teachers are expected to perform their best in order to meet the standards of the school and state.

This study identified specific stressors of K-12 special education teachers in four school districts that contribute to their occupational stress. The results of this study may be used to inform special education teachers about coping skills, wellness programs and professional development. These programs could contribute to lower stress levels and in turn lower levels of burnout and turnover within the field. An additional benefit could be gained as principals and administrators develop a greater understanding for stress in the workplace and utilize the finding of this study to further support the special education teachers within their districts. Leaders can build on their understanding of stress and influence policy change and other needs of the teachers.

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions provided a guideline for the investigation of stress in the workplace concerning special education teachers:

1. What kinds of stressors do special education teachers experience?

2. What factors of the special education teacher role best predict stress?

3. Why do special education teachers experience occupational stress in the work place?

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

In this study, the examination of special education teacher stress in relation to their occupation revealed a variety of findings. Three categories of findings were identified from the quantitative data analysis. Data was collected from 125 Likert-scale questions as well as from an inductive analysis of the four themes that emerged from the qualitative data collected from three open-ended survey questions.

Category 1: Kinds of Stressors That Special Education Teachers Experience

Special education teachers face many different stressors daily. Their jobs are complex in nature as they work with a variety of different students, parents, co-workers and administrators. The teachers all also very complex and come from different backgrounds and handle stress in different ways. Each teacher's personality type plays a role in how they deal with the day- to-day stressors that arise.

The researcher's intention was to examine the different kinds of stressors that special education teachers face within their occupation by investigating the teachers' well-being, social emotional skills, how they manage their emotions and experiences at work. The researcher's purpose was to examine the statements made by teachers and analyze how well they deal with the different stressors within their current occupation. It is also the researcher's intention to verify whether the stressors had significant impact on their overall well-being or only during school hours. In doing so, the findings in this category are as follow.

Finding 1. In this study, the qualitative and quantitative data analysis revealed that a majority of the special education teachers within the four school districts surveyed often felt nervous and stressed (M=2.55 on a three-point scale). The special education teachers revealed that they find their occupation to be stressful (M=2.26 out of three). In this study, this is an important factor because the basis of the research focuses on stress in the workplace. The special education teachers validated that there is stress within the workplace.

Finding 2. According to the quantitative data, 21 (61%) special education teachers stated that they often feel tired at work (M=2.79 on a three-point scale). In their opinions, (M=2.14 out of three) they often feel physically exhausted. The teachers stated that they feel worn out at the end of the working day and that they job is emotionally exhausting (M=2.38 out of three).

Although being tired ranked high within the quantitative data, not one teacher expressed that being tired was a contributing factor to their stress.

Similarly, the quantitative data revealed that 18 (52.9%) of teachers stated that within the past week they sometimes exercised and sometimes ate healthy. Within the qualitative data, teachers explained that in order to alleviate stress they eat healthy, practice yoga and exercise before going home after work. The special education teachers that practiced positive wellness activities stated that they have a lower level or no stress. In other words, a healthy life style contributed to lower stress levels in the special education teachers.

*Finding 3.*A pattern that this researcher gathered from the data of the survey was that the majority of the participants in this study felt that they receive sufficient support to manage their teaching role (M=2.79), they have the opportunity to work collaboratively with their colleagues (M=2.67) and feel encouraged to continually improve their teaching skills (M=3.47). The qualitative data showed otherwise as the special education teachers stated that they feel little administrative support, working relationships pose difficulties and the school climate is negative. There is a discrepancy between the two sets of data.

Finding 4. Participants in this study are expressing their concern with the large work load and paperwork that comes with the job of a special educator. The educator's apprehension is that the work load and paperwork take away from their teaching time and direct instruction with each student. The qualitative and quantitative data in this study show that the main stressor for the teacher's is the overwhelming paperwork and large caseloads. Most special education teachers felt that their workload is not reasonable and that they have insufficient time to plan and prepare for lessons.

Finding 5. Students needs are a contributing factor to the participants levels of stress. Special education teachers have noted that students are difficult to motivate (M=2.95 out of three). The qualitative data in this study signified that the range of disabilities within one classroom and accommodating to each of their needs can be difficult. Most of the teachers documented that fulfilling all the needs of the students is strenuous and can be difficult while trying to be the best teacher you can be.

Finding 6. Participants in this study expressed their concern with student behavior and the impact that it has on the classroom. Most participants stated that challenging behavior is a significant part of their day and many of their students exhibit them (M=3.64 out of five). Within the quantitative data, teachers discussed that it is nearly impossible to attend to the student with the behavior while supporting the other students simultaneously. In other words, one student is receiving all of the attention from a teacher while a significant behavior is taking place.

Discussion of the Findings

Special education teachers are facing stressors daily in their occupation that cause high levels of stress. Gallup (2014) stated that 46% of teachers experience high levels of stress during the school year. The main underlying stressor for most teachers is their overall health. This includes exercise, healthy eating habits and sleep. The teachers in the study showed high signs of tiredness during the day, including emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Gallup (2014) suggested in his research that 46% of teachers were diagnosed with excessive daytime sleepiness and 51% with poor sleep quality, compromising health, quality of life, and teaching performance. It is important for teachers and administrators to have a deep awareness of how a healthy lifestyle can affect both their personal and professional life. The researcher believes that a healthy lifestyle can attribute to occupational stress.

Accordingly, Parihar & Mahmood (2016) suggest that the greatest stressors for teachers are the instructional demands, classroom management and school climate. Similarly, the researcher found within the quantitative data that the special education teachers felt that the school climate was negative and brought about stress. One teacher stated, "The main stress is not my teaching position, but the current events going on in my district." The school climate plays a significant role in how teachers feel. It is important for school officials to create a positive climate within their buildings. Similarly, special education teachers expressed that they are unable to cope with their emotions or understand other's emotions. While working in a setting that involves many other teachers and staff, it is important for teachers to understand their own emotions and other's. This will allow the teachers to contribute to the overall climate of the school.

Along this line, it is important for teachers to recognize their stress. The quantitative data suggests that teachers do not know how to say no to a task or opportunity even if they know it will contribute to their overall stress level. The special education teachers reported that one of the greatest stressors in their occupation is the workload. As the teachers take on more of a workload their stress levels continue to ultimately rise. The analysis of both the qualitative and the quantitative data show evidence of stressors within the special educator's occupation that cause high levels of stress. In this context, it is important that special education teachers in the four school districts recognize the top stressors within their occupation and take precautionary steps to help alleviate these stressors.

Category 2: Factors of the Special Education Teacher Role That Best Predict Stress

While questions about the relationship between the special education role and stress are not easy to address, they are crucial and should be contemplated. Because of the continuous

changing role of a special education teacher in the four school districts, reflections and discussions about the relationship are vital to the teachers and administration. In doing so, it brought immediate awareness to the issue of special education teacher stress.

In this regard, the discussion of the findings in this category address issues concerning the connection between the special education teacher role and the factors of the job that relate to stress. It embraces the belief that the job description may influence the stress of the special education teachers. It was the researcher's intention to find out if the job description predicts stress of a special education teacher and the implications that come with it. In this context, the finding in this category are as follows.

Upon reviewing the content of the quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher compared it to the special education teacher job description as previously reviewed. The top factors within the job description that align to the data include: (a) maintaining classroom discipline; (b) adapt and create curriculum to fit student needs; (c) develop an IEP and conform to the law; (d) communicate and cooperate with parents, staff, and administration; and (e) develop, adapt, score, and administer assessments and make education program decisions. The top stressors described by the special education teachers fall into each of the above categories that are present in the job descriptions.

Category 3: Reasons Special Education Teachers experience Stress in the Work Place

After understanding that there was a high level of stress within special education teachers, the researcher was particularly interested in examining why special education teachers are experiencing stress in their occupation. The researcher's intention was to examine the underlying reasons that the special education teachers are experiencing high levels of stress. The

top themes that emerged from the data collection were: (a) working conditions, (b) professional responsibilities, (c) student needs, (d) student behavior.

Poor working conditions presented itself as the top reason special education teachers are stressed within their occupation. Because self-fulfillment is thought to be the ultimate satisfier for more teachers, many intend to relieve some tension associated with poor working conditions (Krupp & Dempsey, 1982). While teachers have continued to be involved despite less than satisfactory working environments, their enthusiasm has been damped by overloads of paperwork and limited planning time. Tahseen (2015) found similar results as long hours of teaching and clerical work were the top areas of stress within the research conducted. A national study of over 1,000 special education teachers conducted by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) concluded, "Poor teacher working conditions contribute to the high rate of special educators leaving the field, burnout, and substandard of quality of education for students with special needs" (CEC, 1998).

The results of the survey and open-ended questions suggested that lack of administrative support within the workplace creates high levels of stress. It can be reasoned that without support, special education teachers can feel alone and stagnant in their current position. It can be assumed that the longer this continues, teachers will leave the field. Of the sample surveyed, more than a quarter of the population stated that they have had thoughts during the past school year of leaving their current position. Similarly, the PDE data suggested that showed that over 12,000 educators have resigned from their current teaching position in Pennsylvania in the past 5 years.

Similarly, Robinson (1989) found similar results. Robinson (1989), found that the top professional stressors among secondary teachers tended to be divided into four basic sources: (a)

working conditions, (b) professional responsibilities, (c) student teacher situations, and (d) student discipline. Special education teachers discussed student to teacher situations and student discipline, but it did not hold itself to be an outstanding category. The special education teachers within the sample, felt that student needs and student behavior created more stress within the classroom. Looking at both Robinson (1989) and the researcher's results, working conditions and professional responsibilities can be assumed to be top stressors in not only special education, but in all areas of teaching.

Limitations of the Study

This study is a mixed methods examination of only four school districts and their special education teachers' experience with occupational stress in the work place. Because a small sample size of teachers was utilized, the results should not be generalized across all special education teachers. The data also provides a subjective view into the special education teachers' perceptions. The sample is also based on convenience, rather than a randomized sample. Another possible limitation of this study is that all of the teachers are working in different settings, grade levels, with different students, and varying disabilities. Each teacher has different background experiences and background knowledge relating to special education. Each of the teachers deal with the stressors of their job in multiple ways. Stress cannot be generalized as each individual deals with stress in a different manner.

Recommendations for School Districts

The findings of this study suggest the need for different programming options, including wellness education and professional development, for both school district leaders and special education teachers. The following recommendations are specific to Pennsylvania that can help support not only teachers, but also school administration with handling the effects of stress.

First, it is important for school district leaders to have a greater understanding of the special educator role and special education law to help assist teachers in the process. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and the Bureau of Special Education (BSE) (2016), provides professional development that is targeted specifically for principals and assistant principals in improving their practices related to special education. The Principals Understand how to Lead Special Education (PULSE) program focuses on three main topics (a) creating a culture for change, (b) being an instructional leader, and (c) ensuring a safe and supportive school. The multi-day professional development is designed to prepare school leaders to inspire, mentor, and mobilize faculty and staff to address the learning needs of students with disabilities. With leaders who are willing to activate a culture for change, support special education teachers, and have greater content knowledge, this could help alleviate stressors in the work environment.

Secondly, a wellness program to help support teachers would in turn create a healthy workplace. The Kaiser Permanente Thriving Schools program helps to support school employees in the areas of their physical, emotional and professional well-being. A healthy school workplace helps to retain teachers and staff, reduce stress, and boost job satisfaction (Kaiser Permanente, 2018). Districts should consider creating a wellness committee to help plan and implement different programming to support staff and teach staff healthy ways to cope and deal with stress.

As the results indicated, teachers are not able to regulate their stress and identify between the different types of stressors. One method for reducing stress and promoting emotional awareness and self-regulation is through engaging in mindful awareness practices. The program CARE for Teachers, introduces emotional skill instruction, mindful awareness, and stress reduction practices (Jennings et al, 2017). Introducing CARE for Teachers into professional

development and in-service trainings would allow teachers to be mindful of their stress and how to care for themselves.

Interventions to help teachers reduce stress fall into three broad categories: (a) organizational interventions (b) organization-individual interface interventions, and (c) individual interventions. Organization interventions focus on changing the organization's culture to prevent stress from occurring. Organization-individual interface interventions include building workplace relationships and support, while individual interventions focus on teaching individual's practices to manage stress. Several programs and policies are noted as best practices to help teachers reduce stress, improve well-being, and student incomes, and even save schools money. These practices include mentoring and induction programs, workplace wellness programs, social emotional learning (SEL) programs and mindfulness/stress management programs (Greenberg et al, 2016).

Additionally, a self-assessment created for professional development might address the needs of the special education staff relating to their current role and stressors. A detailed breakdown of the different areas that staff communicate as stressors can be broken down into a corrective action plan and explained more thoroughly to help assist teachers. During in-service time, special education teachers and school leaders can brainstorm action plans to help support the staff based on the findings of the self-assessment. This could also include both interpersonal and intrapersonal skill sets and how teachers can recognize and work on these skills. The self-assessment will allow for school leaders to be aware of problems and assist in problem solving and provide further education on the topics at large.

Extensions of Current Research

This survey examines special education stressors within the workplace within Western Pennsylvania. Given that this study only investigated occupational stress in four districts within Western Pennsylvania, a similar broader range study could be conducted to examine special education teacher occupational stress within a larger scope to understand the specific stressors. To do so, knowledge from Sparks (2017) and Gallup (2014) would help support the methodology and framework of the study as the researchers have done large scale studies with over 100 schools. Secondly, conducting interviews with several of the teachers over a five-year span would provide more insight of the role of the special educator. According to PDE (2018), there is a special education teacher shortage. By completing research on special education teachers from the time they graduate college and begin their first teaching job through their fifth year, this would allow for the researcher to understand specific stressors and implications as to why the teachers are leaving the field. The study could also find why some special education teaches are staying in the field. Next, comparing Pennsylvania special education teachers' stress to that of other states' special education teachers could offer insight into how districts support special education teachers to prevent burnout and turnover within the field.

Further research investigating the relevance of this topic to mainstream teachers, school's counselors, and administrators in all areas of education would continue to illuminate the prevalence of this issue in the field of education, while possibly reinforcing the findings of this study.

Additionally, further follow-up in the field of stress can be conducted, in the effort to determine the effects on teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy, confidence and job satisfaction has on children with exceptionalities. More research is needed to explore how special education

teachers manage stress. The current study perceived the teachers stress and the stressors that make their occupation stressful, but does not give insight on how the teachers cope with the stress. Advancements and achievements in stress management must be all inclusive to address all potential sources of stress, while each and every one warrant further research and analysis. It is suggested that future studies investigate other methods, programs and applications that are effective in developing new stress-coping techniques while finding new inventive applications for existing strategies.

Conclusion

This study was guided by the following research questions: What kinds of stressors do special education teachers experience; What factors of the special education teacher role best predict stress; and Why do special education teachers experience occupational stress in the work place? Through these questions, this study sought to explore the implications of the role of a special educator and how it influences stress and the types of stressors that special education teachers experience. The participants' accounts were explored as part of a process that analyzed them in their work environment. The researcher applied a mixed methods analysis design which interpreted the participants' various perceptions of experiences as special education teachers. The results of this study suggest that working conditions is a key detriment in causing stress. The researcher believes that the daily demands placed on special education teachers including paperwork and very little time in the day to complete necessary lesson planning leaves teachers feeling more stressed out.

Consistent with the literature review section of this study, several key findings remained constant in terms of teacher occupational stress and the stressors within the field. The meaningful and rich data gained from the special education teachers in this study corroborates with reference

to the stressors that lead to high levels of stress within the workplace. These include instructional demands, classroom management, school climate, working relationships, overcrowded class sizes, workload and overall wellness (Tahseen, 2015; Parihar & Mahmood, 2016; Gallup, 2009; Gallup, 2014). In addition, the data generated in this study reveals several unique findings that contributed valuable new research to the existing literature.

The research presented new data that expands upon the existing literature by identifying both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that create stress in special education teachers. Furthermore, the study established a greater understanding of how the special education job description plays a significant role in the stress of special education teachers. Specifically, data indicated that most of the teachers enjoy working with students and their colleagues and put in their best effort daily even if this in turn produces stress in their everyday lives.

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Appendix A

Example of Survey

This survey has been adapted from the University of Queensland, Australia School of Education (2015).

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled *Teacher Stress and Wellbeing* Survey. This study is being done by Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey and Jessica Hall from Slippery Rock University. You were selected to participate in this study because you are a current teacher in special education and we value your feedback within your field.

The purpose of this research study is to get an up-to-date and accurate understanding of the degree of stress and burnout experienced by special education teachers. By using this online survey, we will gather information from a broad range of special educators regarding their perceived stress, emotional functioning, their ability to manage emotions, symptoms of burnout, as well as their sense of well-being. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey/questionnaire. This survey will ask about your emotional wellbeing, stress level as it relates to school and your students, and demographic information. It will take you approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may help to provide the researchers, school districts and others with a clear depiction of what is causing stress for special educators, which in turn is causing burnout within the field. This study will contribute to an accurate understanding of the stress and well-being of special education teachers which will assist in planning future well-being programs and measures which target the most critical needs of teachers.

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, as with any online related activity the risk of a breach is always possible. To the best of our ability your answers in this study will remain confidential. We will minimize any risks by keeping the survey collection data in a password secure computer and all documents must require a password to enter. After 5 years, all of the data collection will be deleted.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. You are free to skip any question that you choose.

As researchers, we are not qualified to provide counseling services and we will not be following up with you after this study. If you feel upset after completing the study or find that some questions or aspects of the study triggered distress, talking with a qualified clinician may help. If you feel you would like assistance please contact your special education director, principal or colleague for assistance. If you are a current SRU student, you may contact the Counseling Center at (724) 738- 2034.

If you have questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher(s), Jessica Hall at jessica.hall@sru.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at Slippery Rock University at (724) 738-4846 or irb@sru.edu.

By clicking "I agree" below you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in this research study. Please print a copy of this page for your records.

I agree

○ I do not agree

Background Information

2) Are you:

Male

○ Female

○ Other - Write In: ⬭

3) What is your marital status?

☐ Single

○ Married

○ Divorced/Separated/Widowed

4) How old are you (in years)?

⬭

5) How long have you been a special educator (in years)?

[_____]

6) What grade level do you teach? Click all that apply.

☐ Pre-K

☐ Kindergarten

☐ First Grade

☐ Second Grade

☐ Third Grade

☐ Fourth Grade

☐ Fifth Grade

☐ Sixth Grade

☐ Seventh Grade

☐ Eighth Grade

☐ Ninth Grade

☐ Tenth Grade

☐ Eleventh Grade

☐ Twelfth Grade

☐ Post-Secondary

☐ Other - Write In: [_____]

7) What is the best description of the layout of your classroom?

☐ Learning Support

○ Autistic Support

○ Inclusive Classroom

○ Self-Contain

○ Pull Out/Push In

○ Other - Write In: _____

8) What category does your school fall under?

☐ Private

○ Public

9) What stage of your teaching career are you currently in?

○ Early career

○ Mid career

○ Late career

○ Not applicable

10) In what setting are you currently teaching?

○ Urban

○ Rural

○ Suburban

○ Remote (Cyber Schooling)

○ Other - Write In: ⬡⬡⬡⬡

11) Would you have any interest in participating in a 20-30 interview regarding the topic of special education teacher stress and wellbeing? If choosing yes, please include your contact information (name and email).

☐ No

○ Yes: ⬡⬡⬡⬡

My Stress Experience

The questions in this scale ask about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case you will be asked to indicate by selecting how often you felt or thought a certain way.

In the last month...

12) How often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?

Never ○ Sometimes ○ Often

13) How often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?

    ○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

14) How often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?

    ○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

15) How often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

    ○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

16) How often have your felt that things were going your way?

    ○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

17) How often have you found that you could not cope with all of the things that you had to do?

    ○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

18) How often have you been able to control irritations in your life?

    ○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

19) How often have you felt that you were on top of things?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

20) How often have your been angered because of things that were outside of your control?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

21) How often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

How I Feel

Please read each statement and indicate how much the statement applied to you over the past week. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one statement.

22) I found it hard to wind down

Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time   ○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

23) I was aware of dryness of my mouth

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

24) I experienced breathing difficulty (e.g., excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me sometimes, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

25) I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

26) I tended to over-react to situations

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, most of the time

27) I experienced trembling (e.g., in the hands)

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

28) I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy

○ Did not apply to me　　　○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

29) I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself

○ Did not apply to me　　　○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

30) I felt that I had nothing to look forward to

○ Did not apply to me　　　○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

31) I found myself getting agitated

○ Did not apply to me　　　○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, most of the time

32) I found it difficult to relax

○ Did not apply to me　　　○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, most of the time

33) I felt down-hearted and blue

○ Did not apply to me at all ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

34) I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing

○ Did not apply to me at all ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

35) I felt I was close to panic

○ Did not apply to me ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

36) I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything

○ Did not apply to me at all ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

37) I felt I wasn't worth much as a person

○ Did not apply to me at all ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

38) I felt I was rather touchy

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

39) I felt scared without any good reason

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

40) I felt that my life was meaningless

○ Did not apply to me   ○ Applied to me most of the time, or some of the time

○ Applied to me very much, or most of the time

My Social and Emotional Skills

Please tell us about your social and emotional strengths and challenges.

41) I understand my moods and feelings

Rarely ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

42) I understand why I do what I do

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

43) When I'm upset I notice how I am feeling before I take action

   ○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

44) I am aware of how my moods affect the way I treat other people

   ○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

45) I can identify and name the emotions I feel

   ○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

46) I pay attention when I do things

   ○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

47) I try hard to teach well at school

   ○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

48) I stop and think before doing anything when I get angry

   ○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

49) I set high standards for myself

   ○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

50) I work hard

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

51) I keep focused on tasks I need to do even if I do not like them

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

52) I can be counted on

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

53) I have strong self-control

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

54) I listen carefully to what others say to me

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

55) I get along well with others who are different from me

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

56) It is important to me to help others in my school

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

57) I can tell when someone is getting angry or upset before they say anything

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

58) I care about other people's feelings and points of view

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

59) I try to understand how other people feel and think

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

60) I know how to disagree without starting a fight or an argument

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

61) I ask my colleagues for help when I need it

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

62) If I get angry with a friend, I can talk about it and make things better

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

63) I am able to work well with others

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

64) It is easy for me to join a conversation that other colleagues have already started

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

65) I enjoy being around people whose background and experiences are different than mine

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

66) When I have a problem at school, I am good at finding ways to solve them

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

67) If I can't figure something out, I try different solutions until one works

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

68) When I make a decision, I think about what might happen afterwards

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

69) I take responsibility for my mistakes

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

70) I can say "no" when someone wants me to do things that cause me stress

○ Rarely   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

Managing Emotions

We would like to ask you some questions about how you manage your emotions. Please indicate how often the following statements apply to you by choosing the appropriate term below.

71) I am clear about my feelings

Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

72) I pay attention to how I feel

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

73) I experience my emotions as overwhelming and out of control

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

74) I have no idea how I am feeling

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

75) I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

76) I am attentive to my feelings

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

77) I know exactly how I am feeling

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

78) I care about what I am feeling

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

79) I am confused about how I feel

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

80) When I am upset, I acknowledge my emotions

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

81) When I am upset, I become angry with myself for feeling that way

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

82) When I am upset, I have difficulty getting work done

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

83) When I am upset, I become out of control

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

84) When I am upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

85) When I am upset, I believe that I'll end up feeling very depressed

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

86) When I am upset, I believe that my feelings are valid and important

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

87) When I am upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

88) When I am upset, I feel out of control

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

89) When I am upset, I feel like I am weak

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

90) When I am upset, It takes me a long time to feel better

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

91) When I am upset, my emotions feel overwhelming

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

How I Feel at Work

The following questions are about workplace related fatigue and exhaustion. Please tick one for each question to indicate the answer that best describes how you feel.

92) How often do you feel tired?

Never ○ Sometimes   ○ Often

93) How often do you feel physically exhausted?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

94) How often do you think: " I can't take it anymore"?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

95) How often do you feel worn out?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

96) How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

97) Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

98) Are you exhausted in the morning at the though of another day at work?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

99) Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

100) Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

101) Is your work emotionally exhausting?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

102) Does your work frustrate you?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

103) Do you feel burnt out because of your work?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

104) Do you find it hard to work with students?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

105) Does it drain your energy to work with students?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

106) Do you find it frustrating to work with students?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

107) Do you feel that you give more than you get back when you work with students?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

108) Are you tired of working with students?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

109) Do you sometimes wonder how long you will be able to continue working with students?

○ Never   ○ Sometimes   ○ Always

110) In general, how stressful do you find being a teacher?

○ Not at all stressful   ○ Moderately stressful   ○ Extremely stressful

111) In the last month, have you considered leaving your current role due to stress or dissatisfaction?

   ○ No

   ○ Yes

Well-being at School

We would like to ask you some questions about how you see your school context. For each item, please use the following point scale, with 1 indicating that you strongly disagree with the statement and 5 indicating that your strongly agree.

112) Most of my students are motivated to learn

Strongly disagree   ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

113) A lot of my students exhibit challenging behavior

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

114) My teaching role is clearly defined

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

115) I have sufficient time to prepare for my lessons as I would like to

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

116) I think my workload is reasonable

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

117) I receive sufficient support to manage my teaching role

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

118) I have many opportunities to work collaboratively with my colleagues is I choose to

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

119) I feel like I am encouraged to continually improve my teaching skills

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

120) I can easily seek advice from others at school if I choose to

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

121) I often feel emotionally exhausted when I think about going to work

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

122) I often feel frustrated when I think about solving problems at work

○ Strongly disagree ○ Disagree ○ Neutral ○ Agree ○ Strongly agree

Physical Well-being

Taking care of ourselves is really important to our well-being.

123) How well did you sleep in the last week?

Not very well ○ Ok ○ Well

124) How often did you eat healthy meals in the last week?

○ Not very often ○ Sometimes ○ Very often

125) How often did you exercise in the last week?

○ Not very often ○ Sometimes ○ Very often

Final Questions

126) Taking into consideration the job description in which your district provides, which tasks would you consider as red flags that correlate to stress?

127) If you experience stress in your current position, what are the main contributing factors?
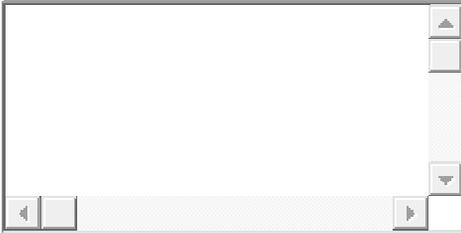
128) If you do not experience stress in your current position, what precautions do you take to avoid the feeling of stress?

Thank You!

Thank you for completing our survey. Your time and effort are greatly appreciated and provide a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the experience of special educators.

Approval to Use Survey

Hi Jessica

Thank you for following up. So long as the survey is accredited to the College, I would be happy for you to use our survey questions.

We also offer **free Associate memberships** to those in study which allows you to access our publications, attend events at discounted rates and use our post nominals, among other benefits. Simply follow the link, click '*sign up now*' and complete the fields to acquire log in details: https://www.austcolled.com.au/product/aace/

Please let me know if you have any further questions, and good luck with your dissertation.

Regards
Nicola Mahoney
Senior Administration Officer

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Appendix C

Email to District Representatives for Survey Approval

Good morning,

I am writing to you to request your permission to send out a brief survey in the Spring of 2018 to all of your special educators in your district. The survey will help us to evaluate the level of stress that special educators are experiencing and their overall perceptions of stress. The hope is that once we receive the results, there will be further roles of interventions and programming that will take place to help teachers and the potential stress that they may be experiencing daily in their jobs. The survey will be all electronic based and can be accessed using a link. To view the survey, please see attached. The survey will take 15-20 minutes. The survey is completely voluntary to the special educators. If you and your district approve the request to send out the survey to your teachers, please send back a confirmation receipt of this email and complete the approval form. This can be scanned and emailed or sent via mail to 114 McKay Education Building, Slippery Rock, PA 16057.

I look forward to hearing from you and thank you for your time.

Best,

Jessica Hall
Special Education Doctoral Student
Slippery Rock University

Appendix D

Request to Participate in Internet Survey Email to Special Education Teachers

I am writing to you to request your participation in a brief survey. As a special educator, there are many demands of your job. Through my dissertation, I am hoping to look at the perceptions of stress and the demands placed on special educators. Your responses to this survey will help me to evaluate the stressors and burnout of special educators so that, in the future, there is a better design of interventions and projects that can help to improve teacher stress.

The survey is very brief and will only take about 15-20 minutes to complete. Please click the link below to go to the survey Web site (or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser).

Survey link: http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/3723043/Teacher-Stress-and-Wellbeing-Survey

Your participation in the survey is completely voluntary and all of your responses will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your responses to any reports of these data. The Slippery Rock Institutional Review Board has approved this survey. Should you have any comments or questions, please feel free to contact me at Jessica.hall@sru.edu or (440)708-3243.

Thank you very much for your time and cooperation. Feedback from current teachers is very important to my research.

Jessica Hall
Slippery Rock University
Doctoral Student

Appendix E

Approval Request Form to Complete Research in District

October 1, 2017

Title of Study: Teacher Stress and Wellbeing Survey
Principal Investigator(s):   Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey
                                 Jessica Hall

To the Slippery Rock University IRB,

As a representative of the _____ school district, I confirm that the school district grants permission for the proposed research: Teacher Stress and Wellbeing Survey to be conducted once IRB approval has been obtained.

_____   _____
Printed Name of School District Official   Title of School District Official

_____   _____
Signature of School District Official   Date

Appendix F

Follow-Up Email to Teachers

I just wanted to thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study. If you have not had the opportunity to complete the survey, it will remain open for approximately two more weeks. Your participation in this study is approximately 15-20 minutes and participation is entirely voluntary. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Slippery Rock University. Please click the link below to go to the survey Web site (or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser).

Survey link: http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/3723043/Teacher-Stress-and-Wellbeing-Survey

Your survey completion indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you are aware of your right to withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time. Your participation in the survey is completely voluntary and all of your responses will be key confidential. Should you have any comments or questions, please feel free to contact me at Jessica.hall@sru.edu or (440)708-3243.

I sincerely appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Jessica Hall

Slippery Rock University

Doctoral Student

Appendix G

Approval from IRB

Dr. Rineer-Hershey,

        Protocol #:   2018-042-88-B
        Protocol Title: A Mixed Methods Investigation of the Effects of Work Related Stress Among Special Education Teachers

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Slippery Rock University has received and reviewed the requested modification(s) to the above-referenced protocol utilizing the expedited review process. The IRB has approved the protocol effective April 5, 2018.

You may begin your project as of April 5, 2018. Your approved protocol will be subject to review within one year from the date of approval by the IRB.

If you complete the study within the next year, please notify the IRB with a Final Report. The Final Report form and instructions can be found on the IRB website.

Please contact the IRB Office by phone at (724)738-4846 or via email at irb@sru.edu should your protocol change in any way. Your formal letter will be sent via interoffice mail.

Thanks,
Casey

Casey Hyatt
Grants and Sponsored Research/
Institutional Review Board (IRB)/
Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC)
Secretary

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