5-2022

Challenging Student Behaviors and Teacher Well-being

Dannah Steele
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Dannah Steele
Saint Louis University
Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education, 2008
University of Missouri St. Louis
Master of Science in Education Administration, 2012
University of Arkansas
Specialist in Educational Leadership, 2020

May 2022
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

_____
Kara Lasater, Ed.D.
Dissertation Director

_____
John Pijanowski, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Joshua Ray, Ed.D.
Committee Member

_____
Christy Smith, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Abstract

Classroom management is a necessary component of a teacher's classroom in order for students to learn in a safe environment. When a teacher is unable to manage his or her classroom because of dangerous and disruptive behaviors, it can be physically dangerous and impede the learning of others. Teachers frequently exposed to challenging behaviors experience high levels of stress that transcends into their personal lives. The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience high levels of stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. Data collected through semi-structured interviews found that teachers were experiencing stress at high levels that negatively impacted their well-being at work and in their personal lives. Self-care practices proved to be inadequate at reducing participant stress. Alternatively, it is recommended administrators deepen the trust they have with teachers and they cultivate positive teacher-student relationships.

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Effective principals know what they do and why they do it (Whitaker, 2012). Focused, purposeful leadership guides the school community to accomplish its goals. While principals must ensure student safety and academic achievement, they must also prioritize taking care of teachers, so they are able to care for students. Student behavior is the biggest stress teachers face each day (Scholastic, 2013). Behaviors disrupt learning and can become potentially harmful (Huang et al., 2017). Being unable to effectively respond to and reduce behaviors may make teachers feel incapable of doing their jobs (Brouwers & Tomic, 2001). The purpose of this study is to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience high levels of stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom.

According to Scholastic's Primary Sources (2013), teachers report an increased intensity of student behaviors in the classroom. The study found 68% of elementary teachers describe student behaviors as stressful and time consuming. Teachers who work in high poverty areas report greater concerns of student behaviors (65%) than those working in higher income areas (56%; Scholastic, 2013). Challenging behaviors are defined as behaviors that are above the expected intensity and/or frequency of normal behavior for a child's age or developmental level and threaten the safety of the student, his or her peers, and teachers (Ogundele, 2018). For example, it is considered developmentally appropriate for a kindergarten student to become upset at recess over a toy and push a classmate. This would not be considered a challenging behavior. However, if this student repeated the behavior consistently and the aggression was severe, then the behaviors would be defined as challenging. The same incident involving a fifth grader would

be considered challenging because it is developmentally inappropriate for a fifth grader to be physically aggressive with peers. This study examined how administrators can better support teachers in managing and responding to challenging student behaviors. Of particular importance is how administrators can effectively care for teacher well-being, so they feel confident and empowered in addressing challenging behaviors in the classroom.

Problem Statement

Treetop Elementary is a public K-5 elementary school, located in suburban north St. Louis County, Missouri. The school is served by predominantly African American students living in a high poverty environment. The majority of students perform below grade level and many struggle with controlling their behaviors in the classroom. The behaviors at Treetop are so severe, teachers feel stress and exhaustion from managing them and keeping students and themselves safe.

Instructional and Systematic Issues

Teachers are pressured for students to perform academically. However, when challenging behaviors disrupt the learning environment, it is difficult to implement instruction. Of 10,000 teachers surveyed, over half stated they spend too much time on discipline and classroom incidents. (Scholastic, 2013). The teacher must stop instruction to intervene and deescalate students in crisis. Sometimes the entire class must evacuate because another student has threatened their safety, resulting in lost instructional time for the student in crisis *and* the entire class. When challenging behaviors are not present within the classroom, teachers have more time for instruction and students have more opportunities to learn, which can result in an increase in student achievement.

Students who exhibit challenging behaviors at school are at risk for poor academic performance, dropout, and future criminal behavior (Kirkhaug et al., 2016). Students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in low income areas are at greater risk for falling behind academically, absenteeism because of suspensions or removal from the classroom, and dropping out of school completely (Gonsoulin et al., 2012; Osher et al., 2012). African American students are three times more likely than their white peers to be suspended from school (Gonsoulin et al., 2012). Black students make up only 14% of Missouri's total population but account for 41% of suspensions statewide (American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri, 2018). Students living in poor conditions, such as poverty or in unsafe homes, are more likely to engage in negative behaviors at school (Gonsoulin et al., 2012). While the intentions of office referrals and suspensions may be to keep schools safe, excessive disciplinary action deprives students of their education and can open up the pathway of entering the judicial system.

Directly Observable

For the 2018-2019 school year, Treetop Elementary School had 506 office disciplinary referrals. Most frequent offenses included fighting (91), physical aggression (150), assault of students or staff (68), and disruptive behavior (137). The most commonly occurring disruptive behaviors were sweeping desks and bookshelves of items, eloping from the classroom or the building, throwing items at the teacher or other students, and cursing at the teacher. Sixteen incidents led to administration calling security, an ambulance, or a school resource officer. Three of these most serious incidents included a student stabbing his teacher with scissors, a student bringing a loaded bb gun to school, and a student pushing his teacher out of a wheelchair.

Teachers at Treetop express frustration and stress with students, as evidenced by the descriptions of office referrals, informal classroom observations, and the frequency in which

students are removed from the classroom. It is unlikely to see a teacher in the school smiling when walking down the hallway. They become defensive with students and colleagues when asked simple questions. They cry in staff meetings and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) because of feelings of being overwhelmed. According to Kyriacou (2001), teacher behaviors listed above are characteristics of teacher stress. Additional behaviors associated with teacher stress include fatigue, nervous tension, "wear and tear", difficulties adapting to staff and students, fragility, and an inability to cope with routines (Kyriacou, 2001). Other signs of stress include lethargy, feelings of poor self-esteem, loss or gain in weight, and insomnia (American Institute of Stress, 2018). Prolonged teacher stress, or "wear and tear" leads to teacher burnout or compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002; Huberman, 1993).

Actionable

Administrators must understand the experiences teachers have when interacting with challenging student behaviors over a long period of time. With an understanding of teacher perceived needs, leaders can develop structures and implement practices to support teachers and reduce student behaviors. After listening to teachers describe the challenges they face and supports they would benefit from, it is the principal's responsibility to address them, while also considering the needs of students. Punitive responses, such as zero tolerance policies for aggressive behaviors, are not allowed in the district, fail to be proactive at reducing behaviors, and are counteractive to positive student teacher relationships (Kyriacou, 2001). Thus, administrators must find alternative ways to support teachers and meet the needs of the entire school community.

Connects with Broader Strategy of Improvement

School improvement plans at Treetop Elementary outline strategies to increase student achievement and attendance, decrease discipline, and retain highly qualified teachers. Teacher well-being is related to each of these goals. A less stressed teacher is likely to deliver engaging instruction and build relationships with students, thus improving school culture and climate (Sutcher et al., 2016). Teachers who have a sense of job satisfaction will remain in the profession and have a greater probability to remain employed in the same school (Bascia & Rottmann, 2011).

High Leverage

Teacher stress contributes to the nation-wide teacher shortage. The Learning Policy Institute (2016) reported a shortage of approximately 64,000 teachers, with the prediction of this number increasing to over 100,000 by year 2021 (Sutcher et al., 2016). These numbers have been exacerbated due to hardships brought on by COVID-19. According to the report, most teachers opt to leave the profession not due to salary, but due to job dissatisfaction, including discipline, stress, and lack of support from administration (Sutcher et al., 2016). Reducing teacher stress and anxiety related to discipline would lead to an increase in safe, positive school cultures (Kipps-Vaughan, 2012).

Research Questions

This qualitative study sought to answer the following questions:

Question 1: How do teachers describe their experiences working with students who display challenging behaviors?

Question 2: How do teachers cope when students display challenging behaviors in the classroom?

Question 3: How can administrators support the well-being of teachers who experience stress caused from challenging student behaviors in the classroom?

Overview of Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to understand how administrators can better support teachers in managing and responding to students exhibiting challenging behaviors in the classroom. Teachers were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews. During interviews, teachers were asked to describe their experiences with students who display unsafe and inappropriate school behaviors. Teachers provided suggestions on ways administrators can support them personally and how systems within the school could be improved to support teacher well-being and reduce challenging behaviors in their classrooms.

Positionality

I have been a teacher and an administrator in urban schools for the past 12 years. During this time, I have suffered personally with managing anxiety and depression because of work-related stress. Much of this stress was caused by student behaviors in the classroom that I was unable to manage. As an administrator, I witness teachers struggling with the same issues I had ten years ago. I have witnessed teachers being stabbed with a pair of scissors, being cussed out and assaulted, and personal belongings destroyed. I understand how difficult it is not to take these actions personal and how not to resent the student for the harm they cause. I can recount at least fifteen colleagues who have resigned *during the school year* because they could no longer mentally, physically, or emotionally withstand student behaviors. At least two were admitted into a hospital for emotional exhaustion and anxiety. I can recall many instances in which I wished I was the resigning teacher. I now carry guilt because I feel unsuccessful at improving situations for my teachers, my students, and myself. I still feel much of the same stress and

sadness I felt as a classroom teacher because the students I interact with daily are often in crisis and become violent with me, others, or themselves.

Researcher's Role

Because of my past and current experiences, I must ensure criticality and reflexivity throughout the research process. Criticality means the researcher is aware of any power struggles that may lie in the relationship between researcher and participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, I was the building principal in the school where research was conducted. Teachers may have felt uncomfortable sharing vulnerable information with a supervisor, and they may have felt like certain responses could lead to an unsatisfactory evaluation. Trust between myself and participants was important. I laid a trusting foundation with my teachers by listening to them, having an open-door policy, and considering their suggestions in school-wide decision making. I reinforced relationships throughout the study by ensuring confidentiality and offering to conduct interviews outside the school setting to provide a level of comfort.

Reflexivity refers to an active and ongoing commitment to address my role as a researcher and the powerful influence I have over the development and enactment of my research findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I was purposeful in separating evaluative observations from participant viewpoints and feelings. For example, if a teacher described a situation in the classroom in which she did not respond appropriately to a student, and she discussed the incident in the interview, it could not be used punitively during her evaluation. I was mindful of how my perceptions of teachers could change based on interview responses. Holding perceptions or bias against a teacher because of his or her answers could change our interactions and relationships, resulting in an uncomfortable or negative work climate. I engaged in reflexive thinking through journaling and memoing. These processes allowed me to consider how my role as administrator,

but also previously a teacher in the same building, could influence the data. I was able to write about my own experiences as a teacher, but also consider how as an administrator I played a role (or not) in incidents participants described. During data analysis, I removed teacher names, and broadly coded themes so I would look only at the data versus what I know and think about individual teachers. This helped ensure an impartial analysis. For example, if a teacher described methods of classroom management that I knew to be untrue based on observations in her classroom, I was able to journal about the conflicting information. However, it did not interfere with the coding process, since I only considered the data and had removed the teacher's name from the transcript.

Assumptions

It is assumed participants were reporting truthful responses in interviews. During the time of this study, teachers and administrators participated in professional development facilitated by Education Plus that focused on building trust among staff. The facilitators led conversations and asked questions that required staff to be vulnerable with one another. While the training was focused on equity (not directly related to behaviors), engaging in uncomfortable conversations as a group may have made it easier for teachers to share individually in interviews. I assumed that, as educators, participants had a basic level of care for students they teach and ultimately want to see all students successful. All people have underlying bias. Therefore, it is assumed prejudice and bias may have influenced the way teachers responded to and interacted with students and interpreted student behaviors. The majority of teachers at Treetop Elementary is middle-class and Caucasian; whereas, the entire student population is African American and living in extreme poverty (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Demographic differences may have created preconceived perceptions of students and

exaggerated behavior incidents. There is research that suggests students learn best from teachers who look like they do (Gay, 2018). There is further research suggesting white female teachers hold low expectations for their black students, fail to understand them, and hold attitudes of fear (Hancock, 2006). All teachers have biases which impact the manner in which they understand, believe in, and respond to students (Hancock, 2006). However, I operated under the assumption all teachers care about their students and ultimately want them to succeed.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms were used operationally in this study:

Appraisal. A constant evaluation of what is happening from the standpoint of the significance of the action or event to an individual's well-being (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977)

Challenging Behaviors. Behaviors that are above the expected intensity and/or frequency of normal behavior for a child's age or developmental level (Ogundele, 2018)

Child Traumatic Stress. Children who have been exposed to one or more traumas over the course of their lives and develop reactions that persist and affect their daily lives after events have ended (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.)

Disruptive Behaviors. Behaviors that interfere with the teacher's ability to teach and other children's learning (McCormick & Barnett, 2011)

Trauma. An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Organization, 2014)

Self-Care. Practice in which an individual takes care of one's physical, mental, social-emotional, and spiritual health in order to cope with stress (Lipsky & Burk, 2009)

Trauma Informed Approach. The six key principles fundamental to a trauma informed approach include (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Association, 2014)

- Safety- Individuals feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe and interactions promote a sense of safety
- Trustworthiness and transparency- Operations and decisions are conducted with a sense of transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust across the organization
- Peer Support- Building safety, hope, and increasing collaboration between peers with similar experiences
- Collaboration and Mutuality- Balancing of power across an organization. Recognizing that healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision making
- Individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon
- Cultural, Historic, and Gender Issues- Organization actively moves past stereotypes and biases

Stress. Stress in teachers is characterized by unpleasant negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, and nervousness that teachers experience due to the challenges at their job (Kyriacou, 2001)

Organization of Dissertation

Chapter 1 describes the problem, student behaviors impacting teacher well-being, and the purpose of the study. The remainder of this study is presented as follows:

- Chapter 2 presents a literature review of the extent of student behaviors in the classroom and the impact they have on teacher stress. It discusses potential interventions for mitigating teacher stress caused by student behaviors.
- Chapter 3 provides a description of the methodology, including data collection and data analysis methods.
- Chapter 4 presents the qualitative findings of the study, in order to identify ways in which administrators can implement practices to support teachers.
- Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and provides recommendations so administrators and policy makers can make changes to support safe and healthy classrooms.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience high levels of stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. A review of the literature was conducted to explore this problem of practice. EBSCO, Eric, and ProQuest search engines were accessed through the University of Arkansas online library to conduct the literature review. The literature focuses on three prominent topics: causes of challenging student behaviors; the impact of challenging behaviors on teachers; and, how administrators can mitigate teacher stress associated with challenging student behaviors, which consists of interventions at the individual and organizational levels.

Review of the Literature

This literature review will provide background knowledge on childhood trauma and how it manifests itself in schools. The purpose of studying childhood trauma is to better understand how behaviors caused by childhood trauma have a profound impact on the stress and well-being of classroom teachers. The effects of stress on teachers will be discussed as it pertains to teacher well-being and overall classroom climate. Finally, the literature will explore ways administrators can make changes to support teacher well-being and implement strategies that support a positive school environment.

Childhood Trauma

Berson & Baggerly (2009) suggest 71% of school-aged children in the United States have been exposed to at least one significant traumatic event in the last year. According to the Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health (2019), this equates to over 35 million U.S.

children – more than half of the children who are sitting in a teacher's classroom. Adverse experiences that contribute to childhood trauma are typically categorized into three groups:

a. abuse (physical, sexual, and psychological)

b. neglect (physical or emotional)

c. household challenges including criminal household member, substance abuse in the home, witness of domestic violence, single parent home, or mental illness (Center for Disease Control, 2016).

Childhood trauma can cause structural damage to the brain, causing portions to be underdeveloped (Cole et al., 2005). Cortisol levels in the brain have been found to be depressed, causing students to remain in a hyper-state of arousal and in a constant state of alert (Cole et al., 2005; Everly & Lating, 2012). Students quickly become dysregulated and default to a freeze, flight, or fight response (SAMSHA, 2014). Freeze behaviors may include severe withdrawal, disassociating, and difficulties focusing (Berandi & Mortin, 2019). Fighting, physical aggression, and emotional combativeness are fight reflexes caused by neural responses telling the student he is in danger (Berandi & Mortin, 2019). A withdrawn student who engages in self-destructive behaviors, such as suicidal ideologies, is likely exhibiting trauma induced flight behaviors (Berandi & Mortin, 2019; Souers & Hall, 2016). Actions may be difficult for teachers to interpret, resulting in punitive consequences which perpetuate problematic student behaviors.

The educational system is based on students following rules and regulating behavior. Students with a history of trauma are at a disadvantage to be successful in school because the inability to regulate responses and emotions makes it difficult to adjust to the structure of classroom norms and behavior expectations (Berardi & Morton, 2019). Executive functioning skills, or the cognitive skills needed to perform daily tasks, are underdeveloped in students with a

history of trauma (Kaufman, 2010). Limited executive functioning skills makes adaptability, impulse control, and emotional regulation difficult (Kaufman, 2010). Examples of impaired functioning in the classroom include loss of short-term memory, inflexibility, and inattention (Cozolino, 2013; Craig, 2015). Lack of executive function can result in misbehavior. For example, a student may have difficulty understanding and remembering a teacher's directive, become distracted with items in the classroom, and begin to wander around the room. He then may become agitated with the teacher's redirection and, as a result, respond with aggression or disruption.

Emotional control, and the intensity felt from these emotions, cause students to under and over respond to a given stimuli (Berandi & Mortin, 2019). Students frequently respond with verbal and physical aggression, eloping, and assault (Garrett, 2006). They may withdraw or become hyperactive when faced with new social or academic challenges (NCTSN, 2006). The inability to cope with emotions or respond appropriately to classroom activities can lead to withdrawal, crying, and rage (Berandi & Mortin, 2019). The heightened state of emotion leaves students unable to express themselves or ask for help (Morton & Berardi, 2017). Students often have difficulty responding to social cues and taking direction from authority figures (NCTSN, 2008). Failure to follow teacher directions or understand a social cue, such as a nonverbal head nod, can quickly escalate into a dangerous or aggressive behavior.

Anger is the most prevalent emotion expressed by students who have been exposed to trauma (Bell et al., 2013). Anger can erupt quickly with no precursor when students feel afraid or stressed. The events causing the explosive anger may seem insignificant to others, but because the student feels overwhelmed or asked to comply with a non-preferred task, they respond with anger and aggression (Hernandez, 2014). Isolation, regression, and attention

seeking behaviors are prevalent in students who have experienced trauma (Bell et al., 2013).

Discipline incidents as a result of behaviors mentioned above, interfere with the entire class's ability to learn. Over half of all classroom teachers in the United States report dangerous student behaviors leading to room clears (Oregon Education Association, 2019). A room clear is when the teacher must evacuate other students because the dysregulated student is posing a threat for student and teacher safety. These incidents require a disproportionate amount of teacher time, causing other students to suffer from lost instruction (Perle, 2018).

Studies of the brain have shown children who have been exposed to traumatic experiences are at greater risk to engage in high risk and destructive behaviors, such as criminal behavior, drug use, and suicide attempts (Cole et al., 2005). They are also more likely to be diagnosed with mental health disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder, attention deficit disorder, and oppositional defiance disorder (SAMSHA, 2014). Symptoms of these disorders, such as verbal outbursts, physical aggression, and hyperactivity, are reoccurring offenses for office disciplinary referrals. Behaviors result in increased suspensions, which only perpetuates negative perceptions students often have of school and mistrust in others (NCTSN, 2006; Garrett, 2006).

Teacher Well-being

In a study of over 200 Norwegian elementary school teachers, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) found a correlation between job satisfaction, exhaustion, and burnout with classroom management being the greatest contributing stress factor. Stress is even greater for educators who interact with students who exhibit extreme behaviors stemming from trauma (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Teachers may be able to manage one student with behavior challenges, but when several students in the class commit similar disruptive and aggressive behaviors, the

psychological load on teachers can become too much to manage (Buettner et al., 2016). This type of stress is known as compassion fatigue, and it refers to emotional and physical exhaustion leading to the inability to feel compassion for others (Figley, 2002).

Three existing studies describe the feelings teachers internalize from working with students who have been exposed to trauma and subsequently behave defiantly in the classroom. In a study of over 300 K-12th grade teachers, high levels of stress were identified as a result of working with challenging students (Borntrager et al., 2012). In the study, participants completed a stress scale questionnaire (i.e., Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale) to assess teacher stress. Findings indicated high levels of depression and anxiety. Results of the study revealed 73% of participants described themselves as being at least somewhat "traumatized" from their work, and 36% of participants reported feeling depressed. The second known study to examine compassion fatigue in teachers is consistent with the Borntrager et al. findings. In the qualitative study, over 200 participants answered a series of questions about teacher history of trauma, types of trauma teachers witness from students, and organizational climate (Caringi et al., 2015). Of participants interviewed, 75% confirmed they were seeking other employment due to compassion fatigue felt from working with their students. In the third case study, multiple kindergarten teachers self-proclaimed themselves as suffering from working with students exposed to trauma. Teachers expressed personal guilt, lack of engagement, physical need for sleep, and the inability to meet the social-emotional needs of themselves, their family, and their students (Essary, 2013).

The way teachers experience difficult student behaviors depends on how they regulate their emotions before, during, and after an event occurs. Emotional regulation is how individuals understand their emotions (Gross, 2014). Emotional regulation can occur before a situation, causing individuals to avoid or involve themselves in an event. It can also emerge in the

moment, when emotions are modified to make it a more positive or negative experience. For example, during a discipline incident, the teacher may ask the distressed student to take a break or may try to find calmness in the classroom through dim lights and soft music. Sutton & Wheatley (2003) found teachers use emotional regulation strategies to maintain their classrooms. Some teachers implement quiet work time while others use nonverbal cues for redirection (Sutton & Wheatley, 2004). However, teachers with avoidance regulation strategies experience more stress and burnout (Hinds et al., 2015). Referring to the example above, instead of calmly asking the student to take a break, an avoidance regulation strategy may be to ignore the disruption by checking email or continuing the lesson. By blocking out the disruption in the short term in an attempt to make the stress go away, not addressing the problem has been found to have a significantly significant impact on teacher likelihood for long-term depression, low self-efficacy, and burnout (Hinds et al., 2015). Positive cognitive framing is another form of emotional regulation. By interpreting incidents as not being their fault or directed toward them, teachers are able to perceive situations differently (Cross & Hong, 2012). Teachers who show empathy and care toward dysregulated students have been shown to have an increase in efficacy and job satisfaction (Yin, 2016).

Lack of emotional regulation skills can lead to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Sutton, 2004), both of which characterize burnout and lack of efficacy (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Friedman, 2000; Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout leads to poor student teacher relationships, inhibits work productivity, leads to punitive classroom management, and influences teacher resignation (Bride et al., 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Sutton and Harper, 2009; Whitaker, et al., 2015). As burnout intensifies, so does the inability to manage the classroom. In classrooms where teachers have identified as experiencing burnout, students

exhibit more off task behavior and decreased academic performance (Marzano et al., 2013). The relationship is cyclical, meaning more stress causes more behavior and more behavior causes more stress. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest burned out teachers are uncaring and insensitive toward students. They are more likely to default to exclusionary discipline practices, such as sending students to the office (Eddy et al., 2020). They show cold, distant attitudes, known as depersonalization, and they experience decreased efficacy as it relates to their ability to perform in the classroom (Browers & Tomic, 2014).

Efficacy is important for teacher confidence and job satisfaction. Teacher efficacy is the extent the teacher believes he or she can effectively manage a classroom and implement instruction that results in student learning (Browers & Tomic, 2014). A study of 523 kindergarten through high school teachers found self-efficacy to be a predictor of classroom management, job satisfaction, and reduced stress (Wang et al., 2015). Alternatively, low self-efficacy influences stress, burnout, and disengagement (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Zee & Koomen, 2016). When teachers feel unsuccessful, they feel so detached they can never regain control of the classroom or rebuild relationships with students and burnout intensifies (Turkoglu et al., 2017). Yet, as mentioned above, increased burnout may also lead to lack of efficacy, therefore there is a cyclical relationship between the two constructs.

Two components required for teacher efficacy are student engagement and classroom management (Turkoglu et al., 2017). Self-efficacy in regard to classroom management means the teacher is able to engage students while minimizing disruptions. If a teacher perceives himself as unable to do this, he will feel increased anxiety and frustration and is more likely to interact with students negatively (Browers & Tomic, 2000). This creates a repetitive loop of increased anxiety, decreased efficacy, increased student misbehavior, and increased burnout. If

the teacher is already experiencing burnout, he or she may feel less efficacious in managing the classroom.

Student engagement is important because if students are engaged in their learning, they are less likely to cause disruption (Martin et al., 2012; Marzano et al., 2013). A study of over 600 teachers found those who had low student engagement were more likely to have authoritarian classrooms where they saw themselves as a manager versus facilitator. Disruptive behavior was common in these classrooms (Martin et al., 2012). On the other hand, those with more student-centered, relationship-focused activities were associated with positive classroom experiences for students and teachers (Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Leadership Support for Teacher Well-Being

Principals have a responsibility to prioritize teacher well-being and make improvements to school climate and culture. A review of the literature suggests the most important trait of effective principals, and the most contributing factor of reducing teacher stress, is the ability to build trusting relationships that build community and belonging to help teachers cope with the stresses from student behaviors (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Teachers want a principal who exhibits leadership behaviors that correlates to a positive school culture, such as one they can trust, one that is open to suggestions, and approachable (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2014). In a study conducted by Tsang and Liu (2016), in "low-morale" schools, teachers reported feeling like principals do not care about them professionally or personally. Principals should openly communicate their concern for teachers and respond with empathy (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2014). Compassion requires a connection, open communication, and meaningful responses (Dewar et al., 2013). Teachers need to know their principals authentically care for them and feel there is a collaborative relationship between stakeholders (Griffith et al., 1998).

Relationships lay the foundation for taking care of teacher well-being. However, intentional care should be given to teachers working in high stress environments where student behaviors are physically, emotionally, and mentally demanding. Essary et al., (2020) categorize prevention methods as: self-care, personal career strategies, and administrative strategies. Self-care and mindfulness practices are proven to be effective at reducing current stress levels (Essary et al., 2020). Physical health is found to be the most beneficial self-care method to alleviate and prevent stress (Souers & Hall, 2016). Exercise reduces stress by regulating chemicals in the body by balancing brain function and increasing blood flow. Exercise does not have to be performed at high intensity levels to be effective. All movement is considered exercise, such as dancing, playing a sport, or walking the dog (Souers & Hall, 2016). Principals can capitalize on physical self-care by finding time to integrate movement into the school day. Suggestions include walking around the school during staff meetings or professional development, implementing healthy daily step challenges, or offering a variety of exercise or yoga classes during plan time or after hours.

Mindfulness is the ability to focus attention on the present moment with an open, nonjudgmental mind (Bishop et al. 2004). It is different from emotional regulation, because emotional regulation is how one experiences or feels emotions. Mindfulness is being conscious of those emotions by focusing on what is happening in the present moment. Studies suggest a positive relationship between mindfulness and emotional regulation (Barrett et al., 2001). For example, those who practice mindfulness are found to be less reactive, less likely to appraise an event as stressful, and more likely to observe the moment as it happens as opposed to labeling the event with negative emotional experiences (Barrett et al., 2001). For example, a teacher who

practices mindfulness would be able to stay present in the moment as opposed to allowing prior interactions to interfere with current emotions.

One program targeted at decreasing stress, anxiety, and depression through mindfulness practices is called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). This training, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979, consists of eight intensive weekly 2.5-hour trainings, independent homework, and one full day seminar (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). In the sessions, trainees focus on gaining mind and body awareness through proper meditation and yoga techniques (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). It was originally offered in hospital settings as a compliment to drug and therapy treatment, but it has gained popularity in other occupations, such as psychology, business, and education (Segal et al., 2002). MBSR programs have positively impacted teacher stress and emotional regulation (Flook et al., 2013). In a systematic review from Emerson et al. (2017), a total of 13 samples with 589 participants were analyzed to determine the effects of Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs) for teachers on symptoms of stress and emotional regulation. The review found variation of MBI effect sizes across studies. However, the effects of MBIs on anxiety and depression in teachers were found most promising, with 44% reported significant improvement. There was medium to significant improvement in the reduction of physical stress in two out of three studies, with most improvement found in sleep quality. Emotional regulation, or the ability to effectively manage one's emotions was found to significantly improve in 63% of studies. Engaging in mindfulness practices increased teachers' ability to regulate their emotions, acknowledge the moment, and remain calm. After reviewing all thirteen studies, Emerson et al. (2017) proposed a model showing how increased emotional regulation causes increased self-efficacy, which leads to decreased teacher stress.

In one of the most promising studies of mindfulness-based interventions specifically for teachers, Cultivating Awareness and Resiliency in Education (CARE), 75% of teachers reported improvements in adaptive emotion regulation, teaching efficacy, mindfulness, reduced psychological distress, and reduced physical distress (Schussler et al., 2017). The professional development program included practice showing compassion, mindfulness training, yoga, and social-emotional skills instruction. At the conclusion of the program, teachers reported they felt increased compassion for students and felt more nurturing, understanding, and patient when responding to student behaviors (Schussler, et al., 2017). Donahoo et al (2018) similarly found mindfulness practices reduced stress in special educators working in classrooms where students were diagnosed as oppositional defiant or emotionally disturbed. Mindfulness can be practiced during staff meetings, grade level meetings, and professional development. As teachers experience stress throughout the day, they could be relieved by another staff member to take a mindfulness break before returning to the classroom. By enacting these types of systems, principals show teacher well-being is valued and important.

Self-care and mindfulness, while effective, do not address root causes of student behaviors or promote prevention strategies at the school level. To do this, principals should implement universal systems at the building level aimed at promoting trauma sensitive schools. Trauma-specific interventions can reduce the long-term negative effects of trauma for students (Dorsey et al., 2017; Jaycox, 2006). The most intensive intervention found to be successful is Cognitive Behavior Therapy, or CBT (Chafouleas, 2019). CBT is a prescribed treatment program for individuals and small groups of students that include six components: education on experienced trauma, emotion regulation, imaginal exposure, vivo exposure, cognitive processing, and problem solving (Chafouleas, 2019). Therapeutic sessions must be facilitated by a trained

professional, such as a licensed therapist or social worker. CBT treatment is not intended for whole-class counseling lessons or school-wide programs. Rather, sessions are individualized and require the student to relive his or her trauma in order to process the event and develop appropriate coping strategies (Jaycox, et al., 2012). CBT treatment has strong evidence of being effective in schools, but it is not always feasible due to the specialized training staff must have to administer treatment. The Support for Students Experiencing Trauma (SSET) program is similar to CBT but requires less training for staff and does not require specialized licensing (Jaycox, et al., 2012). SSET shows promise for large-scale treatment in schools due to its flexibility and the ability to be implemented by classroom teachers (Chafouleas, 2019). In a recent study conducted by Amin (2020), of over 70 students in Pakistan, implementation of the SSET intervention was shown to have a significant reduction in trauma symptoms in students, including a decrease in challenging behaviors.

All students benefit from trauma sensitive strategies. Relationships are the foundation for trauma informed schools (Chafouleas, 2019). They are the most determining factor of success for students, specifically those who have been impacted by trauma (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). When students like their teacher, they are more likely to respond or to engage in learning (Martin et al., 2012; Marzano et al., 2013). If they feel the classroom is a safe place to learn and their teacher cares about them, they are more likely to follow procedures and expectations (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Positive and respectful student-teacher relationships have been found to increase student achievement, increase social-emotional competency, and decrease misbehavior (Early et al. 2007; Jennings & Greenberg 2009). Because children living in trauma tend to have resistance building trust, gaining it from students can be a difficult task (SAMSHA, 2014). Spending extra time with students, asking questions about their lives outside of school,

welcoming them each morning, and showing vulnerability are a few ways teachers can strengthen those relationships (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). Administrators can support these efforts by prioritizing time for community-building, facilitating restorative circles, and implementing positive behavior support practices.

When responding to dysregulated students using a trauma-informed lens, teachers first assist students at regulating emotions to prevent escalation and then make connections with students to promote positive relationships (Kaufman, 2010). More recent research suggests adding an additional component to the interaction: increasing psychological resources (Brunzell et al., 2019). By increasing psychological resources for students, they learn to build confidence and resiliency. Examples of psychological resources are developing growth mindset, practicing self-talk, and recognizing one's strengths (Brunzell et al., 2019). An example of how a teacher could apply these steps would be: de-escalating the student using calming strategies, making a connection with the student by having a one-on-one conversation, and finally providing a psychological resource for the student, such as introducing a coping strategy to practice when the student feels angry.

In trauma informed schools, educators are trained to ask the question, "What happened to the student?" instead of asking, "What is wrong with this student?" (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). To change this mindset, teachers need to separate behaviors from the student himself. When students become aggressive, this can be difficult. Engaging with dysregulated students as research recommends can be difficult for teachers who fail to understand the cause of student behavior or feel emotional themselves. Teachers must understand the experiences of students impacted by trauma and how trauma affects student executive functioning. Ongoing training is needed for teachers to understand symptoms of childhood trauma, recognize student triggers, and

learn strategies to help the child return to a state of calm after an incident (Holmes et al., 2014). These skills are imperative for teachers to implement trauma-informed practices. However, teachers report a lack of confidence and competence in implementing trauma-informed practices due to lack of training (Alisic, 2012).

There is limited coursework on the effects of childhood trauma in undergraduate studies, and school districts have limited professional development days to cover several initiatives (Harvard University, 2017). Even though they are expected to be experts, there has been little preparation for managing a classroom, especially for unique learners. Classroom management practices have traditionally relied on B.F. Skinner's Behaviorist Theory, where students are reinforced positively or negatively for their behavior (Skinner, 1965). Reinforcements rely on token economies, like earning or losing points for desired behaviors, or moving a clip through color coded levels that offer consequences at each level. Token economies contradict trauma-informed practices, so discontinuing their use should be one of the first steps to revamping a teacher's classroom management (Bloom, 2013). Negative reinforcements and exclusionary discipline practices have negative outcomes for students, but also for teachers. There is a correlation between exclusionary discipline practices and increased disruptive behavior that, as a result, cause more stress for teachers (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009). Teachers need job-embedded training, where they learn trauma-informed strategies and have opportunities to practice implementing the strategies (Alisic, 2012). An example of effective job-embedded training could be the principal modeling restorative conversations between students and teachers and debriefing with the teacher afterwards. It is also critical for teachers to have buy-in and intrinsic motivation to acquire new skills, thus further supporting the need for trusting and collaborative administrator-teacher relationships (Bayar, 2014).

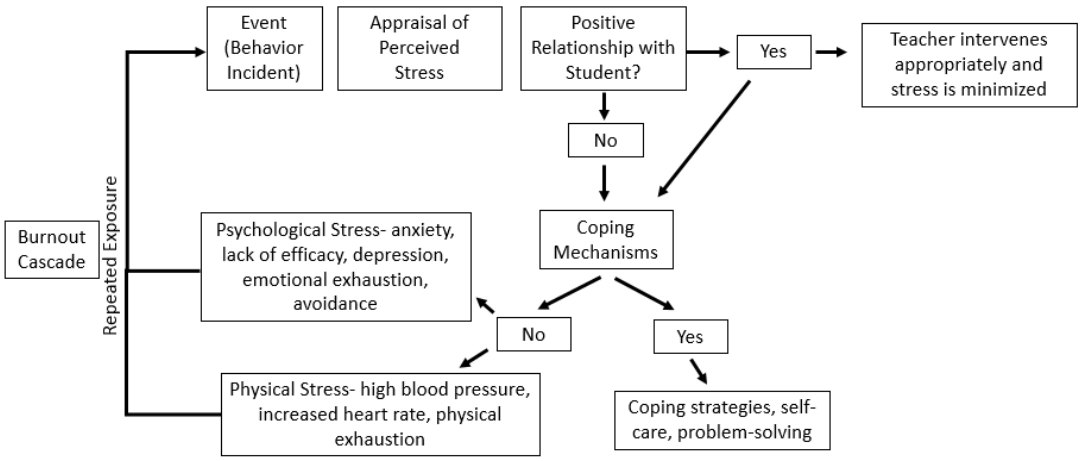
Conceptual Framework

Lazurus's Model of Stress and Coping (1977) defines stressors as internal and external demands that can disrupt an individual's homeostasis and affect physical and emotional well-being (Lazarus, 1999). The emotions experienced during the appraisal process, or the way an individual emotionally regulates himself, and his or her ability to cope, will determine subsequent actions. Coping is defined as "the behavior intended to reduce the experience of stress" (Salo, 1995). Lazarus (1976) categorizes coping mechanisms as direct-action and palliative. Direct-action refers to strategy's teachers can use to directly cope with the stress. In this study, examples include attending training and forming relationships with students. Palliative mechanisms, on the other hand, are mechanisms teachers use when they feel they have no control over their perceived stress.

Palliative mechanisms are often experienced as negative symptoms in individuals. Examples may include not taking care of one's health, denial, or a "fight or flight" mentality. Teachers may "fight or flight" by responding with anger, sadness, frustration, or disengagement. Continued exposure to stressful situations leads to what Jennings and Greenburg (2009) define as a burnout cascade of disruptive classrooms and teacher emotional exhaustion.

In conjunction with negative feelings, recent research explores whether experiencing stressful situations can result in positive affect that allows an individual to make meaning out of his or her stress. A longitudinal study of over 250 caregivers of AIDS patients found that negative and positive feelings of stress could exist simultaneously (Folkman, 2007). The study found caring for a dying partner caused grief and heartbreak, but also feelings of meaningfulness and self-growth (Folkman, 2007). Finding ways to make meaning of the stressful situation may help teachers feel less stress, and experience positive emotions.

Teachers may experience positive affect during stressful events by having existing positive relationships with students. Relationships have been found to be the most critical component to teacher well-being (Friedman, 2000). When positive relationships are in place, teachers are more likely to feel their work is more fulfilling, have higher efficacy, and feel appreciated (Friedman, 2000). Thus, it is possible that if positive student-teacher relationships exist, teachers may not perceive events that happen in the classroom as too stressful to manage, and therefore may experience positive emotions such as fulfillment or success after a stressful occurrence. The below model depicts how Lazarus's Stress & Coping Model is applied to this study.



Chapter Summary

This chapter summarizes how teacher stress levels are impacted by student behaviors linked to experienced trauma. The information presented suggests administrators should support teacher well-being at the individual level as well as building-wide systems, such as trauma informed practices to prevent student behaviors from occurring at such high levels they cause extreme stress for teachers. The research from this chapter informed data collection methods in this study.

CHAPTER THREE – INQUIRY METHODS

Introduction

Student behaviors in the classroom can lead to extreme amounts of stress for teachers, making them feel professionally inadequate and emotionally exhausted (Buettner et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience high levels of stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. This study sought to answer the following questions:

> Question 1: How do teachers describe their experiences working with students who display challenging behaviors?
>
> Question 2: How do teachers cope when students display challenging behaviors in the classroom?
>
> Question 3: How can administrators support the well-being of teachers who experience stress caused from challenging student behaviors in the classroom?

This study employed an interpretive description methodology. Interpretive description is a qualitative form of research stemming from the constructivist approach. With interpretive description, patterns and themes derived from participant perspectives are used to inform new learning and are subsequently applied to improve current practices. This chapter explains the methodological approach taken to complete this study. It includes the rationale, description of the setting in which the research will take place, the data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, limitations, and chapter summary.

Rationale

Interpretive description was selected for this study's methodology. Interpretive description is a form of qualitative research that stems from constructivist approaches. It was initially developed by Sally Thorne to allow researchers in the nursing field to investigate issues to inform new practice (Thorne, 2008). More recently, the methodology has extended into other fields, including psychology, sociology, and education (Hunt, 2009; Thorne, 2008). Interpretive description is used to understand participant experiences (i.e., teachers who work with students who have challenging behaviors) to inform new practice (i.e., ways administrators can support teachers). Interpretive description seeks to make sense of participant subjective perspectives by identifying themes and patterns and simultaneously trying to understand how those perspectives fit into the bigger picture of the problem (Hunt, 2009; Thorne, 2008).

Thorne (2008) suggests purposeful sampling, constant comparative analysis, and ongoing researcher reflexivity when using interpretive description. In this study, classroom teachers were purposefully selected as research participants because they spend the greatest amount of time with students. Comparative analysis began with data collection by taking memos during interviews and writing notes on interview transcripts to analyze the data. Researcher reflexivity occurred through memos and debriefing after interviews with a close colleague. With interpretive description, Thorne (2008) advises reflecting on each interview and how researcher positionality could impact the study. This process is described in more detail in further sections.

Setting/Context

The study took place in an urban elementary school spanning grades pre-kindergarten through fifth located in North St. Louis County, Missouri. It serves approximately 420 students and employs approximately 70 staff including administrators, teachers, support staff, and

therapists. It is one of twenty elementary schools in a St. Louis County School District, consisting of more than 30,000 students. All students are African American, and approximately 20% of students have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). All students qualify for free and reduced lunch, making it a Title I school (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

The school sits in the community of Spanish Lake, a northern St. Louis, Missouri suburb. The community was once known for beautiful homes and historical forts, monuments, and parks. Access to the Mississippi River made the area a prosperous farming community until the 1950's. However, the demolition of a North St. Louis City housing complex resulted in a shift in demographics. From 1970 to 2000, the community went from 20% African American to over 85%. White flight resulted in abandoned homes, Section 8 housing, and the development of low-income apartments. The community has no shopping, no entertainment, and no industry. Other than the school, there is a park, liquor store, and gas station (Community of Spanish Lake, 2011).

High mobility rates result in students and families spending less time in a school which limits the time they have to develop connections, a sense of belonging, and pride in the school. Over 30% of families are in transition and lack permanent housing. Average daily attendance for the 2019-2020 school year was 73%. Only 63% of students enrolled in 2019-2020 attended Treetop the previous year. Parent involvement is limited as evidenced by a 50% parent teacher conference participation rate and three parents belonging to the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Many students' basic needs are not met without the help of school resources. Food is sent home with over 20 families each week, clothes are washed on-site, uniforms and toiletries

provided, an on-site health clinic provides for medical needs, and over 200 social work referrals are submitted annually.

A focus on school climate and culture has attempted to improve morale and decrease disciplinary incidents. Social-emotional lessons are taught weekly and restorative circles resolve conflict. Relationship building with all stakeholders is intentional. As principal, I have continued partnerships with the local Spanish Lake Association and Kiwanis groups which were established by previous principals. The school partners with churches in the area to provide food and clothing to families. Social media platforms share information and highlight student achievements with parents and community members. In 2019, coats of paint, hallway tile repair, and purchasing of new furniture improved facilities. Guided reading and Response to Intervention (RTI) structures were established and enable teachers to target skills to maximize learning growth (Coleman et al., 2006; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996.)

Mobility of staff mirrors student turnover. Between 2017 and 2019, there has been a 30% turnover rate each year (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Transfer programs within the district allow seasoned teachers to move to better performing schools in wealthier neighborhoods. Most teachers choose to transfer after three years, leaving ineffective or inexperienced teachers at Treetop. In exit interviews, teachers commonly cite personal job dissatisfaction as reasons for leaving, but few go into detail. From experience, I know the majority of teachers who transfer are the ones who struggle most with classroom management. Teachers at Treetop face challenges with classroom management and showing achievement on grade level assessments. Despite frustrations and challenges, staff demonstrate a commitment to the safety, well-being, and growth of their students. They participate in a home visit program where they conduct two home visits and host one family

dinner each school year. They participate in CPI training (Crisis Prevention Institute) to ensure they understand nonviolent crisis intervention strategies when working with students who display unsafe behaviors. Food drives, holiday toy drives, and book giveaways take place throughout the year to assist families in need.

Staff demographics do not reflect the population of children they serve. Over 50% of teachers are Caucasian and 84% of teachers are women. None of the teachers live in the neighborhood boundaries for the school, and over 50% commute at least 30 minutes each day to work. The district has attempted to create experiences for staff, such as neighborhood bus tours and home visit programs, to help them feel more connected to the community; however, evidence from teacher observations and walkthroughs show instruction lacks cultural competence and trauma informed practices. Lesson plans lack cultural integration and fail to build background knowledge for students who have little exposure to the world outside their community. On many occasions, teachers fail to acknowledge root causes for student outbursts and focus on the behavior itself as being aggressive. Instead of de-escalating the situation, they make it worse by yelling back or becoming confrontational with the upset student.

Research Sample and Data Sources

Participants were invited to participate in the study through email invitation that outlined the study's purpose and data collection methods. Participants in this study include teachers ranging from inexperienced to veterans with over twenty years of experience. Approximately 33% possess a master's degree or higher. There are currently 26 classroom teachers ranging from grades PreK-5, physical education, music, art, librarian, and reading teachers. Thorne (2008) states an effective interpretive description study uses a small sample, consisting of 5-30 participants. In this study, 15 teachers chose to participate. Participant demographic information

is found in Table 1 below. Individual participant information, including gender, and years of experience is found in Table 2. All names used throughout this study are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

Because absenteeism can be linked to teacher stress levels, Table 3 depicts the number of personal, sick, and professional leave absences teachers take each year. Almost 75% of teachers take at least 10 sick days annually, and 84% use 2 personal days. Professional leave days are designated for teacher development. Teachers choose to participate in training that is aligned to individual growth plans or the building's school improvement plan. Total attendance is the amount of professional leave, personal leave, and sick leave taken by core teachers of instruction annually. The data reflects 88% of teachers taking more than 9.5 days annually which averages about one day a month of instruction.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Participant Demographics

Categories	*n*	*%*
Gender		
Female	15	100
Male	0	0
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	13	83
Black	2	13
Years of Experience		
Less Than Five Years	4	27
Five Years or More	11	73

Note. N = 15.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Participant Demographics

Name	Years of Experience	Grade	Gender	Race	Office Referrals
Asher	22	K	F	W	6
Baker	18	3	F	W	18
Carney	13	5	F	W	12
Dale	3	2	F	W	31
Franklin	9	1-2	F	W	11
Fitz	13	3	F	W	14
Gregory	11	4	F	W	9
Hamson	3	2	F	W	39
Kenton	11	K	F	W	30
Lincoln	3	1	F	W	10
Richie	11	3	F	W	19
Smith	9	K	F	W	4
Tater	5	K	F	B	9
Waterman	3	1	F	W	16
Westbrook	13	4	F	B	17

Note. N = 15.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Demographics

Categories	*n*	*%*
Sick Leave Absences		
0-5 Days		
5.5-10 Days	3	20
10.5-16 Days	10	67
16 or more Days	2	13
Personal Leave Absences		
0-1 Day		
1.5-2 Days	11	73
2.5-3 Days		
3.5-4 Days	4	27
Professional Leave Absences		
0-1 Day		
1.5-2 Days	6	40
2.5-3 Days	2	13
3.5-5 Days	7	47
Total Absences		
0-9 Days	3	20
9.5-13 Days	8	53
13.5-18 Days	4	27

Note. N = 15

Qualitative data was collected for this study during the 2019-2020 school year. After receiving IRB and district approval, data was collected through one-on-one interviews with teachers. Interviews provided a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions as it relates to working with students who exhibit unsafe and disruptive classroom behaviors. Teachers signed-up to participate through use of Google Calendar and open office hours were available for teachers in order to accommodate their schedules.

Interviews were the main source of data collection for this study because it allowed me to capture perceptions, attitudes, and emotions of teachers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Depending on the extent and quality of responses, it was planned to conduct multiple interview rounds as necessary. The purpose of multiple interview rounds was to have the ability to review transcriptions and memos and then follow-up with participants for clarification. Meeting with participants more than once provided time for the interviewee to go deeper into stories and feelings. Due to limited time of in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only two participants engaged in more than one interview. Some participants were limited in sharing, but others became invested in sharing their stories, so two participants completed their interview over multiple days. A list of interview questions is located in the Appendix. Interviews have the potential of bringing about negative emotions for teachers. Teachers were provided information on the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which provides free counseling services for staff. No teacher was pressured to share more information than he or she was comfortable with and all names remained anonymous for the protection and confidentiality of students, staff, and families.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a confidential, private office in the school. I did not use my office setting to reduce fears teachers may have had of their responses correlating to evaluation scores. Locations outside of school were offered to increase participant

comfortability. Participants were asked for permission and provided verbal and written consent agreeing to be recorded prior to the interview. Interviews were recorded using the Voice Memo application and later transcribed. Two recording devices were utilized in case one should fail during interviews. All names, including the participant and other students and staff remained confidential. Memos were taken to note non-verbal communication, emotions, inferences, and questions throughout the interview that might lead to follow-up interviews, focus groups, or future exploration.

Data Analysis Methods

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to draw conclusions from the data. Interviews were open coded to let themes arise organically. By using an interpretive lens, I discerned data relevant to my problem of practice and important enough to glean new insight (Thorne et al., 2004). Student office referrals are a source of preexisting data that were used to help further explain teacher experiences at the time the incident occurred. Safe and Civil Schools survey results served as another source of data. Teachers completed this survey as a part of research conducted by the University of Missouri in fall 2020. Questions on the survey focused on teacher perceptions of discipline, school safety, and school culture. Multiple pieces of data provided multiple lenses to deeply understand teacher experiences.

Interpretive description analysis is informed by grounded theory methods (Thorne, 2008). The first step of my analysis was to memo during interviews. Memoing is when the researcher records ideas, inferences, and questions during the data collection process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In my memos, I reflected on responses, asked questions for future exploration, and made observations of participant mood, tone, and body language (Charmaz, 2014). It helped me to remember ideas likely to be forgotten by the end of the interview process. Memos assisted me as

I began coding and developing themes. They were a resource used to help me think critically and reflect on the data. Missing information, gaps in the data, or questions left unanswered were captured in memos.

As soon as possible after each interview, I transcribed notes and analyzed the interview. Completing this step helped to keep responses fresh in my mind in case I had new ideas or questions after reviewing the data. The next step was coding. With two phases of coding, I developed themes and identified patterns (Charmaz, 2014; Thorne, 2008). By examining larger chunks of data, such as phrases, rather than individual words, I could better grasp participant experiences, rather than extracting individual words and making potentially inaccurate interpretations. For example, if a teacher describes leaving work each day feeling "weak" the term could mean tired, the opposite of strong, or in some contexts used as humorous slang. By coding the phrase, I developed a better understanding of the participants feelings and experiences.

Once data for each interview was coded, I determined how codes for the entire set of data could be categorized and interpreted (Charmaz, 2014). I completed coding of each interview immediately following transcription so I could adjust interview questions as needed to seek out information as new codes arose in the data. After coding, I began to develop themes. I did this by looking for ways initial codes developed patterns and questioned causes for differences with interview responses. For example, when comparing interviews, I discovered teachers with more teaching experience had different perceptions than more novice teachers. I referred back to memos to support my data interpretation. Using an interpretive lens allowed me to determine the themes I found important for my study. Thorne et al. (1997) term this interpretive authority.

Trustworthiness

In order to have a quality interpretive description study, I reflected on my own position within the research (Thorne, 2008). For 12 years I was a teacher and an administrator in the building where the study was conducted. During this time, I struggled with anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, all occurring from what I believe to be stress related to student behaviors at school. I acknowledge my biases so I can prevent assumptions from influencing results of the study. I journaled throughout the process, acknowledging my own emotion and experiences as a classroom teacher and how some responses led me to make assumptions about certain teachers. For example, when Mrs. Tater spoke about getting injured by a student, and having to make room evacuations, it caused me to be very emotional recalling my own experiences as a teacher. I wrote about how I was feeling in my journal and then discussed my feelings with a close colleague. I also acknowledged assumptions I had made about teachers. For example, Mrs. Lincoln's responses did not align with everyday interactions I had with her in the hallway. In her interview, she spoke about loving her students, and I felt she had not accurately conveyed the severity of her stress. In the hallway and in her classroom, she often yelled and was rude to students, and she had more than once came to me upset, saying she "couldn't handle these kids anymore." I wrote about this in my journal and concluded she either lacked awareness of how she appeared, or she was not truthful in her interview. By journaling, I expressed my beliefs while being intentional in not allowing them to interfere with my research. Engaging in this reflexivity process added rigor and credibility to the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Another level of trustworthiness utilized throughout the data analysis process is dialogic engagement. Dialogic engagement is when the researcher discusses insights, questions, and new knowledge about the data with a critical friend (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). My dissertation chair

and a close colleague met regularly with me to discuss collected data and to ensure my analysis was critically considered and was relevant to my study.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggest thick description as another method to ensure the trustworthiness of a study. With thick description, the reader has an in-depth, detailed depiction of participant experiences, so much so that he or she could visualize having the experience, without being present himself. Thick description added credibility to themes developed from the data (Thorne, 2008). The most profound piece of data to collect was a detailed depiction of what is happening to teachers inside their classrooms (that, as outsiders, we are unaware of) and how the teachers internalize what is happening (that they may not speak openly about in other contexts). I ensured thick description by involving classroom teachers as deeply in the research process as possible. Many were strongly invested in this topic and shared deep, impactful stories. Participant validation including, "Is there anything I am missing?" in my interview protocol, allowed for teachers to elaborate or add information previously forgotten or left out. Reviewing interview transcripts with teachers was important in ensuring ideas were portrayed accurately. Reading transcripts could potentially provoke additional ideas previously not considered.

Limitations

This study encountered unforeseen limitations. The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused several variables outside of researcher control. Students at Treetop had been receiving virtual instruction for 11 months prior to teacher interviews. When interviews were conducted, in-person learning had only occurred for approximately four weeks. Only one-third of the student population chose to return in-person, making average class sizes around ten students. As a result, there had been very few behavior incidents in comparison to

prior school years. In general, teachers shared stories of previous years. Details of such experiences were likely less vivid due to the time that had passed. Teachers certainly felt less stress from student behaviors simply because they had just returned to school and had fewer students. However, it is important to note the other stressors that COVID-19 created for teachers during this time, including asynchronous instruction, increased planning, and student learning loss.

Another limitation of this study is the small sample size. Out of 26 total teachers, only 15 chose to participate in the interview process. 100% of participants were women, and 82% identified themselves as Caucasian. Of the non-participating teachers, two were out of school for the remainder of the year on leave, and one was quarantined and chose not to participate in a virtual interview. The remaining non-participating teachers did not respond. It is unknown if the sample of the study is reflective of the entire population of the school or of the district. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to broader populations. Similarly, the scope and size of the study was limited to one urban Midwestern elementary school of approximately 30 teachers. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize findings from this study to suburban, rural, or other urban elementary schools nationwide.

Additionally, I was participants' administrator, and this may have limited their willingness to speak openly on sensitive topics. Participants were reminded of confidentiality before interviews began. Interviews took place in a neutral environment, so teachers did not feel threatened or uncomfortable in the principal's office. Interviews took place after school hours or during weekends to also help participants feel more comfortable. I reiterated to participants the purpose of the study, which was not to place blame on teachers, but to determine how, as their administrator, I could better support them. I wanted teachers to understand we are working

together to solve this problem in our school, and I needed their input to help drive the decisions I made.

Delimitations

Thorne (2008) suggests purposefully selecting participants with similar experiences. Classroom teachers were chosen specifically for this study because of their relationships with and time spent with students. Support staff do not work with the same students for seven hours a day, so behaviors witnessed, and relationships developed with students are likely different from classroom teachers. The study only included classroom teachers, as opposed to other school staff, because teachers spend more time with students and have similar expectations for academic achievement and classroom management.

Additionally, I know other variables cause stress for teachers, such as state testing, required paperwork, the COVID-19 pandemic, observations, and personal life situations. This type of stress is not considered in this research. This study only focused on stress from student behaviors. However, I acknowledge stress caused by other areas of the profession, or outside the profession, could exaggerate experiences relating to student behavior.

Chapter Summary

Chapter three describes the methodology and data collection process for the study. Using an interpretive description approach, I sought to gain an understanding of teacher experiences of working with students who show frequent behaviors in the classroom and how these interactions have affected their personal and professional lives. This approach allowed me to make interpretations of the data collected through the interview process to determine how self-care and administrator interventions can help mitigate stress for teachers.

CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. An interpretive description methodology was selected in order for the researcher-practitioner to understand participant experiences and to inform future practice. Through qualitative interviews, teachers described facing challenging student behaviors and how they cope with managing stress incurred from those incidents. Responses went through multiple coding phases in order to determine results discussed in this chapter.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

Question 1: How do teachers describe their experiences working with students who display challenging behaviors?

Question 2: How do teachers cope when students display challenging behaviors in the classroom?

Question 3: How can administrators support the well-being of teachers who experience stress caused from challenging student behaviors in the classroom?

This chapter explains results of the data. Themes developed during coding, data from participants, and researcher handwritten memos were analyzed to answer each research question.

Results

A total of fifteen interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews went through two to three rounds of coding. Open coding was applied for the first round. Potentially important or thought-provoking phrases or ideas were highlighted. In the second and third

rounds, words and phrases were categorized into broader clusters. Phrases repeated throughout interviews were categorized into three themes: impact of behaviors on teachers, well-being, and administrator support. Each theme answered a separate research question.

Research Question 1

Question 1: How do teachers describe their experiences working with students who display challenging behaviors?

Student Trauma

Participants agree the wide range of student behaviors in their classrooms are a manifestation of chronic trauma. "They bring so much to school with them" or "they carry so much on their shoulders" were commonly expressed phrases. When asked to elaborate, responses included stories of single-parent homes, gangs, drugs, and crime. As Mrs. Baker described:

> I've had students share different stories just this year. One student skipped a day because dad broke through the back door, shattering the window. The glass cut mom. Dad went to jail and mom went to the hospital, so the student had to go with her aunt, her t-t. There was another student, who is one of seven siblings, and mom and boyfriend were accused of killing the younger sibling. She was a very bright girl but she's suffering from that experience because the siblings are now going to be all divided up. There's one student who shared uncle coming into the house, with a gun, threatening their mom. Also, trauma is the fact that they have to live with other relatives while a parent is in and out of their life. One student tells me every other day that mom is going to come pick him up and let him live with her. I listen to the whole story, every other day. And he never hears from her. She never comes. Last year we had a student shoot himself with a gun.

Mrs. Baker shared these stories with no emotion. There was no apparent sadness in her voice or feelings of empathy. As I listened to her recalling the incident of a sibling committing suicide, I wrote in my memos, "chronic trauma" and "happens all the time". It is not that the teacher does not care. It is the reality that she hears stories like this frequently and she feels "there is nothing she can do" to help improve the "situation" for students.

Traumatic experiences such as those described above, and lack of parent involvement, were blamed for aggressive and disruptive student behaviors by 100% of participants. All participants agreed that parents are unable to be fully involved and invested in their child's academic success because they are responsible for providing for their children. In many cases, parents are raising their children in single parent homes, which is an adverse childhood experience associated with trauma (Berardi & Morton, 2019). As stated by Mrs. Dale, "The behaviors are more intense because students are not getting the attention they crave at home. They come here looking for it however they can get it. Positive or negative. They are missing some kind of connection." Because teachers have around twenty students in each class it is difficult to provide each of them with the amount of attention they need. Mrs. Dale went on to elaborate:

> And when you don't give them that attention, they up the ante. And when you don't give them attention with the behavior, they keep upping the ante. So, he's running around the classroom and you don't give him attention. Then he leaves the classroom and runs around the hallways. Well then if you don't give him attention then he leaves the building. It makes you wonder what's going on at home. Where are his parents?

The teacher did not elaborate if she was using the strategy of "intentional ignoring" or if there was another reason for not giving him attention. According to office discipline data for the 2019-2020 school year, ignoring student unsafe behavior was not uncommon. Teachers reported locking students out of the classroom, allowing them to willingly run out of the building, and watching them repeatedly throw objects across the room. Mrs. Dale did not notify the parent after this incident. When asked why, she said it happens so often, if she called home each time, she would be on the phone more than teaching.

Many students living in poverty lack basic needs. Teachers reported students not having electricity, clothing, or necessary medical treatment. When students fail to have basic needs met,

they come to school unprepared and academically behind (Rossen & Hull, 2013 pg. 24). Mrs. Fitz shared her students do not have books at home. "I have a couple of students who don't have books at home. And I'm like, 'do your parents read to you?' 'Well no, we don't have any books.'" Mrs. Tater described similar experiences as she shared how many of her students are transient and do not have basic necessities like running water or electricity. "When you are sleeping in your car or don't have lights on at your house, it's not hard to believe that doing well in school isn't a priority." Families living in poverty are overly stressed, lack resources, and unable to meet daily demands (Babcock, 2014). Parents in chronic poverty are unable to make decisions or use higher executive functioning skills. Their children are subject to the circumstances in their parents' lives, leading to similar neural development. It is not only the lack of resources, but the cognitive disparity brought on by chronic poverty that makes it difficult for students to be successful in school (Berardi & Morton, 2019; van der Kolk, 2005).

Performing two or three grade levels below undoubtedly brings stress on both the student and teacher. "Our kids are supposed to perform at a certain level and our job is to figure out how to make that happen. There are so many outside factors we don't control and a lot of things that are barriers to teaching consistently and teaching at high levels throughout the whole day." In more than half of interviews, teachers noted student self-efficacy, their inability to persevere through complex tasks, and embarrassment for not knowing academic content was a trigger for behaviors in the classroom. Mrs. Smith shared how students respond when they find learning challenging:

> Their hardest challenge is they don't want to admit they don't know something. I would rather clown around and be a bad kid than have my peers know that I don't know what one plus one is, and I am in third grade. Then what happens? They walk out of the room, they get angry and start yelling. They tear up the room. They swear at me.

When disruption to the learning environment occurs, no one is learning. Approximately 90% of all staff reported classroom disruption to be a concern at Treetop. The disruption perpetuates the cycle of students performing below grade level and responding to their deficit by showing more disruptive or aggressive behaviors.

The lack of family-teacher partnerships impacts student behaviors in the classroom. Teachers indicated lack of relationships with the majority of families. More than half of participants reported single-parent households or parents working long hours. As Mrs. Franklin stated, "It feels very defeating. And it prevents you from doing your job." Mrs. Franklin went on to describe how in many families, mom works odd hours, so there is no one to help students with work at home, or anyone cooking dinner and making sure the students get adequate sleep. Without the support from home, teachers feel like they are "fighting an uphill battle." Efforts have been made to connect parents and teachers by participating in the *Homeworks!* program. *Homeworks!* is a home visit program intended to strengthen relationships and trust with families (Homeworks!, 2019). However, less than 50% of parents chose to participate during the 2019-2020 school year. The lack of involvement and communication is a source of frustration for teachers and there is underlying tension in the way they described many parent relationships. Mrs. Carnie explains how lack of parental involvement is an obstacle for student success:

> Parental involvement is such a challenge. It's just such a pivotal role for the success of a student. And we don't have that link from school to home. It is very difficult. I think our kids don't have a ton of structure or love at home and that causes them to act the way they do.

Even teachers who expressed positive relationships shared that communication, while pleasant, is inconsistent. "I mean some are very responsive, but I have to bug. They still don't attend meetings to help their child. The ones who are very responsive, I have to text message."

While teachers have an awareness of how trauma impacts student behaviors, it does not negate the impact these behaviors have on teacher well-being. Participants described how when they entered into education, they wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. "I wanted to teach in an urban setting to make as big an impact as possible. I don't have my own kids, so I treat the kids like my own. I share with them. I want them to know who I am." Even when stressed and under pressure, they constantly reflected on their own practices and how they could improve for their students. Mrs. Hamson expressed, "What can I do differently? What can I do tomorrow? What is the precursor to the behavior?" They spend hours planning and modifying instructional strategies with the hope it will decrease behavior incidents. Mrs. Hamson described the conflict she has when deciding which students to give attention to in her classroom:

> I am always thinking about them. I want to teach them. But if I don't handle the situations people get hurt. I try to do small groups with the ones who want to be there whenever I can or give them things they can do on their own or in groups that would challenge them. I keep trying.

Each teacher shared feelings of "not being good enough" or "like they couldn't do their job."

Teachers described feeling guilty because they were unable to keep students safe and unable to teach. Mrs. Richie shared how she feels at the end of the day:

> I feel like a failure. It is a real struggle for me. I feel like I don't do any teaching all day. I put out fires, manage behavior or I am an emotional support. Showing up for work each day to feel like a failure wears on teachers, leaving them to feel helpless. "I am a big girl now. I am a big girl, why can't I handle this? I should be able to handle this." It's self-defeating.

Teachers blame themselves for student behaviors and the lack of efficacy is compounded when not only are they unable to manage their classroom, they are unsuccessful at teaching curriculum. In this situation, reframing the teacher's mindset may help develop a positive affect instead of feelings of negative stress. For example, instead of feeling like failure, she could remind herself

of all the students she keeps safe every day, and how safety is the most important aspect of her job. Unfortunately, however, negative symptoms of stress are so extreme they have caused participants to look for other positions. Approximately 67% of the teachers did not return to Treetop for the 2021-2022 school year. Mrs. Hamson proclaimed, "I am leaving this year because of all the behaviors that are affecting my health and I can't do that anymore. So, I am prioritizing myself and I had to make the choice to leave."

Teacher Well-being

Battling student behaviors is a form of trauma for teachers. Mrs. Tater shared one incident to explain her daily experiences with student behaviors.

> I could tell what kind of day we would have by how the student would come in each morning. That particular day he didn't want to be there right away. He didn't want to eat breakfast, shoved things. I tried to call for help already but at that point in the day help wasn't available. So, we tried to make the best of it. Tried to get through it. We did evacuate the classroom once earlier that morning. He calmed down to the point where it was safe enough to move the students back in. We started to transition down to our special's classroom, which I think was music. As we were coming back up the stairs after music, this child started running up to the front of the line. I just told the other students to ignore this and he got really upset. He ran up to the top of the stairs and we had really heavy industrial size refrigerators at the top. He took the refrigerator and tried to push it down on top of the kids. Luckily, I was fast enough and strong enough to stop it from hurting the rest of my kids. I think another teacher may have struggled to being able to provide safety or stop the refrigerator from crushing the students who were coming up the stairs at the time. I told the students, because we had to practice evacuating for safety. We had like a code word. I said the code word, they knew to run to the first classroom who was near and go in and close the door and the leader would tell the teacher in the room that I needed help. At that point the student couldn't get the refrigerator, so he tried to crawl over the railing. We were on the 3rd floor, so I had to stop him from climbing over the top. It was just a very extreme case where it took a long time to calm him down. We couldn't get him to calm down for about an hour. Shortly after that he got upset again. He started to just destroy the classroom. He went around ripping up other peoples' work. Knocked everything down. Pulled things off the walls. Anything he could do to destroy something. He was just so angry. Destroying things in his path. So, we had the kids go out of the room again. We made sure the room was relatively secure for him so there was nothing in the room he could harm himself with. And we stayed on the other side of the door and he wrecked my classroom. Destroyed it from top to bottom. He broke the temper glass in the door. He was yelling obscenities. Like "I hate all of you. Fuck you, you bitch." Just like all of this most extreme thing to

> come out of a 5-year-old. Every day I had to go through the whole thing again. Just waiting for the trigger to be attacked. I was kicked, I was punched. I had scratches and bruises. This particular child took off on a different day down one of the main intersections. I chased him down, he fell, I tumbled over top of him and messed up my knee in the process. I had to go to urgent care. I had 8 weeks of physical therapy trying to repair my knee from the fall.

In this scenario, Mrs. Tater described herself as being "fast and strong". These are feelings she could celebrate and think of as positive experiences, instead of focusing only on the student's aggressive behavior.

Every teacher interviewed reported some type of physical aggression to staff, including hitting, kicking, and biting. According to the Safe and Civil School Survey, 41% of all staff reported a student physically hitting, kicking, or punching a teacher, and 60% reported threats, profanity, and insulting remarks. Mrs. Kenton shared instances of aggression toward her:

> I have been kicked, spit at, swore at, pushed up against the Promethean Board. Hitting, kicking, slapping, slapping me. They have no self-control. Then you are trying to help them, and they turn into jello. Like an octopus. Flipping all over the place. Attacking me. How does this this little kid have…like superpowers? JT, JT would tear me apart.

Besides the physical pain felt from the aggressive students, teachers reported a sense of guilt for not being able to keep the distressed student and other students in the classroom safe. Teachers have limited discipline strategies and often spoke about not being able to discipline students like parents can at home. "There's nothing I can do to stop them," Mrs. Baker explained when sharing a story about a student who stabbed another student's cheek with a paperclip. Students do not just comply with a teacher's requests, adding to their sense of helplessness for them and for the rest of their students. Mrs. Tater describes the feeling of unknown each day, never knowing if a student will explode:

> I can't safely teach my class and deal with the behaviors of this one particular student. I just keep saying, "we don't feel safe." I walk on eggshells. This child attacks. He's strong. He's strong enough to break furniture in my room. So, if he's hitting me, if he's got scissors, he's going to really hurt another student.

Stress and anxiety are prevalent. In the moment of student crisis teachers experience muscles tensing, hearts racing, and heavy breathing. Teachers all felt keeping students safe in the moment was their responsibility, but the majority stated when an incident is occurring, they are not able to process what is happening clearly and function with adrenaline. The term, "fight or flight" was used seventeen times to describe initial reaction to an aggressive or disruptive student. Mrs. Hamson shares her reaction when there is a stressful situation in her classroom:

> I try to keep a calm facial expression to show that I am not overwhelmed, or I don't know what to do right now because I have tried xyz abc. But I am sweating. Shaking a little bit. Trying to remain calm and not yell. Sometimes you just kind of snap. I have started screaming and flipping out. It's not appropriate.

Remaining professional and calm in the moment helps to de-escalate the student and helps others to feel safe. However, many teachers expressed feeling angry in the moment and the desire to gain revenge or retaliate. Mrs. Kenton and Mrs. Westbrook shared they felt like pushing the student, and Mrs. Tater admitted, "you think about doing inappropriate things when the student is just constantly beating you up." However, teachers Mrs. Lincoln shared when she starts feeling this way, she has to take sick days to get over the incident:

> You have that thought too if you are in a fight of flight situation with a five-year-old that can go in so many directions. You can lose your certification if you grab a child. This child hits you and you react, and you push them whatever it is. When you get to that point, you need to take a day off.

Processing the incident after it occurs is similar for most teachers. The drive home from work was found to be an integral part of the day where they decompress and feel at peace. Exhaustion is so extreme the drive becomes one part of the day they can "zone out" and "not think about anything". Mrs. Lincoln makes a one-hour commute home each day and shared it was her favorite part of the day because it is the only time she had to herself. The stress and anxiety unfortunately do not disappear when teachers make it home. Teachers are beyond tired.

Many reported they "have no idea how they made it home" that day, or "cloudy brains". Mrs. Westbrook describes the extent of her exhaustion:

> Mostly things just go into a blur. I am just so tired. Like so tired you can't even understand how tired you are. Tired like you've been on a 24-hour flight with jet lag tired. Tired like you can't hold your eyes open.

The exhaustion prompts absences, lack of enthusiasm for teaching, and isolation from friends and family. Relationships are hard because the teacher is either too drained or irritable to be around others. Mrs. Richie explains she has lost many relationships due to feeling stressed and exhausted:

> I have no energy. I used to have girlfriends, but ugh, it's too much energy to rally. I cancel all my plans. I have to work hard. People reach out to me. I just don't have anything left to give. I just want to sleep more. I don't want to be around people. I have to force myself to do things I should do.

And Mrs. Tater explains:

> I just want to take a shower and lay down. Just kind of isolate myself or just be alone. That alone time, you should want to spend it with your significant other, but after a day where you are just constantly in fight mode, it's safer to pull yourself away and be alone. It definitely puts a strain on your relationships. I don't want to be around anyone. Not even my support system.

According to Mrs. Gregory, some teachers experience physical, mental, and emotional symptoms related to the stress experienced from challenging behaviors. As she describes what she sees in her colleagues:

> It manifests physically. Not being able to leave work at work. Visible symptoms. Just looking…. exhausted. Dark circles under their eyes, hair unkept. Not being able to sleep. You know, anxiety attacks. High blood pressure. Any way stress can manifest in your body, I have seen that. But also, they check out. Like the kids check out. They check out. Not being able to care anymore. They can't work anymore. They go through the motions. Sometimes they don't even notice they're doing it because I think people get to the point where they don't see the behaviors anymore because they're always there. It's always chaos so it becomes the norm.

Some admitted to fighting stress, exhaustion, and depression in unhealthy ways. A less experienced teacher, Mrs. Hamson, reported that she was asked by a colleague on her first day if she drinks. The colleague then stated, "Well if you didn't before, you'll start now.," It may have been said as a joke, but the reality is, two thirds of teachers interviewed reported engaging in unhealthy behaviors just to get through their week at work. As Mrs. Richie described, "I am definitely stress eating. I want to just put things in my mouth. Like when I calm down, like I deserve to have…the Cheetos. And I am diabetic. I shouldn't be doing that." Mrs. Kenton further described how some teachers take medications to help them cope with work-related stress and anxiety: "I have so many friends who teach here tell me they're on Xanax. I don't want to be on Xanax. I shouldn't hate my job so much. People joke here, who's got the extra Xanax today. That's so sad."

Research Question 2

Question 2: How do teachers cope when students display challenging behaviors in the classroom?

Coping Strategies

More than a third of teachers admitted to taking medication to cope with their anxiety or depression caused from working at Treetop. The idea of self-care was expressed as a chore and just "one more thing to do." As Mrs. Richie described, "I just want to get the laundry done, watch Netflix, and be alone." Self-care should help to relieve stress or at a minimum be an enjoyable task. When the activity becomes dreaded either due to exhaustion or depression it becomes ineffective at reducing stress (Bober & Regehr, 2006). 73% of participants reported even if the activity was something they enjoyed doing, it wasn't enough or effective in reducing the high level of stress experienced from student behaviors. "I don't want to be negative but no

self-care room, deep breathing, or brownie in my mailbox is going to help with the kind of stress we have here," Mrs. Kenton expressed. Even if activities are enjoyable in the moment or a small bit of respite from the stress, the reality is, teachers must eventually return to their students.

While teachers did not find self-care effective at reducing stress from student behaviors, there reported that some self-care activities bring enjoyment. For example, they shared stories of going hiking with their own children, kayaking, and running outside. Mrs. Waterman owns a dance studio and teaches classes in the evenings. Mrs. Fitz enjoys creating "silly activities" to do with her own children, like "theme dinners" where every food item served begins with the same letter. Physical activities tended to be favored over inactive hobbies such as reading or journaling. Mrs. Lincoln reported she had kept a journal and practiced mindfulness in the past, but she quit because the activities began feeling like chores. She now chooses to dine out for Sunday brunch and take her dog to the dog park. All but three teachers were able to identify at least one activity they enjoy. Mrs. Hamson, Mrs. Richie, and Mrs. Dale were unable to name any self-care activity they currently enjoy. Each recalled memories of things from the past, but now say they are too exhausted to imagine doing anything they used to love. These three are identified as participants who struggle the most at school, based on their number of office referrals, their resignation letters for the 2021 school year, and their use of the term "depressed" more than other participants. They described themselves as being isolated from their outside worlds and too exhausted to do more than fulfill their basic needs.

When asked about mindfulness, Mrs. Waterman was the only teacher who stated she practices yoga and mindfulness each night before bed. She said it was her time to herself, and time to just "be". Five teachers were open to trying the practice, but nine reported it wouldn't be helpful at mitigating stress. "I don't need to go to a room to think about my problems," Mrs.

Westbrook stated. “I am getting beat up daily. Sitting in quiet is not going to fix that.” Others stated their mind races too much with anxiety, they are too tired, or they prefer walking or running.

One common thread throughout all fifteen interviews that seemingly helped teachers cope with student behaviors was collegiality (i.e., the relationships teachers have formed with one another). While relationships were not identified as a form of self-care, they are the reason many stated they could “survive” through the day. According to Mrs. Baker, “There is comradery here with the teachers. Teachers are kind of in the trenches here together. You have teachers who understand you and they support when they can.”. They are able to share stories with one another about the same students, get advice and suggestions from teachers who have had their students in the past, and receive empathy they desire from the outside world. Mrs. Kenton describes staff relationships at Treetop in the following passage:

> I think because it’s rough, it’s hard to work here with the behaviors, the staff comes together. We have close relationships because you need each other. My husband teaches high school in another district. He has no idea what it’s like. If I go home and tell him about my day, he’s like “oh that sounds terrible,” but he has no idea. I need to talk to this teacher about it because she gets it. I need to tell this teacher about it because he has him too. You get close just experiencing the same crap every day together.

The teachers at Treetop need each other. They serve as a shoulder to cry on and a sounding board for ideas. They extend themselves to help one another even when they are in distress. Relationships are the reason many have remained at the school. They have developed a trust and friendship at work and in their personal lives. Actively communicating in the microculture teachers have developed is a way to consciously stay connected, and it serves as an effective self-care strategy toward trauma stewardship (Lipsky & Burk, 2009).

Research Question 3

Question 3: How can administrators support the well-being of teachers who experience stress caused from challenging student behaviors in the classroom?

Administrator Support

If teachers experience stress from working with challenging behaviors, administrators should take necessary steps to support teachers – not only to take care of their well-being, but to ensure their safety. In this study, teachers were asked to recall an effective way an administrator has supported them in the past and to provide suggestions on how the administrator could increase support. The majority of teachers were unable to identify any way they felt supported with student behaviors. Teachers seemed uncomfortable when speaking about an administrator, and in 100% of interviews, they described instances in which their administrator did not come to their rescue when needed. Therefore, it is evident trust is missing from this relationship.

Trust

Participant responses indicated that offering teachers breaks from their classrooms was the most common way teachers wanted to feel supported. Teachers shared stories about how they were physically attacked by a student and minutes later expected to teach the same student in the classroom. Teachers expressed frustration for themselves and other students. Mrs. Tater expressed her frustration by stating:

> About ten minutes later, our director came in and brought this child back into the class. This was one of those moments, I was like "are you kidding me?" At that point, and after all the interactions and behaviors that we had just lived through, he should not have made it back to the classroom that day. Just for everybody else to calm down and regulate themselves. The kids looked very nervous. I wasn't thrilled about him returning that day either. She sat with him for maybe 10 minutes and then she left. Shortly after that he got upset again. He started to just destroy the classroom. He went around ripping up other peoples' work. Knocked everything down. Pulling things off the walls. Anything he

> could do to destroy something. He was just so angry. Destroying things in his path. So, we had the kids go out of the room again.

It is difficult mentally and physically for teachers to regroup after dangerous incidents. Some reported resentment and anger toward the student and admitted it was not healthy for them to rejoin the student immediately following the incident. Mrs. Hamson shared she appreciated a student being suspended for several reasons:

> I know we can't suspend kids. I know it doesn't help them. But the one time you suspended Kasen, that was really helpful. I needed a break. The other kids needed a break. I needed to have a conversation with the other students without him in the room about the situation. I also just needed to not see him for the day. It is really hard day in and day out to go through the same torture and abuse from the same kid and nobody does anything.

Teachers recognized that suspensions do not improve the student's behavior, but they reported needing a break for themselves and the rest of the class. When a self-care room was suggested to offer a break during the day, teachers overwhelmingly agreed it was not enough. Instead, they described taking sick days to escape from their problems – if even for a day. Without addressing the root sources of teachers' stress, days off are only a temporary reprieve from the problem.

Participant responses suggest that trust between the administrator and teachers has been broken due to how behavior incidents have been managed at the building level. They report calling an administrator for help and no one coming or asking for an aide's assistance but no one being available. Mrs. Fitz recalls an incident when no one came for support:

> I redirected and took the Chromebook, their emotions went from playful to angry. They were upset they got in trouble and that I was calling home. So, all the kids are laughing. I text an administrator for help. No one came. They stormed out of the room screaming and crying. They threatened to kill me. I called the office. No one answered. They are screaming at the top of their lungs, threatening, throwing stuff at each other, and then hitting, pushing, slamming to the ground. No one comes to help. You feel stranded and helpless. I had to restrain one. Give him a bear hug until finally another staff member came to take him.

Teachers' descriptions of instances when they did not agree with the way an administrator responded (or failed to respond) suggested feelings of mistrust, anger, and desperation. Many teachers took long pauses and their muscles tensed up when asked to speak about the actions of their administrator. Several teachers recalled instances when they were working with a different administrator. They seemed to be more comfortable sharing these stories versus incidents that occurred while working with me. This topic appeared uncomfortable for teachers, and there seemed to be a lack of trust within the teacher-administrator relationship.

Training

According to participants, it is difficult for teachers to know how to respond to a student who is dysregulated. One of the most common responses teachers noted was blocking the student from leaving the room or holding them to prevent disruption. This action often leaves the teacher hurt and the student in a heightened state of emotion. Another common response is engaging in a power struggle with students or yelling at them. Instead of yelling back at a student who is yelling obscenities, de-escalation training could offer alternatives, such as calmly restating the expectation or offering the student a break. One teacher stated she locked her student out of the classroom – this could be seen as an avoidance regulation strategy and unlikely to be effective in decreasing his behavior (Hinds et al., 2015). Training is something some teachers recognized as needed, but many seemed to feel even the best of trainings could not prevent what is happening in their classrooms.

Data reflect teachers have an awareness of student trauma. They "blame" trauma, but there are inconsistencies on how they feel it manifests in behaviors. For example, Mrs. Franklin is unable to identify triggers, "You don't know. It's hard to know what's going to set a student off." Mrs. Lincoln agrees, "They can be fine one second and explode the next. Throwing chairs,

tackling other students. It can escalate from 0-10 without you knowing what happened because they have internal things going on from trauma and you don't know what sets them off." With additional training, teachers would have a deeper understanding of triggers and how to calm a student before the severity of behavior peaks.

Other teachers believe there is a correlation between trauma and student attention seeking behavior. Mrs. Baker believes students need attention because they do not receive it at home. She says, "Our students don't get attention from home and they come here looking for it however they can get it. Where there are so many siblings in the house, or an absent parent, they are searching aimlessly for some type of connection." There is either a basic understanding of the importance of relationships, but teachers to not seem to understand how to address the need in their classrooms. Three participants shared they feel trauma is the reason many students are behind academically, and because of traumatic experiences, they lack confidence and perseverance with classwork. For example, Mrs. Smith explains, "They don't know how it feels to have to work through something they don't know. Their behavior often times erupts. I am talking about physical aggression with you as the teacher, destruction of school property, eloping, assault to their peers." With additional training, this teacher would have more tools to motivate and instill confidence in her students and protect herself.

While teachers each identified trauma as being a reason for challenging behaviors, over 80% failed to mention at least one effective strategy to use when students misbehave. This data suggests teachers do not have strategies to manage their classrooms or de-escalate students – nor do they have a deep understanding of trauma informed practices. Training and implementing universal strategies and procedures building-wide brings consistency across the school community and ensures teachers are using effective, research-based practices.

Recognizing Bias

Relationships with families were described by participating teachers as inconsistent but pleasant. However, some participants alluded to having underlying negative beliefs about their students and families. For example, when describing one parent who had previous involvement with law enforcement and drugs, Mrs. Dale repeatedly used the words "no judging," but then primarily spoke about parents from a deficit perspective:

> His brother was murdered. His house was raided. The police just busted in there. And not that I am judging the family but it's no secret our students come in smelling like weed. Or I go to houses from the home visit program or I drop off materials or packages things like that and the house just reeks. You can smell it when you get out of your car. No judging. I am not judging. There's a reason they are doing that. If they are doing that instead of beating the heck out of their kid, then please do that. Comments the kids make, "You have a washing machine at your house? My momma never washes our clothes." But again, I'm not judging.

This participant could be describing what she saw, or she could be judging the family for the marijuana smell and not having a washing machine. Memos during the interview noted she "must feel guilty" because she used the term "not judging" four times in one response. I also noted she spoke very rapidly, waved her hands with expression as she spoke, and became very loud. I noted that she appeared nervous or defensive as she described the home visit, as evidenced by her high-pitched tone, hesitancy to respond, and failure to make eye contact when speaking, which was atypical for the teacher.

One teacher spoke about visiting a student's home and how she felt uncomfortable during the day and would never visit after dark. "I felt fine once inside the apartment. But walking up a man said 'hey'. I would never go back now day or night." Feeling unsafe when someone says "hey" is not a typical response for a greeting; thus, it is possible that deficit thinking may play a role in how this teacher thinks and feels about the demographic she serves (Clark & Zygmunt, 2014; Stark et al., 2020). Deficit thinking can be thought of as blaming the victim for his or her

circumstances or difficulties (Ferguson, 2020). In schools, deficit thinking is harmful because teachers may blame a student's home life for their behavior, and therefore helping the student is deemed out of the teacher's control (Valencia, 2010). In this scenario, the teacher feels unsafe, based on her interaction with an individual in the apartment complex. It could be that subconsciously she feels all African Americans, or individuals living in poverty, are prone to violence or dangerous behavior (Kahn et al., 2016).

Additionally, participants discussed the African American race in a negative context as evidenced by teachers' frequent linking of race to terms such as trauma, poverty, and gangs. Mrs. Richie describes Treetop student and family demographics as:

> I think we are 100% free and reduced lunch population. So, the socioeconomic area is low income. It's an all-black school, well I don't know what the correct term is anymore. And we get a lot of kids, tons of kids who it seems like they have a lot of trauma in their background. And they don't know how to respect teachers. Behavior issues. They can't manage themselves. It just always seems like they come with an explosive background.

Mrs. Richie admits she does not even know how to describe her students; "I don't even know what the correct term is anymore." The tone in her voice when she made this statement was loud and harsh. She sounded frustrated. She described her black students as having an "explosive background". Generalizing all of her black students as "explosive" is biased thinking (Clark & Zygmunt, 2014; Stark et al., 2020) and when teachers hold bias, it may be more difficult to obtain student trust and to build relationships (Choi, 2017; Fields-Smith, 2005).

Participants seemingly resented parents because they perceived them as neglectful and failing. They blamed single family homes and multiple siblings as the cause for not being involved with their child's academic and behavior progress at school. They also seemingly hold biases that poor black families do not care about their children. Mrs. Fitz questioned the actions of parents by stating:

> Like 'why aren't you giving your child helpful tools to get through their day? We aren't babysitters. Give them their medicine. Get them to school. Get off your ass or out of bed.' I also can't wrap my head around how…our kids are raising themselves and kids raising their siblings. It stresses me out more than the actual behaviors. I had one girl who lives in the car with her mom. I give the girl toothbrush, deodorant, and clothes. I give her uniforms in the morning and she changes back into her clothes in the afternoon because she's terrified she will get in trouble from her mom. And she has asthma, but her mom just smokes pot in the car with her and her baby brother. They neglect their kid and there is nothing we can do about it.

Generalizing all Treetop parents as neglectful of their children, who happen to be poor and black, is deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). The parent may seem absent because she is working two jobs, or she may decline help from the school out of distrust or pride. By not digging deeper and holding on to deficit ideology, teachers have a more difficult time building relationships with their families (Kahn et al., 2016). Additional comments were made in other interviews that were judgmental and biased. For example, Mrs. Kenton talked about how her parents are poor, but students come to school dressed in Air Jordan's every day. "I don't know what you do for a living, but your baby is dressed to the nine every day," she says. This statement seems to suggest that Mrs. Kenton assumes parents are doing illegal business or spending their money unwisely.

None of the teachers recognized their own bias or racism as a factor for the behaviors happening in their classrooms, but they do recognize the "system" or "systemic racism" as playing an integral part of what goes on at Treetop and in the community. Mrs. Carney explains "it's not the kid, it's the system" and "our students fall victim to systemic racism". She did not elaborate on this, because she said, "that's not what this is about, white kids misbehave too". Mrs. Fitz and Mrs. Asher both express anger with the "system" that keeps families at Treetop in poverty. They further recognize the racial tension in the country during the time of this study. They admit this occurs, but not within themselves. Subtle comments made, such as "these kids"

or “kids like him are only good at sports,” show some staff hold microaggressions that may impede on the way they think and feel about their students (Kahn et al., 2016). Yet kids recognize how teachers feel (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Pinata, 1999). Teachers’ resentment, judgement, and bias toward students and parents could contribute to problematic student behaviors (Valencia, 2010). Students are less likely to listen to or work for someone who they cannot trust (Choi, 2017; Fields-Smith, 2005).

According to participants, there is not a one solution administrators can implement to reduce teacher stress. Participants did not have ideas they felt would be beneficial and generally were unable to identify examples of administrators supporting them in the past. However, data suggest there are steps administrators can take to indirectly reduce student behaviors and teacher stress. First, administrators should recognize the need for teachers to receive an immediate break away from a student who has caused distress in the classroom. Teachers overwhelmingly stated this was needed relief. Strengthening trust and improving communication between teachers and administrators is another form of support. If the principal is unavailable to come to a teacher’s aide when called, this can be communicated. Finally, creating an awareness of implicit bias and how that influences the way students and parents are treated should also be addressed so parents, students, and school staff can find ways to better collaborate for the success of students.

Data Summary

Chapter four describes the open coding process and data analysis for the study. I defined three themes to explain the experiences teachers have when working with students who show behaviors in the classroom, how the behaviors affect teacher well-being, and how administrators can support teachers. The majority of teachers experience stress and anxiety at work that they carry home each day. Self-care activities are found to be enjoyable pastimes, but not effective at

reducing stress. Teachers need administrator support and to feel respected and supported because what they are going through is physically and mentally harmful (Borntrager et al., 2012; Figley 2002). Administrators should support teachers' immediate needs but also help them understand how their own biases negatively impact interactions with students.

CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATION, CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience high levels of stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of findings, reflection, implications for practice, study significance, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions. The results indicate that teachers at Treetop Elementary are emotionally exhausted. In order to support teachers, the administrator should explore options deeper than self-care and mindfulness and focus on building trust and positive relationships within the school. When appropriate, administrators should also provide training for teachers to improve their classroom management.

Discussion

Research question 1 asks, "How do teachers describe their experiences working with students who display challenging behaviors?" Participant responses indicated that teachers internalize challenging student behaviors in a variety of ways, most notably burnout, low self-efficacy, and lack of resiliency. For example, Mrs. Richie calls herself a failure because she spends all day with classroom management and never teaches. Mrs. Baker described feeling helpless and having "no way to stop them" from hurting each other. Most teachers report feeling so drained they zone out from their consciousness and isolate themselves from the outside world. Living through these experiences led to anticipation of future crisis in the classroom. There is a fear of the unknown or what could happen next, leading to increased anxiety and dreading to come to work each day. These feelings indicate teachers are unable to cope with perceived stress (Lazarus, 1977). They blame themselves, constantly pondering what they could do differently. Their pessimistic outlooks and feelings of anxiety and exhaustion indicate a lack of self-efficacy and feelings of burnout due to the inability to manage their classroom (Bride et al., 2007; Figley,

2002; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1999). The worrying or fear of the unknown provokes anxiety in teachers to the point of fixation. Mrs. Carney shared she worries about the day on her drive into work to the point where her heartbeat races and "her blood boils". Mrs. Waterman admits, "you never know what to expect. The fear of what may happen is often worse than what actually happens." This preoccupation of negative emotion and frustration is a symptom of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and lack of resiliency (Figley, 2002; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1999).

Lazarus's stress and coping model suggests if teachers have direct-active coping strategies, they are less likely to experience physical and psychological stress, and could potentially experience positive feelings (Lazarus, 1966 & Folkman et al., 2007). In the examples above, instead of dwelling on the fear of the unknown, Mrs. Waterman could feel a sense of control by reminding herself what she does know will happen, such as lunch time or the scheduled guest speaker. Mrs. Carney could begin to associate her heart racing as a way to build up energy for the day, and recognize her symptoms are an appropriate response for her feelings. In Chapter 4, Mrs. Richie describes putting out fires all day to prevent students from getting hurt. She is frustrated with herself for not being able to teach. Perhaps, she reframes her mindset, and can learn to find success in maintaining student safety. This may result in her feeling job satisfaction and greater self-efficacy.

In order to understand how teachers at Treetop manage and make meaning of their stress, research question two asks, "how do teachers cope when students display challenging behaviors in the classroom?" In the moment of crisis, teachers report trying to stay calm, but they fail to identify any effective strategies or interventions. Responses regarding self-care and mindfulness practices were left flat and sometimes with resentment. "No self-care or mindfulness room is going to make me feel better about being beat up all day," was a common sentiment. It may be

the mindfulness room will not fix the problem, but it could bring peace and relief for the teacher if only for a few minutes.

Research exists in favor of self-care and mindfulness practices as coping mechanisms for relieving stress (Emerson et al., 2017; Souers & Hall, 2016). Mindfulness has been shown to reduce teacher symptoms of stress and depression (Emerson et al., 2017). Teachers at Treetop, however, did not feel these practices would make managing the effects of student behavior any easier. Reframing what mindfulness practices look like and finding small ways to incorporate the practices into teachers' daily lives could help them manage stress, if even for a moment. For example, simply taking a breath before responding to a student could help ease anxiety.

It could also be that mindfulness and self-care are effective at reducing stress related to academics and work performance, but not when circumstances are so severe teachers perceive stress as though they are merely "surviving." They express their emotional fatigue and burn out are beyond the point of mitigation with such methods. They have reached a tipping point where stress has become unhealthy and unmanageable. They are getting hit, kicked, yelled at, spit on, head butted, and cursed out. They are breaking up fights, chasing elopers, and fighting to keep other students safe on a consistent basis. During a crisis, they do not have the ability to pause for deep breathing or body scans. They must react to keep themselves and students safe. Even if mindfulness could be beneficial and show some improvement to well-being, at their current state, teachers are too emotionally exhausted and lack the capacity to embrace and engage in the learning. Training takes time and investment, neither of which is the current reality. They are experiencing symptoms of trauma that must be recognized and acted upon in order to take care of teachers and ensure classroom safety (Borntrager et al., 2012; Figley, 2002).

Research question 3 asks, "how can administrators support the well-being of teachers who experience stress caused from challenging student behaviors in the classroom?" The most important thing a principal should do is develop trusting relationships with staff (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Teachers want a principal who is trustworthy, transparent, and empathetic to their needs (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Data from this study were suggestive of these findings, and aligns with the conceptual framework, suggesting relationships are a form of direct-action coping mechanisms. Teachers spoke of too many occurrences when no administrator came when called, or students returning to class immediately following a behavior incident with no intervention by the administrator. There does not appear to be trust or solid communication between the administrator and teachers. It is possible that resources are depleted at Treetop, meaning that the needs are greater than what the administrator can provide. It is also possible that teachers have had so many negative experiences they perceive the administrator to be at fault for their distress. One way to strengthen communication and trust between the principal and teachers is for the principal to genuinely listen to teachers' needs and concerns and respond in an effective way. Instead of assuming what teachers need, it is critical the principal directly asks teachers for feedback and responds in such a way that teachers feel heard. At a minimum, the principal needs to share with teachers the struggles he or she faces and be open and honest regarding the resources and options available to support them and their students.

It is evident teachers lack an understanding of long-term effective support. The majority of responses requested breaks away from students in the form of suspensions and taking days off from work. This request supports the existence of teacher burnout and does little to mitigate stress or prevent behaviors from occurring (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Suspensions are not an effective solution for students or teachers but finding opportunities to give teachers time and

space away from a student who has caused harm is clearly something teachers need. Relocating students to another teacher's classroom in a "quiet corner", assigning them time in the office, or creating a sensory room for students to visit are a few suggestions to give teachers their needed break.

After returning to class, the teacher is more likely to be calm and prepared for a restorative conversation that will help strengthen their relationship. Relationships have been found to be the strongest contributing factor to teacher well-being (Friedman, 2000.) This study's conceptual framework suggests that when teacher's go through the appraisal process of an incident and positive relationships exist, they may be less likely to experience physical and psychological stress, and the positive emotions they feel from the relationship could influence how they cope with the stressor. Teachers at Treetop described having positive relationships with students, but there was little evidence to support this statement. Only two teachers spoke about getting to know their students. Mrs. Lincoln shared she makes connections with them over Pokemon and Harry Potter, and Mrs. Dale talked about building relationships through fun activities with fruit kabobs and shaving cream. The remainder of participants all spoke about positive relationships but made conflicting statements throughout their interviews. I assume teachers caring about their students and wanting them to do well. But generally, they feel so beat down, they struggle to find positive things to say. For example, Mrs. Baker stated she had strong positive relationships with her students, but when asked to identify one of their strengths, her only response was, "they come to school on time." Mrs. Richie failed to identify any strengths in her students at all. Relationships are broken through repeated instances of aggressive behavior in the classroom. These incidents have led to deficit thinking or, at a minimum, failure of teachers to get to know their students (Clark & Zygmunt, 2014). They blame a student's background and

fail to have an open mindset for improving the situation for themselves and for their students. To an extent, findings for question three align with questions one and two in regard to burnout, self-efficacy, and student-teacher relationships.

Reflections

My "why" for becoming a principal is to help teachers so they would never have to experience the feelings of helplessness and desperation I felt as a teacher. My goal as a building leader has been to implement strategies in my school that would alleviate such stress. Since becoming a principal in 2017, I have tried numerous programs, structures, and hired various support staff to create safe and orderly environments and support the social-emotional well-being of students and staff. For example, after analyzing data and determining the greatest discipline challenges were in first and second grade, I created a multi-age classroom, comprised of seven students, that focused on teaching students self-regulation skills. I implemented Check-In-Check-Out as a way for students and teachers to strengthen relationships. I tried buddy rooms so teachers had an alternate safe location to send students if they needed a break. Most recently, I was permitted to hire a behavior interventionist. This staff member was expected to fulfill a variety of roles including observing students, coaching and giving feedback to teachers, and implementing small group social skills lessons.

In addition to supports mentioned, I spend my entire day, along with the assistant principal, managing discipline. Many days we both have multiple students in our offices to provide teachers relief or as an alternative to suspensions. I am also responsible for removing dysregulated students from classrooms. As the principal, I have been subject to the same harm teachers described in their interviews. With all of my efforts, and my personal investment in teacher well-being, I was disheartened when teachers shared that they did not feel supported or

heard. Many days I left the interview discouraged and in disbelief. I realized my perception and their perception of my intentions were starkly different. Through the interview process, by giving teachers a space to be vulnerable and a space to be heard, I was able to understand what they genuinely felt and needed. Statements such as "no one came" were difficult to hear, because I knew if I did not respond to their call, I was handling another crisis. However, as a scholar practitioner, I needed to hear these perspectives, as they revealed to me that I needed to change the way I approach support. These needs will be discussed further in the implications and recommendations sections.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study confirm teaching is a stressful occupation (Scholastic, 2013; Sutcher et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience high levels of stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. The data showed teachers are experiencing a variety of symptoms, including burnout, emotional exhaustion, and depression. There is no easy "fix" to this problem. As discussed in the literature review, there is a cyclical relationship between stress and behaviors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). It takes time, training, and motivation to implement new systems, and for impactful change, policies beyond the control of school personnel must be addressed. Therefore, this section offers suggestions that are within educator control *and* recommendations for the broader educational system. Teachers at Treetop are emotionally exhausted, and many requested more time away from work, spoke of taking days off, and pleaded for a break. It does not appear, in their current state, they would be able or willing to put in work needed to make long-term change. In some districts, administrators have allotted this relief through teacher mental health days, where teachers can take time off without

sick days being deducted. In these schools, teachers reported feeling less stressed and calm when interacting with students (Essary et al., 2020). In the St. Louis, Missouri area, several districts recently scheduled additional unplanned days over holiday breaks to give staff time for self-care. Other area districts have given flexibility with professional development or allowed teachers extra plan times so they have fewer tasks to complete outside of work hours.

Administrators are able to control their actions and interactions with students and staff. Therefore, administrators should lead by prioritizing relationships with teachers, increasing trust, and improving communication (Friedman, 2000). Teachers in this study were vocal when sharing examples of when they called for help, no one came. They were open in sharing pressures they feel from administrators for students to perform academically, complete required paperwork, and effectively manage the classroom. Principals need to address these perceptions. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, truly listening to teachers, seeking feedback, and following through with suggestions will add a layer of trust and transparency to the relationship. One statement made consistently throughout interviews was no administrator comes to help when called. In cases where the administrator is unavailable, they should send another staff member, so teachers feel that support. If no one is available, there must be a way to notify the teacher.

The importance of academics is not negated. However, in cases like those described at Treetop, other areas of focus may need to take priority before students are able to learn. If classroom management is lacking and relationships are not present, students will have a harder time learning (Friedman, 2000; Marzano et al., 2013). Paperwork, such as lesson plans, report cards, and data tracking should be minimized so teachers feel less pressure and reduced workload. Data reflects collegiality as a strength, so one suggestion is to have teachers work together or divide tasks among the grade level team. For example, if there are three teachers on a

team, one could plan for reading, another for math, and the third could plan for science and social studies. They could initiate a tag-team plan, where if a student in one class is starting to escalate, he or she could take a break in a colleague's classroom.

In conjunction with taking efforts to improve teacher well-being in the short term, principals should begin to emphasize the importance of student-teacher relationships. This recommendation is supported throughout the literature and evidenced in the data (Friedman, 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Students are less likely to display unsafe or disruptive behavior when they like their teacher (Friedman, 2000). However, cultivating positive relationships in buildings like Treetop is not easy, especially mid-way through the year when negative interactions have already occurred. One recommendation is to purposefully plan events where teachers and students make connections outside of instruction. Examples could include family nights after school, teacher home visits, or class meetings. Time should be spent allowing the teacher and student to get to know one another, including likes, dislikes, information about their families, and hobbies.

Data suggest while teachers believe they have positive relationships, there may be underlying deficit thinking or assumptions about students and their families. If there are underlying beliefs about the culture and race of students and families at Treetop, then teachers may allow those beliefs to interfere with the way they respond when a student is in distress. Being unfamiliar with a group can lead to generalizing, stereotyping, and to prejudice (Allport, 1979). It could be teachers have little interaction with African Americans other than their students, and therefore have an ideology based on fear (Allport, 1979). Regardless, if teachers have underlying beliefs or judgement toward students and families, it will diminish trust in the relationship. Providing experiences for connection is one way to debunk some of the beliefs they

may have. Visiting homes of students, getting to know families, and listening to their stories may help teachers see their families and students through a different lens that helps to form authentic relationships. As described in the conceptual framework, if relationships are present, when the teacher appraises an incident, he or she is less likely to perceive the event as stressful. Furthermore, positive relationships may prevent behavior incidents from ever occurring (Friedman, 2000).

A final implication for practice is to provide teachers professional development so they are better equipped to understand and manage challenging behaviors in their classroom. Lazarus's model suggests teachers will be less stressed if they have alternative mechanisms or strategies in place to manage the incident. Data from this study suggests teachers react in a variety of ways, and none of them had a plan for coping when situations arise. Training should be centered around proactive strategies to prevent behaviors and reactive strategies to de-escalate situations and keep students and themselves safe (Bell et al., 2013; Berardi & Morton, 2019). Through trauma informed training teachers have an opportunity to process how their beliefs about traumatic experiences can influence their behavior in class. Once those beliefs are internalized, it would improve the teacher appraisal process when a difficult situation arises in the classroom. Before professional development is planned and implemented, it is important to prioritize need and determine the cause of each teacher's stress. A new teacher may need classroom management professional development. An experienced teacher may be struggling due to burnout, versus a lack of knowledge. Therefore, as stated in the reflection section, it is important for the administrator to seek teacher input and respond with interventions that align to teachers' specific needs.

Research suggests a positive behavior management system would effectively reduce behaviors from occurring (Marzano et al., 2013). Teachers need to learn the difference between a structured classroom with routines and procedures versus a rigid classroom where the teacher demands control. Focusing on positive behavior, through positive praise and practicing expectations makes classroom management a partnership between students and teachers and strengthens relationships.

Significance

School violence statistics continue to rise in America and statistics show a startling rate of student aggression toward teachers (Espelage et al., 2013; Scholastic, 2013). A 2014 national survey confirmed the reality for teachers at Treetop, finding 80% of teachers had experienced threats and physical attacks (McMahon et al., 2014). This study confirmed recent statistics showing teachers are the victims of student aggression in the classroom. These incidents manifest in teachers through physical and emotional exhaustion, depression, anxiety, reduced efficacy, and physical symptoms (Buettner, et al., 2016; Essary, 2013; Turkoglu et al., 2017 Wilson et al., 2011). Lazarus indicates stress occurs when one cannot adequately cope with the demands in the environment (Lazarus, 1977). Teachers' inability to cope, combined with increasingly unrealistic demands, have led to feelings of inadequacy and exhaustion, and this stress carries over into their personal lives, causing many to feel depressed, isolated, and anxious even when outside of work. The level of stress teachers experience has been found greater than other helping professions (Travers, 2001). With wages for teachers below the national average, it could be questioned whether continuing to teach is "worth it" for some.

Teacher stress from working with students who have challenging behavior is likely to lead to an increase of teachers leaving the profession, adding to current teacher shortages. Over

100,000 teachers are currently underqualified for their positions, because districts could not find qualified candidates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). A contributing factor to these attrition rates is student behaviors, as teachers leave environments where student violence and disruption are prevalent (Smith & Smith, 2006). Even more, workplace conditions, such as discipline and administrator support, have been identified as the main reason teachers leave the classroom (Loeb et al., 2005 & Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Low performing, low-income schools (such as Treetop) already have higher than average turnover rates (Boyd et al., 2009). Teachers working in these schools are more likely to transfer to another school, or leave the profession entirely (Boyd et al., 2009). These same schools are more likely to have students who have been exposed to trauma and exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom, further indicating challenging behaviors have a direct correlation to teacher attrition (Gonsoulin et al., 2012; Osher et al., 2012).

In addition to the obvious fear of student and staff safety, dangerous classroom disruption may have long-lasting effects on students (Fisher et al., 2017). Classroom disruption leads to loss of instructional time and contributes to teachers taking time away from work. The American Psychological Association (2016) found 927,000 days a year are lost due to teachers taking time off work to recover from student behaviors. Students who are exposed to high levels of classroom disruption are more likely to show lower levels of student achievement, feelings of isolation, experience greater absenteeism, and decreased efficacy (Macmillan & Hagan, 2004). At the elementary level, data shows students who witness aggressive behavior in the classroom are more likely to have fewer aspirations and demonstrate aggressive behavior later in life (Boxer et al., 2003). Conversely, students who feel cared for and respected at school are more likely to graduate from high school than their peers (Hallinan, 2008). Thus, all stakeholders are

negatively impacted by negative student behaviors, not just the teacher and student causing the behavior.

Recommendations for Further Research

One recommendation for further research is to expand the study to additional schools in order to strengthen the results. Variety of school size, student and teacher demographic, and geographic location, would determine if this study's results are consistent with other settings. While this study could not confirm mindfulness-based interventions or self-care practices were effective at mitigating stress at Treetop, it is recommended to complete action research, where teacher stress is measured before and after participating in mindfulness-based intervention programs. Finally, it is recommended to implement a longitudinal study to determine if there is a decrease in teacher stress levels after participating in ongoing training (as suggested in the implications section above). This would help determine if positive student relationships and trauma informed practices resulted in decreased teacher stress.

Participants in this study had very little feedback for ways in which an administrator could help relieve stress brought on by challenging behaviors. However, their perceived lack of support is something that should be given further attention. This study suggests administrators improve communication and transparency with teachers to improve trust. Furthermore, administrators should strive for creating a school culture that promotes healthy relationships and consistency with routines and practices (Kapa et al, 2018). Schools that clearly communicate expectations to students and are structured with consistent rules and procedures in place are likely to experience fewer behavior disruptions (Kapa et al., 2018). The administrator is the key stakeholder in fostering this environment. It is recommended administrators increase trust and buy-in with teachers through shared decision making to improve school culture (Huang et al.,

2017). If teachers were more involved with creating building-wide discipline policies and had input on the types of support and interventions students needed, they may feel more ownership in the classroom and experience less stress with student behaviors. Further research should be conducted to explore this topic.

Recommendations for Policy

Principals have a level of autonomy to lead their schools according to their vision. However, there are limits and restraints to what a principal is capable of implementing. For example, at Treetop, a behavior interventionist was hired to help with student discipline. But what the staff member was hired to do quickly became far from reality when the individual was required to substitute teach almost daily due to being short staffed. In addition, thousands of dollars were left in the budget because they were ear marked for professional development that teachers did not have the time or energy to complete. Similarly to how a principal should listen to what teachers need, district leaders and policy makers need to listen to what principals and buildings need. Schools are unique and have diverse needs and should be treated as such. Buildings like Treetop need more staff and more mental health resources and less pressure during walkthroughs and evaluations. Teachers and principals need to receive resources and supports that align to the needs of their school.

There are laws in place intended to protect students and keep schools safe. The Students, Teachers and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Act was enacted to prevent mass shootings (Gun Violence Archive, 2019). This bill was proposed after the Parkland, Florida shooting, with the intention of aligning school violence investigations with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The New School Violence Act (2018) was designed to decrease school violence by providing aid from the federal government (Federal Commission on School Safety,

2018). The Federal Commission for School Violence created a school safety report which included ninety-three policy recommendations for school safety, such as requiring active shooter drills and mandating antibullying (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). With bullying, the law requires school staff to investigate every accusation and intervene accordingly for each case (Cornell et al., 2015). Additionally, zero tolerance policies ban weapons on school grounds. Students who bring weapons, such as firearms or pistols on school grounds, are subject to expulsion.

There is legislation designed to protect students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires students to receive appropriate supports in the least restrictive environment. School inclusion is associated with positive outcomes for students, but oftentimes it is implemented without adequate resources, which could lead to an increase of behaviors in the classroom (Sautner, 2008). The law also has stipulations regarding the number of days a student can be suspended. While the intent is to protect students, this red tape may make it more stressful for teachers when repeat offenders are constantly brought back to the classroom (Sautner, 2008).

However, teachers are not afforded the same protection as students. While the Missouri Compilation of Safe Schools and Regulations (2021) requires schools to provide interventions for students that are restorative and preventive, there are few, if any, interventions in place to protect teachers (McMahon et al., 2014). If anything, laws in place add to the stress teachers already experience from challenging behaviors. Pressure from state assessments leads to greater work demands and more hours (Travers, 2001). Daily schedules are more rigid, allowing for less flexibility to teach social emotional skills or take breaks throughout the day. Accountability measures tied to rewards and sanctions place more pressure on district leaders, who funnel down

pressure to building leaders and teachers (Mazzeo, 2001). Ultimately, state and federal laws should be revisited to consider the well-being of teachers and to reconsider the demands created by educational reform (Lenzi et al., 2017). These laws may not currently exist because of a lack of respect for the profession (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2014); however, findings from this study point to the criticalness for all stakeholders in supporting teacher physical and psychological health.

Conclusion

Classroom teachers at Treetop Elementary shared that they are emotionally exhausted. Their powerful stories reflect self-care is not enough and, like teachers all around the country, they are pleading for change. Legislatures in some states have taken notice of unsafe working environments for teachers. In Connecticut, over 100 testimonials from educators urged lawmakers to address the crisis with a bill that provided more support for teachers and more resources for student mental health (An Act Concerning Classroom Safety and Disruptive Behavior, 2018). A similar bill in Minnesota suggests more support for teachers by requiring expulsion for students who displayed aggressive behavior toward a teacher (Minnesota Teacher & Classroom Safety Act, 2021). Neither bill was passed. These attempts, while unsuccessful, prove teachers are starting to advocate for themselves. Lawmakers, administrators, state agencies, and communities must intervene to help make classrooms safe. More resources are needed for student and staff mental health. Schools need more counselors, therapeutic services, and school resource officers. Teachers need support for their mental health, with onsite therapeutic services and free counseling. Stakeholders must work collaboratively to address the root causes for student behavior, while taking care of teachers so they feel safe and supported to remain in the classroom.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Hello, thank you for taking time out of your day, and agreeing to meet with me. I am currently working on my dissertation. I am studying to what extent student behavior impacts educator stress. I also want to better understand the role self-care has at mitigating these symptoms, as well as systems administrators can implement to reduce student behaviors from occurring. I understand that some of these topics may be upsetting for you and require a sense of vulnerability to share. I appreciate your openness and willingness to engage in this conversation. If at any time you need a break or feel uncomfortable, please let me know and we can adjust the interview.

This session will be recorded to ensure I accurately capture your thoughts. This interview is voluntary, and you have the right to decline answering at any time. However, all names will remain confidential, both yours and any mentioned throughout the interview. Before we proceed, do I have your permission to record this interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me a little about yourself. How long have you been teaching? Why did you become a teacher?

2. Tell me about the climate at your school. In your opinion, what factors contribute to l's current climate?

3. Tell me about the morale and working conditions of staff at your school. In your opinion, what factors contribute to staff morale and working conditions?

4. Tell me about your students.

a. Describe their background (race, socio-economic status, age, gender, etc.).

b. Describe their strengths (personality, favorite activities, etc.).

c. Describe their challenges (academic, behavior, social-emotional, etc.)

5. Do you have any challenging students? If so, what makes them challenging?

6. Can you describe a specific situation you found particularly challenging? What happened? What was your reaction? How were you feeling?

7. Have challenging behavior situations had significant long-term impact on you physically, mentally, or emotionally? Can you provide a few examples?

8. How have these incidents affected your ability to implement instruction?

9. What do you think are causes for these behaviors? Why do you think this? Can you provide any examples?

9. What practices or systems do you use specifically in your classroom as interventions for these students?

11. How are these behaviors managed at the school-level? How do you think they should be managed?

12. How does working at your school affect your home life?

13. How do you practice self-care?

14. Are there self-care activities you find more effective than others at reducing stress caused by experiences we discussed earlier? If so, can you provide a few examples? Why do you think these are more effective methods?

15. What are some supports you receive at work that make your job easier?

16. What are some factors at work that make managing student behaviors more of a challenge?

17. What systems exist at your school that effectively aim at reducing student behaviors?

18. What trauma-informed practices exist at your school? Do you find these practices beneficial at reducing student behaviors?

19. What are some additional supports or self-care practices your administrator could put in place to make your job easier?

20. What do you wish other people understood about what it's like dealing with challenging student behaviors in the classroom?

Appendix B: Consent for Participation

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT: Challenging Student Behaviors and Teacher Well-being

Name of Principal Researcher: Dannah Steele
Name of Faculty Advisor: Kara Lassiter, Ed.D.

A. Purpose and Background

You have been invited to participate in an interview facilitated by Dannah Steele, principal researcher. The purpose of this study is to determine how administrators can better support teachers who experience high levels of stress incurred from working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. Interviews will be a time to reflect on these experiences. The information collected at this time will be used to determine how the building principal, the principal researcher can better support teachers in managing their stress as it relates to challenging behaviors in the classroom. The interview, if you decide to participate, will be approximately 60 minutes in length.

B. Voluntary Participation, right to Discontinue and Overview of Procedures

My participation in the interview is voluntary and if I decide not to participate in the study, or withdraw from the study at any time, I will not be penalized. Whether I choose to participate or NOT participate will have NO effect on my relationship with the researcher, my principal. I have the right not to answer questions which make me uncomfortable or to end my participation in the interview at any time. The researcher will not tell anyone else, from my school district, or the University of Arkansas whether I choose to participate or not.
As part of this study, I understand that my responses may be included as data for this study. The principal researcher will facilitate the interviews and ask follow-up questions, both which encourage the natural progression of a conversation. These interviews will be audio-recorded, and the researcher will act as a note-taker. The information collected will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. No identifying information will be used in any reports or publications resulting from this research.

C. Risks and Benefits

I understand this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects at the University of Arkansas. There are no foreseen risks to those participating in this interview beyond those experienced during a typical conversation. By participating in the interview you will be contributing to the existing knowledge of how teachers experience challenging behaviors in the classroom.

Confidentiality

Should you choose to participate in the interview process, your privacy and anonymity will be protected by de-identification procedures by alias number during the session notes and in any written transcription. All information collected will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy.

Questions

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction.

For further information or questions, please contact:
Dannah Steele, Principal Researcher: dsteele@uark.edu
Dr. Kara Lassiter, Faculty Advisor: klassiter@uark.edu
For questions or concerns about your rights as a researcher participant, please contact the University of Arkansas IRB by email at irb@uark.edu, by phone 479-575-2208, or on campus.

D. Informed Consent

I understand by participating in this interview, I am giving my consent for my responses to be used in this research.

Appendix C: Official IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

To:	Dannah Sue Steele
From:	Douglas J Adams, Chair IRB Expedited Review
Date:	05/19/2021
Action:	**Expedited Approval**
Action Date:	05/19/2021
Protocol #:	2104331164
Study Title:	Challenging Student Behaviors and Teacher Well-Being
Expiration Date:	05/01/2022
Last Approval Date:	

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kara A Lasater, Investigator