OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND BURNOUT IN K–2 EDUCATORS POSTPANDEMIC: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

by

Jennifer M. Hart

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 elementary educators in central Pennsylvania postpandemic. The theories guiding this study were Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping and Lazarus's cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion, which provided a framework for understanding how educators process occupational stress. The central research question guiding this qualitative phenomenological study was: *What is the lived experience of K–2 elementary school educators postpandemic?* The sample consisted of 12 to 15 K–2 educators from across three school districts in central Pennsylvania. Data were collected using journal entries, semistructured individual interviews, and focus group sessions. Data were analyzed using open coding to identify themes. Phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation were used to create textural descriptions of the essence of the experience of occupational stress for K–2 educators. The findings of the study demonstrate that varying needs of students and staffing shortages contribute to occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators.

Keywords: occupational stress, burnout, attrition, transactional model of stress and coping

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Randy and Nancy Zimmerman, who always encouraged us to pursue our educational interests. “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Colossians 3:23–24).

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First and foremost, I want to acknowledge our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. My strength and perseverance throughout this dissertation process surely came from the Lord. “Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, 1 Chronicle 16:11).

To my family and friends, thank you for your ongoing support and encouragement. Without your love and patience, none of this would be possible. Many people stepped in when I needed time to complete my schoolwork, and for that I am grateful.

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To my chair, Dr. Saba, thank you for your support throughout this entire process. Your prayers, feedback, and encouragement allowed me to persevere to final defense. Communicating with you has always been so easy and natural. I strongly feel that God placed us together because of our shared elementary education interests. Your guidance has allowed me to advance my knowledge in the field of education.

To my committee member, Dr. Woodbridge, thank you for your support and encouragement. Your feedback and encouragement was essential for me to persevere to final defense.

Finally, to my fellow elementary educators, you are an inspiration every day. You work diligently to do what is right for children. You are their teachers, nurses, counselors, mentors, and role-models, and I know that it can be exhausting. Thank you for persevering and continuing to work in the amazing field of education. Your work does not go unnoticed!

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List of Abbreviations

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment Intervention (PERMA)

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)

National Education Association (NEA)

Sense of Coherence (SOC)

Subjective Well-Being (SWB)

Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In Chapter One, I outline the framework for this hermeneutic phenomenological study on occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators. Occupational stress and burnout in educators have been well-documented in educational research, but circumstances are ever-changing. This chapter begins with the historical, societal, and theoretical background of research on occupational stress and burnout in educators. Next, the research problem, purpose of the study, and the broader significance of the study are articulated. The research questions and subquestions are stated. Finally, terms relevant to the study of occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators are defined, followed by a summary.

Background

Occupational stress and burnout have been documented in research literature dating back to the 1970s (Coates & Thoresen, 1976; Dunham, 1976; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). The problem of occupational stress and burnout has evolved over the years due to changing circumstances in education. Society is impacted by educator stress and burnout because it creates staffing shortages at local schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). Due to teaching shortages, positions are often filled with applicants who are not highly qualified in their area of work (Sutcher et al., 2019). The transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotions (Lazarus, 1991) have been used to study stress and coping in educators. Much of the current research has focused on internal, external, and transactional factors contributing to educator stress (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2017). Current researchers have addressed strategies to mitigate stress (Bottiani et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2019; Crum et al., 2017; Klusmann et al., 2021a; Kuok et al., 2020; Maas et al.,

2021; Mérida-López et al., 2017). There is a need for more research in this area due to the interruptions in education in the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years (Pressley & Ha, 2022). The national teacher attrition rate in 1992 was 5.1% and grew to 8.4% in 2008 (NCES, 1992, 2008). This growth rate created 125,000 new positions in education between 1992 and 2008 (NCES, 1992, 2008). The national teacher attrition rate has remained close to 8% since 2008 (NCES, 2008). This percentage is likely to grow following the COVID-19 pandemic, but the exact percentage is not available to date. The National Center for Educational Statistics has reported that 44% of public schools are looking to fill vacancies, and 61% of those schools cited the pandemic as the cause for the vacancies (NCES, 2022). In fact, the National Education Association stated that there were 389,300 fewer teachers in January of 2022 than in February of 2020 (Patterson, 2022).

Historical Context

Occupational stress has affected educators since the establishment of the first classrooms, but the phenomenon first appeared in research literature in the 1970s (Coates & Thoresen, 1976; Dunham, 1976; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). In the 1970s, several researchers examined educator stress (Coates & Thoresen, 1976; Dunham, 1976; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). Using a sample of British educators, researchers identified sources of high stress (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). Sources included (a) pupils' poor attitudes toward work, (b) trying to uphold/maintain values and standards, and (c) covering lessons for absent teachers (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978). Other studies also identified sources of high stress and anxiety in educators, including (a) time demands, (b) difficulties with pupils, (c) increased class size enrollments, (d) financial constrictions, and (e) lack of educational resources (Coates & Thoresen, 1976).

Research on educator stress in the 1980s listed several similar sources of occupational stress (Brenner & Bartell, 1984; Cole & Walker, 1989; Kyriacou, 1987; Raschke et al., 1985;

Saville, 1981; Worrall & May, 1989). Maslach and Jackson (1981) investigated the concept of occupational stress and burnout for individuals working in human service professions. They emphasized the strain associated with jobs that require working and caring for people. They posited that occupational burnout was leading to increased job turnover, increased absenteeism, and low morale in these human service professions.

The literature on occupational stress and burnout continued to grow in the 1990s (Cecil & Forman, 1990; Dunham & Varma, 1998; Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991; Travers & Cooper, 1996; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). Scholars continued to focus on sources of stress and mitigation techniques, with an emphasis on proactive strategies (Cecil & Forman, 1990; Dunham & Varma, 1998; Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991; Travers & Cooper, 1996; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). Then with the establishment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate, educators faced a new source of stress. Several researchers have discussed the increased pressure on educators to produce adequate testing results, creating an additional source of stress (Abrams et al., 2003; Berryhill et al., 2009; Kruger et al., 2007; Mulvenon et al., 2005). New external factors emerged from research such as teacher evaluation policies, teacher effectiveness, principal effectiveness, and merit pay (Nguyen et al., 2020). The phenomenon of educator stress and burnout is multidimensional and has received much attention over the last 30 years. According to a Gallup poll, teaching is now tied with nursing as the most stressful occupation (Gallup Organization, 2014). A large-scale quantitative study conducted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (N = 2,775,974) has revealed higher levels of anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation in educators (N = 134,693) than in other careers such as healthcare professionals and office workers (Kush et al., 2022).

Social Context

The phenomenon of educator stress and burnout is tied to absenteeism and staffing shortages. This problem affects students, their families, and educational stakeholders. Absenteeism and staffing shortages decrease classroom effectiveness and reduce student achievement (Herman et al., 2018; Oberle et al., 2020). In this study, I explored occupational stress and burnout in elementary educators following prolonged school closures due to COVID-19, identifying the factors contributing to stress as a first step in mitigating absenteeism and staffing shortages. Promoting educator well-being might be a critical step in improving student achievement (Herman et al., 2018).

Absenteeism is a concern for educational stakeholders, and occupational stress and burnout are major components related to this problem. Several researchers have focused on the high stress levels associated with chronic educator absenteeism (Howard & Howard, 2020; Karppinen et al., 2021; Peele & Wolf, 2021). Physical and mental health factors likely contribute to high levels of absenteeism in educators (Howard & Howard, 2020; Karppinen et al., 2021; Peele & Wolf, 2021). Scholars have found that educator absenteeism is a serious concern for student achievement (Karppinen et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2008). The investigators of a U.S. study found "that 10 additional days of teacher absence reduced fourth-graders' mathematics achievement by 3.3% of a standard deviation" (Miller et al., 2008, p. 82). Furthermore, financial costs are associated with chronic absenteeism (Peele & Wolf, 2021). School districts must use extra resources, including substitute teachers, to provide instruction while the educator is out of the classroom.

Current researchers have analyzed the teacher labor market (Sutcher et al., 2019). Staffing shortages occur when there is a disproportionate number of qualified educators to fill the vacancies within a school district (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutcher et al.,

2019). The demand for qualified educators becomes more than the supply of qualified educators. The research literature outlines four areas related to teacher demand (Sutcher et al., 2019). Those areas include (a) student enrollment, (b) pupil-teacher ratios, (c) retirement attrition, and (d) preretirement attrition (Sutcher et al., 2019). Compared to other occupations, educators are leaving the field at startling rates (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017). Teacher supply is measured by new entrants and re-entrants into the field (Sutcher et al., 2019). Much of the problem lies in low numbers of entrants and preretirement attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). Sutcher et al. (2019) stated that "the number of college freshmen entering the field of education has been the lowest proportion of students considering teaching in the last 45 years" (p. 19). From 2008 to 2014, 200,000 fewer college students entered the field of education (NCES, 2008, 2014; United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2015).

Attrition is calculated as the number of educators who leave the field each year. Eight percent of educators leave the field of teaching each year, and only one third of those teachers are leaving due to retirement (Sutcher et al., 2019). A national shortage of about 112,000 teachers occurred in the 2017–2018 school year (NCES, 2018). That same year, they reported that another 109,000 teachers were uncertified in the subject area that they were teaching and working under emergency certifications (NCES, 2018). With current trends, the number of classroom vacancies is estimated to grow each year (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). Occupational stress and burnout directly affect the national attrition levels, contributing to absenteeism and staffing shortages. Reducing attrition rates to between 4–6% could help to balance teacher supply and demand, thus reducing shortages (Sutcher et al.,

2019). These high levels of absenteeism and staffing shortages affect instructional outcomes for students and come at a cost to the community.

Theoretical Context

Most of the current research on educator stress and burnout has focused on the seminal research of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Lazarus (1991). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed the transactional model of stress and coping. The transactional model of stress and coping theorizes that an individual's ability to cope with a stressful situation is based on the individual's interactions with the environment. Lazarus (1991) developed the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion. The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion explains how individuals process emotions beginning with a thought, or cognition.

Lazarus worked in the field of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley (University of California, San Francisco, 2021). He conducted research on emotions by studying participants' reactions to film clips. Lazarus's work was seminal because it went against the prominent behaviorist theory of B.F. Skinner (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus believed that cognition was strongly tied to emotion (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Folkman began studying stress and coping under Lazarus, and eventually went on to conduct research on the stress of caregivers of AIDS patients (University of California, San Francisco, 2021). Both theorists' work was influenced by cognitive psychologists such as Piaget (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described how an individual appraises a stressful situation. Subsequently, the individual determines if they have the resources to handle the situation. Recent research points to both internal factors (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022), external factors (Lambert et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; von der Embse et al., 2015), and transactional factors (Klusmann et al., 2021a; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021) that cause

occupational stress and burnout. Both the transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion explain how individuals process emotions and subsequently determine if resources are available to cope with the situation (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This study addressed how the school closures of 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 have impacted educators and their resources to cope with occupational stress (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). This study added to the existing body of literature on occupational stress and burnout by identifying new sources of stress for educators due to interruptions in education.

Problem Statement

The problem that inspired this study was that occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators is leading to absenteeism and staff shortages, potentially caused by mental and physical illness. There is some research linking occupational stress to physical health (Catalina-Romero et al., 2013; Pogosova et al., 2015; Steptoe, 2000; Steptoe & Kivimäki, 2012). The problem is cyclical in nature because when there are staffing shortages, it is likely that other educators will pick up the extra workload. Scholars have proposed that occupational stress and burnout contribute to negative student outcomes as well as adverse outcomes for the school system (Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl). The occupational stress and burnout of educators creates several negative consequences for children (Herman et al., 2018; Oberle et al., 2020). Educator burnout is related to quality of instruction, disciplinary referrals, student achievement, and the physical and mental health of students (Eddy et al., 2020; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Occupational stress also affects the entire school system (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). School districts suffer financial burdens when constantly replacing teachers

(Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). Occupational stress and burnout impact educators' physical and mental health as well (Aloe et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Ryan et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Recent researchers have identified sources of occupational stress and burnout in educators (Aloe et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Ryan et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Scholars have identified standard sources of stress that have impacted teachers for decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new sources of stress for educators, particularly the reduction of staff members. Recent articles pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic cite stress, anxiety, and depression as increasing concerns for educators (Federkeil et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). The authors of two studies cited the need for explanatory, qualitative research in this area (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). Both studies quantitively measured occupational stress and anxiety in educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, but stated the need for more explanatory, qualitative research to determine the factors creating additional stress for educators (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). A gap in the literature exists pertaining to occupational stress and burnout for educators in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 elementary educators in central Pennsylvania. For the purposes of this research, occupational stress was defined as job-related demands that exceed the resources available for support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Occupational burnout describes the experience of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Significance of the Study

This study has theoretical, empirical, and practical significance. The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion advanced by Lazarus (1991) served as the theoretical frameworks for this study. Both the transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion explain how individuals cognitively process the demands within their environment. The current study contributed to the empirical literature on occupational stress and burnout by investigating occupational stress following prolonged school closures. This study had a practical significance, as the findings demonstrated pathways to improve school conditions, beginning with teacher well-being.

Theoretical Significance

This study contributed to theoretical understanding because I examined how K–2 educators appraise environmental resources to cope. The person-environment relationship is evident in primary appraisal when an individual is determining the stakes of a situation, and in secondary appraisal when an individual is determining if they have the appropriate resources to cope with the situation (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Occupational stress and burnout are tied to chronic absenteeism, staff shortages, and teacher attrition. The lived experiences of K–2 educators described throughout the study support the chosen theoretical frameworks.

Empirical Significance

Previous researchers have focused on the sources of occupational stress in educators showing internal, external, and transactional factors can contribute to educator stress (Aloe et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Ryan et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Others have focused on the impact of occupational stress on students (Eddy

et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl). Some researchers have focused on the impact on the school system (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). This hermeneutic phenomenological study contributed to the literature by exploring how occupational stress in educators has changed in recent years.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of this study is the development of a better understanding of how to improve conditions within school systems. Student success is tied to the well-being of their educators (Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl). Teacher well-being is tied to improved instructional quality (Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b), decreased disciplinary referrals (Eddy et al., 2020), and an increase in positive school climate (Ryan et al., 2017). There is a rising demand for elementary education teachers, a popular certification area in previous years (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Researchers have stated that retaining current teachers and reducing attrition rates from 8% to 6% would eliminate national teacher shortages (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The findings of this study provided insight into the experiences of K–2 educators and contributed to the growing empirical literature on occupational stress and burnout.

Research Questions

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lives of current K–2 educators. The study described the lived experiences of these educators, focusing on occupational stress and burnout. The following questions guided this research study.

Central Research Question: How has occupational stress and burnout contributed to the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania postpandemic?

Subquestion 1: How do K–2 educators describe their experiences with changes to instruction in recent years?

Subquestion 2: How do K–2 educators describe their experiences with staffing shortages?

Subquestion 3: How do K–2 educators describe how the experience has changed working with children given the impact of the past 3 school years?

Definitions

1. *Attrition* – the action of leaving the field of education for one reason or another (Sutcher et al., 2019).
2. *Depersonalization* – a phase of occupational burnout characterized by cynicism and detachment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).
3. *Emotional exhaustion* – a phase of occupational burnout characterized by lack of energy and chronic fatigue (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).
4. *Lack of personal accomplishment* – a phase of occupational burnout characterized by feelings of low self-worth (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).
5. *Occupational burnout* – a state of mind that occurs after periods of prolonged stress; includes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).
6. *Protective factors* - strategies or factors that alleviate the symptoms of occupational stress and burnout (Taxer et al., 2017).

Summary

In this chapter, a current problem in education has been articulated. Occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators is leading to absenteeism and staff shortages. Educational stakeholders should be concerned with alleviating occupational stress to improve classroom

conditions. Educators who are under chronic stress cannot perform their duties proficiently. Occupational stress is related to a decrease in the quality of instruction, an increase in student disciplinary referrals, a decrease in student achievement, and an increase in concerns for the physical and mental health of students and educators (Eddy et al., 2020; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Occupational burnout leads to attrition, which is a financial burden for school districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). A gap in the literature exists pertaining to occupational stress and burnout for K–2 educators in the aftermath of the school closures in 2019–2020 and 2021–2022. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 elementary educators in central Pennsylvania following prolonged school closures.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the problem of educator well-being, specifically occupational stress and burnout in educators. In this chapter, I present a review of the current literature related to occupational stress and burnout faced by educators. In the first section, the transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion are discussed, followed by a definition of occupational burnout, including the three phases of burnout. After that, a synthesis of recent literature on stress, anxiety, and burnout in the teaching profession is included. Sources of educator stress are identified. Internal, external, and transactional factors contributing to stress are addressed, as well as the impact on the educational system. Finally, I discuss the protective factors to alleviate teacher stress and subsequent burnout. At the conclusion, a gap in the literature is identified, justifying the need for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion advanced by Lazarus (1991) served as the theoretical frameworks for this study. Each theory provides perspective on occupational stress and burnout. Both the transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion explain how individuals cognitively process the demands within their environment.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provided seminal research on stress and coping. Drawing on a constructivist perspective, they developed the transactional model of stress and coping. The

transactional model of stress and coping theorizes that an individual's ability to cope with a stressful situation is based on the individual's interactions with the environment. This person-environment relationship is the central focus of the theory. Cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors interact to produce a response to stress. The transactional model of stress and coping theorizes that an individual cognitively appraises the stakes of a situation (primary appraisal), and then the individual decides whether they have the resources to manage the situation (secondary appraisal).

Primary appraisal occurs at the onset of a stress-inducing situation. An individual assesses the demands or stakes of the situation. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), three types of primary appraisal exist: *irrelevant*, *benign-positive*, and *stressful*. An irrelevant appraisal means that the situation is neither harmful nor beneficial for the individual. A benign-positive appraisal occurs when the individual benefits from the stress-inducing situation, and a stressful appraisal demonstrates that a situation is either threatening or challenging. Primary appraisal is a cognitive function that assesses the demands of a situation.

Secondary appraisal occurs as an individual decides whether they have the resources to cope with the stress-inducing situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The interaction of primary appraisal and secondary appraisal determines the level of stress. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), three types of secondary appraisal exist: *blame or credit*, *coping potential*, and *future expectations*. An individual might assess a stressful situation and assign either blame or credit. Coping potential is the individual's assessment of whether they have the resources to handle the situation, while future expectations are an individual's assessment of what will happen after the threat or challenge. Taken together, primary appraisal and secondary appraisal determine the strength of the reaction.

Current theories on educator stress and coping cite the seminal work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in this field of knowledge (Crum et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2020; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The transactional model of stress and coping has advanced the literature on educator stress and coping because it proposes a logical explanation for the coping process. The theory details how an educator appraises the demands of a situation and determines possible coping strategies. The transactional model of stress and coping supports this research project because it provides a theory suggesting how K–2 educators process the demands of their occupation and cope with those demands. This study extended the transactional model of stress and coping. I detailed how educators appraised stress following school closures due to COVID-19 and outlined coping strategies and resources to alleviate educator stress following these school closures.

Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory of Emotion

The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion posits that emotions are complex and have a cognitive aspect, a motivational aspect, and a relational aspect (Lazarus, 1991). According to the theory, the cognition is a precondition for emotion, and the thought always comes before the emotion is experienced. The theory proposes that motivation is a disposition that an individual brings to every situation and is the basis for achieving goals. Under the theory, relational refers to the person-environment relationship that is at the root of every emotion. The theory offers multiple examples of core relational themes experienced by human beings. For example, “desiring reciprocated affection from another valued person” is a core relational theme for love or “being slighted or demeaned” is a core relational theme for anger (Lazarus, 1991, p. 826). Emotions are tied to core relational themes in an individual’s life.

Essentially, the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion posits that emotions are complex and that the three elements cannot be separated from each other (Lazarus, 1991).

The three constructs come together during every emotional experience. The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion has advanced current research literature on occupational stress in educators. The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion proposes that educators have an initial cognition during a stressful situation. The theory proposes that educators are motivated to respond based on their relationship with the environment. The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion provides a framework for understanding stress and burnout within this study. The K–2 educators within this study experienced a cognitive process prior to the development of emotion. In this study, the person-environment relationship was an important factor in the assessment of occupational stress. The motivational aspect determined if participants persisted through difficult circumstances. This study extended the theory by demonstrating how individuals process stress as an emotion following school closures (due to COVID-19).

Related Literature

Occupational stress and burnout have been extensively studied in current literature. As a construct, occupational stress was first noted by Maslach and Jackson (1981) in reference to individuals working in human service careers. Since then, the study of occupational stress and burnout has carried over into the field of education. In recent years, educational researchers have become interested in the concept of teacher well-being. Educators face high levels of psychological and physical stress (Vagaeva et al., 2020). Work-related burnout can be associated with hypertension, hyperlipidemia, cardiovascular disease, digestive physiological response, and mortality (Ahola et al., 2010; Camacho et al., 2021). Current researchers have reported a correlation between reduced teacher well-being and negative educational outcomes for children (Arens & Morin, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle

& Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). The literature focuses on occupational burnout (Bottiani et al., 2019; Chang, 2009; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Solomon & Lambie, 2020; Teles et al., 2020), sources of educator stress (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Solomon & Lambie, 2020), the impact on education (Arens & Morin, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021; Sutcher et al., 2019), and protective factors for educators (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2019; Crum et al., 2017; Daniilidou et al., 2020; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Kuok et al., 2020; Maas et al., 2021; Mérida-López et al., 2017; Oliveira et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Roberts et al., 2020; Smetackova et al., 2019; Tarrasch et al., 2020; Taxer et al., 2017; Zhao & Ding, 2020).

Occupational Burnout

Maslach and Jackson (1981) studied the phenomenon of occupational stress in human service professionals. Their seminal work determined that individuals, who work in a field where there is a responsibility to care for other people, can become more susceptible to occupational stress and burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Maslach and Jackson stated that burnout is quite frequent for individuals who dedicate their life to working with people. Prolonged periods of stress lead to occupational burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Current studies on educator stress and burnout reference this seminal research (Aloe et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Ryan et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Definition of Occupational Burnout

Maslach and Jackson (1981) delineated three phases of stress: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion occurs when an individual feels drained and depleted of their resources (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The individual might feel that they have nothing left to give to others (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion is frequently studied in educational research (Corbin et al., 2019; Donker et al., 2020; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Maas et al., 2021; Taxer et al., 2017). Depersonalization is characterized by cynicism and negative attitudes (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The individual does not appear to care about the others they are interacting with daily (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Finally, a lack of personal accomplishment occurs when the individual no longer feels like they are being productive (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The individual begins to feel as if someone else could perform their job requirements more satisfactorily (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Maslach and Jackson (1981) cite that occupational burnout is a major factor in the decision for an individual to leave their job. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was created to assess the degree to which individuals are experiencing occupational burnout. The scale has three subscales, which align to the three phases of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment subscales function separately and should not be calculated as a composite score (Gilmour et al., 2022; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). Educators may score high in one category and low in another category, or vice versa (Gilmour et al., 2022; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). Educators can have high levels of emotional exhaustion while still maintaining high levels of personal accomplishment (Gilmour et al., 2022). The three constructs should be viewed separately (Gilmour et al., 2022; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). The MBI is used in current research

pertaining to educator stress and burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Ryan et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Demographic Variables

Current research provides mixed conclusions regarding the demographic variables of educators who suffer from occupational stress and burnout (Bottiani et al., 2019; Chang, 2009; Solomon & Lambie, 2020; Teles et al., 2020). Female educators reported higher levels of perceived stress than did male educators (Teles et al., 2020). Female educators often report higher levels of emotional exhaustion, while male educators report higher levels of depersonalization (Bottiani et al., 2019; Chang, 2009). Age and experience impact reported levels of occupational stress (Teles et al., 2020). These researchers found that female educators in the middle of their careers reported the highest levels of perceived stress (Teles et al., 2020). Female educators with more than 10 years of experience but less than 30 years of experience had the highest emotional exhaustion scores (Teles et al., 2020). A recent study of Italian educators found that educators under the age of 37 had the lowest levels of emotional exhaustion (Luisa et al., 2020). Notably, the same study found that diminished social prestige has contributed to educator stress and burnout (Luisa et al., 2020). Urban educators are at risk for higher levels of occupational stress and burnout than their rural counterparts (Camacho et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2018). Urban educators face additional challenges such as poverty, discrimination, community violence, over-crowding, and limited resources (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Camacho et al., 2021; Dorado et al., 2016; Shernoff et al., 2011). A qualitative study on Hispanic elementary school educators found that minority educators are leaving the profession at a higher rate than other educators (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). Minority teachers entered the field of education at higher rates, but also left the profession at higher rates than other teachers (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015).

Suppression

Several recent studies have pointed out the detrimental effects of suppressing emotions (Bi & Ye, 2021; Donker et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). These studies describe the emotional labor of teaching (Bi & Ye, 2021; Donker et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Teaching involves the use of emotional resources (Zhang et al., 2022). According to this research, educators working in early elementary settings often suppress their true emotions to conform to social expectations (Bi & Ye, 2021; Donker et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). This form of emotional suppression leads to emotional dissonance, or a conflict between what a person feels and what a person displays (Donker et al., 2020). Educators in the K–2 setting are expected to be upbeat and enthusiastic (Bi & Ye, 2021; Donker et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Researchers have suggested that expressing emotions can be more beneficial than suppressing emotions but recognize that early elementary educators have different standards of conduct than professionals in other areas (Donker et al., 2020). Although the studies are correlational in design, they point out some interesting findings on emotional suppression and its relationship to emotional exhaustion (Bi & Ye, 2021; Donker et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Trait mindfulness research was conducted on Chinese educators (Bi & Ye, 2021). Trait mindfulness refers to an individual's ability to stay focused on the present and is considered a personality characteristic (Bi & Ye, 2021). This research demonstrated that trait mindfulness could potentially be a factor that could reduce emotional exhaustion in educators (Bi & Ye, 2021). Trait mindfulness allowed educators to reconcile the emotional dissonance created by suppression (Bi & Ye, 2021). Trait mindfulness can be cultivated in educators (Bi & Ye, 2021). Current research has explored how educators can regulate emotions to avoid emotional exhaustion, the first phase of occupational burnout (Donker et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Both studies found that emotional labor and emotional dissonance created negative impacts on educators (Donker et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022).

Sources of Occupational Stress

Occupational stress leading to burnout is well documented in the literature (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Solomon & Lambie, 2020). Research studies of the past have investigated the factors that cause occupational burnout. Recent research points to both internal factors (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Solomon & Lambie, 2020), external factors (Lambert et al., 2018; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; von der Embse et al., 2015), and transactional factors (Klusmann et al., 2021a; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021) that cause occupational stress and burnout.

Various internal, external, and transactional factors have been investigated in the research literature (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Solomon & Lambie, 2020; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021; von der Embse et al., 2015). In most educational situations, various factors contributing to stress come together at once (Herman et al., 2020). Researchers provide three pathways associated with educator stress (Herman et al., 2020). The three pathways include *coping*, *competence*, and *context* (Herman et al., 2020). Interpersonal qualities, mindset, and coping strategies are the critical aspects of the *coping* pathway (Herman et al., 2020). The *coping* pathway highlights how educators process stress in their environment (Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2019). The *competence* pathway highlights the cyclical nature of educator stress (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020). The *competence* pathway demonstrates how educator stress interacts with classroom practices (Aloe et al., 2014;

Bottiani et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020). For example, an educator who is under stress might lack classroom management skills which might lead to student misbehavior. Student misbehavior might cause more educator stress. The problem continues in a cycle (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019). The *context* pathway focuses on external factors contributing to educator stress (Bottiani et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2017). These factors include the school context, the societal context, building level factors, and state and national education policy (Bottiani et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2017). The various sources of stress discussed in the next section fall into the 3C framework presented by Herman et al. (2020). Various factors can overlap to create occupational stress in educators (Herman et al., 2020). There is not always a clear path for determining the sources of occupational stress (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2017).

Internal Factors

Several internal factors contribute to occupational stress and burnout in educators. Internal factors are concentrated on the educator as an individual, as well as classroom climate (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Dos Santos, 2021; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Solomon & Lambie, 2020; Turner & Thielking, 2019; Turner et al., 2022). Workload and time pressure are factors leading to emotional exhaustion in educators (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Solomon & Lambie, 2020). In a phenomenological study on occupational stress in Hispanic educators, the researchers found that educators suffered from complex feelings of guilt related to their job (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). Participants cited feeling guilty about time pressures and workload (Solomon & Lambie,

2020). Participants felt that the teaching workload made them less effective in their careers as well as in their personal lives (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the workload for many educators (Chen, 2022; Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). Unconventional teaching methods have increased the workload for educators worldwide (Chen, 2022; Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021).

Disruptive student behavior is a source of emotional exhaustion for educators (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019). Interestingly, both research studies mention the reciprocal nature of disruptive behavior in students (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019). Disruptive behavior can lead to increased educator stress, but increased educator stress can also lead to disruptive behavior (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019). Educators who are suffering from prolonged stress and burnout can become apathetic regarding classroom management strategies (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019). Research was conducted on classroom management as a factor related to emotional exhaustion (Gilmour et al., 2022), with results confirming that emotional exhaustion is correlated with classroom management practices, and that the relationship is reciprocal in nature (Gilmour et al., 2022). Effective classroom management strategies are critical for students with emotional/behavioral disorders, and administrators should direct resources to support educators in circumstances of emotional exhaustion (Gilmour et al., 2022).

In an experimental study, large class sizes and large percentages of students with low socioeconomic status were sources of stress for teachers in urban areas (Bottiani et al., 2019). Educators in urban school districts face additional challenges such as poverty, discrimination, community violence, over-crowding, and limited resources (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Camacho et al., 2021; Dorado et al., 2016; Shernoff et al., 2011). Turnover rates for urban educators often

exceed 40% due to working conditions and the additional factors that contribute to stress in urban education (Barnes et al., 2007). In a qualitative study on personal and contextual factors related to educator stress, the researchers found that urban educators cited higher levels of stress and burnout than educators from rural counties (Richards et al., 2018).

In a recent study on emotional exhaustion, threats to individual work identity and collective work identity emerged as sources of stress for educators (Nordhall et al., 2020). Educators view themselves not only as the teacher, but also collectively as the school (Nordhall et al., 2020). Negative comments about teachers in general and comments directed toward the school impact educator stress because of this collective work identity (Nordhall et al., 2020). In a qualitative study conducted on 28 Midwestern educators, researchers found that the school environment was a critical factor contributing to stress levels (Richards et al., 2018). Educators who perceived their school environment to be nurturing reported less stress than educators who perceived their school environment to be combative and constraining (Richards et al., 2018). School climate is measured as a factor contributing to stress in much of the research on educator stress and burnout (Herman et al., 2021; Ramberg et al., 2020; Saeki et al., 2018; von der Embse et al., 2019). In line with transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion, environmental factors interact with individuals to determine levels of stress and coping (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Several recent phenomenological studies have investigated the impacts of occupational stress on educators (Dos Santos, 2021; Solomon & Lambie, 2020; Turner & Thielking, 2019; Turner et al., 2022). Research on the lived experiences of 60 kindergarten educators who left the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic provided insight into the phenomenon of occupational stress in educators (Dos Santos, 2021). Core themes such as family consideration,

environmental factors, and financial considerations related to the kindergarten educator attrition were identified (Dos Santos, 2021). The lived experiences of Hispanic elementary educators were observed in recent phenomenological research (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). Researchers found several core themes related to occupational stress (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). The core themes included: (a) general stress, (b) emotional stress, (c) cultural stress, (d) coping skills, and (e) recommendations for administrators (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). This research pointed out that minority educators potentially face additional forms of stress compared to their nonminority peers. Additional forms of stress may be created by overt and covert discrimination, language barriers, and discrepancies in cultural values (Solomon & Lambie, 2020).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, primary educators faced additional stress due to the use of technology with young children who lacked advanced technological skill (Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020). Unsettling work schedules, implementation of new initiatives, workload, and communication with parents were identified as sources of stress for educators (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Researchers articulated that educators faced stress before the COVID-19 pandemic but propose that the unexpected challenges of accommodating all learners has created new forms of occupational stress (Pressley & Ha, 2022).

External Factors

According to several recent studies, educational policy is an external factor creating occupational stress and burnout for educators (Lambert et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; von der Embse et al., 2015). External factors are considered factors outside of the educator's control, for example state policy and testing standards (Lambert et al., 2018; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; von der Embse et al., 2015). A nationally representative study using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics 2007–2008 Schools and Staffing Survey

was conducted (Lambert et al., 2018; NCES, 2008). Researchers found that states with higher accountability indices had elementary teachers reporting higher levels of workplace stress (Lambert et al., 2018). This study provides strong empirical evidence that accountability measures affect educator stress and burnout (Lambert et al., 2018). The study holds strength because it used a large, random sample (N = 11,850) that included members from all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia (Lambert et al., 2018).

Recent studies provide empirical evidence that testing pressure affects teachers' well-being (Ryan et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Research points to evidence that testing pressure can lead to teacher stress, attrition, migration, and burnout (Ryan et al., 2017). Current research provides evidence that a learning goal structure, as opposed to a performance goal structure, leads to higher levels of teacher self-efficacy and lower levels of stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Testing pressure affects K–2 educators, even though their students are not actually taking standardized accountability tests (Saeki et al., 2018). In a study spanning three states, researchers found a strong correlation between educator stress and test environment stress within the school, demonstrating that even K–2 educators feel the impacts of accountability measures (Saeki et al., 2018). In fact, accountability policies were clinically linked to anxiety in educators (von der Embse et al., 2015). While these four studies are correlational in design, they provide some empirical evidence that accountability measures are impacting educators (Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; von der Embse et al., 2015). In the qualitative study on 28 Midwestern educators referenced earlier, it was established that testing pressure and the teacher evaluation processes contributed to occupational stress (Richards et al., 2018). The findings of various studies (Lambert et al., 2018; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al.,

2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; von der Embse et al., 2015) have demonstrated that testing pressure and accountability measures create stress for educators.

Transactional Factors

Based on the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Chang (2009) proposed a third dimension of educator stress and burnout. Transactional factors of stress are educator perceptions regarding occupational stress (Chang, 2009). Transactional factors include educator attributions and judgements and are related to educator self-concept and self-efficacy (Chang, 2009). Transactional factors are school level factors (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). Two current studies have investigated transactional factors of stress and burnout (Klusmann et al., 2021b; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). Researchers conducted an extensive literature review on school context, followed by a correlational study examining the school context as it relates to educator stress and burnout in Belgium (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). The study included international data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). Researchers compared educator burnout to student socioeconomic status, rates of verbal abuse, and overall school culture (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). The results of both the extensive literature review and the research study demonstrate that the relationship between school context and educator stress is hard to conceptualize due to the transactional nature of the factors (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). Empirical evidence related to school context is scarce and should be investigated in further studies (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021).

Researchers have investigated transactional factors related to emotional exhaustion in educators (Klusmann et al., 2021b). Researchers conducted a correlational study on the daily life experiences (hassles and uplifts) of 141 German educators (Klusmann et al., 2021b). The results of the study found a pattern indicating that daily hassles and daily uplifts related to time and

physical health were indicators of emotional exhaustion in educators (Klusmann et al., 2021b). The study examined overall aspects of life experience and was not limited to work experience (Klusmann et al., 2021b). Notably, the findings revealed that participants with more health-related issues had higher overall levels of emotional exhaustion than participants reporting fewer health-related issues (Klusmann et al., 2021b). This finding is in line with the notion of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999; Emmons & Diener, 1985). Subjective well-being (SWB) consists of three primary components: *life satisfaction*, *positive affect*, and *negative affect* (Diener et al., 1999; Emmons & Diener, 1985). An individuals' assessment of their overall quality of life is measured as SWB (Diener et al., 1999; Emmons & Diener, 1985). The COVID-19 pandemic had an enormous impact on individuals' assessment of their SWB (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021).

Impact on Education

A considerable amount of research has been dedicated to determining the impacts of occupational stress and burnout (Arens & Morin, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021; Sutcher et al., 2019). Occupational stress and burnout are detrimental for students (Arens & Morin, 2016; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021). Having a teacher who suffers from stress or burnout has severe consequences for children. Several scholars have cited negative outcomes for students (Arens & Morin, 2016; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021). Occupational stress and burnout may impact emotional well-being, quality of instruction, disciplinary sanctions, and even the

physical well-being of students (Arens & Morin, 2016; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021). The occupational stress and burnout that educators face also impacts the school environment (Barnes et al., 2007; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). Numerous studies have assessed the ramifications of educator burnout and attrition on the school systems, particularly the financial burden (Barnes et al., 2007; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Negative Outcomes for Students

Two recent studies focused on the emotional impact associated with educator stress and burnout (Herman et al., 2018; Oberle et al., 2020). In one study, the authors assessed the emotional well-being of teachers from a teacher perspective (Herman et al., 2018), while the other scholars assessed the emotional well-being of teachers from a student perspective (Oberle et al., 2020). Both studies focused on students in an elementary school setting (Herman et al., 2018; Oberle et al., 2020). The first study concluded that (a) 3% of teachers could be categorized as high stress level with low coping abilities, (b) 30% of teachers could be categorized as high stress level with moderate coping abilities, and (c) 60% of teachers could be categorized as moderate stress level with high coping abilities (Herman et al., 2018). Only 7% of the 121 teachers surveyed could be categorized as well-adjusted in terms of teacher stress and burnout (Herman et al., 2018). Students who were taught by the 3% of teachers who had high levels of stress and low coping abilities had the lowest academic achievement (Herman et al., 2018). Researchers for this study implied that an “unexamined path” to student achievement might include taking care of teachers’ well-being (Herman et al., 2018, p. 97). The latter study

conducted research in which students, as well as teachers, rated the teachers' social emotional competence (Oberle et al., 2020). The researchers found that teacher burnout has the largest impact on classroom effectiveness (Oberle et al., 2020). These two studies provided strong empirical evidence because they were both experimental studies that were conducted as a part of larger, longitudinal studies (Herman et al., 2018; Oberle et al., 2020).

Two correlational studies have focused on the emotional impact associated with educator stress and burnout as well (Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021). Data from students and educators in Stockholm, Sweden was collected to study educator stress in secondary schools (Ramberg et al., 2020). Researchers found an association between educator stress, fatigue, and depression and students' school satisfaction (Ramberg et al., 2020). Educators who had high scores on stress, fatigue, and depression inventories ranked low on students' assessments of perceived teacher support (Ramberg et al., 2020). Researchers speculate that high levels of stress and low levels of self-efficacy influence educators to withdraw from student relationships, a sign of depersonalization (Ramberg et al., 2020). A second study focused on support from colleagues as related to educator stress (Ramberg et al., 2021). Sense of coherence (SOC) was defined as an individual's understanding of the meaning of their life's work (Ramberg et al., 2021). Researchers found that colleagues with a high sense of SOC could positively influence each other (Ramberg et al., 2021). It is also possible that colleagues with a low sense of SOC could negatively influence each other, as cited by the stress-contagion theory (Wethington, 2000). Both studies imply that educator stress contributes to negative school climate, which directly influences students (Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021).

Other studies have identified negative impacts on the quality of instruction, disciplinary sanctions, and health and well-being of students (Eddy et al., 2020; Klusmann et al., 2021a,

2021b; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Researchers have demonstrated that teachers' emotional exhaustion is linked to less emotional support for students, and a decrease in classroom organization, both leading to lower levels of instructional quality (Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b). Data from an experimental study was used to examine K–3 student disciplinary sanctions, such as office disciplinary referrals, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension (Eddy et al., 2020). The results revealed that teachers who had high levels of emotional exhaustion were more likely to refer students for office disciplinary referrals as well as in-school suspension (Eddy et al., 2020). Teachers who had high levels of self-efficacy showed significantly less instances of referring students for office disciplinary referrals or out-of-school suspension (Eddy et al., 2020). Exclusionary discipline referrals impact instructional outcomes for students (Eddy et al., 2020). Current researchers have examined the physical impact of occupational stress and burnout (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Using a saliva sample, elementary students' cortisol levels were measured three times throughout the day (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). These researchers conducted a series of assessments on classroom teachers as well (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). The findings of the study infer that there could be a link between teachers' stress levels and neuroendocrine functioning in children (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Empirical evidence in two of the three studies (Eddy et al., 2020; Klusmann et al., 2021a) is strong because of large sample sizes and research design. Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) stated that because of funding, their sample included only 406 students, a relatively small sample for their research design. The study provided weak evidence for the correlation between teacher stress and cortisol levels in children, and the authors state the need for more investigation in this area of study (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

Alleviating educator stress could be a potential pathway for improving student achievement (Pressley & Ha, 2022). In addition to the evidence provided by Eddy et al. (2020) three studies provide empirical evidence that educator stress is associated with student achievement (Arens & Morin, 2016; Dicke et al., 2020; Klusmann et al., 2016). A unique international study of educator job satisfaction was conducted in 32 countries (Dicke et al., 2020). This large-scale study found that the job satisfaction of educators was correlated with disciplinary climate and student achievement (Dicke et al., 2020). Researchers found that both teachers' and principals' job satisfaction was related to student achievement, possibly due to positive school climate (Dicke et al., 2020).

Two current studies were conducted using emotional exhaustion as the independent variable (Arens & Morin, 2016; Klusmann et al., 2016). Emotional exhaustion is the first sign of occupational burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The first study compared educators' emotional exhaustion to student variables such as standardized achievement scores, classroom grades, self-perception, school satisfaction, and perceived teacher support (Arens & Morin, 2016). In this German study of fourth-grade students, the researchers found that higher levels of emotional exhaustion in educators translated to lower average levels of academic achievement (Arens & Morin, 2016). While noting the small effect sizes throughout the study, the latter study found evidence that educators' emotional exhaustion impacted fourth grade students' mathematics scores on standardized achievement tests (Klusmann et al., 2016). Noting the need for more research in this area, researchers point to a possible link between educators' psychological state and student achievement (Klusmann et al., 2016). This study is cited as the first of its kind to directly link educators' well-being to student achievement (Klusmann et al., 2016).

Negative Outcomes for School Systems

Occupational stress and burnout impact the school system (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). Several studies have cited the negative outcomes for school systems (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). Eight percent of teachers leave the profession each year (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), with less than one third of those departures being due to retirement (Sutcher et al., 2019). Recent studies have cited the cost of replacing a teacher anywhere from $17,000 to $20,000, depending on location of the school (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). School systems spend an extensive amount of their budget each year to replace staff members (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). The financial burden of teacher attrition is not the only factor. Stress and burnout in educators potentially create declining school climates (Ryan et al., 2017), high levels of dropout rates (Eddy et al., 2020), and increased absenteeism among staff (Herman et al., 2018).

Protective/Mediating Factors

Current research suggests that there are protective or mediating factors that can alleviate the effects of occupational stress (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2019; Crum et al., 2017; Daniilidou et al., 2020; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Kuok et al., 2020; Maas et al., 2021; Mérida-López et al., 2017; Oliveira et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Roberts et al., 2020; Smetackova et al., 2019; Tarrasch et al., 2020; Taxer et al., 2017; Zhao & Ding, 2020). These factors include improving self-efficacy (Daniilidou et al., 2020; Kuok et al., 2020), peer support (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020), administrative support (Maas et

al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022), positive teacher-student relationships (Corbin et al., 2019; Taxer et al., 2017), mindfulness techniques (Crum et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2017), inquiry-based stress reduction interventions (Landau et al., 2015; Leufke et al., 2013; Lev-Ari et al., 2013; Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017, 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021), and social emotional learning interventions (Oliveira et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020). These factors provide possible suggestions and techniques for helping our nation's educators. Protective factors demonstrate strategies that educational stakeholders can use to improve conditions for educators. Research in this area is on-going, and there is no definitive answer or method for reducing occupational stress for educators.

Self-Efficacy

The literature on occupational stress and burnout emphasizes that educator self-efficacy is a key factor in the burnout syndrome (Daniilidou et al., 2020; Kuok et al., 2020). Self-efficacy is defined as a person's beliefs about their own abilities (Bandura, 1977). Two recent studies have found correlations between self-efficacy and work-related characteristics (Daniilidou et al., 2020; Kuok et al., 2020). Levels of educator attrition are increasing internationally (Daniilidou et al., 2020). Current research on Greek educators revealed that both resilience and self-efficacy enhance coping skills in educators (Daniilidou et al., 2020). In a study conducted with Chinese educators, the authors found that self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of work engagement (Kuok et al., 2020). Researchers noted that educators can experience emotional exhaustion and positive work engagement at the same time; they are independent factors (Kuok et al., 2020).

Peer Support

Social support is defined as a relationship between two individuals, with one role as a giver and the other role as a receiver (Turner et al., 2022). Positive relationships among colleagues can enhance educators' well-being (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019;

Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020). Current research provides evidence that support from colleagues can buffer the effects of occupational stress (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020). An experimental study on teacher stress and burnout in urban middle schools provides evidence that social support is crucial (Bottiani et al., 2019). The results indicated that educators' perceptions of social support from colleagues buffered the effects of occupational stress (Bottiani et al., 2019). In a similar study, researchers found that levels of professional and social-emotional support were tied to urban educator burnout (Camacho et al., 2021). Educators have continuously cited the need for social support from colleagues (Camacho et al., 2021).

A correlational study found that physical activity, social interactions, and time constraints reduced reports of emotional exhaustion in educators (Klusmann et al., 2021b). Similar results were found internationally (Avanzi et al., 2018; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019). This international research provides evidence that social support buffers the effects of occupational stress and burnout in Italian, Swiss, Bangladeshi, and Czechoslovakian educators, respectively (Avanzi et al., 2018; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019). Another recent correlational study was conducted to assess the occupational stress of university professors (Zhao & Ding, 2020). The researchers found correlations suggesting that professors who used coping strategies related to problem-solving and seeking peer support suffered from less emotional exhaustion (Zhao & Ding, 2020). A recent phenomenological study on first year primary school educators during the COVID-19 pandemic found that social support was the key protective factor in alleviating stress and attrition (Chen, 2022). Educators in the

study found opportunities to connect with colleagues during school closures, including holding virtual lunch times (Chen, 2022). The participants in the study cited the extreme need for social support during this time of uncertainty (Chen, 2022).

Phenomenological research related to the PERMA intervention for occupational stress was conducted recently (Turner & Thielking, 2019; Turner et al., 2022). PERMA stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Turner & Thielking, 2019). The PERMA intervention focuses on four strategies: (a) use of an individual's character strengths, (b) social support, (c) work-related attitudes, and (d) focusing on the positive aspects of one's work (Turner & Thielking, 2019). Both phenomenological studies focused on having participants actively provide social support to their colleagues through acts of kindness (Turner & Thielking, 2019; Turner et al., 2022). The studies point to the idea that positive social support is contagious, and that it is beneficial for the givers as well as the receivers (Turner & Thielking, 2019; Turner et al., 2022). Research in the area of social support has demonstrated that social support stimulates self-compassion (Chen, 2022; Lavin et al., 2020; Stallman et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). Self-compassion is a key factor in educator resilience (Chen, 2022).

Administrative Support

Two studies illuminated the power of administrative support (Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022). Administrative support is a mediating and protective factor against occupational stress and burnout for educators (Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022). Using data from a large, longitudinal study, researchers examined teachers' perceived time pressure and emotional exhaustion as well as the protective factor of administrative support (Maas et al., 2021). These authors found that time pressure is related to teachers' emotional exhaustion, and that social support from an administrator can lower teachers' perceived time pressure and emotional exhaustion (Maas et al., 2021). A correlational study was conducted to determine ways to

support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pressley & Ha, 2022). The researchers found that teachers with low administrative support showed low engagement efficacy and higher levels of stress during online teaching throughout the pandemic (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Teachers with high instructional efficacy in virtual teaching strategies showed lower levels of stress (Pressley & Ha, 2022). While both studies were correlational in design, they provided empirical evidence that administrative support could be a resource to buffer the effects of occupational stress and burnout in educators (Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022). Administrators have the capacity to empower educators or demoralize educators (Richards et al., 2018).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Recent studies have provided evidence that positive teacher-student relationships can serve as protective factors against occupational stress and burnout (Corbin et al., 2019; Taxer et al., 2017). Data from a large-scale experimental study on social emotional learning and literacy intervention was used to assess teacher-student relationships (Corbin et al., 2019). The study was based on the 4Rs—reading, writing, respect, and resolution—program for elementary students (Corbin et al., 2019). These researchers examined teacher-reports of personal relationships with individual students compared to the emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Corbin et al., 2019). The results determined that teachers who had higher relational closeness with students demonstrated lower levels of occupational stress and burnout (Corbin et al., 2019). Teachers with high levels of conflict with students demonstrated higher levels of occupational stress and burnout (Corbin et al., 2019). Researchers postulated that building relationships could be an intervention for occupational stress and burnout for educators (Corbin et al., 2019). The experimental design of this study provides strong evidence in support of teacher-student relationships as a mediating factor (Corbin et al., 2019). In a similar study, researchers used a correlational design to study 266

secondary teachers in Oklahoma (Taxer et al., 2017). The role of anger and enjoyment as related to teacher-student relationships was investigated (Taxer et al., 2017). Educators with high levels of enjoyment and low levels of anger demonstrated low levels of emotional exhaustion (Taxer et al., 2017). Both studies provided empirical evidence that close teacher-student relationships provide a protective barrier for teachers in terms of occupational stress and burnout (Corbin et al., 2019; Taxer et al., 2017).

Mindfulness Strategies

Mindfulness strategies (e.g., yoga, meditation, visualization, and breathing techniques) are techniques used to reduce occupational stress and burnout in educators (Crum et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2017). Mindfulness is defined as a state in which the individual pays attention to the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness practices are derived from Buddhist traditions (Tarrasch et al., 2020). According to Buddhist tradition, mindfulness makes an individual consider the suffering of self and others and compassion leads to kindhearted behavior towards others (Tarrasch et al., 2020). Mindfulness is thought to enhance qualities such as kindness, compassion, sympathetic/empathetic joy, and composure (Cullen, 2011). These qualities could lead to enhanced self-efficacy for educators, alleviating occupational stress and burnout symptoms (Tarrasch et al., 2020).

The use of mindfulness interventions for educators is a novel idea. Research is just beginning to explore the use of mindfulness intervention to improve educator well-being (Crum et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2017). There is a need for more empirical research on mindfulness strategies and their long-term effects (Jennings et al., 2019). Small sample sizes, poor research designs, short-term outcomes, and single-time point measures have undermined the strength of current research on mindfulness strategies (Jennings et al., 2019).

Three recent studies have examined the role that changing mindset can have on stress and burnout (Crum et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2017).

Emotional regulation strategies can reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress in educators (Mérida-López et al., 2017). Individuals appraise a situation as either stressful or challenging (Crum et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The challenging mindset takes on a positive perspective for individuals (Crum et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In one current study, the researchers found evidence that a stress-is-enhancing mindset could potentially boost dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate (DHEAS) hormone production and improve physical reactions to stressful situations (Crum et al., 2017). This study will need replication to gain strength because of the small sample size ($N = 113$) of college students and the nonexperimental design, however, the ability to control mindset is established in yet another study (Crum et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019). The long-term impacts of a program that provides mindfulness strategies for educators has found support for mindfulness strategies (Jennings et al., 2019). The Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) program was evaluated using an experiment design, which provides for strong empirical support (Jennings et al., 2019). Researchers found that participation in the CARE program caused educators to have reduced levels of psychological and physical distress (Jennings et al., 2019). The most intriguing aspect of this study was the reduction of physical illness over the course of the 2-year program (Jennings et al., 2019). This study provided the strongest case for including mindfulness strategies within a school system (Jennings et al., 2019).

Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction

The Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR) intervention is a three-step approach that helps participants to cognitively-reframe their thinking (Landau et al., 2015; Leufke et al., 2013; Lev-Ari et al., 2013; Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017, 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). IBSR is a

program that is free of cost and does not require a facilitator, which makes it an intervention that is appealing in the field of education (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020). The IBSR intervention has been used as a meditative strategy for cancer patients (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017). In the first phase of the intervention, participants write down stressful thoughts or feelings (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020). The second phase of the intervention involves participants asking themselves a series of questions to reflect on the stressful event (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020). Finally, in the third phase of the intervention, participants use a strategy to turn the event around and positively reframe it in their mind (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020). In the third phase, the individual is asked to choose three examples of how the event could be turned around so that they can interpret the situation from a different lens (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017). Much like mindfulness strategies, IBSR interventions are thought to improve the subjective well-being of participants (Diener et al., 1999; Emmons & Diener, 1985; Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). IBRS has been practiced in several countries and has been shown to reduce depression and anxiety (Landau et al., 2015; Leufke et al., 2013; Lev-Ari et al., 2013).

Recent scholars have investigated the effectiveness of IBSR intervention (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). These studies provide strong empirical evidence in support of IBSR intervention to alleviate educator stress and burnout (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). A study with an experimental design was conducted to determine if an IBSR intervention could improve conditions for educators (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). The study was conducted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and researchers found that IBSR interventions improved the psychological well-being of educators and improved their ability to be resilient (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). A quasi-experimental study on IBSR intervention was conducted on educators (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020). Researchers found that

participants in the intervention group had less emotional exhaustion and felt a higher sense of personal accomplishment than their counterparts in the control group (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020). A phenomenological study was conducted with eight Israeli educators, with the results indicating that IBSR intervention helped them to feel more centered and focused and gave them the ability to accept reality (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017). Researchers have demonstrated that IBSR intervention is a promising resource to alleviate educator stress and burnout (Landau et al., 2015; Leufke et al., 2013; Lev-Ari et al., 2013; Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017, 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021).

Social Emotional Learning Interventions

Social emotional learning interventions have been implemented for students to promote positive behavior in school settings (Oliveira et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020). Recently, researchers have pointed to the idea that social emotional learning interventions could benefit educators as well (Oliveira et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020). A meta-analysis of 13 research studies focused on social emotional learning interventions for educators in the preK-12 setting (Oliveira et al., 2021). The studies included in this meta-analysis were either quasi-experimental or experimental studies (Oliveira et al., 2021). Researchers found that interventions for teachers improved personal accomplishment and alleviated emotional exhaustion among preK–12 teachers (Oliveira et al., 2021). Researchers have pointed out that the studies with the largest effect sizes customized the interventions to the specific content and specific strategies that would benefit educators (Oliveira et al., 2021).

Although the use of social emotional learning strategies for educators is a novel concept, recent studies provide strong empirical evidence supporting the positive effects of such strategies (Roberts et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020). Both studies were experimental in design and conclude that social emotional learning interventions provide promising results to diminish

occupational stress and burnout in educators (Roberts et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020). Social emotional learning interventions that included coaching and expressive writing helped to alleviate occupational stress and burnout in educators from the treatment group (Roberts et al., 2020). This research implies that coaching may have provided expert support and feedback that enhanced educators sense of self-efficacy (Roberts et al., 2020). These authors suggested that the reflective writing practices provided a positive emotional outlet for participants, allowing them to express their emotions instead of suppressing them (Roberts et al., 2020). In another study, a 20-week social emotional learning intervention allowed educators to develop sharper inter- and intra-personal skills (Tarrasch et al., 2020). The results of the study provided evidence that the intervention group had demonstrated higher levels of teacher well-being and self-efficacy (Tarrasch et al., 2020). The intervention groups also had reduced levels of psychological symptoms (Tarrasch et al., 2020). Social emotional learning interventions provide a promising avenue for providing educators with support.

Summary

Occupational stress and burnout are critical issues in the field of education (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion provide the basis for much of the current research on occupational stress and burnout (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined occupational burnout and identified the three phases of burnout which include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. Numerous studies have identified sources of stress experienced by educators (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Solomon & Lambie,

2020). Internal, external, and transactional factors contribute to educator stress and burnout. The impact on education is evident in the current literature on this topic. Current scholars have proposed that occupational stress and burnout contribute to negative student outcomes as well as adverse outcomes for the school system (Arens & Morin, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). Scholars have reported several protective factors that could lead to improved conditions for educators including improving self-efficacy (Daniilidou et al., 2020; Kuok et al., 2020), peer support (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020), administrative support (Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022), building teacher-student relationships (Corbin et al., 2019; Taxer et al., 2017), mindfulness strategies (Crum et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2017), inquiry-based stress reduction interventions (Landau et al., 2015; Leufke et al., 2013; Lev-Ari et al., 2013; Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017, 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021), and social emotional learning interventions (Oliveira et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020).

The authors of recent articles pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic have cited stress, anxiety, and depression as increasing concerns for educators (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has created new sources of stress and anxiety for this population (Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). Two studies cite the need for additional explanatory, qualitative research in this area (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). A gap in the literature exists pertaining to occupational stress and

burnout for educators following this challenging time. Qualitative research in this area could further explain this phenomenon, to provide more support for educators.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of K–2 elementary school educators in central Pennsylvania. The focus of Chapter Three is to describe the selected methods and procedures for conducting this study. Chapter Three begins with a justification of the choice to use hermeneutic phenomenology as the research design for this study. I will restate the research questions and subquestions, followed by a description of the setting and participants. The interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, and researcher positionality are described. Chapter Three contains detailed descriptions of the procedures for data collection and analysis, providing specific information on the journal entry, semistructured individual interviews, and the focus group interviews. Finally, I outline the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, as well as the ethical considerations for participants.

Research Design

I employed a qualitative phenomenological research approach to capture the essence of teaching K–2 elementary students following the global pandemic. Two quantitative studies provided preliminary findings linking the pandemic to increased stress, anxiety, depression, and exhaustion in educators (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). The studies specifically stated the need for explanatory research in this area (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). Phenomenological research is appropriate for this study because it is explanatory and focuses on the lived experiences of the participants—in this case, K–2 educators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological research design is appropriate when the goal of the research is to explain the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A hermeneutic phenomenological research approach was chosen for this study because of the researcher's

pedagogical orientation as a second-grade educator. Hermeneutic phenomenology is appropriate when the researcher has a pedagogical orientation (van Manen, 1990). The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to create a detailed description of human experience, as met in the lifeworld (van Manen, 1990). The final product of hermeneutic phenomenological research is the creation of descriptive text. The phenomenological text is poetic because it forces the reader to search for deeper meaning (van Manen, 1990). In this study, the phenomenological text conveyed the essence of K–2 elementary educators' lived experiences with stress. This study provided a snapshot of the lived experiences of these educators as they strive to provide adequate education for their students throughout ever-changing circumstances.

Research Questions

The following research questions built an understanding of the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania following school closures (due to COVID-19):

Central Research Question

How has occupational stress and burnout contributed to the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania postpandemic?

Subquestion 1

How do K–2 educators describe their experiences with changes to instruction in recent years?

Subquestion 2

How do K–2 educators describe their experiences with staffing shortages?

Subquestion 3

How do K–2 educators describe how the experience has changed working with children given the impact of the past three school years?

Setting and Participants

The following section details the setting of the study and the demographics of the participants. This study took place within three school districts in central Pennsylvania. All three school districts service students from K-12. Three school districts were used to triangulate the setting. The participants were K–2 elementary educators who have taught over the last three years. Participants shared their pedagogical reflections and experiences in the K–2 setting.

Site

The location of the study was three school districts in central Pennsylvania. Participants were sampled from elementary schools within the three school districts. All three school districts are within the greater Harrisburg, Pennsylvania area and service students from K–12. Pseudonyms were used for the three school districts. The Arden County School District, Brown County School District, and Crouse County School District approved the participation of educators from within their systems.

The Arden County School District is an independent local school district. Within the Arden School District are four elementary schools, two intermediate schools, one middle school, one junior high school, and one high school. The Arden County School District covers an area of 362.3 square miles and enrolls approximately 4,715 students. The district employs a total of 422 full-time educators. Each elementary school is served with one principal and one assistant principal. The Arden County School District was chosen as a location for this study due to convenience. While it was convenient, this district was also a good fit for this research study because it is geographically large and provided diverse populations of students and educators.

The Brown County School District is an independent local school district. Within the Brown County School District there are two elementary schools, one middle school, and two

high schools. The Brown County School District covers an area of 372 square miles and enrolls approximately 2,400 K–12 students. The district employs approximately 60 full-time elementary educators. Each elementary school is served with one principal and one assistant principal. The Brown County School District was a good fit for this research study because the strategies for online education were different than the strategies for online education in other school districts.

The Crouse County School District is an independent local school district. Within the Crouse School District, there are two elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The Crouse County School District covers an area of 226 square miles and enrolls approximately 2,114 students. The district employs approximately 150 full-time educators. Each elementary school is served with one principal and one assistant principal. The Crouse County School District was chosen as a location for this study because the district has a large number of elementary educators who have taught over the last three years. This district was a good fit for this research study because it is geographically large and participants provided diverse perspectives on occupational stress.

Participants

Participants in this study were K–2 elementary educators from within the three school districts. I focused on K–2 elementary educators because primary education is the foundation for future literacy and mathematical skill. The interruptions in education due to school closures in the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years impacted foundational skill development in these students. Additionally, educators in the K–2 setting generally work in self-contained classrooms and are responsible for teaching all subject matter. A self-contained classroom is a classroom where students are taught by one educator throughout the course of the day. There are several criteria for participation in this study and a qualifying question was asked before obtaining participants. Participants had to teach in a self-contained classroom of K–2 students. Participants

were only eligible for the study if they had taught K–2 over the last three school years. If an individual had moved into the school district, they were eligible for participation in the study if their previous occupation included teaching K–2 over the last three school years. The sample included educators who had experienced in-person instruction, virtual instruction, or some form of hybrid instruction in recent years.

A purposeful sample was recruited for this study. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University was obtained prior to the recruitment of participants. Approval from the administrators of the three participating school districts was obtained. District administrators were contacted to inform them of the details of the study and to obtain the contact information of potential participants. A snowball sampling strategy was used to find additional participants that could add valuable input to the research study until data saturation was achieved.

Researcher Positionality

In the following sections, I detail the study's interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions. This research was structured around a social constructivism framework. Social constructivism centers around constructing the meaning of an experience using data from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I explain my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions to position myself within this hermeneutic phenomenological study. Finally, I describe my role as a researcher to be forthcoming with my personal opinions and biases.

Interpretive Framework

The goal of this research was to interpret the lived experiences of K–2 educators regarding occupational stress and burnout. For this reason, I employed a social constructivism framework. Social constructivists seek to understand the world through participants' eyes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They are interested in subjective meanings created in society (Creswell

& Poth, 2018). Social constructivism involves looking at multiple perspectives and analyzing the complexity of views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, I asked broad questions to draw information from the participants. I was interested in the process of the interaction as well as the context in which participants presented information. I used imaginative variation to consider the collected data from multiple perspectives to describe the essence of educator stress. Imaginative variation is the process of looking at the data through multiple lenses to uncover unconventional or unique perspectives of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Philosophical Assumptions

In the following sections, I define my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. These assumptions guide my daily life and informed my research. Many of my beliefs align with Husserl (1931) and van Manen (1990) and their philosophies regarding phenomenology. I positioned myself to be open to the possibilities of varying beliefs and values regarding my participants. I set aside my personal emotions and passions to view the data from an unbiased perspective.

Ontological Assumption

I believe that there is one universal reality established by God. I was raised in a Christian home, and my family attended a Methodist church regularly. I was taught that God is the creator of all things earthly and beyond. God was the central focus of our lives. My family based all decisions on our Christian faith, and strongly believed that God would provide guidance. As the human instrument in this study, I reported on multiple realities as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). Qualitative researchers report multiple perspectives and uncover themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Some of my participants might have had the perception of multiple realities. Although their beliefs may not align with mine, I reported the data using my participants' words and perspectives, as mentioned in Creswell and Poth (2018). Qualitative research involves

providing accurate accounts of participants' voices. In a phenomenological study, the researcher's job is to borrow the experiences of participants to uncover a deeper meaning (van Manen, 1990). As the researcher, I borrowed the lived experiences of other educators to create meaningful descriptions of their realities.

Epistemological Assumption

My epistemological views align with Husserl (1931) and van Manen (1990). Husserl (1931) believed that knowledge was based on intuition. Husserl (1931) posited that the essence of an experience precedes empirical knowledge. As a qualitative researcher, I believe this to be true. I believe that a qualitative researcher can develop a sense of the essence, which precedes any form of numerical data or quantitative analysis. Qualitative research is exploratory and often comes before objective, quantitative research on a topic can take place (Moustakas, 1994). As the human instrument in the study, I used my intuition to ask additional questions and analyze the data. I organized the subjective knowledge in a way that displayed participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I believe that intuition can be used to subjectively observe a phenomenon and interpret an experience.

Axiological Assumption

In qualitative research, the researchers must *position themselves* within the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout this study, my values are known to the reader. The first step in data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology is self-reflection. I bracketed out my personal values and biases to view my data from a naive perspective (Moustakas, 1994). As I progressed with the study, I remained honest and objective, while showing compassion and appreciation to my participants. It is my hope that the readers of this study recognize the integrity of my work. Hermeneutic phenomenological research is never completely free of bias (van Manen, 1990). It is my job as a researcher to convince my readers that I have been upfront about

my personal relationship to the topic in the study. The integrity of the study depends on my ability to remain as objective as possible. Because I am a second-grade educator interested in the lived experience of other K–2 educators, it is important for me to set my opinions aside and seek the truth from the data.

Researcher's Role

I have been a public school, general education teacher for 15 years. For the first 13 years of my career, I taught sixth-grade English language arts in a middle school setting. I have always been interested in how children learn to develop as readers. In my middle school position, I spent a great deal of time teaching children who were fluent readers to make the shift of focusing on comprehension of text. In the 2020–2021 school year, I was asked to teach second grade in an elementary school setting. This was a major career change that I had been interested in for several years. I have always wanted to learn more about how children develop initial reading skills.

When I made the shift from middle school to elementary school, I quickly learned that my elementary school setting was much more demanding than my middle school setting. In middle school, I was responsible for teaching one subject, and I had planning time every day. In elementary school, I was responsible for teaching nine subjects and did not have time set aside for planning every day. In my personal experience, K–2 educators have an enormous number of demands placed on them. I feel that this is mainly due to the foundational skills needed in those grade levels. The global pandemic created various new challenges for educators as well. The educators who I work with often discuss the "old" forms of stress related to their career. These things include workload, parental contact, and student misbehavior. In my opinion, there has been a major shift since the pandemic. Educators have "new" forms of stress related to their career. For this reason, I was interested in exploring the lived experiences of other K–2

educators. I bracketed out my personal experience and really focused on the participants' perspectives.

The participants in this study were not under my supervision. The perspective that I brought to the study was my own personal experience of teaching second grade in the 2020–2021 school year, over the period of prolonged school closures. During the 2020–2021 school year, I taught second grade virtually for several students and for the entire month of December for all students. When students returned to school, I did not feel like our class had made much progress. I had to go back and teach many of the lessons again in person. There was an enormous amount of pressure to keep up with the virtual workload as well as the regular workload. It was extremely frustrating when all the extra work did not produce the desired result, student knowledge of foundational skills. I conducted this study under the assumption that school closures have caused increased occupational stress in K–2 educators in recent years. The data proved this assumption to be correct. The phenomenon of occupational stress has impacted me personally and professionally. Increased responsibilities at work in recent years have increased my own levels of occupational stress. My personal experience influenced my choice for hermeneutic phenomenology because I was interested in the lived experiences of other K–2 educators. My personal experiences also influenced my data collection and data analysis procedures because I decided that I wanted to interview other educators, both independently and as a focus group, to determine whether K–2 educators were having common experiences. Experiencing not only the changes to instruction but the long-term repercussions of school closure made me want to share the stories of my participants, while searching for common themes in their experiences.

This study revealed what demands K–2 educators are currently facing. This is the first step in providing support for educators. The goal of this research was to mitigate absenteeism, staffing shortages, and teacher attrition. Many studies have highlighted the link between teacher wellness and student achievement. Teacher wellness is critically important for students.

Procedures

In this section, I will detail the procedures that were used to conduct this hermeneutic phenomenological study. The process for obtaining permissions are discussed, as well as the recruitment plan. This section describes the general procedures for collecting data from the journal entry, semistructured individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Finally, the data analysis procedures are described.

Permissions

This study took place within three different school districts in central Pennsylvania. I presented the research plan to the administrators of each school district to obtain permission to conduct the study within their districts. Initial permission from the site and building administrators was granted and signed permission was obtained prior to IRB approval (see Appendix B). After receiving approval to complete the study from the IRB at Liberty University (see Appendix A), volunteers for the study were recruited. Administrators received a recruitment letter (see Appendix C). After responding to the recruitment letter, administrators received a permission request letter (see Appendix D) and a permission response letter (see Appendix E) for convenience.

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool was the number of K–2 elementary educators within each school district. The sample pool was identified using the staff directory information listed on each school district's website. The staff directory provides educators' email addresses and the grade

level that they teach. The sample pool consisted of 59 K–2 elementary educators. The overall sample size of the study was 12 participants. Participants were solicited through email communication. I provided participants with a brief overview of the study. A purposeful sampling procedure which included criterion sampling was used. A purposeful sample of participants involves choosing individuals who can address the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling involves choosing participants based on a list of criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criteria for participation included status as a K–2 elementary educator for a minimum of three years. A qualifying question (see Appendix G) was asked when recruiting participants. Snowball sampling procedures were utilized to find individuals who were willing to participate in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling procedures are used to find additional participants that could add to the knowledge base (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants were given an informed consent form (see Appendix F) and an explanation of the nature of the study. I sent a copy of the signed consent form to the participant via email and kept a signed copy with study materials. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Participants received a $100 Amazon gift card via email at the conclusion of the study.

Data Collection Plan

To triangulate data, three methods of data collection were implemented. Triangulation of data enhances the credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Initially, participants were asked a qualifying question and provided their demographic information (see Appendix G). Data were collected from a journal entry, semistructured individual interviews, and focus group sessions. A flexible timeline was provided for participants to submit the journal entry. In each journal entry, the participants reflected on their experiences of teaching K–2 students during the pandemic. Data collection proceeded with semistructured individual interviews to learn more

about participants' lived experiences. The interviews were audio recorded using two separate devices and were held at a location agreed upon with the participant. After meeting participants and listening to their stories, focus group sessions were conducted to obtain a group perspective on the phenomenon. Following the journal entry, semistructured individual interviews, and focus group sessions, data were transcribed for analysis and uploaded to NVivo qualitative analysis software.

Journal Entry Data Collection Approach

Each participant was given a consent form before the data collection phase of the study. Individuals were assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality. The journal entry asked participants to reflect on their experiences of teaching K–2 students during the pandemic. The journal entry addressed Subquestion 1 (*How do K–2 educators describe their experiences with changes to instruction in recent years?*) and Subquestion 3 (*How do K–2 educators describe how the experience has changed working with children given the impact of the past three school years?*). The journal prompt is listed in Appendix H. The journal entry was a one-time writing and participants were given clear expectations regarding the length (Hatch, 2002). Participants were asked to write one to two paragraphs answering the prompt. The journal prompt was distributed using traditional email. Participants submitted the journal entry via email. A flexible timeline was provided for participants to submit the journal entry. Journal entries have become a prominent source of data collection in qualitative research because they provide rich data, allowing participants time and space to reflect on an experience (Eidse & Turner, 2014; Kaun, 2010; Meth, 2003; Taylor et al., 2019). Using a journal entry as a qualitative data source can provide the researcher with unique information because writing is a reflective process, unlike discussion (Johnstone, 1994). Qualitative journal entries have become even more popular throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with researchers collecting reflective experiences from

participants in Poland, Wuhan, and England (Lukianow et al., 2021; Qi, 2021; Scott et al., 2021; Yang, 2021).

Journal Entry Data Analysis Plan

Journal entries were collected and coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Participants' statements were coded with *in vivo* and process codes during the first cycle of coding. During second-cycle coding, or focused coding, five themes emerged from the data. Descriptions of the experiences were written in paragraph form. Imaginative variation was used to reflect on the lived experience in the structural stage of the writing process. Imaginative variation is the process of thinking deeply about the data to explore unexpected perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

The hallmark of phenomenology is the individual interview. The individual interview is a method for collecting experiential narrative material that allows the researcher to comprehend a human phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). The individual interview also serves as a way of developing a conversational relationship with participants in the study (van Manen, 1990). Semistructured individual interviews were appropriate for this study to explore the lived experiences of K–2 educators in their own words. Information gained from the interview process was used to create written descriptions of the experience of occupational stress.

The individual interviews were conducted with the 12 participants. Two separate devices were used to record the audio from the interviews. The interview questions were open-ended and structured to elicit information pertaining to the phenomenon. The interview was structured to provide a clear understanding of the lived experiences of K–2 educators in the current educational environment. The interviews begin with a grand tour question, as recommended by Marshall and Rossman (2015) to set the tone for the interview. Following the grand tour

question, questions proceeded to address the central research question and subquestions of this study.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Grand Tour Question: Describe a typical day in your classroom.
2. Describe a situation or an experience that is stressful in your current teaching position. (RQ)
3. Describe a situation or experience that caused you stress prepandemic? (SQ1)
4. Describe a situation at your job that has been difficult in recent years, following prolonged school closures. (RQ)
5. Describe a memorable situation or experience that suggests that the school closures in 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 have affected children. (SQ3)
6. How has your experience as an educator changed since the school closures in 2019–2020 and 2020–2021? (SQ1)
7. Describe a situation or experience when technology was a challenge for your students. (SQ3)
8. Describe a situation or experience that made you feel there has been a loss of learning in the last three years. (SQ3)
9. Describe a situation or experience that made you feel there has been an increase in social-emotional behavioral concerns with students in the last three years. (SQ3)
10. Describe a situation where the PA Common Core standards and curriculum impacted your daily instruction. (SQ1)
11. Describe a situation where the substitute shortage impacted your job. (SQ2)
12. Describe a situation where a staffing shortage (custodians, secretaries, special education teachers, art/music/gym/library teachers) impacted your job. (SQ2)

13. As a K–2 educator, describe a situation or experience where you received support in the classroom. (RQ)
14. During that situation, who provided you with support? (RQ)
15. How has this challenging time in education improved the quality of education in recent years? (RQ)

The questions listed above were used to elicit details of participants' lived experiences of teaching. The purpose of Question 1, the grand tour question, was to set the tone of the interview and to develop a relational conversation (van Manen, 1990). The interview questions were intentionally sequenced to begin the interview with the questions that would be easily answered by the participant. Questions 2, 13, and 14, were included in the interview protocol to offer theoretical insight into Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping and Lazarus's (1991) cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion. The transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion describe the person-environment relationship (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transactional model of stress and coping and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion also describe methods of coping (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The questions explored additional resources to alleviate occupational stress and burnout in educators. The empirical literature provides evidence that administrative support and social support buffer the effects of occupational stress and burnout (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a, 2021b; Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Rahman, 2019; Richards et al., 2018; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020). Occupational stress is appraised and managed through these theoretical lenses.

Questions 5, 11, and 12 of the interview protocol addressed the problem of the research study. The problem was that occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators is leading to absenteeism and staff shortages, potentially caused by mental and physical illness. Occupational stress and burnout have negative consequences for students (Arens & Morin, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021; Ryan et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). Absenteeism and staff shortages have an impact on occupational stress and burnout levels in educators.

Question 4 was included in the interview protocol to address the purpose of the study. The purpose of the study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 elementary educators in central Pennsylvania. Stressful circumstances in recent years have contributed to occupational stress in educators. In this study, I investigated stressful circumstances and coping strategies in K–2 educators.

Questions 8, 9, and 15 addressed the central research question: *How has occupational stress and burnout contributed to the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania postpandemic?* Loss of learning throughout the prolonged school closures was a source of occupational stress for K–2 educators. Question 15 addressed the positive impacts from the period when there were prolonged school closures.

Questions 3, 6, and 7 were included in the interview protocol because of their relevance to the empirical literature. Current researchers have revealed that occupational stress in educators has changed after the course of the pandemic and school closures (Pressley & Ha, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2021). Researchers have stated that the use of technology with young children was challenging for educators throughout the pandemic, potentially causing occupational stress

(Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020). The final question in the interview was specifically focused on improvement in the quality of education to end the interview process on a positive note.

Committee members reviewed the interview protocol to ensure the clarity of the questions. A pilot interview with a colleague who is not participating in the study was conducted to further refine the interview protocol. The colleague had similar qualities to the participants in the study. The pilot study clarified the appropriate sequence of the questions.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Individual interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings using the Otter.ai program. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with organizing data for coding. Pedagogical reflections and anecdotes from participants were noted. Interview recordings were uploaded to NVivo qualitative analysis software. Following the guidelines of Saldaña (2021), first-cycle coding was conducted using *in vivo* and process codes. Second-cycle coding, or focused coding, was completed to identify themes. During focused coding, initial codes were alphabetized and then organized into broader themes using Excel software. Five themes emerged from the coding process. After common themes were uncovered, descriptions of the experience were written in paragraph form (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation was used to reflect on the lived experience in the structural stage of the writing process. Imaginative variation is the process of thinking deeply about the data to explore unexpected perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

After completion of the semistructured individual interviews, focus group sessions were conducted with the 12 participants. Focus groups were divided into three groups to allow for smaller groups so that each participant had an opportunity to voice their experiences. Participants were contacted via email to sign up for a focus group Zoom session. Sign-up dates were

provided in the email communication. Flexible times and dates were chosen to accommodate the schedules and internet access of participants. A Zoom link was sent to each participant via email. The purpose of the focus group session was to gain group-level data pertaining to the lived experience of K–2 educators. The conversation included 11 broad, general questions. Each participant had the opportunity to speak during the session and convey their personal experiences. The hermeneutic interview can be described as building a conversational relationship with the participant to elicit rich insight into a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). The focus group session allowed me to view the experience of K–2 educators from a different angle, incorporating a group perspective. The advantage of a focus group is that interaction among participants can lead to quality information, and participants who did not open up during individual interviews may have felt compelled to add to the conversation (Kruger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1997). The focus groups session allowed for the creation of detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of K–2 educators.

Focus Group Questions

1. Grand Tour Question: Describe an activity that you do to relax and decompress either in school or at home.
2. Describe your experience with virtual learning in the beginning of the pandemic. (RQ)
3. Describe the first time you realized that school closures were detrimental to your students. (SQ3)
4. Describe how your workload differs from that of Grade 3–5 or 6–8 educators. (RQ)
5. Describe a recent moment when a staffing shortage impacted your day. (SQ2)
6. Describe a situation or experience where someone at your workplace provided you with emotional support. (RQ)

7. Respectfully, what demands, or responsibilities do you feel could be removed from your plate? (RQ)
8. Describe a moment when you considered leaving the field of education due to stress. (RQ)
9. How will the experience of being a K–2 educator be impacted for the next several years? (SQ1)
10. What will the future hold for K–2 students? Can things return to normal? (SQ1)
11. Describe a moment of intense personal accomplishment at your job. (RQ)

The questions listed above were used to elicit details of participants' lived experiences of teaching from a group perspective. The purpose of Question 1, the grand tour question, was to set the tone of the interview and to develop a relational conversation with participants (van Manen, 1990). The interview questions were intentionally sequenced to begin the focus group with questions that would be easily answered by the participants.

Questions 6, 7, and 11 were included in the interview protocol to offer theoretical insight into Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping and Lazarus's (1991) cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion. Resources such as social support can allow an individual to cope with the demands of a situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Social support can alleviate occupational stress and burnout (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020). Educators shared their perspective on how social support helped them to cope with additional work-related stress. Question 7 asks participants to share what demands could be removed from their list of responsibilities. This question addressed strategies to cope with or alleviate occupational stress

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Question 11 ended the focus group session on a positive note by asking participants to share an intense personal accomplishment. While educators can suffer from emotional exhaustion, they can still feel a sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The two constructs are not always interrelated (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Questions 8 and 10 were included in the interview protocol to address the problem of the research study. The problem was that occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators is leading to absenteeism and staff shortages, potentially caused by mental and physical illness. Teacher attrition is often the result of prolonged periods of occupational stress. Question 8 uncovered details of whether educators have considered changing positions or leaving the profession entirely. Question 10 elicited educator perspectives on student learning, absenteeism, and staffing shortages.

Questions 2 and 4 were included in the interview protocol to address the central research question: *How has occupational stress and burnout contributed to the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania postpandemic?* Question 2 was included to open the discussion on the state of education over the past 3 years. Question 4 addressed how the lived experiences of K–2 educators differ from that of Grade 3–5 or 6–8 educators.

Questions 3, 5, and 9 were included in the interview protocol to address Subquestions 1–3. Question 3 addressed Subquestion 3 and elicited anecdotes of how school closures were detrimental for children. Question 5 addressed Subquestion 2 and focused on how staffing shortages impact educators. Question 9 addressed Subquestion 1 and revealed whether educators believe things will return to normal or whether children will be impacted by the loss of learning for years to come.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

Focus group interviews were recorded via Zoom. Synchronous online focus groups can be advantageous because they allow many individuals to come together in real time (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). The interviews were transcribed from the Zoom recordings using the Otter.ai program. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with organizing data for coding. Pedagogical reflections and anecdotes from participants were analyzed. Focus group transcripts were uploaded to NVivo qualitative analysis software. Following the guidelines of Saldaña (2021), first-cycle coding was conducted using *in vivo* and process codes. Second-cycle coding, or focused coding, was completed to identify themes. During focused coding, initial codes were alphabetized and then organized into broader themes using Excel software. Five themes emerged from the coding process. Once common themes were uncovered, descriptions of the experience were written in paragraph form (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation was used to reflect on the lived experience in the structural stage of the writing process. Imaginative variation is the process of thinking deeply about the data to explore unexpected perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Synthesis

When each form of data is analyzed, coded, and described, the final step in the data analysis process can occur. Written descriptions were developed from the data to create the phenomenological text. The final step in hermeneutic phenomenology is to synthesize and interpret the descriptions to reflect on the meaning of an experience (van Manen, 1990). Husserl (1931) highlighted the importance of the essence of the experience. The essence of the experience is a form of knowledge. The descriptions were synthesized to create an overall essence of the phenomenon of educator stress. Van Manen (1990) affirmed, “The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived

world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible" (pp. 125–126). The final analysis of the essence of the phenomenon was presented in written form, as phenomenological text.

Trustworthiness

Critics of qualitative research have often cited a lack of reliability and validity within the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Positivists rely on quantitative measurements of reliability and validity, which often cannot be established in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) established a set of criteria to judge the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be established through detailed descriptions of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This section describes the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness within this study.

Credibility

Credibility is synonymous with positivist researchers' concept of internal validity (Shenton, 2004). A study is found to be credible when the findings are congruent with reality (Shenton, 2004). Credibility was established in three ways: (a) triangulation, (b) disclosure of background, and (c) member checking.

Triangulation

Triangulation was used in this study to enhance credibility. Sources of data included journal entries, semistructured individual interviews, and focus groups interviews. Journal entries were conducted to assess participants' lived experiences of teaching during school closures. Semistructured individual interviews were conducted with K–2 elementary school educators to listen to their experiences and focus on the demands of their job. Focus group interviews were

used to gain a group perspective of the experiences of K–2 educators. Triangulating the sources of data within the study ensured that a credible account of the experiences would be detailed throughout the study. I incorporated site triangulation in the current study as well. Participants were recruited from three separate school districts in central Pennsylvania. Site triangulation ensured that results of the study could not be attributed to one organization or school district.

Disclosure of Background

The credibility of the researcher is of particular importance because the researcher is the form of instrumentation within a qualitative research study (Patton, 1990). The first step in hermeneutic phenomenology is personal reflection. Throughout this study, personal experiences, opinions, and biases were bracketed out. To enhance the credibility of this qualitative study, there is a full discloser of personal information and my relationship to the phenomenon of educator stress. This information is stated under the role of the researcher. The topic of this research study was initially decided on after having taught second grade for two full school years. The last several years have been demanding on K–2 elementary educators, which led me to inquire about the sources of educator stress in this current environment. My personal experience was bracketed out to ensure that the focus remained on the lived experiences of my participants.

Member Checking

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checking is an essential element to establish credibility within a qualitative study. After completing semistructured individual interviews and focus group interviews, I transcribed and coded data. Five themes emerged from the study. I presented the common themes to participants for verification. Participants had the opportunity to clarify any misconceptions from the interview process. In a spirit of collaboration, participants had conversational relations with the researcher (van Manen, 1990).

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability is demonstrated using thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research findings are not generalizable. Through detailed descriptions, readers can analyze the degree to which the findings could transfer to another population or setting. Hermeneutic phenomenology is known for rich, thick descriptions. Rich, thick descriptions of participants are provided using data collected from a demographic survey. The demographic survey asked participants the qualifying question and asked for background information on their career as an educator. Rich, thick descriptions of participants were also provided using a grand tour question during the semistructured interview. Throughout this study, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon were written. At the conclusion of the study, a comprehensive synthesis describing the essence of the phenomenon was written. The context of the study was presented clearly for the reader.

Dependability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability is the degree to which the study could be replicated with similar results. This is often challenging in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba stated that the nature of qualitative research and the changing phenomena can make it difficult to determine conventional reliability. In this study, a detailed outline of the research design, including procedures and methodology was included. The traditional procedures for conducting hermeneutic phenomenology were executed and enough detail was provided so that other researchers would be able to replicate this study with ease.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the researcher remains objective and neutral (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the process of bracketing was used to outline my personal experience with the phenomenon. My personal connections to the topic was bracketed out to

remain an objective observer of the phenomenon. As mentioned above, triangulation of data sources and research sites was used to enhance credibility and confirmability. An audit trail (see Appendix I) was created to document the steps of data collection and analysis throughout the course of this study. Finally, reflexivity was achieved by keeping detailed reflections during the collection of data. At each step of the research process, imaginative variation was used to try to view the phenomenon from various, and potentially unexpected perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection began, approval for the study was obtained from the administrators of each school district. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were informed of the goal of the study and provided with confidentiality using pseudonyms for individuals as well as school districts. The list of participant names and pseudonyms was kept in a password protected document. Pseudonyms were chosen using a list of names from the birth year of 1976 because the average age of participants was 46 years old. Participants signed an IRB-approved informed consent form. Physical data was stored in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data was password protected. Both physical data and electronic data will be destroyed after a 3-year period. This study provided minimal risk to participants and school districts. Participants may experience psychological or emotional benefits as a result of sharing their personal experiences of occupational stress and burnout. Voicing their perspectives could provide them with a sense of relief. This study benefited the educational community by providing perspectives on possible ways to retain educators and minimize absenteeism, staffing shortages, and teacher attrition.

Summary

The goal of Chapter Three was to describe in detail the methods and procedures used to conduct this hermeneutic phenomenology. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 elementary educators in central Pennsylvania. Hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the research design for this study because of its emphasis on interpreting the lifeworld of participants (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me to pedagogically reflect on the lived experiences of these K–2 educators. I used three forms of data for triangulation: journal entries, semistructured individual interviews, and focus group interviews were used for the collection of data. Data analysis included first- and second-cycle coding to determine common themes. Descriptions of the experience were written. Finally, descriptions were used to form a synthesis of the essence of the experience of educator stress.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the occupational stress and burnout experienced by K–2 elementary educators in central Pennsylvania. In this study, I examined the lived experiences of K–2 educators following prolonged school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Occupational stress is generally defined as job-related demands that exceed the resources available for support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This chapter begins with a rich description of the participants included in the study. The findings are presented in the form of themes, and outlier data is identified. The research questions, aligned with the theoretical frameworks, will be answered.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling procedure that included criterion sampling. A qualifying question (see Appendix G) was asked when recruiting participants. Participants were certified Pennsylvania K–2 educators who had at least three years of teaching experience. Participants were drawn from three school districts in central Pennsylvania. The administrators from each of the three school districts were presented with a recruitment letter (see Appendix C), a permission request letter (see Appendix D), and a permission response letter (see Appendix E). Once the administrator returned the signed consent form, potential participants were contacted via email. Participants were made aware of the guidelines for the study, and interested parties were asked to contact the researcher to set up a date and time for the individual interview. Before the individual interview, I sent participants an informed consent form via email (Appendix F). During the individual interviews, snowball sampling procedures were used to identify participants with extensive knowledge of teaching K–2 during school closures due to

COVID-19. Twelve K–2 educators with a variety of experience participated in this study. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample participants' characteristics.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Educator Participant	Current Age	Years of Experience	Current Grade Level	Gender
Amanda	55	17 years	1st grade	Female
Amber	46	20 years	1st grade	Female
Angela	51	24 years	1st grade	Female
Crystal	50	23 years	kindergarten	Female
Danielle	37	10 years	2nd grade	Female
Erin	43	21 years	2nd grade	Female
Heather	61	31 years	2nd grade	Female
Kimberly	45	24 years	2nd grade	Female
Melissa	29	7 years	2nd grade	Female
Michelle	48	24 years	1st grade	Female
Stephanie	41	3 years	kindergarten	Female
Tiffany	58	36 years	kindergarten	Female

Amanda

Amanda has been an educator in her current school district for 17 years. For 13 years, she was a first-grade educator in a small, rural elementary school. Her first school had one classroom for each grade level. She looks back on her time at that school with fond memories. Because her school district consolidated buildings, the last four years of her career have been at a much larger elementary school. Her current school has five classrooms for each grade level. Amanda stated that she has only ever experienced first grade and knows nothing else. She started her career as an educator later in life after working for many years as a physical therapist. During that time, she had two children and eventually began to help out in their classrooms at school. She mentioned that she spent many years as a volunteer at her children's school before pursuing a degree in elementary education. Amanda explained that the school closures in March 2020 were much different than the school closures in December of 2020, stating that the closures in March

of 2020 were unexpected and expectations for students were unclear. The level of work required from students was not rigorous, and parents viewed it as optional. During the school closures in December of 2020, students were required to complete 6 to 7 hours of work per day, similar to a regular school day. Amanda states that families got used to the optional framework and many did not put in much effort to educate their children during closure. Amanda shared, “Looking back, it was probably a bad idea to start virtual education with such low expectations. But I guess everyone was entering unknown territory.” She also discussed the discrepancy between the level of work that children will do in the classroom compared to the level of work that children will do with their parents. Throughout the entire 2020–2021 school year, Amanda was responsible for teaching virtual students as well as her in-person classroom. Amanda conveyed that this was a challenging time, especially due to a lack of high-speed internet in the area. Many families did not have access to the internet or had a dial-up connection. Because she lives out in the country, Amanda faced similar internet issues. She had to borrow a Wi-Fi connector from the school district; later, she was asked to return it because a family needed to use it. There were many instances when Amanda had to come into the school or even park outside of the school to use the internet. She mentioned that one time the video she was uploading for students stated that it would take 35 hours to upload because of her internet speed. Throughout the course of the interview, it was clear that the prevalence of rural internet connections was a huge challenge to virtual education.

Amber

Amber has been an educator in her current school district for 20 years. She began her career as an instructional support teacher, traveling throughout the district. She spent almost two full years in that position. After that, Amber took a position in the same school district teaching half-day kindergarten and half-day first grade. Eventually, she moved over into a full-time first-

grade teaching position. Throughout the interview, Amber discussed her experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to becoming an elementary school building, her building was a high school. For this reason, classrooms were much larger than a typical elementary school classroom. Because her classroom was very large, she taught a large number of first graders. This was due to the requirements of social distancing, where students needed to be spread out six feet apart. In her school district, one teacher per grade level was asked to take on the virtual students as well as the in-person students. She mentioned that the district alluded to the idea that educators would be compensated in some way for the additional work. At the time, Amber stated that there were three first-grade educators in her building. She volunteered to take on the virtual assignment in addition to her regular classroom because she felt comfortable with technology. Throughout the course of the year, she struggled with the additional workload. She described trying to set up students at home via Zoom, while 23 first graders were in the background of the classroom unattended. Because of various quarantines, Amber had a constant flow of students in and out of her virtual classroom. She expressed that she was really struggling to keep up with the two full-time jobs. She feels that at some point she had a mental breakdown. She would become upset and make strange comments over routine challenges. Finally, her colleagues got together and forced the school district to allow them to take on their own virtual students. Amber recalled that this was a tremendous relief because she just could not keep up with it anymore. She reiterated that it was a terrible year for her, and she had difficulty even remembering the details because her brain has blocked out the bad memories. Throughout the conversation, Amber mentioned academic and social concerns for her students during the pandemic. She thinks that things are slowly improving, but that education is not back to its original state.

Angela

Angela has taught first grade in her current school district for 24 years. She began her career at a small, rural school. Her school had one classroom for each grade level. She taught at that school for seven years and discussed the challenges of acquiring services for students in such a rural area. The school shared an administrator with three other schools, and it was difficult to have access to the administrator. Angela eventually transferred to a slightly larger school that had two classrooms per grade level, where she taught first grade for 13 years. Eventually, the school district decided to consolidate eight elementary schools into two elementary schools. For the past four years, Angela has been at a large elementary school containing five classrooms per grade level. Angela mentioned that educators were responsible for unpacking and setting up their classrooms over Christmas break the first year after the consolidation. She stated that educators are constantly being required to complete tasks on their own time. For example, she said that she has been required to come in on her own time to set up student iPads before the beginning of the school year. She stressed that in recent years students are not receiving the additional services that they need to be successful in school. Her students are not receiving the additional reading/Title services that they need, and subsequently are being tested for learning support. She feels that in recent years, there has been a lack of parental involvement. During the school closures, Angela was responsible for teaching both in-person and virtual first graders. She stated that if parents did not help students at home, they often did not complete virtual assignments. She felt that students are greatly struggling with academics and socialization following the pandemic and school closures. Angela also addressed her personal health concerns, perceiving that her level of stress is impacting her health. She is currently searching for another career path outside of education.

Crystal

Crystal has been an elementary educator for 23 years. She has taught at five elementary schools within the same school district. She began her career teaching fourth grade at a school that held two classrooms per grade level, and then was moved to another small, rural school to teach kindergarten. That school had one classroom per grade level and a small enrollment number. She then moved to another elementary school, where she taught kindergarten followed by second grade. Eventually she moved to yet another elementary school within the district where she taught fifth grade, third grade, first grade, and eventually kindergarten. When the district's eight elementary schools combined, she moved to a new school which held five classrooms per grade level. She has been teaching there ever since that final move. Crystal has a unique perspective, having taught many grade levels at many schools throughout her 23-year career. As a kindergarten teacher, she shared that the pandemic was difficult for her students. She feels that her students learn best during small-group activities, and the COVID-19 pandemic would not allow for such close contact. During that time, most of her instruction was whole-group instruction because of social distancing. She feels that her students suffered academically. Currently, she has an aid in her classroom as well as a foster grandmother. Having two additional adults has allowed her to have small group activities throughout the day. Crystal described how the curriculum has changed over the years, especially for kindergarten. She feels that there is little time for activities that she has taught in the past. For example, in kindergarten she used to teach children how to tie their shoes, and kindergarten used to have nap time. She expresses how the schedule is packed and time flies by quickly in her classroom. When asked about the PA Common Core standards and curriculum, Crystal mentioned that there is pressure to push kids academically, which creates a problem for basic life skills and socialization. She mentioned that she has added time in the morning for children to play at her kitchen station, block station, and

Play-Doh station. She strongly feels that building social skills is important to educating kindergarteners, and that this was a major piece that was missing over the pandemic years.

Danielle

Danielle has been an educator for 11 years. After graduating from college, she was a substitute teacher before being hired as a third-grade teacher at a rural elementary school. Unfortunately, she was furloughed the following school year. After half of a school year, she was called back to teach first and second grade as a class size reduction teacher at a different elementary school, before being furloughed again for an entire school year. The school district made her reapply for a teaching position the following year. Danielle was hired back to the same school as a kindergarten teacher, where she worked for five years. During the 2018–2019 school year, the school district consolidated eight small elementary schools into two large elementary schools. Danielle was moved to a new school, where she taught second grade for four years. She discussed the tumultuous start to her career, having been furloughed twice. She finally feels that she is in a permanent position in second grade. Danielle also described many challenges in education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Days before the 2020–2021 school year began, she described a situation where she was sitting on the floor of her classroom crying. She was required to set up 25 iPads, connect them to the Wi-Fi network, and download apps for instruction. The situation felt overwhelming to her. After that, she had to come up with a plan for virtual instruction. That year, she was responsible for teaching in-person students as well as three virtual students. On top of that, her school district required her to take a 60-hour course titled LETRS training, which involved phonemic awareness and phonics skills. The district was using the training as an intervention strategy. There were also several new curriculums being introduced during the pandemic. Danielle discussed the tremendous stress related to training and implementation of new curriculum, especially during an already difficult time. She described

having an anxiety attack during one such training. She had to leave the room during that training to try to calm down, and she discussed being put on medication due to stress and anxiety. When asked how this challenging time in education has improved the quality of education, Danielle responded that she could not think of a single way that it improved education. She perceives that things are worse now than ever before.

Erin

Erin has been an elementary educator in her current school district for 21 years. She began her career as a long-term substitute teaching fourth and fifth grade for half of a year. Her school was a small elementary school with two classrooms per grade level. Following her time as a long-term substitute, she moved to a first-grade teaching position, where she stayed for 10 years. After that, she remained at the same school but taught second grade for 11 years. For the last four years, her elementary school has transitioned to holding five classrooms per grade level. Erin mentioned that a difficult time in her career was the transition and construction of the new school. The constant interruption of construction was a challenge for her and her students. For example, one day the construction workers were cutting down a tree right outside of her classroom window. Another day, there was drilling all day long on the roof. Looking back, she stated, “We haven’t had a normal year since before consolidation.” The pandemic occurred shortly after the consolidation. Although academics are always a concern, Erin stated that a major concern in her classroom this year is socialization. She mentioned that families did not get out and do regular activities because of the pandemic, and she perceives that her current students are lacking social skills. Erin worries that if the social problems that students and families are having are not addressed, these problems will grow and manifest into other behavioral concerns. She mentioned that she has often debated taking pieces of instructional time and possibly using that time to allow students to play and socialize. She questioned whether this type of activity

would allow her students to develop critical social skills, and possibly encourage them to be more focused during instruction. Erin stated that her biggest concern is that her students are not receiving the support services that they need. The mental health services are just stretched thin everywhere. She provides an example stating that our school social worker is not able to meet with students and provide the support that she has provided in the past. The social worker is currently being called into classrooms to deal with extreme behaviors. This creates a lack of resources for students who need the support of talking to a guidance counselor. Erin emphasized that the mental health and social well-being of her students has declined since the pandemic. She would like to see increased support for education on a state and federal level.

Heather

Heather has been an educator for 31 years total. She has taught in her school district for 16 years but has a wide variety of teaching experience. She began her career right after graduating from college, teaching at a private Christian elementary school. At that school, Heather taught 2 years of kindergarten, 7 years of third grade, and 1 year of first grade. For several years after that, Heather decided to be a stay-at-home mother, raising her three children. She returned to education as a substitute in public schools. She was a substitute educator for three years before taking a position as a daycare/preschool director. Heather worked as the daycare/preschool director for one year before moving into a Head Start position, where she stayed for another two years. After that, she began her career at her current school district as a speech teacher at a small, rural school. Eventually, she moved into a second-grade classroom at that same school. During the 2018–2019 school year, her school district consolidated eight small elementary schools into two larger elementary schools. Heather is currently teaching second grade at a large elementary school, which has five classrooms per grade level. Throughout the pandemic, Heather struggled with the integration of technology. She was used to a traditional

style of teaching and had to invest in several books to help her during the school closures. She mentioned that she bought books like *Google for Dummies* and *Google Chrome for Dummies*, and really struggled to figure out how to transition her curriculum to an online format. She mentioned several times that she felt isolated and alone during the school closures. She stated that she would cry almost every day. She felt that there was little support in this new style of teaching and the workload was tremendous. At one point, her husband dialed a number and made her make an appointment with a therapist. She described the entire experience of virtual teaching as being on an island and knowing that no help is coming. Heather also discussed troubleshooting with parents. She mentioned that parents would contact her at all hours of the day and night to troubleshoot technology problems. This created additional stress for her. She also compared the school closures to a death in the family. Students would email her and write letters to her during that time, expressing that they missed their teacher and their friends. She said it felt like a sudden death within their little school family, describing it as a sad time.

Kimberly

Kimberly has been an educator in her current school district for 24 years. She began her career teaching learning support for third to fifth grades for one year. Then, she moved to another elementary school to teach fourth and fifth grade math for one year. After that, she moved to yet another elementary school within the district and taught third grade for eight years. Kimberly thought that moving to another elementary school to teach first and second grade would be her final move. She remained at that school for 10 years before her district decided to consolidate eight elementary schools. She currently teaches second grade at the new, larger elementary school and has been doing so for the last four years. Throughout the global pandemic, Kimberly taught both in-person second graders and virtual second graders. She discussed the difficulty of virtual education for young children. One example occurred during school closures when

students were attending instruction via Zoom. While teaching on Zoom, she decided that she would like to have her students complete examples on a worksheet. She taught her students how to split the screen, so that one screen would be her on Zoom and the other screen would be the students' worksheet on Seesaw. She recalled that the students would have technical issues and other students would try to talk them through it. It was difficult for her as a teacher to help because her screen was totally different. During the interview, Kimberly discussed the level of stress on educators throughout the pandemic. She never dreamt that she would be doing anything but teaching. Now, she finds herself searching for other jobs on a daily basis. Kimberly stated that the last three years have been difficult, and she just feels totally burnt out. Towards the end of the interview, she stated that she feels the best educators are the ones with the most experience. As her career has progressed, she has learned what it takes to get young children to read. She feels her knowledge of the reading process has improved with several years of experience with diverse readers. Kimberly mentioned that she hates to see the field of education losing those experienced teachers, as many educators are burnt out and leaving the field entirely.

Melissa

Melissa has been an educator for seven years. She began her career teaching first grade. The following year, she looped with her first-grade class and became a second-grade teacher. Since then, she has taught second grade for six years. Throughout the conversation Melissa described that her school has three second-grade teachers. She elaborated on how she has become close to one of the other veteran teachers and thinks of her as sort of a mother figure. Melissa described depending on her colleagues for advice and support. She described how she just needs a safe place to talk about the events of the day; other times, she is looking for advice from her colleagues. The school building where Melissa teaches used to be a high school and was turned into an elementary school. Throughout the pandemic, her classroom was in a large

room that was used for home economics when the school was a high school. She was placed in this room so that she could fit 27 students spread out six feet apart. She was mainly responsible for in-person classroom instruction, except for when Pennsylvania schools were closed for the month of December 2020. Throughout the interview, she details the stress of students constantly coming and going in second grade. Some of her students signed up for virtual instruction and then came back for in-person instruction after a few weeks. Some of her students were present for in-person instruction and had to be sent to virtual instruction because of COVID-19 quarantines. Many of her students switched between the district's three choices of in-person instruction, virtual instruction with a district educator, and self-paced virtual instruction. Melissa told me that when masking became optional, many students within her classroom changed their instructional choice. She described the constant struggle of adding new students, setting up passwords for technology for them, and teaching them the classroom rules and procedures.

Michelle

Michelle has been an educator in her current school district for 24 years. She began her career teaching first grade at a small, rural school. The school had one classroom teacher for each grade level. The following year, she moved to another small elementary school within the district. This school was slightly larger than her original school and had two classrooms per grade level. For the next 19 years, Michelle continued to teach first grade. During the 2018–2019 school year, her school district consolidated elementary schools. Five smaller schools became one large school. During the interview, Michelle discussed several years of teaching first grade in a construction zone. Her school was the school that was being expanded. During the day, educators and students would hear loud banging or drilling. She mentioned that she would have to stop talking every few minutes because of a loud noise. She also stated that every summer they had to pack up every item in the classroom and put the boxes on pallets to be wrapped.

Educators had to list every item within every box, down to the number of pencils. Every fall, educators unwrapped the pallets and prepared their classrooms again. Michelle told me that this went on for almost three years. Finally in the 2019–2020 school year, things were back to normal at Michelle's school—or so she thought. In March of 2020, the school district closed schools for the remainder of the year. Educators had to figure out how to teach students virtually. Michelle struggled with teaching students over Zoom, and eventually had to change her style of teaching. She began to prerecord lessons to post on Google Classroom. Michelle stated that several parents demonstrated inappropriate attire and behavior and she felt that she could not continue to teach via Zoom. She discussed challenges when students returned in January 2021. Students had varying levels of support at home to complete class work. Michelle mentioned the struggle to catch kids up when they returned to school. She stated that since the pandemic and school closures, parents have viewed education as optional. It has been her experience that many parents do not send children to school on a regular basis. Michelle feels the pressure of being accountable for student learning under difficult circumstances.

Stephanie

Stephanie is in her third year of teaching kindergarten. She disclosed that she went back to college in adulthood to pursue a career in elementary education. She is currently certified in grades K–4 in Pennsylvania. When she began her career three years ago, there was a larger population of students within her school. She is worried about being moved to another grade level. This year, she has only 13 students in her kindergarten classroom. She mentioned several times that she loves kindergarten and feels like she is prepared with kindergarten material. She is not opposed to a grade level change, but she understands that it would be time consuming. Stephanie discussed the challenges of teaching kindergarten during a global pandemic. In her school district, families had two choices for educating their children: (a) students could attend in-

person instruction or (b) families could choose a self-paced online learning program. Her school district did not require educators to teach virtually unless the school was completely closed down. At the time of the first closure, the district did not have a one-to-one device program. Families could be provided with laptops upon request. During December 2020, her school district was closed completely. Stephanie discussed the challenges of engaging kindergarteners virtually. Many students were at home with older siblings or grandparents. Technology was a major challenge during this time. Stephanie mentioned that she struggled to find activities to fill her day because many of her current activities did not translate easily to a virtual format. Her school district did not require her to be online for the full instructional day. When students returned to school, many challenges existed. Stephanie described the difficulties she faced when students could not share supplies. She also mentioned struggles with masks, and specifically students vomiting into their masks. Stephanie has expressed the difficulties that her kindergarteners continue to face, even though they are now in second grade. She stated that those children are still far behind in reading and mathematics, as demonstrated by their assessment scores. She also elaborated on extreme behaviors that continue to be present within that group of children.

Tiffany

Tiffany has been a kindergarten teacher for the last 36 years. She began her career teaching at a private kindergarten program at a YMCA. After working at the YMCA program for three years, she moved to another town where she taught kindergarten for six years. Following her career in that town, she taught kindergarten at a Mennonite school for eight years. Finally, Tiffany plans to end her career teaching kindergarten in her current school district, where she has been a kindergarten teacher for the last 19 years. She plans to retire at the conclusion of the 2022–2023 school year. Throughout the course of our discussion, it became clear that Tiffany

loves teaching kindergarten and being with small children. When asked about challenging circumstances during school closures, she became very emotional. She stated that the most difficult part of the pandemic was not being able to be close to children. She went into teaching to be with children and learn their love language. She continued to explain that she loves hugs and hands-on activities with small children and suddenly she was looking at her students through the computer screen. This was devastating to her. Even when students returned to school, the guidelines for social distancing kept her away from her students. In her school district, families had the option of enrolling students for in-person instruction, self-guided virtual instruction, or teacher-created virtual instruction. Tiffany explained that she had only one student she had to provide with virtual instruction. Virtual instruction for her kindergartener consisted of short videos on letters or counting, Heggerty phonemic awareness, and a few simple activities on Seesaw. Tiffany mentions that it was a particularly difficult year and described some positive support that she received at work. She had a student teacher during the 2020–2021 school year that was able to help out with technology and find new activities for the children. She also mentioned that many of her colleagues provided her with technological support throughout the pandemic. She discussed the difficulty with varying levels of support for students at home. Tiffany expressed the gratitude that she received from parents and other members of society following school closures due to COVID-19. She felt that other people were able to understand what takes place in schools.

Results

The analysis of individual interview transcripts, journal entry documents, and focus group session transcripts provided the results for this study. Interviews and focus group recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai and uploaded into NVivo qualitative analysis software. I uploaded journal entry documents to NVivo qualitative analysis software as well.

First-cycle coding was conducted using *in vivo* and process coding. Second-cycle coding was conducted using focused coding to organize the data into the themes presented in this section. In this section, I will present the findings of the study, followed by answers to the research questions. The answers to the research questions align with current literature on occupational stress, as well as the theoretical frameworks for the study. The five themes that emerged from this study were (a) social-emotional needs, (b) extreme behaviors, (c) need for differentiation, (d) technology and virtual learning challenges, and (e) staffing shortages and lack of services. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes, subthemes, and contributing codes.

Table 2

Five Themes

Theme	Subthemes	Contributing Codes
Social-Emotional Needs	Students	social behavior, severe emotional needs, problem-solving, simple things, class meeting, coping, we do help each other out, appreciate being together more
	Educators	
Extreme Behaviors		violent, nobody's learning, behavior issues, para, helper, experienced teachers
Need for Differentiation		how to write their names, developmentally appropriate, bought my own curriculum, weren't doing anything at home, different levels, option, were not learning, writing, form their letters, didn't want to do it, small-group instruction, gaps, curriculum, sharing supplies, time, duties
Technology and Virtual Learning		technology, two jobs, exhausted, thrown into it, normal routine, changed overnight, parents, all in this together, frustrating, burned out, leaving the field of education
Staffing Shortages	Substitute Planning	coming to work sick, feel bad taking off, coping extras, more services, still plan for a sub, split, spread thin and they're starting to turn on colleagues, our administration
	Lack of Services	

Social-Emotional Needs

Many of the participants in this study cited an increase in the social-emotional needs of children following the prolonged school closures due to COVID-19. Stephanie, a kindergarten teacher, noted "Students are struggling with self-regulation, and how to regulate themselves in a larger group and a larger situation." Throughout the data collection process, it became evident that educators did not have their social-emotional needs met during the prolonged school closures.

Students

The educators in this study expressed an increased need to teach social skills within their classroom following the pandemic and the return to school. Many participants in this study expressed the additional challenge of teaching more social skills in addition to academics. Stephanie explained the lack of self-regulation skills in her classroom:

> I think maybe, I don't know, about 15 years ago or so, they (social skills) were taught at home. And a lot of kids just don't have that anymore. You know, like how to self-regulate. What do you do if you don't get the color scissors that you wanted?

Many educators expressed that students are not picking up on social cues. One example provided by a participant was her students' inability to read body language. Melissa explained, "Something I noticed is that kids don't understand what a head nod is. I've noticed that last year and the year before." Many of the educators in this study expressed the need to teach problem-solving skills as they described problems that arise at recess. Melissa noted, "And then something else we noticed was they don't know how to interact with each other, especially at recess. They can't problem-solve. There's a lot more tattling."

Educators

The findings of this study demonstrate that in recent years educators have suffered from a lack of social-emotional connection. I noted support from colleagues as the most common form of support described throughout this study. Almost everyone echoed the sentiment "We do help each other out." Most of the participants in the study struggled to identify other forms of support at their workplace. Kimberly shared, "We would just get emails saying we're all in this together, but it certainly didn't feel like it when the people making all the decisions never asked the people doing all the work how it was going." When asked how they cope with their occupational stress, nearly all participants listed some activity that included their colleagues. Crystal explained, "We appreciate being together more. I don't know. My kindergarten group, we missed each other. Like being able to be right there and go right to each other and talk to each other about different things." Participants in this study expressed that their mental health and well-being was tied to support from their colleagues.

Extreme Behaviors

A common source of occupational stress for K–2 educators was extreme, violent behaviors. Participants stated that since K–2 students are new to school, many of them have not been identified for extra services. Almost all of the participants in this study discussed physical altercations that they have had with students. Kimberly shared,

> I had a kid who was hit me, kicked me, putting push pins into my arms, tried to get the scissors and stabbed me, threw a stapler at my head. And that went on for probably like three months every day. My kids had to leave my classroom.

Kimberly also discussed having a concussion stemming from a broken nose that occurred while restraining a student. She discussed how she missed Christmas with her young children because

she had to sit in a dark room to rest. Kimberly expressed that in those types of situations, “Nobody is learning.”

Another participant, Melissa, discussed the stress of being part of a crisis team. An announcement would be made over the school intercom for the crisis team to respond. This would occur multiple times throughout the day. Her second-grade students would split themselves among the other second-grade classrooms, and she would go to help. Melissa explained,

> So, we had some pretty extreme behaviors where we had to restrain kids if they were making very unsafe choices, and you’d actually hear our announcements come on. And everybody kind of cringes when the announcements come on, because there’s like three beeps, but you will hear it sometimes six, seven times a day.

This year, her school formed a crisis team of special education teachers instead. While this has been helpful to her because she is not responding, her special education students are not receiving enough support because they are missing instruction. At a moment's notice, she will have to create materials for those students who are missing their individualized instruction. Melissa stated, “They’re sometimes two years behind, and now they're put back into your math class and you're quickly trying to scramble for something to help them.”

Crystal, a kindergarten teacher, felt very frustrated when trying to get extra help for a violent student. Crystal said, “We’re experienced teachers and they [administration] should know that. We’re not just saying this just to say it, you know. We know kind of what, you know, students are and how their behaviors are and that this isn’t normal.” Kindergarten is always challenging in the beginning of the school year, but Crystal described wanting to quit her job this year. She described crying in her room after school on a daily basis. Her classroom had been

destroyed often, with bulletin boards torn down and furniture scattered throughout the room. Crystal was able to seek support from her colleague next door. Current literature on occupational stress and burnout has revealed that peer support can improve the well-being of educators (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020). During the focus group session, Crystal mentioned that the situation improved when the student received a higher level of support. During the focus group, she shared, “Which was good, but I think that's the worst I've ever had anyone, you know. He's been calmer now, but he was hitting, kicking, screaming, throwing shoes and chairs, and all kinds of lovely things.”

Need for Differentiation

Differentiated instruction has been a popular word in the field of education for many years. The educators in this study described how the prolonged school closures created gaps in student knowledge. While there is consensus among the educational community that there was a loss of learning during this time, the participants in this study emphasized the wide variety of levels within their current classrooms. Erin explained, “We always thought about differentiated instruction. No, it was a word we threw out for guided reading. But the pandemic made us look.” The educators in this study detailed the importance of having an adult at home to help with schoolwork during school closures. Young children struggled to read directions and complete learning tasks on their own using technology. Because the level of parental involvement and participation in learning activities varied, student learning levels varied throughout the time that school was closed. One participant, Erin, stated that she currently has at least 12 different learning levels within her classroom, describing, “I think it just really made us, it forced us to stop and think about the kids.”

Amanda, a first-grade teacher, expressed her frustration with trying to meet all of her students' needs. She stated, "And then we'll have a data meeting and want to know what is Amanda going to do to address all of the needs?" She explained that even with an adult willing to help at home, instruction was just not the same during the time of the school closures. Amanda said, "Because you know, what you were able to get the parents to do with them and what you could accomplish in an 8-hour day was not the same." Amanda said that she felt her students worked harder at school than they did while at home.

Several educators in this study mentioned the importance of small-group instruction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, small-group instruction did not occur because students had to remain six feet apart. Crystal, a kindergarten teacher, discussed how the lack of small-group instruction impacted her students. Crystal shared, "We were mostly all whole-group activities. I could tell that they just didn't learn as well. I don't know, some of them didn't grasp the concepts as well as they would have with small groups." Kimberly, a second-grade teacher, stated that a lack of small-group instruction affected her students. She felt that it was hard to get students to focus in a whole-group setting without much movement. Kimberly stated, "And so just keeping them focused was hard. Plus, there were no small groups." The consensus of educators in this study was that the school closures due to COVID-19 created a situation where the students in the classroom were at different learning levels. Differentiated instruction became vital. The additional work of differentiating lessons and seeking support for students presented occupational stress for educators.

Technology and Virtual Learning Challenges

The educators in this study still feel misunderstood when it comes to technology and young children. Many participants stated that when they asked what the expectation for virtual learning included, administrators would say things like "Just put them on Google Classroom" or

“Put them on a learning app.” The K–2 educators in this study shed light on the complications of using technology with young children who cannot type or read prompts. Many of the participants in this study described experiences of teaching children how to turn on an electronic device, whether it was a laptop or an iPad. The educators in this study explained that students still do not know how to complete simple technological tasks such as performing a restart or a hard shutdown. Amber explained, “When we got the laptops, my students didn’t even know how to turn them on.”

Young children struggle to even find the home button on an iPad. Crystal, a kindergarten teacher, explained her frustration when the technology department told educators to have students set up their iPads at the beginning of the year. The technology department sent out step-by-step instructions for iPad setup and expected educators to post the directions on the board for students to read and follow. Students had to do things like choose a language, choose a country, and enter a Wi-Fi password. K–2 educators know that small children cannot complete such tasks on their own without confusion. Crystal shared,

> And then, every year when the technology department says, “Oh, you can let them set up their iPads.” No, they cannot. And I would tell them [kindergarteners] where the home button is. [I say,] “Push the home button” and they're like, “What's that?”

Melissa, a second-grade teacher, explained the occupational stress related to teaching young children how to log in to an app on their laptop. Melissa described,

> They had their login numbers and stuff. They had to have a pin for something on the website. The principal handwrote everything, but she curled her two. The kids thought it was a six, like a backwards six. So, something as small as that, like, you spent like half an hour.

Another second-grade educator, Heather, described how quickly things can go wrong on an app like Google Classroom or Seesaw. Heather laughed and said, “Sometimes they deleted the whole worksheet or slide.”

All participants in this study, except for one new educator, expressed their desire to leave the field of education in recent years. Many of the participants stated that they feel burnt out after the COVID-19 pandemic years. Many of the educators described how they were doing two or three full-time jobs, and no one was recognizing their efforts. Kimberly stated, “Administration keeps saying that we’re all in this together, but it certain doesn’t feel like it.” One participant, Amber, described how looking back she felt that she had a mental breakdown. She felt that she was being asked to complete two full-time jobs. Amber is a first-grade teacher who volunteered to teach both in-person and virtual students during the 2020–2021 school year. Amber explained that it was almost impossible to guide young first graders via Zoom while teaching 26 other students. She was helping her virtual students via Zoom; in the meantime, her classroom students were unattended and going wild. At one point, her microphone was not working, so she had to carry her laptop all around the room. Amber shared, “I’m not one who asks for help or shows emotions, but the 2020–2021 school year ‘broke’ me.” Danielle, a second-grade teacher, described the “months of stress and frustration” caused by virtual learning. Danielle explained, “I remember sitting on my classroom floor with a coworker and a stack of iPads beside us, crying because I had no idea how to manage it all.” The educators in this study expressed that in recent years things have improved slightly; however, most of them are still actively looking for other career options. Current literature indicates that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, primary educators faced additional stress due to the use of technology with young children who lacked

advanced technological skill (Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020). For the participants in this study, technology and virtual learning have contributed to occupational stress and burnout.

Staffing Shortages

Participants in this study stated that staffing shortages create additional obligations. These additional tasks lead to increased levels of occupational stress. Many of the educators in this study expressed that time was a major component of their level of stress. Kimberly explained, "I would say the thing that's very stressful to me is the lack of time to prepare quality materials." Throughout the data collection process, it became apparent that staffing shortages have a trickle-down effect throughout the school building. When an individual is absent or a position is vacant, another individual must pick up the responsibilities. In one way or another, staffing shortages impact student learning.

Substitute Planning

The educators participating in this study expressed the challenges of planning for a substitute teacher. In the past, teachers would create one set of substitute plans. The educators in this study explained how their school districts handled the lack of a substitute teacher. The school districts participating in this study refer to it as "split classrooms" or "Plan Z." When there is a substitute shortage, teachers find themselves creating two to three sets of lesson plans. Danielle explained,

> Every time you want to take off, you're planning for different things. You're planning for sub, you're planning for no sub, you're planning in case of a split class, then you're planning because there was nobody covering your class and you have to redo your lesson plans.

Most of the educators included in this study expressed frustration with taking on extra students in the spur of a moment. Heather shared, "Well, I don't really mind other students coming in if I'm

prepared. That's the thing. Because I'm all about that. But last minute?" Many of the educators expressed the anxiety that they felt when taking on extra students at the last minute. At a moment's notice, these educators were making extra copies or scrambling to find additional activities for the extra students.

Lack of Services

Participants expressed that staffing shortages have caused a lack of support services for students. For example, educators in all of the school districts included in this study cited that Title I reading teachers are pulled from intervention to cover regular education classes. Amanda said, "Like seriously, yeah, and it is impacting the students' learning, not just our job, because every time they say keep students in class or split class, somebody's not getting what they need." The lack of support services, combined with the need for differentiation, has become a source of anxiety and stress for educators. From their perspective, educators expressed that student learning is severely impacted by the lack of services due to staffing shortages. Angela said,

> They just keep increasing the standards, but there's not the support for the kids to reach the standards. And it's one person with over 20 kids in your room. You can only do so much. You can only, I mean, the needs are so great. And you're only one person. And they don't get their interventions regularly.

Staffing shortages created occupational stress for the participants in this study.

Outlier Data and Findings

Throughout the data collection process, the information collected from participants aligned with the research questions of the study. One participant in particular qualifies as an outlier in this study. Her perspective was uniquely different from all of the other participants in the study. Stephanie, a kindergarten teacher, is fairly new to the field of education. She began teaching kindergarten in the 2020–2021 school year. Stephanie has three years of experience, all

of which was during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, her perspective was a little different because she did not teach prior to the pandemic.

Many of Stephanie's statements aligned with data collected from other research participants and answered the study's research questions. Some of her statements, however, diverged from the statements of the other 11 participants. Stephanie was extremely positive compared to the other educators in this study. Stephanie expressed, "I love being here. I'm sure that'll fade though. I think that's pretty typical. I feel like it's like a 25-year span, right. And then I think you grow impatient." Stephanie had an interesting answer when asked what the future holds for K–2 students and whether things will return to normal. Stephanie responded, "I feel like it's pretty normal now to be honest. I think there's some benefits like we were able to get one-to-one [technology]. I'm not sure if that would have been a push. And I think we're all using a lot more technology." This was a unique answer when compared to the other 11 participants. Everyone else in the study expressed their opinions on the *new normal* in the field of education. Stephanie's perspective was drastically different because she was not an educator prior to the global pandemic.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania. The research questions for this study were created to address the current literature and theories surrounding occupational stress and burnout in educators. The research questions and subquestions are addressed using the data collected from participants through individual interviews, journal entries, and focus group sessions.

Central Research Question

The central research question asked: How has occupational stress and burnout

contributed to the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania postpandemic? All five of the themes presented in the finding section answer the central research question. The educators in this study stated that increases in extreme behaviors and social-emotional needs are sources of occupational stress and burnout. Every participant in this study expressed concern for extreme—sometimes violent—behavior. The need to explicitly teach social-emotional skills was addressed by every participant in this study as well. Erin, a second-grade teacher, expressed her concern for the students who do not receive mental health and social-emotional support. Erin said, “So, if those basic skills are lacking, then you know that the kids with the extreme behaviors are just multiplying.” Another aspect of social-emotional need is the support needed for educators. The educators that participated in this study expressed that they receive support from colleagues at their job site. It is evident that educators need social-emotional connection as much as students need social-emotional connection.

It is apparent that the prolonged school closures due to COVID-19 created a large variance in student ability. When asked what experience has been the most difficult in recent years, Heather, a second-grade teacher, indirectly mentioned differentiation. Heather shared, “Trying to teach all those different levels because some kids didn't even learn anything because they didn't do anything.” With many different levels of ability within a single classroom, educators are pushed to differentiate learning tasks. The critical need for differentiation is time-consuming. The participants of this study expressed that time was a major source of occupational stress. The concept of time included having enough time to prepare for lessons, having enough time to meet the needs of all learners, and having enough time to cover the desired amount of curriculum.

Technology was a source of occupational stress for the educators in this study.

Technology itself was not the problem; rather, the problem was the misunderstanding of what young children can do independently with technology. Michelle, a first-grade teacher, explained that most apps require students to sign into an email address. Michelle stated, “Well, they didn't know, in first grade, like even the administration doesn't realize, you can't just say type in your email address. They can't. So yeah, they had to rely on an adult.” Expectations for technology implementation seemed to be inappropriate for the developmental skills of young learners. Throughout the study, educators stated that the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to be thrown into a scenario where they were working two full-time jobs.

Staffing shortages are a source of occupational stress and burnout for K–2 educators. The educators in this study discussed preparing for several different situations when taking a day off of work. Educators are spending their time making lesson plans in two to three formats due to substitute and staffing shortages. Educators also described the stress of taking on extra children at a moment’s notice. Many educators in this study talked about feeling stress and anxiety when they were unprepared. Tiffany, a kindergarten teacher, explained the added pressure of taking on five to six extra students. Tiffany shared, “Whenever you have to have split classes and have children in your room that you didn't plan for necessarily. You don't know them, that is really difficult.” The lack of services created by staffing shortages impacts the students and educators in this study. Educators feel that students are missing important intervention time. A lack of services creates an even larger gap in student learning. For all of the reasons listed above, many educators stated that they have felt burnt out in recent years. Many of these educators have described situations where they had a breakdown and cried at work. Most educators in this study expressed a desire to leave the field of education.

Subquestion 1

The first subquestion was: How do K–2 educators describe their experiences with changes to instruction in recent years? The educators that participated in this study expressed that the biggest change to instruction following the prolonged school closures due to COVID-19 is the need for extensive differentiation. Now, more than ever, students are performing at different levels. Amanda, a first-grade teacher, discussed the need for differentiation in her classroom: "Just the varying levels, like some kids did nothing. Some kids did everything. And now you've got them all and you're trying to move forward with the curriculum." One participant, Erin, explained that differentiation was always just a word used in education, but now it is a reality: "We've got a lot of different learners. I have probably about 12 different styles of learning in my classroom. And I think it just really made us, it forced us to stop and think about the kids." Erin stated that educational stakeholders on the state and federal level seem to think that students can just move on with business as usual. She mentioned that state assessments continue to be given in the same format as they were before the pandemic. Erin feels that the people who create educational policy have not taken into account everything that has changed and the current needs of students.

Subquestion 2

The second subquestion inquired: How do K–2 educators describe their experiences with staffing shortages? Staffing shortages have affected all the participants in this study. Each participant described a situation in which a staffing shortage impacted student learning. A lack of substitute teachers has created a situation that causes occupational stress for educators. Staffing shortages impact student learning because students are not receiving the additional services that are needed. Educators, who are responsible for student progress, are experiencing occupational stress due to staffing shortages.

The educators in this study described having to plan for an absence. Planning for an absence takes a large amount of time because lesson plans need to be created in the event that there is a substitute teacher and in the event that there is not a substitute teacher. Many educators in this study discussed coming to work sick because it was easier than spending time planning for different scenarios. Danielle said, “So, I spend more time planning than I do taking off. It's not worth it. I am coming to work sick because I don't want to deal with it.” When a substitute teacher is not available, children are split between other classrooms at their grade level. Erin, a second-grade teacher, explained that the substitute shortage puts a strain on all learners. Erin shared, “So, not only do I not like it because it puts a strain on my colleagues, but it's really unfair to the kids in both situations.” All the educators in this study stated that having extra students from another classroom affects the learning of their own students.

Staffing shortages create a lack of services for students. All the educators in this study cited times when a specialist was pulled to cover a regular education classroom. The students who received intervention did not get the extra support that day. The participants in this study mentioned that when a specialist or a learning support teacher is absent, typically a substitute teacher is not secured for that position. Michelle, a first-grade teacher, expressed her frustration with the lack of services due to staffing shortages. Michelle shared, “But yeah, I mean, these kids are missing out on weeks of learning. Title and special ed, and all of it.” It became evident throughout the study that staffing shortages trickle down to every aspect of education. In one way or another, student learning is impacted by staffing shortages, and staffing shortages create additional stress for educators.

Subquestion 3

The third subquestion was: How do K–2 educators describe how the experience has changed working with children given the impact of the past three school years? Over the course

of this study, it became clear that education has changed given the impact of the past three school years. All five of the themes presented in this study address the changes to education over the course of the last three years. The participants in this study expressed that extreme, violent behavior seems to be on the rise. Educators articulated an increasing need to address social-emotional behaviors. Students are learning at a variety of different levels and differentiation has become an important part of education. The integration of technology and virtual learning has had positive and negative effects on K–2 education. Staffing shortages in recent years have impacted student learning and the well-being of educators. The educators that participated in this study expressed frustration and concern for students. One participant, Heather, described the feelings of the educators in her school. Heather commented, “So emotionally exhausting, everybody. Just exhausted.”

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an analysis of the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania following the prolonged school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The occupational stress and burnout of the participants was clarified. A rich, thick description of each participant is provided. Five themes emerged from this study: (a) social-emotional needs, (b) extreme behaviors, (c) need for differentiation, (d) technology and virtual learning challenges, and (e) staffing shortages and lack of services. I answered the central research questions and subquestions using the data collected from participants.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 elementary educators in central Pennsylvania. For the purposes of this research, occupational stress was generally defined as job-related demands that exceed the resources available for support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Occupational burnout describes the experience of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In this study, I collected data from 12 K–2 elementary educators through individual interviews, journal entries, and focus group sessions. The collected data was then analyzed using several cycles of coding, and five themes emerged from the data. In this chapter, I provide a summary and interpretation of the findings of the study. Implications for policy and practice are articulated, and theoretical and methodological implications are discussed. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations and delimitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Through this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I explored the lived experience of K–2 elementary educators in the three years following the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted individual interviews, journal entries, and focus group sessions to answer the central research question and subquestions. The following five themes emerged from the analysis: (a) social-emotional needs, (b) extreme behaviors, (c) need for differentiation, (d) technology and virtual learning challenges, and (e) staffing shortages and lack of services. In this section, the findings of the study are supported with empirical and theoretical sources.

Interpretation of Findings

The five themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis process answered the central research question. The central research question focused on how occupational stress and burnout contribute to the lived experiences of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania. Following the prolonged school closures due to COVID-19, educators articulated the increasing need to explicitly teach social skills. Participants expressed that social-emotional needs seem to be increasing exponentially. All the participants in this study discussed teaching self-regulation skills, problem-solving skills, and social awareness skills. Throughout the pandemic, educators expressed that their own social-emotional needs were not met. The educators in this study described the personal relationships and support that they received from their colleagues. Many participants stated their desire to return to school to be with colleagues. It became clear that social-emotional connections are important for both students and educators.

Another theme that emerged was the presence of extreme, violent behavior in elementary schools. Almost all the educators in this study told a story about a violent encounter with a child. Physical altercations seem to be common in early elementary school classrooms and may be occurring more frequently. Educators expressed that in the early years of schooling, many students are not identified for special education services. Because young students do not have additional support, violent behaviors occur until the child is placed in the appropriate programming. The participants in this study identified extreme, violent behavior as a common source of occupational stress.

Differentiation of instruction became a prominent topic of discussion throughout the data collection process. The educators that participated in this study frequently reiterated that students are performing at a variety of different levels. The prolonged school closures created gaps in student learning. For young students, the level of support at home became critical to learning.

The educators in this study continuously stated that some students did all of the work, while others did none of the work. This created vast differences in students' literacy and mathematical skills. Writing became almost nonexistent, as students were using iPads or laptops to complete learning tasks. Participants stated that differentiation is crucial to student success following the pandemic.

Technology and virtual learning continue to be sources of occupational stress for educators. The educators in this study detailed the misunderstandings surrounding what K–2 students can do using technology. Many participants stated that one positive aspect of the pandemic was the incorporation of technology. Educators were forced to use technology to provide instruction. Educators emphasized feelings of frustration when young children are expected to use technology in the same manner as older students. The participants of this study felt that there was a huge misconception that children can learn independently using technology. Many of the educators in this study described the amount of time required to teach young children to sign into a learning platform. For this reason, the participants cited use of technology as a source of occupational stress.

The participants in this study cited additional workload created by staffing shortages. Staffing shortages impact both educators and students. Educators reported spending many hours preparing for an absence. In the past, educators prepared one set of lesson plans for a substitute teacher. Presently, educators are preparing several sets of lesson plans to cover all scenarios when they are absent. The districts that participated in this study use strategies called "split classrooms" or "Plan Z" when a substitute teacher cannot be secured. Educators articulated that students miss instruction when a substitute teacher cannot be secured. Participants stated that staffing shortages impact student intervention and special education services. A lack of services

inhibits student learning. Educators expressed that occupational stress occurs from increased workload and concern for student instruction.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The purpose of this study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania. Based on the five themes presented in the findings of this study, three significant interpretations are offered.

Educators Take Care of Educators. The educators in this study provided explicit examples of caring for each other. Most of the educators stated that they would not still be in the field of education if it were not for their colleagues. This form of support is essential for persistence in a career in K–2 education. While peer support is important, educators need more support to maintain their wellness.

Educator Wellness is Tied to Student Outcomes. All the educators in this study articulated that their concerns were for the students. The educators did not directly mention concerns for their own personal health. The conversations always centered on what was best for the children. The educators in this study were able to persist through difficult times because of their concern for students. Many of the educators expressed guilt in circumstances in which they felt that they could not give their best.

Classrooms are Changing. Following the prolonged school closures due to COVID-19, classrooms changed significantly. Many of the sources of occupational stress and burnout proposed in this study are different from the sources proposed in current research literature. Internal, external, and transactional factors of occupational stress and burnout are still present. Varying needs of students and the pressures of staffing shortages are not presented in current research literature.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Through this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I described the lived experiences of K–2 educators following the COVID-19 pandemic. Implications for policy and practice are derived from the data and subsequent themes presented in this study. Recommendations for educational stakeholders, such as legislators, are proposed. On a local level, recommendations for educational stakeholders such as administrators and parents are addressed.

Implications for Policy

Educational stakeholders at the state level need to enact policies to attract candidates for substitute teaching positions. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has taken action to help school districts with the substitute teacher shortage. Act 91 was created to address the growing problem (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023). This Act states that school districts may use retired educators, day-to-day emergency permits, educators with inactive certifications, graduates of educator preparation programs, and student teachers to fill open substitute teacher positions (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023). State and federal legislators need to enact policies that make a career in education more attractive to students entering a postsecondary school program. Teacher preparation programs have seen a 35% reduction in recent years (Sutcher et al., 2019). Legislation could include a raise in the minimum salary of educators. Some states, such as Massachusetts, have seen a surplus of educators due to higher teacher salaries (Sutcher et al., 2019). Legislation could also include funding for security initiatives to make school buildings a safe working environment.

Educational stakeholders at the state level need to enact policies to provide funding for mental health and family support services. There has been an increased need for these services following the global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of many Americans (Reilly et al., 2020). Researchers have indicated that mental health symptoms during

a pandemic far surpass the effects of any physical symptoms (Reilly et al., 2020). The findings of this study point to increasing social-emotional needs in the classroom. Legislation could be passed to create funding for mental health services and family care in general. Funding could provide increased resources to schools. Resources might include emotional support teachers, programs and curriculum to support healthy social skills, school guidance counselors, and school psychologists.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study support prior researchers' allusions to the idea that educator well-being impacts students and may even be linked to student achievement. Current scholars have stated that having a teacher who is suffering from occupational stress and burnout has negative outcomes for students, and several authors have cited the negative outcomes tied to occupational stress and burnout in educators (Arens & Morin, 2016; Dicke et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Klusmann et al., 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Oberle et al., 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ramberg et al., 2020, 2021). Educational stakeholders such as administrators and parents can provide support to educators in the interest of children.

Administrators. The educators that participated in this study listed colleagues as their main form of support. Researchers have proven that peer support is a protective factor against occupational stress and burnout in educators (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020). In addition, administrative support can reduce occupational stress and burnout in educators (Maas et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022). Administrators can provide support for educators simply by checking in on them. Several of the participants in this study stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, their administration did not

bother to ask how things were going. Working with educators to problem-solve may be an important aspect of alleviating occupational stress and burnout in educators.

The findings of this study demonstrated that educator wellness can improve student outcomes. To ameliorate the symptoms of occupational stress and burnout, administrators could focus on wellness activities for educators. Current research findings have demonstrated that mindfulness techniques (Crum et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019; Mérida-López et al., 2017), inquiry-based stress reduction interventions (Landau et al., 2015; Leufke et al., 2013; Lev-Ari et al., 2013; Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017, 2020; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021), and social emotional learning interventions (Oliveira et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020) are promising techniques to alleviate occupational stress and burnout in educators. Inservice training could be aimed at focusing on the wellness of educators. As peer support is essential for educators, administrators could work to (a) carve out time for educators to communicate with their colleagues and (b) create common planning times and common lunch times for educators.

Parents. Many parents have a vested interest in the education of their children. The findings of the current study suggest that educator wellness improves outcomes for children. Researchers have reported that educators who are healthy produce better environments for children (Arens & Morin, 2016; Klusmann et al., 2016). Parents could partner with parent-teacher organizations (PTO) to provide additional support for educators to alleviate occupational stress and burnout. PTOs could (a) organize classroom volunteers to support instructional activities within the classroom and (b) use their influence to lean on school directors in support of educator wellness activities. When school directors and administrators hear from parents, they are inclined to act. The PTO could organize initiatives to reduce the workload of elementary

educators. Such tasks could include copying, cutting lamination, supervising lunch periods, and supervising recess.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991) guided the current study. The findings of the study provided support for both of the theoretical frameworks. In the following section, I will illustrate the connection between the theoretical frameworks and this study.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) guided this study. The transactional model of stress and coping theorizes that an individual's ability to cope with a stressful situation is based on their interactions with the environment. This person-environment relationship is the central focus of the theory. The current study aligns with the elements of the transactional model of stress and coping. The educators in this study experienced primary appraisal. During primary appraisal, an individual assesses the demands or stakes of a situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Three types of primary appraisal exist: *irrelevant*, *benign-positive*, and *stressful* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The educators in this study described their experiences and appraised those experiences. Secondary appraisal occurs as an individual decides if they have the resources to cope with the stress-inducing situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Three types of secondary appraisal exist: *blame or credit*, *coping potential*, and *future expectations* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Throughout the course of discussions, the educator participants of this study assigned blame or credit, discussed coping strategies, and evaluated their future expectations of occupational stress. The educators' level of occupational stress and burnout was always tied to person-environment relationships.

Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory of Emotion

The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion also guided this study. The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion posits that emotions are complex, containing cognitive, motivational, and relational aspects (Lazarus, 1991). According to this theory, the cognition is a precondition for emotion, and the thought always comes before the emotion is experienced. This study shed light on the process that occurs for elementary educators when they experience occupational stress. Most of the educators in this study described experiences aligning with the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion. An event would occur, and the participant would ruminate on the situation for a period of time. Following the period of rumination, the participants would experience intense emotional reactions, such as crying. This theory proposes that educators are motivated to respond based on their relationship with the environment. The participants of this study were motivated by intense concern for their students. This intense concern allowed them to persist in difficult circumstances throughout the pandemic and the years following the pandemic. The person-environment relationship was demonstrated when the participants shared environmental circumstances that lead to their level of occupational stress.

Empirical Implications

Empirical implications connect this study to current literature on occupational stress and burnout. Occupational burnout, peer support, and student outcomes are topics that align with current literature on occupational stress and burnout. The novel contribution of this study is the exposure of new factors contributing to occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators.

Occupational Burnout. In their seminal work, Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined occupational burnout in educators. They delineated three phases of stress: (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) depersonalization, and (c) lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson,

1981). Throughout the course of this study, all three phases of stress were demonstrated in participants. Many educators expressed unexplained fatigue and exhaustion. Many of them stated that they were concerned that they might be suffering from underlying health conditions. Several participants in the study noted detachment or depersonalization. One participant, Michelle, stated that she had to train herself to stop caring about her students because she felt that the administration was not concerned about the lack of support services. Michelle said, “I'll just say it. Like I went home to my husband, and I said, I have to really train myself not to care about my job.” Her comments demonstrate depersonalization as a coping mechanism for occupational stress. Researchers have indicated that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment function separately (Gilmour et al., 2022; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021). Although the participants in the current study suffered from emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, many of them could still pointed to a sense of personal accomplishment with their students.

Peer Support. This study confirmed much of the current literature on occupational stress and burnout in educators. Educators take care of educators. The educators in this study confirmed that they would not still be in the field of education if it were not for their colleagues. This form of support is essential for persistence in a career in K–2 education. Positive relationships among colleagues can enhance educators' well-being (Avanzi et al., 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019; Camacho et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Fiorilli et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a; Rahman, 2019; Smetackova et al., 2019; Zhao & Ding, 2020).

Student Outcomes. Educators' wellness is tied to student outcomes. Conversations with participants always centered on what was best for children. The educators in this study were able to persist through difficult times because of their concern for students. Recent studies have

provided evidence that positive teacher-student relationships can serve as protective factors against occupational stress and burnout (Corbin et al., 2019; Taxer et al., 2017). In turn, current researchers have pointed to a link between educator wellness and student outcomes, indicating that educators who are healthy produce better learning environments for children (Arens & Morin, 2016; Klusmann et al., 2016).

Factors Contributing to Occupational Stress and Burnout. This study extended the previous research on occupational stress and burnout. Current literature points to various internal, external, and transactional factors related to occupational stress and burnout in educators (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Klusmann et al., 2021a; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Solomon & Lambie, 2020; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021; von der Embse et al., 2015). In this study, I found that classroom environments are changing, and as a result the factors contributing to occupational stress and burnout in educators are different. Educator workload, time pressure, student behavior, and technology concerns are mentioned in the research literature on occupational stress and burnout for educators (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2021; Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; Nordhall et al., 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Richards et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Solomon & Lambie, 2020). The novel contribution of this study is that new factors of occupational stress and burnout are emerging. The varying needs of students and the pressures of staffing shortages are not presented in current research literature. The varying needs of students include social-emotional support and extensive differentiation of instruction. The pressures of staffing shortages and a lack of support

services seem to be contributing to the overall health and wellness of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was not without limitations. The study was qualitative in design and was conducted in a rural section of central Pennsylvania. Thus, the results of the study are not generalizable to educators in different areas. Replicating the study in another geographical location could produce different results. The sample population for the study was not diverse in terms of gender or ethnicity. The K–2 educators in the study were Caucasian females. While female educators are prominent in K–2 classrooms, replicating the study with male participants could produce differing results. Previous researchers have demonstrated that female educators reported higher levels of perceived stress than male educators (Teles et al., 2020). Educators experience occupational stress and burnout differently based on gender. Female educators often report higher levels of emotional exhaustion, while male educators report higher levels of depersonalization (Bottiani et al., 2019; Chang, 2009). Finally, I had a pedagogical orientation to the topic of study. All attempts were made to control for bias, including a description of the researcher's role and pedagogical orientation to the topic.

Delimitations are the purposeful decisions that a researcher made to define the boundaries of the study. A hermeneutic phenomenological design was chosen because of my pedagogical orientation to the topic of study (van Manen, 1990). All participants were certified K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania. The participants of the study were required to have taught in K–2 regular education classrooms over the last three years. The goal of the study was to describe the lived experiences of K–2 educators following the prolonged school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the focus of the study was based on the last three school years, participants were excluded if they did not have classroom experience during that period.

Recommendations for Future Research

I conducted this study using a hermeneutic phenomenological design. Because the study was qualitative and exploratory by design, future research should be conducted using a quantitative design. An experimental study could potentially illuminate current factors contributing to occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators. Future researchers should focus on the level of needs of students as well as the impacts of staffing shortages. The participants in this study were Caucasian females. Future investigations including a more diverse population of participants could yield differing results. The current literature on occupational stress and burnout emphasizes that female educators report higher levels of stress, specifically emotional exhaustion, than male educators (Bottiani et al., 2019; Chang, 2009; Teles et al., 2020). Finally, this study was conducted in a rural area in central Pennsylvania. Future research should be conducted in other geographic areas of the United States. Because the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures occurred globally, studies could be conducted internationally to produce a more elaborate picture of occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe occupational stress and burnout as experienced by K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania. The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and the cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion advanced by Lazarus (1991) served as the theoretical frameworks for this study. A purposeful sample of K–2 educators was chosen for this study. Educators were required to have taught over the last three years in a K–2 elementary classroom. The sample pool included participants from three school districts. Individual interviews, journal entries, and focus group sessions served as the data collection procedures in this study. Data were collected, transcribed, and entered into NVivo qualitative analysis software. First-cycle

coding was conducted using *in vivo* and process coding. Second-cycle coding was used to organize data in a process called focused coding. The following five themes emerged: (a) social-emotional needs, (b) extreme behaviors, (c) need for differentiation, (d) technology and virtual learning challenges, and (e) staffing shortages and lack of services. From the five themes, three implications were developed. The implications include: (a) educators take care of educators, (b) educator wellness is tied to student outcomes, and (c) classrooms are changing. The novel contribution of this study is that new factors of occupational stress and burnout are emerging. The varying needs of students and the pressures of staffing shortages are not presented in current research literature. The varying needs of students include social-emotional needs, as well as extensive differentiation of instruction. The pressures of staffing shortages and a lack of support services seem to be contributing to the overall health and wellness of K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 14, 2022

Jennifer Hart
Christine Saba

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-508 OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND BURNOUT IN K-2 EDUCATORS POST-PANDEMIC: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

Dear Jennifer Hart, Christine Saba,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B

SITE APPROVAL LETTERS

December 16, 2022

Dear Jennifer M. Hart:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Occupational Stress and Burnout in K-2 Educators Post-Pandemic: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [redacted]

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☑ I grant permission for Jennifer M. Hart to contact K-2 educators in the building to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Permission Response Letter

December 18, 2022

Dear Jennifer M. Hart:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Occupational Stress and Burnout in K-2 Educators Post-Pandemic: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [redacted].

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☒ I grant permission for Jennifer M. Hart to contact K-2 educators in the building to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Permission Response Letter

December 18, 2022

Dear Jennifer M. Hart:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Occupational Stress and Burnout in K-2 Educators Post-Pandemic: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [redacted].

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☑ I grant permission for Jennifer M. Hart to contact K-2 educators in the building to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT LETTER

January 1, 2023

Dear [Recipient]:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. The purpose of my research is to describe occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be K–2 educators from Pennsylvania who have been employed over the last three school years. Participants, if willing, will be asked to write a journal entry (15 minutes), complete an audio-recorded individual interview (45 minutes), complete an audio and video-recorded focus group session (45 minutes), and check the accuracy of the themes presented at the conclusion of the study (15 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at [redacted] or [redacted]@liberty.edu to schedule an initial interview.

A consent document is attached to this letter and will be given to you at the time of the first interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the first interview.

Participants will receive a $100 Amazon gift card.

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Hart
Researcher
[redacted]/[redacted]@liberty.edu

APPENDIX D

PERMISSION REQUEST LETTER

January 1, 2023

Dear [Recipient],

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. The title of my research project is Occupational Stress and Burnout in K–2 Educators Postpandemic: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology, and the purpose of my research is to describe occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in your school building and contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to complete a journal entry (15 minutes), an audio-recorded individual interview (45 minutes), an audio and video-recorded focus group interview (45 minutes), and at the conclusion of the study, participants will be asked to review the common themes developed by the researcher (15 minutes). Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Hart
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX E

PERMISSION RESPONSE LETTER

January 1, 2023

Dear Jennifer M. Hart:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Occupational Stress and Burnout in K–2 Educators Postpandemic: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [name of school district].

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ I grant permission for Jennifer M. Hart to contact K–2 educators in the building to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Hart
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

APPENDIX F

CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: Occupational Stress and Burnout in K–2 Educators Postpandemic: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology
Principal Investigator: Jennifer M. Hart, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a Pennsylvania certified K–2 educator who has been employed over the last three school years. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe occupational stress and burnout in K–2 educators in central Pennsylvania. The study will investigate the lived experiences of K–2 educators after prolonged school closures (due to COVID-19).

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participants will be asked to write a 1–2 paragraph journal entry describing the experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The estimated time to complete the journal entry is 15 minutes.
2. Participants will be asked to complete an individual interview with the researcher. The estimated time for the interview is 45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded.
3. Participants will be asked to complete a focus group session with the researcher. Focus group sessions will include 2-8 other participants. The estimated time for the focus group session is 45 minutes. The focus group session will be audio and video recorded.
4. At the conclusion of the study, participants will be asked to review the common themes developed by the researcher. The estimated time for review is 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a better understanding of occupational stress and burnout in educators following the prolonged school closures (due to COVID-19). Reducing absenteeism, staffing shortages, and educator attrition directly benefits children, parents, and educational stakeholders.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Pseudonyms will be used for school districts as well as participants. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Physical data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and may be used in future presentations. Electronic data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After 3 years, physical data will be shredded, and all electronic records will be deleted.
- Individual interviews and focus group interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for 3 years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. A $100 Amazon gift card will be emailed to participants at the conclusion of the study. The gift card will not be pro-rated if a subject does not complete the study. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer M. Hart. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Christine Saba, Ed.D, at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will send a copy of the signed consent form to the participant via email. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

☐ *I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

APPENDIX G

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Qualifying question: Have you taught in a K–2 self-contained elementary classroom in Pennsylvania for the last three school years (2019–2020, 2020–2021, 2022–2023)?

Name: Date/Time: Location:	Ethnicity:
Primary email address:	Years of experience:
Secondary email address:	Current employment:
Age:	Gender:
Comments:	

APPENDIX H

JOURNAL ENTRY

Directions: Please respond to the journal prompt in 1–2 paragraphs. Participants may type the journal entry and submit it via email to [redacted]. Participants may also choose to write the journal by hand, in which case the researcher will arrange for in-person collection of the handwritten responses.

Journal Prompt: Please reflect on your experiences teaching K–2 students during the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures.

APPENDIX I

AUDIT TRAIL

IRB Approval Received	December 14, 2022
Permission Request Letters/Emails sent to Administrators	December 19, 2022
Permission granted by 2 administrators	December 21, 2022
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 4, 2023
Permission granted by 1 additional administrator	January 4, 2023
Two interviews scheduled	January 5, 2023
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 5, 2023
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 9, 2023
Scheduled three more interviews	January 9, 2023
Schedule one interview	January 10, 2023
First interview conducted/suggested some other participants I may want to reach out to	January 10, 2023
Second interview conducted	January 11, 2023
7 interviews scheduled as of this date	January 11, 2023
Received an inquiry about participation	January 11, 2023
Scheduled interview number 8	January 11, 2023
Transcribed 2 interview tapes	January 16, 2023
Reached out to 4 more participants to schedule interviews	January 17, 2023
Scheduled 4 more interviews (total of 12 so far)	January 17, 2023
Third interview conducted	January 17, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	January 18, 2023

Fourth interview conducted	January 18, 2023
Began to write participant profiles	January 18, 2023
Received 3 completed journal entries from participants	January 18, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	January 18, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	January 19, 2023
Fifth interview conducted	January 20, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	January 22, 2023
Received 1 completed journal entries from a participant	January 23, 2023
Received 1 completed journal entry from a participant	January 24, 2023
Sixth interview conducted	January 24, 2023
Seventh and eighth interview conducted	January 25, 2023
Received 2 completed journal entries from participants	January 25, 2023
Transcribed 2 interview tapes	January 26, 2023
Ninth interview conducted	January 27, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	January 28, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	January 29, 2023
Tenth interview conducted	January 30, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	January 30, 2023
Eleventh interview conducted	January 31, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	February 1, 2023
Twelfth interview conducted	February 1, 2023
Transcribed 1 interview tape	February 2, 2023

Set up Zoom focus group dates for next week	February 2, 2023
Received a completed journal entry from a participant	February 2, 2023
First Zoom focus group at 7 p.m.	February 6, 2023
Transcribed first Zoom focus group	February 7, 2023
Second Zoom focus group at 3:30 p.m.	February 7, 2023
Transcribed second Zoom focus group	February 8, 2023
Eight $100 Amazon gift cards sent out	February 8, 2023
Received 1 completed journal entry from a participant	February 9, 2023
Third Zoom focus group (1 person left)	February 9, 2023
Transcribed third Zoom focus group	February 10, 2023
Received 2 more journal entries	February 12, 2023
Began to reread transcripts and code data	February 13, 2023
Began first cycle coding (*in vivo*/process)	February 13, 2023
Began second cycle focus coding	February 22, 2023
Starting writing Chapter 4 Findings	February 25, 2023
Member Checking Email sent	March 7, 2023