

Teacher Stress: Sources, Effects, and Protective Factors

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- **A qualitative study was conducted to examine teacher stress by investigating special education teachers' unique responses to stressors.**
- **Special education teachers experienced several sources of stress and utilized protective factors in responding to those stressors.**
- **Teachers indicated that lack of administrative support could be a source of stress while administrative support can be a protective factor against stress.**

• **Key words: Administrative Support, Qualitative Research, Special Education, Teacher Stress.**

The effect of occupational stress and its relationship to teachers leaving the profession is a growing concern (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Schlichte, Yssell, & Merbler, 2005). Stress is defined as a disagreeable emotional experience accompanied with feelings of anxiety, anger, frustration, and tension, and connected with specific environmental causes (Kyriacou, 2001). Stress manifests in teachers and significantly impacts their sense of efficacy, job satisfaction, burnout, attrition, student engagement, and physical health (Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011).

Recently, Greenberg, Brown, and Abenavoli (2016) documented four main sources of teacher stress. These sources are (a) school organization (e.g., lack of administrative support and organizational structure of the school, negative school working conditions; Ingersoll, 2012); (b) job demands, (e.g., excessive paperwork, high teaching loads, insufficient time; Shernoff et al., 2011); (c) work resources (e.g., limited sense of teacher autonomy and decision-making power; Frank & McKenzie, 1993; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997); and (d) social and emotional competence (e.g., lack of collegial interactions; Schlichte et al., 2005).

Landers, Servillio, Tuttle, Alter, and Haydon (2011) found that stress and frustration in response to managing chronic challenging behaviors in the

classroom manifests in teachers as low self-efficacy and low job satisfaction. High stress levels are noted as one of the main reasons why 25% to 50% of teachers leave the profession within their first 5 years of teaching (Algozzine, Wang, & Violette, 2011). Teachers' stress also affects their physical health and wellbeing. Chronic stress among teachers is associated with exhaustion and negative changes in biological indicators of stress. For example, chronically stressed teachers show atypical daily patterns of stress reactivity and cortisol levels (Katz, Greenberg, Klein, & Jennings, 2016).

Kyriacou (2001) noted that sources of stress experienced by a particular teacher are unique and depend on the precise complex interaction between the teacher's personality, values, skills, and circumstances. Billingsley, Israel, and Smith (2011) indicated that teacher stress (especially for new teachers) is specific to particular work environments and educational initiatives. Special educators have unique challenges that involve attending to multiple policies at the federal, state, district and school levels. States' adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has amped up academic expectations for all students to improve. The increase of instructional rigor and the implementation of Response to Intervention, multilevel frameworks, and evidence based practices for students with disabilities has increased and put more pressure on teachers'

performance (Brownell, Billingsley, McLeskey, & Sindelar, 2012).

Therefore, there is reason to expand research in the area of teacher stress so it reflects a variety of contexts and individuals. Building on the work of earlier research and accounting for teachers' unique responses to stressors, three research questions guided this study; 1) What are recent sources of stress for special education teachers in various school settings and grade levels? 2) How does stress impact special education teachers? 3) What protective factors do special educators use to alleviate and address stress?

Method

Participant Selection

The study consisted of 16 Caucasian special education teachers (13 females; three males) from a variety of urban and suburban settings in a large, Midwestern metropolitan region. Seven teachers taught at the elementary level, seven in middle school settings, and two in high schools. Six teachers were early career teachers with 5 or fewer years of teaching experience. Three were midcareer teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience. The remaining seven participants were late career teachers with 11 or more years of teaching experience. It is important to note that not all of the early career teachers were younger in age. Some teachers were middle-aged and entered the teaching profession following previous careers. The selection criteria for the teachers were based on a convenience sample of former or current mentor teachers in the first author's university's special education practicum experience.

Study Design and Data Collection

This investigation used a qualitative case study to examine the sources of teacher stress and the ways teachers try to alleviate stress. Interview data were collected over a period of 3 years using a standardized interview protocol in which the number and types of questions remained consistent across the study. The interview consisted of 11 questions that were informed by a review of the literature on teacher stress (Billingsley, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001; Miller et al., 1999; Schlichte et al., 2005; Shernoff et al., 2011). The interview was designed to elicit teachers' perceptions of the stressors facing teachers working in schools, the impact of those stressors, and perceptions regarding additional resources and supports needed

to reduce stress (a copy of the protocol is available from the first author).

Teacher participants were interviewed one time for approximately 75 minutes. Each interview was tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim for use in data analysis. The data collection team was comprised of the first author and six advanced undergraduate students who volunteered to participate in the research project. Two different undergraduate students participated in Years 1, 2, and 3, respectively. There were four completed interviews in Year 1, six in Year 2, and six in Year 3.

Analysis

The first two authors implemented deductive and inductive analyses using a three-level coding scheme: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Prior to the transcript analysis, the authors conducted a review of the literature and familiarized themselves with factors related to teacher stress and in particular special educators. The literature review provided a list of *a priori* factors related to teacher stress that fell into two main categories: sources of stress and mitigators of stress.

Open Coding. The first two authors deductively reviewed the interview transcripts for instances in which participants discussed topics related to stress. These text selections were tagged for additional coding to add description to the data (Charmaz, 2006). Each author completed the coding of all transcript data from the 16 participants separately before meeting to review the open coding. Upon reviewing the coding and memoing about the content of the transcripts, the authors determined that the next step of the coding process would be to inductively analyze the individual text selections deeply to more fully understand the stress events each participant was describing. While the open coding stage in this inductive analysis consisted of identifying and briefly naming the stress-related factor, the next step in our process resulted in an organization of the open codes into a logical binary of sources of stress and mitigators of stress.

Axial Coding. Next, the first two authors began the axial coding of the transcripts, which was initially done separately and independently. Axial coding was completed by grouping related open codes and, in some instances, abandoning open codes that turned out to be irrelevant to the research questions. We sought to explore the richness of the discussion from

Table 1: Summary and frequency counts of sources of stress and protective factors

Sources of stress	Frequency	Protective factors	Frequency
Administrative interaction	34	Peer interaction	26
Individual student challenges	33	Teacher perceptions	22
Teacher perceptions	21	Health/wellbeing efforts	20
State mandates	16	Administrative support	18
Peer interaction	15	Parents/families	8
Adequate time	14	Teacher-student relations	8
Parents/families	13	Individualized student issues	2
Professional responsibilities	12	Paraprofessional dynamics	1
Safety	6	Professional issues	1
Health/wellbeing efforts	5	Adequate time	1
Teacher-student relations	4		
Administrative demands	3		
Adequate resources	1		

the participants while connecting comments and topics to emerging themes. During weekly meetings, we reviewed the axial codes and our rationale for them, resisting the temptation at this point to reconcile differing interpretations of events. Rather, we discussed and took notes on our individual rationales for the conclusions we were drawing from the data. In instances when the first two authors coded strings of text differently, we discussed the surrounding the interpretation and context of comments from teachers to reduce confusion and misunderstanding (Ezzy, 2002).

The axial coding process resulted in a list of factors related to teacher stress. Some of these factors, such as state mandates, were only identified as sources of stress. Other factors, such as administrative support, were exclusively seen as mitigators of stress. However, still other factors, notably peer support, were identified as both sources of stress and mitigators of stress depending on the context in which they were described.

Selective Coding. Finally, the first two authors began the selective coding of the transcripts, which was also initially done separately and independently. Once each author was finished, they met to discuss any coding that did not align. As a result, two primary selective codes emerged: (a) sources of stress and (b) protective factors. It was at this point the authors arranged axial codes in relation to the two selective codes.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

There were several procedures put in place to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the study and its

findings. First, after interviews were transcribed, they were returned via e-mail to the teachers for review and comment as a form of member checking. Next, the first two authors separately coded the transcripts and then searched for disconfirming evidence. The first two authors engaged in peer debriefing throughout data analyses. For example, each author initially identified strings of text related to stress in the eyes of the participant and in subsequent coding cycles categorized the type of situation or stress the participant described. Working collaboratively, the authors then discussed every coded string of text and the associated categorization. As a result, the authors came to consensus as to the presumed meaning behind the categorization of the participants' comments and the implications of these comments.

When asked to draw on their experiences of sources of stress, the majority of participants emphasized the concepts of *lack of administrative support*, *individual student challenges*, *teacher perception*, *state mandates*, and *peer interactions*. We present the findings in the following sections including the frequency with which factors appeared in the data and participants' statements supporting the major themes. Table 1 summarizes the sources of stress and protective factors of stress.

Q1 Sources of Stress

The top four cited sources of stress were administrative interaction, individual student challenges, teacher perceptions, and state mandates.

Lack of Administrative Support. Lack of administrative support was the most frequently

cited theme among participants. Lack of support included (a) lack of supervision of staff members, (b) lack of understanding of special education law and policies, and (c) inadequate training on the part of administrators. The negative results of the inability to effectively support special education staff members included little notice of schedule changes, placing students with various disabilities in one class, termination of effective programs or supports for both teachers and students, imposition of ineffective programs or supports, and the presence of a negative overall school climate. Special educators in the study perceived these items as the responsibility of the administrator. One veteran teacher, David, described how “most of the stress-inducing things don’t occur in the classroom—they occur from dumb decisions made by administrators that dictate to me how I should run my classroom.”

Individual Students Challenges. Individual student challenges was the second most cited theme ($n = 33$). Special education teachers faced a number of challenges with individual students that were reported as stress factors. Three teachers indicated that their students had intense individual daily needs such as personal care, hygiene, and physical transport. Beyond these physical needs were psychological and behavioral needs presented by students with autism and other communicative challenges. The disruptive behavior of students with emotional disturbances frequently created stressful situations for three teachers. Two teachers indicated that poorly written or ineffective behavior plans were a source of stress as well managing an overwhelming number of caseloads. Rebekkah noted, “There’s too many kids that you just can’t figure out, all the supports and strategies that you put in place, you just kind of feel like you’re drowning after a while.”

Teacher Perception. The way in which teachers perceived, processed, and internalized changes at the school, district, and state levels affected stress. Seven teachers indicated that they were unable to keep up with constant changes. These perceived uncontrollable factors created excessive worrying, apathy, isolation, detachment from “everything,” and burnout (particularly for those teachers older than 40). Six teachers felt the pressure of meeting expectations in state testing.

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State Mandates. Six teachers associated changes in programs, testing reforms, policies, procedures, and curricula as negative. These teachers perceived the CCSS as detrimental to special education students. Brandi recounted, “Once the standardized testing came in, our program started narrowing down what we were supposed to be teaching to get them to pass the test.” While three teachers were able to manage their stress associated with this seemingly constant change, three teachers perceived these changes as unmanageable and stress inducing. David described, “I would have a tough time with somebody telling me I had to write an IEP based on the Common Core, or for us, it would be the extended Common Core, because it loses track of the individual.”

Peer Interaction. Nine teachers described a number of instances where they felt stress while working with various individuals in the classrooms. Coordination of multiple adults servicing high-needs students in the classroom was a challenge for teachers. Amy related, “We’ve had nurses in the past who didn’t want to work with our kids during instructional time. It makes a huge difference in the classroom.” Three teachers indicated they had little training pertaining to how to supervise nursing staff or paraprofessionals. Three teachers felt co-teaching in a general education classroom was stressful.

Challenges included finding time to meet, maintaining adequate communication, and feeling respected. Finally, lack of integrity among peers created stress. Three teachers were stressed when their colleagues did not follow through on promises or obligations. Peers were considered undependable when teachers had to step in and take up the slack.

Additional Sources of Stress. Three teachers spoke of other sources of stress including inadequate time, negative or challenging interactions with parents and families, coordinating special education meetings, and completing required paperwork outside the regular school day.

Q2 Impact of Stress on Teachers

Twelve teachers reported that stress had an impact in two areas, self-efficacy and health and wellbeing.

Stress influenced four teacher's self-efficacy and classroom management. Grace indicated, "[W]hen I can't manage the classroom we are not seen as an authority figure." Holly stated that when she couldn't manage the classroom it feels like "you are banging your head against the wall and there is nothing you can do to change the situation." Two teachers (Pam and Queen) spoke in a broader sense and stated that they didn't have any control over "rules, students, administration, and peers." These teachers who had little success at managing behaviors didn't feel they were making a difference academically.

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Eight teachers indicated that stress impacted their health and wellbeing. The effects were in several areas. Elizabeth indicated that stress isolated her from her peers and caused her to "excessively worry," and this worry carried over to other areas of her life such as her physical and mental health. She stated that the worry was "no longer about her students but became generalized anxiety." Stress caused Nick to "worry over things he had no control over" and turned him into a "perfectionist." Amy and Grace were fearful and stressed about being physically attacked. Grace was actually kicked several times during the previous year. Amy who was pregnant was fearful of "getting kicked in the belly" and was concerned how the stress she experienced at work would carry over to her future family. Jess stated that she brought her stress home. She "felt rushed at home... never had enough time to get everything done and accomplish what I want." Like Nick, she felt under pressure to be a "perfectionist" and felt like she was developing obsessive-compulsive disorder. Jess never had enough time to take a walk or pleasure read, or "do anything to get rid of stress." She felt there is never enough "me time." Brandi experienced the pressure of "constantly being on as soon as I walked into the building until I left.... I had to be there 100% or more with the students (emotionally and physically)." The stress on Maxine and Queen had a physical impact. Maxine felt tired all the time and Queen gained 25 pounds since the start of the school year (Katz et al., 2016).

Q3 Protective Factors of Teacher Stress

Protective factors of teacher stress are presented in Table 1. The top four cited protective factors were peer interaction, teacher perceptions, health/wellbeing efforts, and administrative support.

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Peer Interaction. Peer interaction and support was the most cited protective factor among teachers. Fourteen teachers stated that positive peer interactions shielded them from stress. Simple acts such as supporting each other, getting along, being willing to collaborate, offering assistance, and having a positive attitude helped teachers make stress more manageable. Grace suggested that teachers take an active role in choosing with whom to collaborate. She recommended, "Just make sure you are surrounded by good people and people that really support you." This point was confirmed by Nick who said, "You don't last unless it's a positive environment. You know, I've got to work with that kind of [positive] people too. I can't work with negative depressing people."

Good communication among peers helped to build trust. In this study, people who were dependable demonstrated trust. Irene gave several qualities of collegial teams.

A really good team—they work well together. They are punctual. If I have an IEP meeting, they are there. They take care of the duties of attending and participating. They are good to my students. They treat them well. They understand the objectives. They understand the modifications and accommodations that have to be made.

Teacher Perception. Ten teachers spoke about how mindset and perceptions influenced stress levels. When teachers accepted circumstances and situations as beyond their control, stress was reduced and their positive attitude increased. For example, Holly explained, "It's important to keep a positive attitude with students. I tend to brush things off and not let bad interactions affect my day or me. I feel I am doing the best I can to keep positive interactions with

students.” Chris spoke in similar terms describing, “I tune out the things that I don’t have any control over,” and “I really don’t let the things out of my control get to me because there’s nothing I can do about it. In my opinion, it’s just not worth stressing out about it.” For these teachers what was once considered a stressful event was now made more manageable.

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Five teachers described how self-awareness of stressful thoughts and feelings helped changed their mindset and made stressful events more manageable. Irene was aware of one of her sources of stress, and self-awareness helped her manage stress levels. Irene recounted, “It’s stressful because I see what I want them to do with their education; I see what they can do, but there are outside factors.” Irene’s belief in her students’ capabilities coupled with the acceptance of challenges they were facing in their lives outside of school helped her manage stress.

For three teachers, teaching was a “calling” and they persevered and overcame challenges, thus increasing their self-efficacy. As a result they were less stressed. Nick explained, “I wanted to do something with my life that would make an impact on others. I feel that I have found where I am meant to be.”

Health and Well-Being Efforts. Ten teachers indicated that balancing work with health and wellbeing activities was an effective protective factor against stress. Sports and activities that elevated cardiovascular function were cited as an effective means to reduce stress. Three teachers preferred individualized activities that easily fit into their busy schedule. Activities such as running, swimming, and cycling were noted. Seven teachers were oriented toward team sports and activities like softball, basketball, soccer, or bowling. Six teachers preferred outdoor activities while four preferred indoor activities. Jess explained, “I like to be outside. Being outside is a big stress reliever for me. I like to sit outside, go for a walk, go to the park, play softball, and sit by a bonfire in the evenings.” Regardless of the physical activity of choice, all 10 teachers were

aware that these activities were protective factors on their stress levels.

Administrative Support. Positive administrator support served as a protective factor against teacher stress for all of the teachers. Specific practices by administrators that mitigated stress included being trustful, allowing collaborative decision-making, communicating, having empathy, being knowledgeable of the needs of the special education department, and setting a clear course for the school in terms of the mission and vision for the organization. Teachers felt positive when their administrators trusted them to make decisions. Specifically, six teachers noted that they felt empowered when administrators left discipline and classroom management decisions to the teacher. Chris elaborated upon her feelings of her principal trusting her decisions when she stated, “She [principal] trusts that we as teachers are doing what we need to be doing in the classroom, and if there’s an issue with a parent or anybody outside of the school, she’s very good about being supportive.” She further stated, “It really helps that my principal lets me do my job.” Amy also discussed principal trust and stated, “He doesn’t micromanage us so I feel like he trusts us.”

When principals practiced trust, respect, and good communication, collaborative decision-making increased. For example, Pam stated that “He [principal] wants our input on issues, and is good about collaborating with our special education team.” As a result decision-making became less stressful and more positive and empowering for all. As decision-making became more positive, trust, respect, and communication between the principal and staff increased. Pam’s sentiments represent the other participants in this study when she said, “Our principal is very easy to discuss issues with and he listens to us. He wants our input on issues (especially in special education) and is good about collaborating with our special education team.” David said, “[S]he [principal] knew our needs, she knew our struggles, and she was always there for us.” Holly reiterated David’s thoughts and said, “You don’t last unless it’s a positive environment.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the sources of teacher stress, the effect stress has on

teachers, and protective factors teachers use to reduce or manage stress. The authors investigated the following three questions, 1) What are recent sources of stress for special education teachers in various school settings and grade levels? 2) How does stress impact special education teachers? 3) What protective factors do special educators use to alleviate and address stress?

Kyriacou (2001) noted that sources of stress experienced by a particular teacher are unique. Participants reported sources of stress that supported earlier research (e.g., administrative support, individual student challenges, and peer interactions; Greenberg et al., 2016). Teachers felt the pressure from policies and the CCSS (Brownell et al., 2012). Teachers felt isolated working with the same group of students all day in a self-contained classroom. Participants in this study felt managing classroom behavior was burdensome and disempowering (Landers et al., 2011). Educators were stressed because they had little control of students' home life and lack of homework.

In regard to how stress impacts special education teachers, some of our results were consistent with earlier findings. Stress often affected teachers' health and wellbeing. Teachers felt tired all the time and one teacher complained of weight gain (Katz et al., 2016). A difference in this study from earlier research is that teachers shared how stress affected their mental health. Stress caused them to become a perfectionist, develop obsessive-compulsive disorder, and excessively worry. Female teachers developed fear and anxiety around the issue of physical aggression.

While participants described sources of stress, they were also able to offer several ways to protect them from stress. Having positive peer interactions was the most cited protective factor from stress ($N = 26$). Specific skill sets included being friendly, helpful, and supportive, having a positive attitude, using direct, clear and regular communication, and being good listeners.

Participants in this study provided new information on protectors of stress. One key finding from this study was that for special education teachers, the way they perceived events influenced stress levels. We found that two teachers could have vastly different perceptions and responses to the same situation. The way a teacher internalized outside events influenced stress levels. For example, one teacher accepted the implementation of the CCSS as a reality and an inevitable change in education policy. Teachers enjoyed working alone because they

did not have to worry about issues that didn't directly relate to their students. Teachers viewed disruptive student behaviors as part of teaching and considered managing these behaviors as their life's work. Nick, who was a beginning teacher in his 40s, was able to "let things go" and even felt grateful for teaching because he experienced what it was like to work in other fields. In comparison younger teachers complained more about teaching.

Health and wellbeing efforts was another noted protective factor against stress. Those teachers who exercised a few days a week or who were involved in coaching, outside school activities, or their children's activities had less stress and were able to manage stress more effectively. Participants were less stressed when they didn't bring work home and had "me" time such as walking outdoors alone or quietly read. Having time off from school was stress reducing.

Implications and Recommendations for Administrators

Administrators are key agents in ensuring that positive changes occur as schools become more inclusive for all students (Crockett, 2002; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2003; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). Unfortunately, much of the evidence in the literature suggests that administrators are not well prepared to address the needs of students with disabilities and others struggling learners (Pazey & Cole, 2013).

Administrators in this study who made efforts to become informed and educated on issues related to special education both from a legal and procedural perspective mitigated the stress levels of teachers in this study. Unfortunately, teachers reported administrators whose special education knowledge was low and thus contributed to teachers stress levels. As a consequence teachers did not feel supportive. A contributing factor that leads to this lack of knowledge is the absence of content related to disability in special education in administrator preparation programs. Specifically, there is a need for administrators to increase their knowledge of special education law, evidence-based practices, and procedural regulations. Therefore, a recommendation is for administrator preparation programs to incorporate special education topics into their preparation programs (Osterman & Hafner, 2009).

Administrators can be influential in establishing effective working conditions in schools. Leaders can

create positive climates and ensure that staff members have the time, schedules, and preparation to plan for the needs of students with disabilities and engage in collaborative instruction such as co-teaching (Brownell et al., 2012; McLeskey et al., 2014). This study provides evidence that the presence of these factors is associated with lower teacher stress levels. Administrators can protect teachers from stress by reducing noninstructional responsibilities so there is adequate time to teach. Reducing the amount of paperwork when possible, the number of meetings, and other compliance activities that are not focused on instruction would help reduce stress (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011; Meier, 2002).

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Administrators can lead efforts in establishing positive interactions among teachers (Crockett, 2002). Although teachers often work in isolation with their students, administrators can look for ways to create opportunities for teachers to collaborate and interact both on a professional and social level. Administrators can encourage and reinforce teachers to be supportive of one another and if possible provide paid time for collaborative efforts. Professional development activities could be offered to nurture teachers' social and emotional competence.

Administrators could provide professional learning opportunities for teachers on stress management (Correa & Wagner, 2011). Most schools and districts have new teacher induction programs and these could be utilized to coach new teachers to be aware of how their perceptions increase or reduce stress. Finally, administrators could look into and implement workplace wellness programs in order to increase health and wellbeing efforts. These efforts could reduce health risk, health care costs, and absenteeism among teachers (Katz et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations in this study that need to be addressed. First, the participants were selected based on their involvement

with the university's special education practicum experience. Consequently, the study sample is a limited representative sample of special education teachers. Future research could look into obtaining a different sample of participants. Future researchers could look into studies that triangulate data over a period of time. Second, data were not broken out or presented by school settings or grade levels. Future researchers could have more participants in each grade level and separate data for analysis. Third, although there was a wide range of stress factors discussed by teachers in the study that led to saturation in many areas, it is possible that other teachers from different backgrounds or working in different settings may have unique experiences that would add to the findings of the study (Kyriacou, 2001).

Conclusion

The most prominent themes from the results of this study indicate that lack of administrative support, individual student challenges, teacher perceptions, and state mandates are sources of stress. Administrative support that helps build collaboration among teachers, changes negative teacher perceptions, and encourages health and wellbeing can be protective factors against stress. The results of this study indicate that there are several strategies administrators can implement in order to reduce teacher stress levels. Recommendations include increasing administrator knowledge of special education procedures and policies, saving teachers' time related to the amount of paperwork when possible, increasing positive peer interactions, providing professional development on stress management, and implementing health and wellness programs. Based on the findings of this study, more research could be conducted on the effectiveness of specific administrative practices on reducing teacher stress.

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