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Public School Elementary Teachers' Perspectives on Levels of Workplace Stress and Needed Supports

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Rima Granados

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2023

Abstract

Public School Elementary Teachers' Perspectives on Levels of Workplace Stress and

Needed Supports

by

Rima Granados

Ed.S., Walden University, 2022

MS, Hofstra University, 1997

BA, University of Baltimore, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

The problem addressed through this study was that public elementary school teachers in the United States have reported increasing levels of workplace stress. Teachers' stress levels need to be studied and addressed because they affect students as well. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. Coping-competence-context theory was the conceptual framework. Research questions explored elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress, and their perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. Participants were selected purposefully in a sample of 13 K-3 U.S. public school teachers with 3 or more years of classroom experience. Data analysis procedures included interview transcription and the process of coding and categorizing data into emerging themes. Key results included teachers' perspectives on stress and needed supports along three themes: time, balance, and institutional support. The reported average level of weekly stress was 6.4 on a scale of 1 to 10. Future studies may widen the geographic area and the representation of the sample. Implications for positive social change include aiding district leaders in developing institutional supports to assist elementary teachers and generating additional research on the influence stress has on their work. This study may lead to positive social change and fill a gap in practice by providing public school districts with the data to address K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress.

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Dedication

Bear, Facie, EllBell, MomBo, Kid, Jazlet, Pedhead, Fiona, Sue, Anne, and Tracey; you are wonderful and thanks for all your encouragement. Dr. Brackin and Dr. Curtis, you are the best chairs ever, just saying, and Keith Snodgrass, you deserve a medal for being an incredible academic advisor. Walden University students are blessed to have you in their corner. To all the talented, kind, hardworking teachers and administrators I have had the honor of working with, thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Public elementary school teachers in the United States have reported increased levels of workplace stress for decades (Dilberti et al., 2021; MetLife, 2012; National Education Association [NEA], 2022; Parthasarathy et al., 2022; Reglin & Reitzammer, 1998; Turner, 1981). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. Results from this study may lead to social change and fill a gap in practice by providing school districts with the data to ask for support to address the effects of workplace stress on public school K-3 elementary teachers and the influence it has on their work. It may also aid districts in developing the institutional supports to assist elementary teachers and generate additional research. Stress levels in public elementary teachers needed to be studied and addressed because they affect students as well (Eddy et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2022). Teacher workplace stress varies but targeting needed support could help teachers and their students improve performance (Berger et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018).

In Chapter 1, I provide background information on the research related to the rising stress levels of public elementary school teachers. Within the Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study sections, I present the reason for the study and the focus on the perspectives gathered from K-3 public school elementary teachers on the reasons for work-related stress and needed supports. The coping-competence-context conceptual framework supported the research questions, data collection, and data analysis for the study. In addition, I present the nature of the study, define key terms, and present the

assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. The chapter concludes with the significance of the study and a summary.

Background

Stress in the workplace has been a concern for teachers for decades (MetLife, 2012; Reglin & Reitzammer, 1998; Turner, 1981). To provide some context, historically, the percentage of elementary teachers who noted great stress occurring over several days each week went from 9% in 1981 to 35% in 1985, 37% in 1998, and 59% in 2012 (MetLife, 2012; Reglin & Reitzammer, 1998; Turner, 1981). By 2017, Herman et al. (2018) noted that 93% of public elementary teachers reported high stress levels. The NEA (2022) found that 75% of elementary teachers perceived workplace stress as a serious concern, contributing to their decision to remain in or leave the field of education.

Specific contributing factors to public school elementary teacher stress include testing redundancy, teacher evaluation practices, feeling voiceless in school decision making, and others (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). Researchers in the U.S. Department of Education (2021) recommended a response to the workplace stress on teachers as it also affects outcomes for students. Berger et al. (2022) recommended additional research on how institutions can address stress, rather than how teachers may tackle it individually. There is a need for districts and schools to support teachers who are stressed, and an exploration of needed supports would be helpful (Chen et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2020). This study was focused on addressing this gap.

Though there is abundantly available research concerning stress levels of teachers in the upper elementary grades through high school, there is minimal available research

concerning K-3 public school teachers within the United States. The gap this study explored is K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress.

Institutional supports is a term used to mean support provided at the building or district level, as opposed to support received from sources outside the work environment.

Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. (2021) noted that institutional support had a positive impact on teachers' well-being.

Farley and Chamberlain (2021) wrote that stress comes from the job itself. Work stress is separated from the outside influences of stress in the research; therefore, in this study it was imperative that I guide the participants to separate workplace stress from stressors outside the workplace. There is a link between high levels of teacher turnover and work-related stress, which can adversely affect morale and school climate (Ryan et al., 2017). The stress teachers experience may also adversely affect their students' stress and behavior (Herman et al., 2018). This study is needed because with a better understanding of the perspectives of public school K-3 teachers on their levels of stress, district and grade level team leaders will be better equipped to develop needed supports to address the toll work-related stress takes on the teachers, and if teachers are better equipped, their students will benefit.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed through this study was that public elementary school teachers in the United States have reported increased levels of workplace stress. Eddy et al. (2019) wrote that current public elementary school teachers in the United States rated

the stress level of their jobs at 8 out of 10. Parthasarathy et al. (2022), in a study of 862 public school elementary teachers in the United States across five cities, found a reported stress level of 85%. In a study on elementary teachers in a public midwestern district, those teachers who were rated as high stress with low coping had the lowest student outcomes (Herman et al., 2018, p.96). Regarding public school elementary teachers in the United States, Herman et al. (2018) noted that stress is experienced differently by each teacher. Supports should be crafted to address teachers' specific needs to improve outcomes for teachers and those students in their care (Herman et al., 2018). The data furnished by the current study could help district leaders and teachers to determine U.S. K-3 public school teachers' perspectives on the reasons for workplace stress and contribute to the development of needed K-3 public school teacher specific supports (see Herman et al., 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. I chose the qualitative approach for this study as I wished to explore and understand the perspectives of K-3 public school teachers. Burkholder and Burbank (2020) noted that seeking understanding of participants' perspectives in more depth lines up with the ontological, constructivist, and epistemological viewpoint of social interaction as the means of creating meaning. The basic approach to qualitative inquiry allows for some flexibility (Kahlke, 2014). The

phenomenon of interest was the perception of workplace stress by K-3 public school teachers.

The role of the qualitative researcher is subjective (Hammersley, 2013). Because I am a current classroom teacher, objectivity was a challenge throughout the course of this research. The sample size, 13 participants, was consistent with qualitative research standards (Hammersley, 2013). This study included narrative accounts to go into greater depth and detail than a discussion concerning statistics (Hammersley, 2013). Qualitative research, in this case, was a better fit than quantitative research or mixed methods would have been. As qualitative researchers are concerned with exploring the perspectives of others, this study contained research questions designed to aid me in exploring the perspectives of elementary public school teachers (see Burkholder & Burbank, 2020).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were the following:

- RQ1: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress?
- RQ2: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual lens through which this study was grounded was the coping-competence-context theory by Herman et al. (2020). This conceptual framework includes the assertion that three pathways—coping, competence, and context—intertwine to give a more complete picture for the reasons which connect workplace related factors to teacher

stress levels (Herman et al., 2020). *Coping* refers to how teachers react to stress, *competence* refers to experience and training dealing with stress, and *context* refers to the environment in which stress occurs (Herman et al., 2020). I will go more into depth about the coping-competence-context theory in Chapter 2.

The coping-competence-context theory relates to the study approach, research questions, instrument, and data analysis in the following manner. A qualitative approach is used when a researcher wishes to understand or explore a phenomenon (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained how qualitative research is not linear. Neither is the coping-competence-context theory, which relies on an interdependent tangle of its three pathways (Herman et al., 2020). The research questions include probes into the perspectives of stress, which are well suited to the interdependent coping-competence-context pathways. The instrument that I developed contained questions supported by the coping-competence-context theory framework. Finally, the data were analyzed along the lines of how the stress K-3 teachers perceive related to coping, competence, and context. The conceptual framework is further discussed in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

This study had a basic qualitative design. Kahlke (2014) noted that a basic qualitative design does not tie a researcher to any particular tradition, rather, it incorporates parts of many traditions. My research was well suited to the basic qualitative design as I wanted to explore elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress

with structured questions and flexibility with follow up questions (Kahlke, 2014). Qualitative research is focused on the exploration of perspectives of a phenomenon (Crawford, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The alignment of qualitative research with this study was consistent as a qualitative approach is used when the researcher seeks a greater understanding of the meaning people have constructed (Crawford, 2020). The research was intended to explore the problem of the increased levels of stress in public elementary school teachers in the United States.

Open-ended questions were used to collect data during the semistructured interviews, which I conducted via the videoconferencing platform Zoom (<https://zoom.us>). Interviewees included 13 public elementary school teachers in the United States found through social media posts on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com>), Walden's participant pool, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children HELLO posting board (<https://hello.naeyc.org>) for online (Zoom) audio interviews. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to find meaning (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Coding continued until no new information could be put into a category related to K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress.

Assumptions

Assumptions can help form and guide a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Assumptions for this study included that the stress the teachers experience at work is due to work-related causes and not from outside influences. Though sleep or nutrition may

add to stress, this study explored stress perceived to have arisen in the workplace. Another assumption was that teachers provided genuine responses to the interview questions (see Appendix) and that the data gathered were accurate. It was necessary to presume honesty to sustain the integrity of the research and trust the study results (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Scope and Delimitations

According to Crawford et al. (2020), the researcher designs the scope of the study to connect the research with a relevant group to whom the results may be applicable. Exploring the perspectives of K-3 elementary public school teachers was the scope of this study. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 13 K-3 public school teachers with 3 or more years of classroom experience. Participants needed to work within the United States to qualify.

Delimitations, on the other hand, refer to which participants will not be part of the study (Crawford et al., 2020). Administrators, paraprofessionals, and those teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience were excluded. Part-time teachers or teachers working in international schools were not considered. Also excluded were early intervention or special education teachers, to concentrate the study on those who teach in a general education classroom. The exclusion of these groups strengthened transferability by focusing on K-3 classroom teachers who have similar full-day schedules and job requirements found in many public schools across the United States.

This study filled a gap in practice by providing school districts with the data to ask for support to address the effects of workplace stress on public school K-3 elementary

teachers and the influence it has on their work, and aiding districts to develop the institutional supports to assist elementary teachers, and possibly generating additional research. Stress levels in public elementary teachers needed to be studied and addressed as they affect students as well (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2022). This study has the potential to be transferable within public elementary schools within regions of the United States. Teacher workplace stress varies but targeting needed support could help teachers and their students improve performance (Berger et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018).

Limitations

Limitations describe which parts of the study may include weaknesses (Crawford et al., 2020). Weaknesses that may be encountered in this study included the demographics of the participants. For example, teachers in public school K-3 classrooms who have taught for more than 3 years and are willing to speak about their perspectives of workplace stress may have had regionally varied views. In addition, the population may or may not have been unionized. Researcher bias may also have been a limitation since I have both worked as a teacher and have perceived stress in the workplace.

Measures I took to address these limitations included keeping a reflexive journal to keep aware of any personal bias. I grouped participants by region to see if common themes emerged that could be helpful or applicable to the target population. Also, I asked if participants were union members and considered that in my results. Eddy et al. (2019) defined the sources of stress as work-related, such as arising from the school system, the school climate, and the students, rather than coming from sources outside the school.

Farley and Chamberlain (2021) wrote that stress comes from the job itself. Work stress was separated from the outside influences of stress in the research, so in the interviews I was prepared to encourage the participants to separate workplace stress from stressors outside the workplace. Union membership may affect transferability and dependability as not all public schools have teacher unions. To address this, it was noted in the interview whether or not a teacher belongs to a union, and this was taken into consideration when analyzing the results and considering sources of work-related stress.

Significance

This study was significant in that it filled a gap in practice by providing school districts with the data to ask for support to address the effects of workplace stress on public school elementary teachers and the influence it has on their work. It may have aided districts with developing the institutional supports to assist K-3 elementary teachers, and possibly by generating additional research. Stress levels in public K-3 elementary teachers needed to be studied and addressed as they affect students. (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2022). Teacher workplace stress varies, but targeting needed support could help teachers and their students improve performance (Berger et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018).

Potential Contributions and Social Change Implications

Lambert et al. (2018) noted that job-related workplace stress is a problem for public school elementary teachers. Many aspects of public school educators' careers have been negatively influenced by workplace stress, including attendance, habits at work, personal health, and likelihood of choosing to remain in the field (Chambers-Mack et al.,

2019; Jones et al., 2019; Landsbergis, et al., 2020; Marais-Opperman et al., 2021).

Participants in this study shared their experiences and perspectives on which workplace supports have been effective in reducing work-related stress on K-3 public elementary school teachers. Through this study, I uncovered perspectives unique to K-3 public school educators about their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress.

Teachers, grade level teams, and local administrators may incorporate helpful ideas gleaned from the interviews to make a difference within their buildings. From a social change viewpoint, an understanding of the workplace stress felt by K-3 teachers may inspire district leaders to consider professional development or additional supports to address the stress the workplace adds to teachers' work performance within this environment. More funding may be requested by national leaders should they be inspired by any responses concerning wellbeing initiatives or professional development. The intention was to positively affect the work environment, and by extension the attendance, work habits, and personal health of the K-3 teachers employed in the public school elementary setting, and to improve outcomes for the students whom they serve (Berger et al., 2022; Chambers-Mack et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2019; Landsbergis et al., 2020; Marais-Opperman et al., 2021). The data from this study may lead to other studies, which when combined may lead to solutions to lessen workplace stress for K-3 public school teachers. As when attempting to solve a particularly difficult puzzle, the pieces uncovered here may be connected with data from additional studies to

result in long-term, positive social change for U.S. K-3 public school elementary teachers.

Summary

It was a problem that public K-3 elementary school teachers in the United States have reported increased levels of workplace stress. In Chapter 1, I presented this problem and the purpose of the study to explore elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. The research questions, conceptual framework, the nature of the study and the assumptions to consider were included. In addition, the scope, the delimitations, and any limitations pertinent to the research were discussed. Continuing with the review of the literature, research strategies, and the conceptual framework, Chapter 2 covers an exhaustive review of existing studies and information exploring elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was addressed through this study is that public elementary school teachers in the United States have reported increased levels of workplace stress. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. Eddy et al. (2019) wrote that current public elementary school teachers in the United States rated the stress level of their jobs at 8 out of 10. Parthasarathy et al. (2022), in a study of 862 public school elementary teachers in the United States across five cities, found a reported stress level of 85%. Poor coping skills are associated with high stress levels (Herman et al., 2018). In a study on elementary teachers in a public midwestern district, the group which noted high stress and burnout with low coping linked with the lowest student outcomes (Herman et al., 2018). Herman et al. (2018) wrote that since teachers in the United States experience stress differently, an exploration of teachers' needs will determine the development of supports to improve outcomes for students as well as teachers.

Chapter 2 includes the search strategies I utilized to locate relevant articles to elementary public school teacher stress levels and needed supports. I describe the conceptual framework, Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context theory, and how it relates to this study. Major themes in the literature included information categorized into coping, competence, and contextual themes, with subsets of poor student outcomes, teacher attendance, teacher anxiety, collegial relationships, climate,

administrative leadership, and wellness supports. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of the literature review.

Literature Search Strategy

To find current research to include in the literature review, I searched within the Walden University Library, ERIC, EBSCOhost, Elsevier, Education Source, Google Scholar, APA Psych articles, and citation chaining. The articles were chosen as they were related to the stress levels of public elementary school teachers. Search limitations included that the articles should be from 2019 to the present, from a peer-reviewed journal, government entity, or reputable survey, with full text and written in English. The key words I used as search terms for the articles included: *teacher stress elementary not (-)international -China -Netherlands -Canada -Australia -Japan -England, workplace stress teacher, teacher stress levels elementary, elementary burnout, burnout stress teacher elementary, wellbeing teacher elementary, teacher attrition and stress, occupational stress teacher elementary, competence stress teacher, context stress teacher, coping stress teacher, coping competence and context theory, teachers emotion elementary, wellbeing teachers*, and I frequently used the “find similar results” option.

Conceptual Framework

Grant and Osanloo (2014) wrote that a conceptual framework is like a blueprint for a house. The conceptual framework that supported this study was the coping-competence-context theory. Herman et al. (2020), the developers of this theory, wrote specifically about teacher stress, its history in the research, the negative outcomes for teachers and students that arise from it, and the future research that is necessary. As such,

this content aligns with the problem of increasing levels of workplace stress for public elementary teachers in the United States. The coping-competence-context theory also aligns with the purpose of exploring public school K-3 teachers' perspectives about their level of workplace stress and institutional supports available to reduce workplace stress.

In developing their theory, which includes the three interdependent pathways of coping, competence, and context, Herman et al. (2020) were heavily influenced by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory. Transactional theory includes that stress results from external demands outweighing a person's ability to cope with, or manage, these demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping may include cognitive emotional, or behavior-based, adaptive problem-solving strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman noted that primary and secondary appraisals concern first understanding the threat level and then formulating a coping response. Over time, prolonged exposure to stressful experiences leads to health implications (Herman et al., 2020). Conversely, the ability to cope well with stress may mitigate negative consequences (Herman et al., 2020).

Herman et al. (2020) also drew inspiration from both Dweck's (2006, 2008) stress mindset theory, which concerns personal beliefs about whether stress can add to or detract from one's sense of well-being and health, and the prosocial classroom model by Jennings and Greenberg (2009), which concerns teacher social and emotional competence (SEC). SEC was found to have a significant effect on the classroom climate, the teacher-student relationship, and student work outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Those with high SEC are more likely to buffer the students, and themselves, from

the effects of teacher stress (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The coping-competence-context concept melds these three ideas into a new theory with pathways that are interconnected (Herman et al., 2020).

The coping pathway concerns how the individual teacher manages stress (Herman et al., 2020). Coping and stress should be considered together, as those teachers with the highest levels of stress and lowest levels of coping were found to be the most adversely affected by stress, as were their students (Herman et al., 2021). Eddy et al. (2019) also found a connection between stress and coping as an indicator for the likelihood of stress and burnout occurring over long periods of time. How a teacher copes determines how well stress is managed (Herman et al., 2020).

The competence pathway concerns how classroom practices are affected by teacher stress, which can adversely affect student reactions (Herman et al., 2020). Uncooperative student reactions can create a negative stress cycle (Herman et al., 2020). Lack of efficacy in classroom management has been shown to raise teacher stress levels (Herman et al., 2020). Tolan et al. (2020) suggested that training to increase classroom management efficacy may be beneficial for teachers with high levels of stress (Tolan et al., 2020). The competence one gains from experience and training can positively affect classroom management, which may contribute to lowering levels of perceived stress (Herman et al., 2020).

The context pathway concerns the influence of districtwide policies and procedures within the system which may increase the stress teachers experience (Herman et al., 2020). Context may also include the local setting in which the teachers work

(Herman et al., 2020). According to Kim and Buric (2020), 18% of the variance in stress teachers experienced on the job was linked to the context of the school. Kaihoi et al. (2022) connected building site influences with stress levels in teachers.

The 3C conceptual framework benefited the present study as it joined together three major pathways, coping, competence, and context, which connected workplace-related factors to teacher stress levels (Herman et al., 2020). Kindergarten to third grade elementary public school teachers have perspectives to add to the conversation about how their coping, competence, and context affect their levels of workplace stress. The 3C conceptual framework was my guide for the formulation of interview questions and supported the purpose of exploring public K-3 elementary school teachers' perspectives about their level of workplace stress and institutional supports available to reduce workplace stress.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Stress levels of public school elementary teachers in the United States have been rising for decades (Dilberti et al., 2021; MetLife, 2012; NEA, 2022; Parthasarathy et al., 2022; Reglin & Reitzammer, 1998; Turner, 1981). Eddy et al. (2019) wrote that current public elementary school teachers in the United States rated the stress level of their jobs at 8 out of 10. Parthasarathy et al. (2022) in a study of 862 public school elementary teachers in the United States across 5 cities, found a reported stress level of 85%. In a study on elementary teachers in a public midwestern district, those teachers in the subset of both low coping, high stress, and high burnout were linked to student outcomes that were inferior when compared to other subsets.

Herman et al. (2018) related that public elementary school teachers in the United States experience stress differently, so building supports targeted toward specific needs could improve results for teachers as well as their students. Determining U.S. public school teachers' reasons for workplace stress will contribute to developing needed support (Herman et al., 2018). According to the coping-competence-context theory, stress comes from multiple sources (Herman et al., 2020). The ability to cope, one's level of competence with classroom practices, and the school context largely determines the level of stress that teachers can tolerate (Herman et al., 2020).

Rising levels of teacher stress have been a concern and noted in research not only in years past but also within the last 5 years. Santoro (2019) interviewed teachers who saw demoralization as the basis for their stress and eventual burnout. Parthasarathy et al. et al. (2022) determined that 85% of the U.S. elementary teachers surveyed reported feeling stressed in the sometimes or often categories. Eddy et al. (2019) included 166 elementary teachers from a midwestern district in nine urban schools with an intervention group which received classroom management training, and a control group. A baseline average of reported stress levels from elementary teachers in the Midwest was 8 on a scale of 10 (Eddy et al., 2019). Elementary teacher stress is a current problem. A strength of the following studies is that they show data on what has worked and what is needed to reduce stress for elementary teachers or K-12 teachers in general. A weakness in these studies is that the perspectives of specifically public school K-3 teachers on the levels of workplace stress and needed supports in the United States had not been addressed.

Attrition

High levels of workplace stress contribute to the choice to leave the profession (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019). The NEA (2022) polled 3,621 NEA members, U.S. public school educators, and found that 75% saw stress as a serious issue and felt stressed to the point of considering leaving their jobs. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) investigated teacher attrition data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Surveys. Results showed that stress is reported to influence the choice to leave the profession which may impact the district budgets and negatively affect student learning (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Chambers-Mack et al. (2019) identified factors that cause stress in 2,588 teachers from a Texas district including approximately 532 elementary teachers. Results from the elementary teachers surveyed included that 48% wished to leave the teaching profession compared to 23% and 29% for teachers at middle school and high school. Stress in elementary teachers is higher than middle and high school teachers, and more than twice as high in the case of middle school teachers (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019). This study is meaningful because stress reduction is needed to lower teacher attrition (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019). This study will help explore K-3 elementary teachers' perspectives of workplace stress and needed supports to lower these levels of stress.

International Research

Teacher stress is not just an issue in the United States. Recent international research shows evidence of rising concern worldwide (Carroll et al., 2020; Levantini et al., 2021; Tomek & Urhahne, 2022; Tomek & Urhahne, 2023; Wang et al., 2021). Wang

et al. (2021) gave the Classroom Appraisal of Resources and Demands (CARD) survey to 521 U.S. elementary teachers from an urban district and 580 urban Chinese teachers, and 85% of the 65 items were the same in both countries. Tomek and Urhahne (2022, 2023) studied the influence of noise levels on reported levels of teacher stress in Germany and found higher noise levels led to burnout. Levantini et al. (2021) studied 32 public school teachers and their students in Italy on the effectiveness of social emotional learning programs and whether teacher stress influenced the effectiveness of these programs with the students. Teacher stress significantly affected the efficacy of the social emotional results with the students (Levantini et al., 2021). International research was more readily available on stress levels of teachers of the primary grades than there was from the United States. These international studies are important to show that elementary teacher stress is happening worldwide, and that more information on K-3 teachers' perspectives of workplace stress and supports is needed to address the problem in the United States. Herman et al.'s (2020) 3C theory is a meaningful approach to explore the research questions on K-3 teachers' perspectives of workplace stress and needed supports. Below, the three pathways of Herman et al.'s (2020) 3C theory are described in detail.

Coping

The first pathway discussed in Herman et al.'s (2020) 3C theory, *coping*, is defined as distinct from stress and concerns one's ability to tolerate or manage any imbalance of internal and external demands which lead to stress (Herman et al., 2018; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The metacognitive element to coping includes reflecting on strategies which help with problem-solving and mindfulness, which can influence the

perception or appraisal of stress (Herman et al., 2020). McCarthy et al. (2009) focused on public school elementary teachers and noted that when workplace demands overburden teachers' ability to cope well, levels of stress rise. Braun et al. (2020), who conducted a pretest and posttest on the effect of a mindfulness intervention upon the level of wellbeing reported by 21 elementary teachers from two districts in the northwestern United States, found that the training had a positive impact on the teachers and their practices in the classroom. The combination of high levels of stress with low coping levels were found to lead to negative outcomes for students as well as their teachers (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020). High stress and low coping negatively affected both classroom management and student behavior (Herman et al., 2020).

Competence

Competence is the pathway that describes how classroom management and practices are connected (Herman et al., 2020). Herman et al. (2020) noted that stress has a direct influence on teachers' practice in the classroom, which can affect how they respond to students, and can result in undesirable student behavior. This cyclical pattern can repeatedly add to teachers' levels of stress (Herman et al., 2020). Herman et al. (2018) related stress levels to coping levels in 121 public elementary school teachers from nine urban schools in a midwestern district. Teachers with a combination of high stress and low coping had the lowest performing students (Herman et al., 2020).

Poor Student Outcomes

Poor educator stress levels linked to poor outcomes for students (Akhavan et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2022). Researchers found that teacher stress significantly affected

the efficacy of the social emotional program results with students (Levantini et al., 2021). Jeon et al. (2019), who studied the responses of 132 early childhood teachers to the perceived stress scale questionnaire, found that higher stress levels negatively influenced the teachers' perspectives on the behavior of students, and their responses to it. Students notice when teachers are stressed (Oberle et al., 2022). Oberle et al. (2022) related Canadian teacher stress to 676 elementary public school students' perceptions of their 35 teachers' SEC through surveys completed by both groups. The higher the reported stress level of the teacher, the lower the SEC rating (Oberle et al., 2022). Teacher stress directly affects students (Oberle et al., 2022).

Attendance and Anxiety

Teacher stress levels can also affect attendance (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019; Jones & Howard, 2019). Chronic teacher stress can affect absenteeism, attrition, and teacher turnover (Dilberti & Schwartz, 2023; Eddy et al., 2019). Robinson et al. (2022) explored surveys of 52 teachers in 11 midwestern public elementary schools and noted that without additional support, teacher stress could lead to additional teacher shortages. Jones and Howard (2019) surveyed 3,361 public school teachers and noted how teacher anxiety and stress affects attendance. Half of the elementary teachers who took the surveys reported having an anxiety disorder. Eddy et al. (2022) studied 52 K-12 teachers in Missouri districts to see if a cognitive-behavioral stress management intervention was effective when compared to the results of a control group. Findings included that 50% of the sample showed improvements in the severity of anxiety levels. Lowering stress levels contributed to lowering anxiety (Eddy et al., 2022).

Influence of Lowered Stress Levels

When teachers lower their stress levels, their competence in classroom practices improved (Klusmann et al., 2023). Klusmann et al. (2023) studied a pre-recorded computer delivered program called Bridging Academics and the Mind (BAM) for children and its effect on the stress levels of 43 teachers who delivered it in four U.S. East Coast public elementary schools. Teachers perceived their stress levels to be lowered, and they felt they were better able to handle classroom disruptions, enabling them to save time, which also lowered their stress (Klusmann et al., 2023). Dexter and Wall (2021) surveyed 46 elementary teachers from two southeastern U.S. districts and related that teachers who are more reflective have lower stress levels and lower levels of burnout. Teachers who are more reflective view themselves as more effective teachers, which may contribute to preventing high stress and burnout (Dexter & Wall, 2021). Developing positive self-image may be effective in supporting public school elementary teachers with lowering or preventing perceived workplace stress (Dexter & Wall, 2021).

DiCarlo et al. (2020) studied three teachers of children 5 and under in a southern U.S. state to see if mindfulness training lowered the influence of teacher stress on the classroom climate by using the perceived stress scale and video observations. All teachers who took part perceived a reduction in stress and a positive influence upon classroom climate (DiCarlo et al., 2020). Wink et al. (2021) studied 178 public school elementary teachers in the northeastern United States and how their levels of empathy for challenging students influenced their levels of burnout. In addition, those who were more

empathetic with challenging student behaviors were less likely to experience stress related burnout.

Context

The context pathway can be defined as systemwide policies and school level administrative practices which may influence teacher stress levels (Herman et al., 2020). The context in which one teaches has an influence upon stress levels (Herman et al., 2020). Working conditions vary per location, which adds to or detracts from stress levels (Lambert et al., 2018). Context can also concern relationships with coworkers and administrators (Weiland, 2021). Akhavan et al. (2021) found that unclear administrative expectations and high workloads raise teacher stress levels.

Collegial Relationships

Collegial relationships affect wellbeing (Weiland, 2021). Weiland's (2021) study used semistructured interviews with three elementary teachers from the United States, two of whom were public school teachers. In the implications Weiland (2021) described the need for increased teacher support, in this case, in the form of supportive workplace relationships. Marais-Opperman et al. (2021) surveyed 229 South African teachers, including 127 primary school teachers, and focused on linking workplace stress to intentions to leave. High levels of workplace stress and emotional exhaustion pointed toward educators wishing to leave, while higher collegiality and job control led to a desire to stay (Marais-Opperman et al., 2021). Chan et al. (2021) related workplace supports that were effective during the pandemic. The researchers found that feelings of perceived workplace support and autonomy lowered stress levels.

Workplace supports including collegiality and more control at work can positively affect early educators' intent to remain in the field (Marais-Opperman et al., 2021). Landsbergis et al. (2020) discussed risk factors for stress within a teacher's workplace and compared teaching stress levels to other professions through 829 kindergartens through 12th grade member surveys from two districts in New York and a national sample. Results included that teachers' stress levels affected their health, when compared to other occupations, and that the perception of feeling respected by coworkers, supervisors, students, and community lowered reported stress levels (Landsbergis et al., 2020).

Kaihoi et al. (2022) explored the role support networks with colleagues has in affecting stress levels of public school teachers in mid-Atlantic coast states, including 142 elementary teachers in eight schools, and 228 teachers in nine middle schools. Kaihoi et al. (2022) explored if teachers were more likely to choose same grade, same gender, and levels of experience. Results included that teacher stress is influenced by the level of stress in their support networks (Kaihoi et al., 2022). Most colleagues chose those similar to themselves, with few differences separating the elementary and middle school results (Kaihoi et al., 2022). Kaihoi et al. found there could be an advantage or detriment associated with seeking collegial support for managing workplace stress if the colleagues themselves are under great stress.

Climate

Lambert et al. (2018) explored 11,850 public elementary teacher surveys to find what reasons contributed to teachers becoming vulnerable to workplace stress.

Workplace climate played a large role in contributing to stress (Lambert et al., 2018). According to Lambert et al. (2018), institutional supports may be available at low or no cost to be harnessed such as more professional autonomy, instructional support from administrators, and a positive school climate, all of which may contribute to lessening the workplace stress of public elementary school teachers. University of Georgia (2022) created a taskforce sponsored by the Georgia Department of Education to study the causes for burnout in response to rising teacher attrition rates. Pre-existing teacher stress was exposed by the pandemic time and stress is influenced in part by high expectations with multiple tasks and too little time to accomplish them (University of Georgia, 2022).

Alamos et al. (2022) studied teachers and students with average ages between 8 and 9, within 60 schools in an urban northeast district in the U.S., about how teacher burnout, defined as chronic work-related stress over time, affected the classroom relational climate with the students. Poor classroom relational climate contributed to burnout (Alamos et al., 2022). This study contained evidence, which is different, that burned out elementary teachers did not strongly affect the classroom climate (Alamos et al., 2022). It was also found that poor classroom climate and conflict did contribute to teacher burnout (Alamos et al., 2022).

Administrative Leadership

Steiner et al. (2022) surveyed K-12 teachers and principals in the U.S. districts and investigated job related stress, its sources, and the supports schools provided. Teachers who have a role in making the decisions and have the support of their administrators and colleagues are less likely to leave their jobs (Steiner et al., 2022).

Kaynak (2020) studied well-being, and in part the influence of stress on well-being, with nine public elementary school teachers from a title one school in the Midwest. Findings included the teachers' stressors that came from administrative observations, student misbehavior, and testing (Kaynak, 2020).

The Georgia Department of Education (2022) released a study in which the authors listed specific contributing elements to elementary public teacher workplace stress. Workplace related stress included unnecessary testing procedures, teacher evaluation, and lack of feeling a voice in schoolwide decision making, among others (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). Chan et al. (2021) related workplace supports that were effective during the pandemic. Feelings of perceived workplace support and autonomy lowered stress levels (Chan et al., 2021).

Wellness Supports

McCarthy (2019) developed a survey to explore teachers' working conditions, the classroom appraisal of demands and resource (CARD) and approximately 1000 elementary school teachers in the U.S. completed it. The 25% of teachers who are most at risk for high stress are in what the author called the demand category, where classroom demands outweigh the resources, such as wellness supports offered by the district, necessary to cope with stress (McCarthy, 2019). One study found that access to childcare was a stressful concern among teachers (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Steiner and Woo (2021) related 1,006 surveyed K-12 teachers' perspectives of work-related stress in recent times. Schools need to consider workplace supports such as access to childcare (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Merrimack College (2022) filled the gap left by the defunct MetLife (2012)

Teacher Survey by creating a survey to highlight the perspectives of 1,324 public school teachers, including 497 elementary teachers. Many teachers saw their salaries as unfair and felt they had less respect from the public, and 72% of the entire sample reported being somewhat to extremely dissatisfied with their work and expressed a need for increased support (Merrimack College, 2022).

Corbin et al. (2019) surveyed 145 elementary teachers from 27 schools in an urban northeastern state and discussed how there is a link between closeness of relationships with students and stress levels. Those teachers with closer working relationships with students reported lower levels of stress (Corbin et al., 2019). Carroll et al. (2020) explored the lived experiences of 74 primary and secondary teachers in Brisbane who were surveyed before and after a stress reduction program. Certain supports were found to be helpful in reducing stress such as increased time, support, well-being, and effective administrative leadership (Carroll et al., 2020).

Congress.gov (2023) listed that Representatives Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR) Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) and Susan Wild (D-PA) introduced Bill H.R. 744 on February 2, 2023, the Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act. The newly introduced bill calls for providing direct support for educational staff mental health and well-being with federal funding (Congress.gov, 2023). There is a need for schools to provide workplace supports for educator mental health and the issue of teacher mental health (Congress.gov, 2023). This bill places burnout at a level of national importance (Congress.gov, 2023).

Summary and Conclusions

Major themes in the literature included information which can be categorized into coping, competence, and contextual themes, with subsets of poor student outcomes, teacher attendance, teacher anxiety, collegial relationships, climate, administrative leadership, and wellness supports. What is currently known about the stress levels of United States teachers in the literature was available in abundance about those who teach grades higher than grade three, and less so for those who educate at the preschool level. Most mentions of stress in teachers of elementary students in grades K-3 at comparable ages were limited to international studies, or they were joined with studies which address all K-12 teachers of both private and public United States schools at once (Carroll et al., 2020; Georgia Department of Education, 2022; Kaihoi et al., 2022; Levanti et al., 2019; Marais-Opperman et al., 2021; Oberle et al., 2022; Sandilos & DiPerna, 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Tomek & Urahane, 2021).

Though much was revealed in the current literature, what was not known is how to apply the findings to support teachers the K-3 context in U.S. public schools. This study is significant because it filled a gap in practice by providing school districts with the data to ask for support to address the effects of workplace stress on public school K-3 elementary teachers and the influence it has on their work, and aid districts to develop the institutional supports to assist elementary teachers, and possibly generate additional research. The approach is meaningful as qualitative research gives the researcher a greater understanding of the meaning people have constructed (Crawford, 2020). This study could lead to the generation of additional research as more is learned about which

supports are needed, which will further influence practice. Stress levels of public elementary teachers need to be studied and addressed as they affect students as well (Akhavan et al., 2021; Eddy et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2022). Teacher workplace stress varies but targeting needed support could help teachers and their students improve performance (Berger et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018).

Chapter 2 included information about the strategy used to search for literature. Following this, the conceptual framework was explained, and the current literature was discussed. In Chapter 3, the research design, methodology, and data collection are presented. The plan for data analysis is explained and the conclusion includes a discussion of trustworthiness and adherence to ethical standards.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. Participant interviews included teachers of Grades K-3 in public school districts from a few U.S. regions. Chapter 3 contains the details of the methodology such as the research design description, the rationale, the role of the researcher, and the selection of participants. In addition, I provide information about the data collection and data analysis. Chapter 3 ends with comments on the trustworthiness of the study and a summary of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The two research questions I employed for this qualitative research study are as follows:

- RQ1: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress?
- RQ2: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress?

This study had a basic qualitative design, which I used to explore elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. The systematic approach for this study was qualitative and the design was basic qualitative. Qualitative research aligned with this study as a qualitative approach is used when the researcher seeks a greater understanding of the meaning people have constructed (Crawford, 2020). As qualitative

research is exploratory, the research was intended to explore the problem of the increased levels of stress in public elementary school teachers in the United States (Crawford, 2020). The exploratory nature of the problem and purpose aligned with the exploratory nature of the qualitative approach. A basic qualitative design aligned with this study as it is not tied to any formal qualitative design such as phenomenology, ethnography, or grounded theory, though it may contain elements of some or all of these (Kahlke, 2014). The basic qualitative design allows for some flexibility (Kahlke, 2014).

Phenomenology is well suited to understanding how meaning is constructed or interpreted, but not to the process of how or why things work, or how to make things better, and this study was focused on which supports are needed to lessen stress for K-3 elementary public school teachers (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Ethnography is a branch of research in which the researcher is immersed into a culture for a long period of time to observe, and this was not a good fit for my goals (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Grounded theory researchers wait to see which theory emerges from the data, but this study will use the coping-competence-context theory by Herman et al. (2020). In quantitative studies the role of researcher is objective, and as a second grade teacher, my viewpoint was subjective, so the constructivist qualitative paradigm was a better match for my study (Burkholder & Burbank, 2020).

Role of the Researcher

As the only researcher for this study, I was responsible for finding, interviewing, and recording participants. My role also included transcribing and analyzing the data collected. At present, I am a second grade teacher in a public school district in a southern

U.S. state. I did not choose participants with whom I have a personal or professional work history. As such, I had no supervisory or power relationship with any participant. Having served as an elementary public school teacher for two decades has allowed me to witness, both personally and in the research literature, a trend toward rising stress levels. I explored K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. Although I have witnessed rising stress levels, as a researcher I bracketed my own opinions and experiences and allowed the participants to speak from their own perspectives and viewpoints.

Qualitative research is exploratory (Crawford, 2020). A qualitative approach is used when the researcher seeks a greater understanding of the meaning people have constructed (Crawford, 2020). Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted that the researcher in qualitative study is an important element to the outcome as the research. As such, I was reflective upon any bias that could have arisen from the process. I took frequent careful notes of my own perspective as I progressed, to be sure it was not influencing my understanding of the data collected. In addition to the committee, this study was checked by an expert, a doctoral-level university methodologist, for bias in the final results. Though I had briefly considered conducting a quantitative study, I wanted to explore and understand, rather than predict and measure, so the constructivist qualitative paradigm better matched the goals of this study (Burkholder & Burbank, 2020).

Methodology

The participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling has also been referred to as purposive sampling, and according to Ravitch and Carl (2016), it is not random. Those selected purposefully are from a population that shares experiences or contexts in common (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Participants qualified if they met the following criteria: They must have been working as public school general education K-3 teachers, and candidates needed to have 3 or more years of classroom experience.

I used semistructured interviews with 13 K-3 U.S. public elementary school teachers from multiple U.S. regions. Qualitative sample sizes have been found to reach saturation from approximately 12 to 15 participants (Guest et al., 2020). According to Ravitch and Carl (2016) semistructured interviews involve particular questions asked of all participants, with follow-up questions that may vary as needed to clarify responses. The interview protocol may be found in the Appendix.

Participants were identified, contacted, and recruited with the following steps. As this study was not limited to a particular school or district, it was not necessary to contact a superintendent or district leader to request permission. Prior to commencing any interviews, I obtained Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I published a post on social media, on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com>), on Walden's participant pool, and on the National Association for the Education of Young Children HELLO posting board (<https://hello.naeyc.org>). On the post, I mentioned the selection criteria and the purpose for the interviews and the study. Interested participants contacted

me by responding to the post or through instant messaging. Messages were stored on a password protected personal computer, and the apps themselves were password protected and logged out when not in use.

Once I was contacted, I responded with a request for the participant's email address and sent an informed consent form. In addition to the informed consent form and the posted invitation, I explained that interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and that any personal information acquired that could identify them would be confidentially stored on a password-protected personal computer stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office, and that data would be destroyed after 5 years by deleting digital files. As it was difficult to find enough participants, snowball sampling was used as a backup. Snowball sampling involves having current research participants find additional potential participants with similar characteristics (Ungvarsky, 2023). Participants provided me with the contact information of interested candidates whom they perceived to be qualified. I sent an invitation and the informed consent form to new contacts, as needed, to find additional qualified participants for the study. It was noted clearly on the post that no compensation would be offered for participation.

Instrumentation

For this study, I conducted semistructured interviews. Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted that semistructured interviews allow the researcher to follow a structured question format while allowing flexibility with the following probe questions used to clarify meaning. I constructed my own interview protocol to explore data related to elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional

supports needed to reduce workplace stress. I included the purpose of the study, the research questions, the interview protocol (see Appendix) and follow-up question prompts that were used, as well as my Walden university email address. The participants were informed that I would send them a summary of the study results when they became available through my Walden University email, or by private message.

Interviews took place over Zoom using the audio function and recorded with the camera disabled so as not to capture any visual data. Though recorded telephone interviews were an option if the participant preferred, or had technical difficulty with Zoom, no participant chose this option. Content was immediately transcribed following the interviews by the Zoom transcription, which takes place during the interview, and I checked this transcription line by line for accuracy against an audio recording of the interview. Following the Zoom transcription, I checked and transcribed the rest myself without the assistance of a program. When the interview was not properly captured on Zoom, I transcribed each line from the audio recording myself. Throughout the interviews, transcription, and analysis, I kept a reflexive journal of any potential bias which entered my thoughts about the interviews.

The interview protocol was developed as a result of my reviewing the literature and noting the lack of recent perspectives on workplace stress from K-3 elementary teachers within the United States. I wrote the interview questions as the basis of the semistructured interviews to help me explore data related to K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. According to Crawford and Lynn (2020), a researcher

may prepare specific interview questions aligned with the research questions, but there is also flexibility for the follow up questions or probes to elicit further details from the interviewees. The questions were designed around the coping-competence-context theory to encourage participants to share rich, in-depth information (Herman et al., 2020). I tested the questions by administering them to a fellow teacher who did not participate in the study to establish sufficiency of data collection instruments to answer the research questions. Content validity was established by having a subject matter expert, a doctoral level university methodologist, review the questions to be sure they were framed well and appropriate for the study, and check for bias in the final results (Stewart & Hitchcock, 2020).

The role of the qualitative researcher incorporates operating as a data collection instrument (Cox, 2020). In combination with the protocol, both components were sufficient to address the research questions for this study (see Cox, 2020). The information gained from the K-3 elementary public school teachers may help to furnish the data to help support teachers as they navigate work-related stress. In addition, the information gained from this study may spur teachers and school staff to design and implement improved supports. This research may be used as a stepping stone by other researchers to yield further supports for teachers who are experiencing work-related stress. Providing more targeted supports to the teachers may positively affect students (Herman et al., 2018).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After Walden University's IRB granted the continuation of my study, I recruited participants and collected data. I used semistructured interviews with 13 U.S. public elementary school teachers found through social media posts on Facebook, Walden's participant pool, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children HELLO posting board for telephone and online (via Zoom) interviews. The purpose of my study was explained, as well as the qualifications for inclusion, which included participants who were public school teachers of kindergarten through third grade with at least 3 years of classroom teaching experience. I sampled purposefully using the former criteria.

Participants were informed that they would receive no compensation for taking part in the study. I added that their names would not be used in the study and their identifying characteristics would be kept on a password-protected computer in my home office. All participants were told that information concerning their identities, including the pseudonyms assigned to them, would be stored for 5 years then destroyed through paper shredding or digitally deleted. My email was added to the posts so that potential recruits could contact me, at which time I sent a more detailed email, including the informed consent information. Interviews were then scheduled. Recruits returned the form, and by stating "I consent," they became participants. Participants were reminded of the appointment and that it would be recorded by email preceding the interview.

Interviews took place over Zoom, unless the participant requested a phone interview. Participants Zoomed from the location of their choice. I conducted all

interviews over Zoom from a private room behind closed doors within my home.

Interviews took place over approximately 45 to 60 minutes. My interview questions, designed to help answer the research questions, and follow-up questions explored participants' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. At the conclusion of the interview, I asked if they had any questions concerning the study and thanked them for their participation. Following the study, I used member checking by sending a summary of the results to participants.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis is the process of deriving meaning from the information the researcher collected (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Following each interview, I viewed the transcription from Zoom, then checked it against the additional back-up audio recording, word for word, the content of each session. I checked multiple times against the recorded version to ensure it was correctly transcribed. If there were inaccuracies or difficulties with the Zoom transcription or the technology, I transcribed it myself from the back-up audio recording without the assistance of a program.

I read and reread final transcripts several times before starting the coding process. The first step after accurate transcription was first cycle coding, the process of taking apart the information to analyze it (Saldaña, 2021). I started the first cycle open coding process by using direct quotes from the participants line by line at first (Saldaña, 2021). Then during the second cycle, I used a priori coding (Saldaña, 2021). A priori codes were used to determine if the comments were related to coping, competence, or context, to connect and incorporate Herman et al.'s (2020) conceptual framework. Finally, I put the

information back together and synthesized it into new groups of meaning using axial coding to connect categorical ideas and find emerging themes as they related to the research questions (Saldaña, 2021).

I searched for patterns and regrouped the codes on an Excel spreadsheet. After I compiled a list of categories, I started codifying, or categorizing, them into groups with similar characteristics and put them into subcategories (Saldaña, 2021). By analyzing and synthesizing the categories, I distilled them into major themes (Saldaña, 2021). I removed any categories and themes that did not directly relate to the research questions and documented those that I decided to keep. Data were connected to each research question (Saldaña, 2021). Though I had intended to report on discrepant data, no discrepant data surfaced.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the process that allows the reader to trust the research. Researchers can strengthen trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For a study to be considered credible and trustworthy, collected data must align with the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Validity is the quantitative counterpart to qualitative trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The degree to which a reader can believe the study results depends upon trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To increase the trustworthiness of this study, I used member checking and peer debriefing to increase credibility, fully described my participant selection to strengthen transferability, consulted an expert, a

doctoral level university methodologist, to review my work to fortify dependability and check the final results for bias, and I kept a reflexive journal to bolster confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility, according to Ravitch and Carl (2016) is similar to the quantitative term internal validity. Credibility in qualitative research concerns using a standard research process to help explain results that are not simple to clarify (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers can indicate results are credible through methods such as member checking. Member checking involves having participants review the study results and convey that their perspectives and experiences were documented accurately (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

I emailed study results to the participants and invited them to respond to ensure their information was represented accurately. Credibility can be strengthened through peer debriefing (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Peer debriefing is the process of having experienced mentors or colleagues critically review the work and offer suggestions, challenge content, or provide questions to consider (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I regularly conferred with an experienced researcher, an early childhood doctoral education university methodologist, to review the content of my data analysis to check for bias.

Transferability

Transferability is the qualitative counterpart to external validity and regards how the results may apply to other settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A researcher must provide enough information about the context and the population through thick description to make the study relevant when repeated in another location or context (Ravitch & Carl,

2016). Thick description is extremely detailed writing about the context, setting, and participants which makes the study easier to understand as it goes into great descriptive depth (Stahl & King, 2020). I described each section of the study in great detail to strengthen trustworthiness through increasing transferability. Participant selection procedures should be fully described to ensure transferability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Regarding limitations noted in Chapter 1, I reported if participants were part of a union, whether regions are associated with a view stated by multiple participants and noted any personal bias in my reflexive journal as I worked through the interviews.

Dependability

Dependability means that a study can be repeatable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For a study to be presumed trustworthy the results must be consistent if the study were to be conducted elsewhere under similar conditions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers can test the dependability of a study by conducting an audit trail, by having an expert examine the analysis and process of the research for repeatability and consistency (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To reinforce dependability, thick rich descriptions of the location and direct quotes from the participants were included and an expert, a doctoral level university methodologist, checked the final results for bias.

Confirmability

Confirmability, known as objectivity in quantitative studies, is the qualitative process of examining one's own biases, and documenting these through reflexive self-awareness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers do not claim objectivity, as they have experienced the world in different ways and those experiences alter how they

see the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). If views are documented throughout, and systematically challenged as they surface, the research will be considered more trustworthy. As such, I documented my thoughts in the form of a reflexive journal beside the interview responses so that I could challenge my own biases and assumptions with the help of an expert in the field, a doctoral level university methodologist who also checked for bias in the final results.

Ethical Procedures

Ethics should guide researchers in the quest to protect their participants from harm (Cox, 2020). I received permission from the NAEYC HELLO posting administrator and the Walden University participant pool administrator before posting my request for participants. I then received permission from the Walden University IRB. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is 05-18-23-1037173. The purpose of an IRB is to examine any confidentiality concerns or conflicts of interest (Cox, 2020). After receiving approval from the IRB, I proceeded with the recruitment of participants.

I had no imbalance of power over participants as I had no supervisory capacity nor previous personal or work relationship with them. Prior to interviewing each participant, I emailed each an informed consent form, complete with details regarding the purpose of the study, that interviews would be recorded, and their identifying information would be kept private. In addition, I added that if they became uncomfortable with a question, they could tell me and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants emailed or messaged back indicating that they consented, then we determined a time for the interviews.

I took many precautions to protect participants from harm. Each participant received a numeric code as an identifier. Any data collected were stored on my personal computer, which was password protected and stored in a locked area of my home office. Any paper documents were stored in a locked cabinet and both paper and electronic data would be destroyed by shredding or digital deletion after 5 years.

Summary

Chapter 3 included the methodology I used to explore elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. The purpose and rationale behind the choice of a basic qualitative study, the role of the researcher, and the justification for the sample selection of 12–15 K-3 public school elementary teachers were also included. In addition, I presented how the semistructured interviews, data collection, and data storage method would be conducted. Following this, I detailed the plan for the data transcription and the analyzation of the transcription data. To conclude, I explained the trustworthiness and ethical considerations for the data resulting from the study. In Chapter 4, I document and discuss the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. The research questions were: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress, and What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress? This chapter contains detailed information regarding the setting, data collection, and data analysis. It also contains sections on the results, evidence of trustworthiness, a summary of the chapter, and a preview of Chapter 5.

Setting

Participants interviewed for this study hailed from the East Coast of the United States, including the southern, mid-Atlantic and northeastern regions. Though I originally interviewed 15 participants, two did not meet the qualifications and their data were not included. The 13 remaining semistructured interviews of K-3 elementary teachers were conducted from my office at home via Zoom. Participants had all taught general education in a K-3 setting and were currently working in public schools. I utilized the closed captioning feature of Zoom to transcribe the interviews, then checked the transcriptions multiple times for accuracy against the audio recordings and transferred them line by line onto Excel spreadsheets. Once the interviews were transferred to the spreadsheets, I started the process of coding and analyzing them.

The 13 K-3 teachers' experience in the classroom ranged from 8 to 37 years for most, while one participant, P5, noted 50 years of experience. Codes assigned to the

participants ranged from P1–P15. Two participants’ interviews, P9 and P13, were removed from the study due to lack of the required 3 years of experience or due to not teaching in a general education environment. Table 1 displays participants’ demographics by experience, grade level, union membership, region, and the levels of stress they reported experiencing 3 or more days per week. Stress levels reported as ranges were averaged first, then computed as a single digit (see Table 1). The overall teacher stress level average was 6.4 on a scale of 1 to 10.

Table 1

Demographics

Participant	Years of experience	Grade	Union membership	Region	Stress level
P1	30	2	No	Southeast	3
P2	8	2	Yes	Mid-Atlantic	8
P3	30	1	No	Southeast	4-10
P4	4	1	No	Southeast	7
P5	50	Kindergarten	Yes	Northeast	6
P6	21	2, 3	No	Southeast	5
P7	9	2	Yes	Mid-Atlantic	6
P8	27	3	Yes	Southeast	5-8
P10	29	1	Yes	Mid-Atlantic	5-8
P11	22	3	Yes	Mid-Atlantic	9
P12	37	3	Yes	Northeast	4-7
P14	8	1	Yes	Northeast	7-8
P15	19	2	No	Southeast	6
Average stress level					6.4

Data Collection

The collection of data occurred from May 24 through June 23, 2023. After Walden University’s IRB granted permission for the continuation of my study (Approval no. 05-18-23-1037173), I recruited participants and collected data. I used semistructured

interviews with 13 U.S. public elementary school teachers found through social media posts on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com>), Walden's participant pool, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children HELLO posting board (<https://hello.naeyc.org>), for telephone and online (via Zoom) interviews. The purpose of my study was explained, as well as the qualifications for inclusion, which included participants who were public school teachers of grades kindergarten through third grade with at least three years of classroom teaching experience. I sampled purposefully using the former criteria.

Participants were informed that they would receive no compensation for taking part in the study. I added that their names would not be used in the study, and their names would be assigned a pseudonym, and that this confidential information would be kept on a password-protected computer in my home office. All participants were told that information concerning their identities, including the pseudonyms assigned to them, would be stored for 5 years then digitally deleted. My email address was added to the posts so that potential recruits could contact me, at which time I would send a more detailed email, including the informed consent invitation. Recruits were reminded of the appointment and that it would be recorded by email preceding the interview. By stating their consent on the interview recording, they became participants.

Once a participant contacted me, I responded with a request for the recruit's email address and sent an informed consent form. In addition to the informed consent form and the posted invitation, I explained that with their recorded consent they would become participants, interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and that their pseudonyms

and any personal information acquired that could identify them would be confidentially stored and then destroyed after 5 years. Participants were reminded that, should they become uncomfortable or wish to discontinue the study, they should immediately make this known. Participants were audio recorded and their words were transcribed using the Zoom platform. As it was difficult to find enough participants, snowball sampling was used as a backup.

Participants were audio recorded and interviewed via Zoom from my home office. Each participant took part in one interview which lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. The same list of approved questions was followed for each interview. Semistructured interviews were used to explore K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. As participants were interviewed and audio recorded, I took notes in a reflexive journal to collect any thoughts that emerged during the process to stay aware of any possible bias. The Zoom closed captioning transcriptions were reviewed repeatedly against the recordings for accuracy. Protocols were followed as described in Chapter 3 without deviation. No unexpected events occurred as data collection took place. All Zoom interview recordings and transcriptions were stored in my home office on my personal password-protected computer. Zoom recordings and transcriptions will be held for 5 years then deleted.

Data Analysis

I interviewed K-3 elementary public school teachers in this basic qualitative study to explore their perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports

needed to reduce workplace stress. The order and content of the questions were the same for each participant. Using the closed captioning feature of Zoom, the interviews were automatically transcribed, then I compared the transcriptions to the audio recordings to make sure they were accurate. Each line of each interview was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet to make the data easier to code in a table.

Data were analyzed and considered through the lens of the literature included in the review and the coping-competence-context theoretical framework by Herman et al. (2020). Saldaña's (2021) work provided the basis for my coding process. Saldaña advocated organizing the data first, familiarizing oneself with it, coding the data, sorting it into categories, identifying themes, and applying them to the research questions. I chose the Excel program as the best way to keep track of and display the data gathered. First, I used open codes to separate ideas (Saldaña, 2021). A priori codes were then used to determine if the comments were related to coping, competence, or context to connect and incorporate Herman et al.'s (2020) conceptual framework. Then I used axial coding to connect the ideas and put them into categorical groupings (Saldaña, 2021). As themes emerged from the categories, I applied them to the research questions and entered them on the spreadsheets (Saldaña, 2021).

Data Organization

To organize the data, I took the closed captioning from the Zoom interviews and checked it multiple times against the Zoom recorded sound for accuracy. Line by line, I transferred it to Excel spreadsheets, with one line per participant. These spreadsheets had columns to note condensed meanings in the first round, repeated words and phrases for

second round, a notation area for coping, competence, or context to incorporate the conceptual framework of Herman et al. (2020), as well as a final reflexive journal column to capture any stray thoughts that arose during the process to check for bias. In addition, I created a spreadsheet to keep track of participant demographics, including the participant number, years of experience, union membership, grade level, region, and their level of stress. I read through each transcript multiple times. The recordings helped me with the spotting and correcting of errors in the original closed captioning pages. Once each transcript was checked for accuracy, I read them all in order, repeatedly, to become familiar with the content of the data. Seeds of repeated words and categories started to emerge.

Data Coding

To code the data, I relied on Saldaña's (2021) work to choose open, a priori, and axial coding to make sense of the information gathered from the interviews. Open coding, also known as initial coding, was used to break the data into parts with corresponding or opposing details (Saldaña, 2021). During the first round of coding, I read each transcribed line and wrote words or phrases to condense the meanings in the first column. During the second round, in the second column, I used a priori coding, which Saldaña noted consists of provisional codes which arose that a researcher may expect to find based upon existing literature or personal experience, and which could be revised as needed. In the third column, I noted whether the statement addressed coping, competence, context, or a combination, to address Herman et al.'s (2020) conceptual framework. Finally, in the

fourth column I added notes whenever thoughts popped up during the interview or coding to keep track of any possible bias.

Once all transcripts were coded, I noticed eight primary repetitions in categories relating to meetings, adding to one's workload, paperwork, extra duties, personal time, work/life balance, exercise and coping strategies, and institutional support received or needed. Each line relating to a category received a different color highlight to make grouping corresponding topics simpler. At first, I highlighted all time references red, and meetings, blue. The next set of similar items I grouped together and highlighted green, including adding to workload, paperwork, and extra duties. Finally, I grouped together personal time, work/life balance, exercise and coping strategies, and institutional support received or needed and highlighted them with purple. It occurred to me, while highlighting, that the eight categories were falling naturally into three main themes. The first theme, time, consisted of time, meetings, adding to workload, paperwork, and extra duties. The second theme, balance, consisted of personal time, work/life balance, and exercise and coping strategies. The third theme consisted of institutional support received and institutional support needed. In addition, I looked at each line and noted whether it related to coping, competence, or context, to provide another perspective when viewing the data. Table 2 shows a few samples of open codes and the associated quotes, and Table 3 shows a few samples of the categories within each theme.

Table 2*Samples of Open Codes*

Code	Participant	Quote
Adding more to workload	P8	At the end of the day, I can only do so much.
	P12	It seems like they, every year, it kind of seems like the curriculum gets added onto, or the framework, or the expectations from the county, and it can be debilitating at times.
	P15	The amount of things that I have to do now, compared to what I had to do 12 years ago, has increased so much.
Meetings	P11	More so than the kids is the meetings, the constant meetings that take place, which is more than ever now, that take away from your planning time, which makes you have more stuff to do at home, a lot of needless meetings.
	P3	It takes up planning time that can be used for things that you wanna get done in your classroom instead of having a meeting on something that can be sent in an email.
	P5	Of the 5 plannings that they have in a week, I'd say at least 3 of them are scheduled meetings, weekly.
Time	P6	Just, there was never enough time. I went home every single day feeling like I had not done enough, that somehow, I had failed the kids because there just weren't enough hours in the day.
	P7	So, you're telling us to take care of our mental health, but they're telling me that I have a meeting in 2 minutes that you didn't tell me about till today.
	P2	I normally don't get the opportunity to teach a full lesson any day, because I only have a certain amount of time.
Institutional support	P10	There has to be more support, smaller class sizes, more people, more hands on deck.
	P7	However, there is also a culture of micromanagement, and it can become frustrating to try to navigate that system.

Table 3*Samples of Categories Within Themes*

Theme	Category	Quote
Time	Meetings	It's that time is taken away, with meetings and uploading data, everyday.
	Adding to workload	They keep saying, oh, one more thing, this will just take a little bit of time, you know.
	Paperwork	So, we have copious things that we have to fill out, and that's more stressful than the kids. The fortunate thing for me is I have gone to the point in my life where I'm gonna do the best job I can.
	Extra duties	Okay, for one of them would be. Take away, say, extended teacher duties. Like, take teachers off of cafeteria duty, lunch duty, hire people to do that. Hire people to monitor the halls, the bathrooms. The car, the car lane. So that a teacher can be a teacher in her class, in his or her classroom.
Balance	Personal time	We're getting burned out because we're being asked to do way too much and not given the time to do it.
	Work/life balance	It definitely is, okay, do what you can, let it go, and try again tomorrow. So, it's a different approach that has definitely saved me a lot of anxiety, and allowed, it got me a lot of sleep back.
	Exercise and coping strategies	Sometimes, even if I don't feel like I'm ready to leave, I leave anyway, if I'm stressed, and then, once I start playing or exercising, I kind of feel better.
Institutional support	Support received	Right now, we have a team, a grade level team, and that's a big saving grace for us to be able to co-plan together.
	Support needed	The Department of Education could tell teachers what to teach, but not how to teach it, okay, because teachers have different styles of teaching, and children have different styles of learning.

To be sure the themes related to the research questions, I reviewed the spreadsheets, compared them with the data in articles from Chapter 2. I sought the advice of a university methodologist to review the data. This expert in the field confirmed that the data were valid. Participants were sent a summary of the study results and no new data were added. Though I had intended to discuss any discrepant data, there were no discrepant cases encountered.

Results

I explored elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress in this study. The research questions were: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress, and What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress? These research questions were investigated through the 19 questions from the interview protocol (see Appendix). Questions 1 to 4 established demographic background. Questions 5 to 11 addressed Research Question 1. Question 14 referred to the conceptual framework. Questions 12 to 13, and 15 to 19 addressed Research Question 2. The 13 interviews chosen for the study resulted in data leading to three themes, the first consisting of four categories, the second consisting of three categories, and the third theme consisting of two categories. Responses included reasons for stress, and the themes of time and balance applied to the first research question: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress? The combined categories

from these two themes were meetings, adding to workload, extra duties, personal time, life/work balance, and exercise and coping.

The third theme applied to the second research question: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress? Categories for this second theme were: support received, and support needed. Responses were coded according to the work of Saldaña (2021). Comments were also contemplated through the lens of Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context theory. Though it was my intention to discuss discrepant data, contradictory data did not surface, so there are no discrepant cases on which to report.

Theme 1: Time

The first emerging theme was that time, its availability, or the lack of it, is of great importance to the participating teachers and contributed to their stress levels. Comments about time concerns fell into four main categories, meetings, adding to workload, paperwork, and extra duties (see Figure 1). Stress is influenced in part by high expectations with multiple tasks and too little time to accomplish them (University of Georgia, 2022). Participants also often felt time was short. Participant 1 (P1) said, "I think that as a teacher, you do not have enough time to plan well for our lesson" and P2 noted that, "I normally don't get the opportunity to teach a full lesson any day, because I only have a certain amount of time with my students." Participants expressed that the daily schedule can be limiting, as P4 remarked,

The way that our schedule was created this year everything was, it seems like I had only a limited amount of time to get to such, like, things such as reading, so if

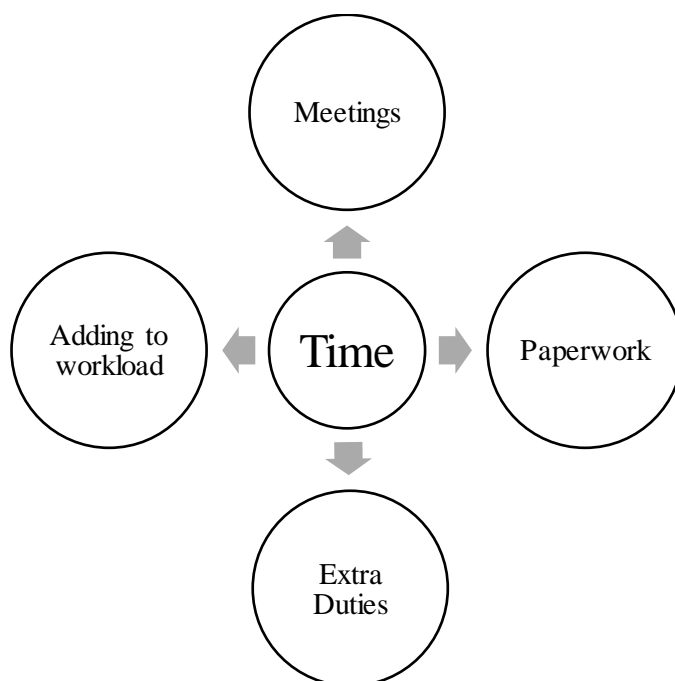
I wanted to spend more time on reading, I couldn't do that because it would interfere with my math time. So, everything was very tight I should say, when it came to teaching.

P6 added,

Just, there was never enough time. I went home every single day feeling like I had not done enough, that somehow, I had failed the kids because there just weren't enough hours in the day. And you know it would be impossible to do your job well and effectively without spending so much extra time, and I just feel like teachers, specifically, classroom teachers, that their time is just not respected.

Figure 1

Categories in Time Theme



Klusmann et al. (2023) found that teachers who have more time also have lowered stress levels. Teachers are concerned when they are asked to do last minute tasks. P7 said,

“There’s not enough time to implement that. So, you’re telling us to take care of our mental health, but they’re telling me that I have a meeting in 2 minutes that you didn’t tell me about till today.” P8 noted,

But then there are days when you tell me at 8 o’clock this morning that you need it by 3 o’clock this afternoon, but I had planned on going home and now I have to get this task done because for lack of a better word, they’re on my back about the deadline, the deadline, the deadline.

Increased time was a support found to be effective in lessening teachers’ workplace stress, according to Carroll et al. (2020).

Time is taken from participants’ lunchtimes. P8 explained that many teachers do not receive any break to use the rest room, even on days when there is no lunch break. P8 said,

These 6 years have been the only ones that I’ve had lunch duty, so that was new to me. So on that particular day, my stress level probably is higher, because I haven’t had a chance to step away and be myself, or step away to say, let me make this phone call, or step away to say I just have time to go to the restroom and not worry about 19 plus students that might be in the room doing whatever, you know, so I’m rushing, and you know, I think when we talked about the physical aspect I have to touch on that, because we as teachers, it’s almost like you have to schedule your restroom visits, and I know that sounds horrible. But it’s almost like, okay, I have to go to the rest room. But let me do this, because then you have to say, who can watch my class while I go to the rest room, because

anything could happen, even with the best of classes, even with the best of discipline. You never know, you know, what's gonna happen, or what could happen. So, it's almost like, is this that one moment that I'm going to leave to go to the restroom, and something happens and so, you know, I myself have been in situations where I'm trying to get to the restroom, and it's tight like, okay, wait, stop, I gotta go!

P11 said,

So, we definitely need more time, more supports, as far as people, supports in our classrooms, smaller class sizes. And, and, we're getting burned out because we're being asked to do way too much and not given the time to do it.

Meetings

The first specific category under the theme of time concerns meetings. Teachers expressed that the meetings they were required to attend were taking away from their planning time. P15 noted,

When I'm in a PLC meeting. It's usually more talk and less the action, which leaves you less time to enable the action that's aiming to happen from a meeting and so it just leaves you with more things to do and less time to do them.

P1 mentioned "I sometimes, I find it a little bit annoying when we have to do the professional development every single week." P5 expressed,

Of the 5 plannings that they have in a week, I'd say at least 3 of them are scheduled meetings, weekly, and I know that my school does the best that it can, but it's always things coming down from the county, like the county wants you to

meet once a week for this reason, and once a week for this reason, and once a week for data, and once a week, and, and that's just, it's just outrageous.

P11 added,

Let's see, I, my stress during a current day, maybe revolves around, more so than the kids is the meetings, the constant meetings that take place, which is more than ever now, that take away from your planning time, which makes you have more stuff to do at home, a lot of needless meetings that in my opinion, are just to check the boxes of people from the county level to justify their jobs, so that they have a purpose.

P15 said,

Well, at our school we have mandatory meetings every Tuesday during our planning, and Thursday, during our planning, and Tuesday after school, and we have grade level meetings on Wednesdays if we don't have an SST, a student support team, or a tier meeting for students that are struggling. So sometimes we have grade level meetings on Mondays and Fridays, which leave you with 0 planning time to get things done. I feel if my, some of my biggest workplace stresses are from the amount of meetings that we have. I feel like if our meetings were run with a clear objective, to have something accomplished, then that would lessen my stress, because it would mean I would have less to take on personally during my own time.

P2 was the only participant who noted the weekly meetings had decreased:

Our school is great about not having, like, we don't have weekly meetings, you know, staff meetings, like other schools do, or like other principals have done with us just to have a meeting just because we all need to. So, we don't have a lot of staff meetings.

Time and how it was spent was of great concern to the participants.

Adding to Workload

Another category under the theme of time that emerged was the phrase “adding to my plate,” meaning that more tasks have been added to teachers' workloads. P12 stated that “It seems like they, every year it kind of seems like the curriculum gets added onto, or the framework, or the expectations from the county, and it can be debilitating at times.” P6 expressed, “And there was a whole lot more being added, but never things being taken away, and you know, it would be impossible to do your job well and effectively without spending so much extra time.” Teachers put pressure on themselves to accomplish all that is asked of them. P7 remarked,

But most of the teachers that I know have, like, a superhero complex. We have to make it work. We have to get it done. We can't fail them. And that's stressful, because you can't fix everything, but we definitely try to. I really did think I was going to change the entire world with my classroom and now I'm aware that that's not necessarily realistic.

P8 expressed some frustration with added tasks and said,

I often feel people lose sight of teachers, but it's almost like, do this, do this, do this, do this, until there is nothing left, because the kids are the focal point and

don't get me wrong, I understand, but I'm a focal point, too, and I can't do what I need to do for those kids that are the focal point if I can't do what I need to do for myself. It's almost like with your family, if I'm not well then you are not well, so I need to make sure that I'm well. But I need you to help me do that. I don't need you to continue to crowd my plate with things that I need to do, which forces me to then say, okay, I'm not gonna do this. I'm not gonna do this cause, understand, that puts you behind, too.

P14 added that "the amount of things that I have to do now, compared to what I had to do 12 years ago, has increased so much, and so it just leaves you with more things to do and less time to do them."

Paperwork

The next category which arose under the theme of time was paperwork. Participants expressed that the amount of paperwork to keep track of data has become extensive. P4 said, "Beyond the reading I would say paperwork, such as grading, can be very stressful. I guess just the amount of grades that we have to keep track of, though I will definitely say mostly paperwork of data." P6 noted that "I mean it just felt at some point that I was testing more than I was teaching." P8 explained,

Other stressors can come from having a lot of, hmm, I guess teacher tasks like paperwork, whether it's grades or things that admin are asking us to compute that we have to do in the midst of just the normal teaching job. But there are weeks when you know the stress level comes from this is what I'm teaching, and these are the tasks that I have to complete. I've had to realize that at the end of the day I

can only do so much. I find, when people have been promoted to admin positions, they so often forget what it's like being a classroom teacher, of people that you're dealing with. And so often, I feel that once they get out of the classroom and they are sitting behind a desk, there are certain things that they do remember, and there are certain things that they don't remember, and they haven't experienced it in this day and time, so it's like, do this, do this, do this, but do you understand? Again, these are stressors that I'm dealing with on a day-to-day basis.

P4 added that with a supportive team the paperwork can be managed, and noted,

I would like for them to understand that, although it can get very busy, there are some tedious parts of teaching in general. With K, 2, and 3, paperwork can be a lot, can be very stressful, and it can become a lot. It can become a lot. But if you have the support from your team, whether it's your administrators, your colleagues, that you work with on a team, your parents, and you have a great classroom management system, I think it's doable.

Extra Duties

The final category under theme 1 concerns the extra duties that participants have been carrying out beyond their classroom responsibilities. Marais-Opperman et al. (2021) found having more control at work can positively affect early educators' intent to remain in the field. One extra duty was carried out during the teachers' lunch period. P1 expressed,

You have to be at a duty, carpool, or cafeteria duty, which I really think that's disgusting. We have to do lunch duty when you could be in your classroom

preparing a lesson, or calling a parent, or fixing the grade books. I find that can be stressful when you have lunch duty. And you talked about being an experienced teacher, well you need to be in a cafeteria before the time because you've got to take the time to get the line straight. You've got to take the time to get the kids down to lunch and the kids have to get their lunch. Meantime, your lunchtime is ticking away. You've got to go check your mailbox. You've got to call a parent. And then you eat your lunch, because I see teachers in the schoolyard eating their lunch. I don't think that's fair. I don't think that's fair that you can't sit down and have a moment, and just take a deep breath and eat your food.

P1 continued,

Take away, say, extended teacher duties. Like, take teachers off of cafeteria duty, lunch duty, hire people to do that. Hire people to monitor the halls, the bathrooms, the cars, the car lane, so that a teacher can be a teacher in her class, in his or her classroom. Relieve them of all those extra duties.

P3 said,

They have added on the PBIS points system, because I am getting evaluated by how much I use that. Like, I said, when the administration just keeps adding more things to our plate that we have to keep doing, that I feel like, they are not in our shoes, so they don't understand that we're already doing so much, and they keep saying, oh, one more thing, this will just take a little bit of time, you know this will just take a minute. I feel like they are, they're not being supportive. But then they just find one more thing that they want us to do.

P10 related that “we have copious things that we have to fill out and that’s more stressful than the kids.” P10 then mentioned the stress and anxiety of having to oversee and carry out code red active shooter drills. P10 said,

About code red drills and gun control, and many of the, there have been a lot of discussions in my district regarding, you know, improvements to security, and possibly you know, arming people in schools and things that I certainly would not support, and I find that very frustrating. And you know, sometimes I just feel like we’re just constantly putting Band-aids on bullet holes. And I just, I find it very frustrating from the district level all the way up to, like, professional level.

There’s a certain level of anxiety, that sort of lives with you always as a teacher, it is the anxiety of you know, having to protect your children in a violent situation.

P10 continued, “I’ve had to be in a lot of lockdowns and code red drills with, you know, very frightened children, and just the fact that that’s even part of my existence in my work has been very sad and stressful.”

Theme 2: Balance

Theme 2 concerns comments about balancing one’s work with one’s personal life, and what the participants have noticed about this. and how to work toward accomplishing this balance. Comments from Theme 2 applied to the first research question, What are elementary public school teachers’ perspectives on their level of workplace stress? This theme included three categories, including work/life balance, personal time, and exercise and coping strategies (see Figure 2). Responses included reasons for stress in this area, and the theme of balance applied the first research question, “What are elementary public

school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress?"

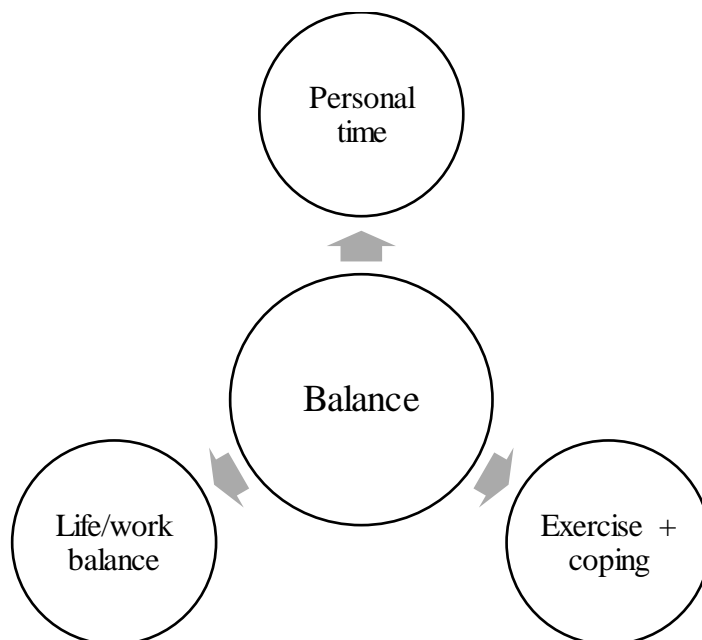
Work/Life Balance

The first category that emerged under the theme of balance is the idea of maintaining an equilibrium between one's work and one's home life. Participants expressed that work spills into their evenings and weekends. Lines between work and personal time can blur. Regarding teaching, P2 explained,

When I leave work, I pretty much don't have any time for anything because I'm tired. I just want to go home and rest and prepare myself for the next day because I understand that if I'm not doing well, then I'm not gonna be able to teach the way that I need to teach and show up for my students the way they need me to show up.

Figure 2

Categories in Balance Theme



P2 continued, “The thing is that I usually work late every day.” P4 noted,

Fridays I try not to take any work home, so if it doesn’t get done through Monday to Thursday, then I just try to leave it for Monday. It may work sometimes, and then sometimes I may give in and bring it home, and only work on to Sunday evening. But that’s how I kind of cope with trying to get through things, because I feel like I deserve at least 2 days to take a break from everything, to rejuvenate and get myself back on track.

P6 said, “There was an expectation there that teachers are doing so much of their work and grading whatever outside of our working hours.”

Personal Time

A second category within the theme of balance, similar to the first, is personal time. P8 warns that giving personal time to work may not be conducive to one's mental health. P8 said,

I have noticed that some of the younger teachers, it's like, oh, no, I have to get it done. And I watch them stay until 6 o'clock, and that used to be me when I first started teaching, and I shared with them so often, don't, because I wish someone had shared it with me. Don't spend your life in this building. Like, pick one day out of the week to stay say, like, this is gonna be my late day, and I'm gonna stay on, so whatever time that you know that stopping time is, and leave and come back to it tomorrow because you get so consumed, and you turn around, and you look like, where did my time go? Where did my life go? And I also understand that these are single ladies, and I get it. When I was single, I didn't have anybody to worry about but me. But when I got a family, I carried those things straight home. Hence, when I got home, I was tired. I didn't have time for them. And so, I try. I try to tell them that because these are things that I have learned over the years that I wish someone had told me from the beginning.

P10 related, "Actually, the physical piece makes you exhausted. Get home, and be really, just worn out. That's the physical piece of it. The mental piece is the anxiety of, like, being on edge." P10 added, "sometimes it's out of your control, so it makes you wake at night thinking, how are you gonna handle it the next day?" P11 said,

I don't know how some people do it. They walk in with the kids, walk out with the kids, they'll do their work while they give the kids busy work, but I can't do that. I'm not that person. So now it's like I can't put my work down, because it's always available.

P11 discussed the requirement of doing professional development work on one's own time, and noted:

It was a whole year long thing, and the amount of work was like a graduate class which they forced us to do on our own time, because it wasn't optional, and we have to do it, like, it was asynchronous. But then there were, there were 4 synchronous days during the, during the year that they gave us the day off to attend this virtual workshop, but all the work you had to do to prepare for that was hours, and that's like a good 12 or 13 hours each quarter that we do on our own time on top of everything else we have to do. So, PD (professional development) can be a double-edged sword.

P12 shared, "I try to, at times, leave earlier than I sometimes do. That's the latest we can stay because the custodians lock it up." P14 continued, "I'm not gonna, I try definitely on weekends, like, not to take things because I don't want it to roll over into home life, but every day of the week I will, for sure." P15 related that using personal time for work can create a negative cycle:

I find much more of my personal time being devoted to work time, and I have less patience for my personal family and kids than what I used to, and I have not been able to get weight off, even with doing diets and exercise like I've always done in

the past, because the stress and the lack of sleep due to the amount of stuff that we have to do. It's like a little cycle of yuckiness.

P8 said,

I feel this, quite often I give so much of myself, mentally and physically, to my students and my job. Every day when I get home I have very little for my family and my family consists of a husband and 2 children, so, you know, it does, it takes a, it takes a toll professionally, but it also takes the toll personally.

Exercise and Coping Strategies

The third category to emerge under the theme of balance concerned how to cope with work related stress. McCarthy et al. (2009) noted that when workplace demands overburden teachers' ability to cope well, levels of stress rise. Many responded they coped with exercise or quiet time, and a few mentioned wine. P3 responded, "My teammates probably would say they go home and have a glass of wine. I don't do that. I'm probably going for a walk." P4 "prays a lot." P7 would like to exercise but finds it difficult to fit into the schedule:

I don't have a lot of time to, like, work out or time for myself, so you know, not being as healthy as I could be, because I devote a lot of time to the things that I can't get done in a day outside of my workday.

P10 noted that mental health days and colleagues are helpful to release stress, while joking about wine:

I drink! No (laughs), for me to be honest, and this is actually something new in the past couple of years, I'm taking, for lack of better word, my mental health

days. I mean, it used to be, you know, you get that feeling that nobody can do this as well as you can, so I've definitely backed away from that, where, if it's getting to that point, I'll take a couple days off just to regroup, and I also rely on the school counselor and my fabulous teammates that are across the hall, for days when I've had enough.

P11 mentioned wine and exercise and continued with, "I do a lot of stretching exercises to get tension out of my back every day, and then walking my dogs." P12 also exercises to leave the school building and feel refreshed:

Pickleball a couple of times a week, and I do an exercise class at church. So, I know those things start at 6. So sometimes, even if I don't feel like I'm ready to leave, I leave anyway, if I'm stressed, because and then once I start playing or exercising, kind of, I feel better and I feel refreshed.

P15 said, "I go work out, or I eat a whole lot of chips up. One extreme or the other." Maintaining a balance between work and life outside of work was of concern to the participants.

Theme 3: Institutional Supports

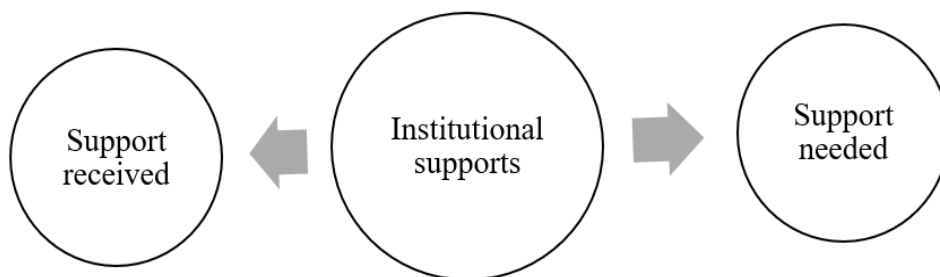
The final theme, institutional supports, whether provided or needed, directly answered the second research question, "What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress?"

Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. (2021) noted that institutional support had a positive impact on teachers' well-being. The following responses are participants' praises for support

received, or suggestions for institutional support that would be helpful to reduce the experience of workplace stress for K-3 teachers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Categories in Institutional Supports Theme



Lambert et al. (2018) found administrative support may contribute to lessening the workplace stress of public school elementary teachers. P1 found the instructional coach provided by the school was helpful in relieving daily stress, as in the past that was not this participant's experience:

Where I work at now, yes, we have a coach that comes around, and she comes around every day... in this school that I'm working at now, yes, I feel that they try their best to put some stress relievers in there. Well, it's just good to know that the assistance is there because a lot of times you work in a school and they tell you that they're here to support you, but they're not there. They may want to be there, but because of other responsibilities and duties they're not present to help you.

P2 also discussed needing support:

I do want people to understand that it can be stressful when you don't have that support in place. So, the support can be parents. It could be colleagues, it could be

administration, and with their support I believe that teachers can reduce stress, especially when they have other people that will come into a system, and other people that will come in to actually alleviate some of their stress, whether they may be able to provide them with the materials and resources that they need, or just to give them that time that they need to plan and prepare without feeling rushed.

P4 mentioned having a literacy coach in the building helped her to relieve some of her stress:

I feel like my literacy coach this year did a really good job with showing, modeling, how certain literacy lessons should go. How should it look like in each classroom? Although every classroom is not the same, she did a good job with giving an example of what you could use to help your literacy instruction be more effective. So, I feel like that was not always available to us in the past. But having it this year really helped with improving literacy and instruction in my classroom.

Some participants mentioned that they had a relaxation place for teachers available within their buildings though opportunities to use it were few. P8 shared that her staff found their Zen Den effective but found it frustrating not being able to use it, “Well, I can’t go, because I have to get this task done because for lack of a better word, they’re on my back about the deadline, the deadline, the deadline.” P12 had a staff relaxation room, but it was taken away to make more offices:

We lost our staff room, but that was a nice place to go. It was like they had, it was dark, and they had music, and they had little waterfalls. And one of those massaging chairs in there, and some lights, you know, soft lights and soft music.

P15 found the relaxation room ineffective as there is no time to utilize it:

They recently put a Kaiser Permanente thrive room in our school that has a yoga ball, and some lightweights, as well as dim lighting. I don't find that to reduce my stress at all, because I don't have any time to use that location. Like, they tried. But it's unrealistic because we're always in meetings. So meetings or copying things that need to be copied. So, there's no time during the day to go there unless I would want to stay afterward. They are ineffective at helping me cope.

P14 found grade-level planning to be helpful in relieving work-related stress:

Right now, we have a team, a grade level team, and that's a big saving grace for us to be able to co-plan together. So, we'll take or break it up in a group, powerplan math and science, then reading and writing. And we'll plan social studies, and whatever else. So that has been helpful in my case, definitely. It definitely is, okay, do what you can, let it go, and try again tomorrow. So, it's a different approach that has definitely saved me a lot of anxiety, and allowed, it got me a lot of sleep back.

P15 continued,

I feel, if my, if some of my biggest workplace stresses are the amount of meetings that we have, I feel like if our meetings were run with a clear objective, to have something accomplished then that would lessen my stress, because it would mean

I would have less to take on personally during my own time and I feel if we were given additional help, not just for working with students.

One response included the view of P1 that personal development or providing a therapist in lieu of a meeting may be helpful:

I think that sometimes when the children don't have school. And you have to come in anyhow, I think that might be a nicer time to have personal development ... they should have a check in for teachers that you have to go in for a place to just relax and just talk with a therapist just to talk ... So they say they care, but if you're paying attention they don't care. It's just in place because that's what's been said, but realistically, there's no opportunity in there for stress relief.

P1 also suggested, "allowing teachers to really get breaks, real breaks, with nothing to do to relax their mind and come back." P2 suggested collegial support:

But I do want people to understand that it can be stressful when you don't have that support in place. So the support can be parents, it could be colleagues, it could be administration, and with their support I believe that teachers can reduce stress, especially when they have other people that will come into a system, and other people that will come in to actually alleviate some of their stress, whether they may be able to provide them with the materials and resources that they need, or just to give them that time that they need to plan and prepare without feeling rushed.

P2 continued,

I found that to be helpful and I've also found that if I do need like a mental day for myself, whereas if I'm exhausted and I know that I'm not going to be my best person. So I may, you know, have conversations with my colleagues. We may suggest different things for each other. To try to take some of that stress off of us or just to, you know, release some of the stress. We do, I actually have some really good colleagues that are very helpful when they pertain to that. They give us mental breaks throughout the day if we need them, like, if I need to take a minute.

P3 suggested something as simple as a vending machine would be welcome:

No vending machines at all, I think, that's something that could be a plus. You know what I mean. Things like that, like, we can get a Coke. Maybe you need a candy bar. Maybe you need, you know, crunchy chips. I need to crunch, you know, something like that. Right, alright, you could add a vending machine, okay?

Many responses concerned administrators. P2 said, "I wish the district was more aware of what we have to do on a daily basis and they actually were able to physically come in and see it and observe it. Then that would give them a better understanding as to how to help us." P10 is very happy with the principal:

Oh, absolutely I, you know, we have a fabulous principal who checks throughout the day and says, you know, if you need me, whenever you need me, I will come. Yeah, we, once again, I have a lovely principal, but we spend a lot of time with

the county saying, you know, you need to do this, this, this, and this. What are your goals? How are you gonna hit them? What are you going to do?

P11 appreciated how the current principal tries to reduce the paperwork for teachers:

So, my administrator tries to do everything. She tries to keep it down, but in what I have experienced, because I haven't been at this school that long, in other schools, is the amount of paperwork they give us. For example, like when it's time for your evaluation, they'll ask you to write up like a brag book of tell-us-everything-you-do-in-your-classroom, and then they just turn around and use that in your evaluation it's like to me that's paperwork I didn't need to do, because that's your job.

P12 would like more administrative check-ins:

I guess it might be nice if people, if maybe some of the administration checked in more on us, you know, how are you today? How are you feeling? Can I cover your class for 10 min? You know, do you need to run some copies? Just kind of being checked. I mean, they make it clear that you can go to them. But sometimes people aren't as comfortable reaching out. This is, like, maybe a sign of weakness as opposed to someone, just, you know, coming in and saying, you know I'm here for 10 minutes. Or can I pull a small group of kids? Can I run these copies for you? Would you like a soda, or, you know, like almost insisting or forcing or making them available.

Some participants noted it would lower workplace stress if teachers were given more flexible lesson planning schedules. Other comments included that help was needed with clerical duties that take teachers' time away from lesson planning. P3 noted, "what I

was just talking about is having an extra person to give you support. When teaching reading, we can have an extra person to give these children more attention.”

P1 suggested that teachers could be allowed leeway to be more creative and take more time for lessons. P1 enjoyed “teaching them whenever it’s allowed in a creative fun way. You know, when I’m able to take my time and I don’t have to rush, and I can take time to make sure that children understand the lesson.” P5 expressed the concern that there was a lack of understanding from management, and a need to for greater autonomy, and expressed a preference to be told what to teach, just not how it should be taught. P11 offered that teachers need, “more planning, time, unencumbered planning time,” and continued with,

I mean, first of all, the district needs to stop having us have so many mandatory meetings, but also maybe hire TAs (teacher assistants) to come in and help with some of the things that, like copying, that could give us more time for some of the other stuff or cover the class so we can have some more planning time, so it’s just more people to help with things.

P15 suggested,

Every Wednesday, send in the kids on 2-hour delays, so that you can have that time to parallel plan and analyze data for the kids. I have done it at a prior school, and it was the most successful. And for teacher stress level, just sometimes doing that or even a painting class on those days, that is, doing something fun to make sure your teachers don’t burnout.

P6 was very happy with the supports at work, and related, “I certainly see a lot less supportive communities than the one I’m lucky to be in.” P7, however, when asked if workplace supports were available, replied, “My honest opinion? No!” P8 would like an occasional brief personal break, and mentioned, “I still can’t make that phone call like I need, or to go to the restroom like I need to.” Teachers expressed that though they have received some institutional supports, there is still a need for more.

Comments and Conceptual Framework

Participants’ comments about needed supports related to coping, competence, or context, when seen through the lens of Herman et al.’s (2020) conceptual framework. Coping comments were in reference to how teachers were dealing with work related stresses. Comments regarding competence pertained to the amount of experience or training teachers have that may have influenced their levels of stress. Comments in reference to context regarded the environment of the workplace and the administrative policies and procedures which influence stress levels. This is important so needs for support can be identified and addressed.

Coping

K-3 public school teachers have experienced a variety of ways of coping with their work-related stress. Responses they have shared about coping outside of the workplace ranged from exercising, to praying, to having an occasional glass of wine. However, institutional coping pathways were available. Collegial and administrative support helped participants handle the stresses associated with teaching in a K-3 public school environment. The provision of staff relaxation rooms is an admirable addition to a

school; however, teachers must be afforded the coverage to make use of them when needed.

Full uninterrupted 30-minute lunch periods could be provided to ensure teachers have a moment to rest during the day. Rest room coverage is necessary. Perhaps a background checked parent volunteer could allow each teacher on a grade level 5 minutes every 3 hours to make a quick restroom visit, while the volunteer stands in the classroom, so the children are not alone. Some participants remarked they felt as if they were not seen as human, and basic protected lunch time and covered bathroom visits would go a long way toward making teachers feel valued.

Competence

Teachers who are trained in time management and stress relief may be able to better balance the demands on their time (Herman et al., 2020; Tolan et al., 2020). More competent teachers may be able to whittle excess responsibilities to the bare minimum to spend the time on the core of the job, the education of the children, through improved lesson planning and presentation. According to some participants, the provision of an instructional coach modeled efficient lesson delivery and improved the performance and confidence of those who had access to them. Affording teachers even minimal schedule flexibility and allowing teachers to use professional judgement to a small degree within the confines of a curriculum, could affirm their role as professionals. Educational professionals, many of whom possess advanced degrees, desired the autonomy to adjust lesson pacing by a few minutes to bring all students up to meet the level of a standard. If all standards cannot be met in the time allotted, provide more paraprofessionals or

volunteers to help lessen the teacher to student ratio. More autonomy, feeling one is being appreciated as a professional, improved satisfaction and lessens workplace stress (Chan et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2018). P4 noted, “It can become a lot. But if you have the support from your team, whether it’s your administrators, your colleagues, that you work with on a team, your parents, and you have a great classroom management system, I think, it’s doable.”

Context

In the context of the administrative policies and procedures in the work environment, excess teacher responsibilities may be lessened. This may be achieved by providing additional paraprofessional support to assist teachers with clerical duties such as copying and data entry, carpool, lunchroom, and hallway duties, which take time away from lesson planning. Meetings could be curtailed to essential data gathering, discussion, and lesson planning. Grade level or vertical team planning could be offered, only as needed, as a method of dividing and conquering curriculum units that may be shared across a grade level by breaking lesson writing into manageable chunks. Another recommendation would be to make building and district level climate surveys truly anonymous, without the expectation that those who fill it out note their grade level and years of service, which makes teachers feel they may be identified, so they are less likely to speak openly. As P8 noted, “I appreciate you choosing to focus on this topic and reaching out to educators, to see what we really feel, and it being anonymous so that we really can speak our truth.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness can be strengthened through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this study to be considered credible and trustworthy, I gathered data to align with both research questions. A reader of this study can accept the study results based upon trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To make this study more trustworthy, I utilized member checking and thick description to strengthen credibility. I described how I chose which participants to include in detail, which increased transferability. A doctoral level university methodologist reviewed the study to strengthen dependability and checked the results for bias. Reflexive journaling fortified confirmability.

Credibility

To make the study more credible, I utilized a process called member checking. Participants were sent a summary of the research findings and invited to comment for the following three days. No inaccuracies were reported. Thick description also strengthens credibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I recounted the data in a detailed manner to make the process clear to the readers, so they may read the study and come to their own conclusions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In addition, an experienced early childhood methodologist and mentor regularly reviewed the data analysis of the study, provided suggestions to improve it, and checked for bias.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to apply the study procedures to an alternate location (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers should include enough details for the next researcher

to repeat the steps and expect to find similar results. (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I provided detailed thick description to describe the participants and contexts. This process makes transferability possible for the next researcher who may wish to build upon this study and investigate more about elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress (Stahl & King, 2020). The selection criteria used to find participants was transparent and detailed, which helped to bolster trustworthiness by making the study more relevant and transferable to other contexts. To minimize the chapter 1 limitations, I noted which participants were union members, and considered if similar comments were linked to any particular region. Also, the direct quotes included in the study will allow the reader to determine if the study is transferable. Finally, I wrote down any emerging thoughts during the interviews and coding in the reflexive journal to keep track of any possible bias.

Dependability

A dependable study could be conducted in a similar context and achieve consistent results. (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This study is repeatable and was reviewed by a university level methodologist for consistency. This educational expert evaluated the analysis conducted during the study and the research process through an audit trail to test the dependability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The dependability of the study was strengthened through member checking, and the use of thick description by providing rich details on the setting and the words of the participants through their direct quotes. The final results were checked for bias by a university level educational expert.

Confirmability

Qualitative researchers' views are subjective (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). They cannot profess objectivity, as qualitative researchers' life experiences may color their views of the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). However, researchers may document their biases through reflexive journaling, and combat these biases as they surface through self-reflection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Systematically challenging these biases makes qualitative research more trustworthy (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I maintained this process of self-awareness and challenged my biases by utilizing the reflexive journal throughout the research process and through the help of a university level methodologist, the use of an audit trail, and through member checking.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided information regarding the setting, data collection and analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness in the study. I explored elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress in this study, through the two research questions. The research questions were: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress, and What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress? I interviewed a group of 13 participants from three regions in the United States through semistructured interviews.

This basic qualitative study included findings I evaluated based upon the work of Saldaña (2021). Three themes surfaced to answer the research questions. The first

research question was answered by the themes of time and balance. Time, its availability, or the lack of it, was of great importance to the participating teachers and contributed to their stress levels. Comments about time concerns fell into four main categories, meetings, adding to workload, paperwork, and extra duties. Participants expressed an overall desire to have enough time within the workday to accomplish what was asked of them. The second emergent theme was that balance was necessary for a teacher to do his or her best work. This theme was comprised of three categories including personal time, life/work balance, and exercise and coping. Participants expressed, for example, satisfaction with some existing supports such as a faculty relaxation room, and extra help with clerical duties. In addition, the participants expressed desires for a duty-free lunch, sufficient planning time, reduced meeting frequency, fewer clerical duties or help with them, lesson schedule flexibility, and classroom coverage so they may use the restroom when necessary.

The third theme, institutional support, contained comments which related to the participants' desire for more support in the workplace. This theme applied to research question 2, What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress? Comments fell into two categories: institutional support received and institutional support needed. Examples of support received ranged from grade-level planning to instructional coaching. Examples of support needed included, among others, requesting extra help with clerical duties, a need for uninterrupted planning time, a duty-free lunch, and restroom breaks. The responses were also examined through the lens of Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context

theory. I found that teachers are finding ways to cope with their levels of work-related stress through collegial support, relaxation rooms, and when possible, uninterrupted lunch breaks. Teachers' collective competence was supported through instructional coaches though the participants would have preferred more schedule flexibility and autonomy. The administrative policies and procedures influenced the levels of stress in the participants' workplaces through the number of meetings, interrupted planning time, and extra clerical duties. District leaders can use the data within these themes to identify and address the reasons for increased levels of teacher stress in their own contexts.

Chapter 5 addresses the interpretation of the results, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications. The three themes which emerged are discussed and thoroughly presented in relation to the literature. In addition, limitations are addressed, as are future research suggestions. The study implications and social change possibilities are provided, as well as the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. The research questions were: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress, and What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress? The basic qualitative design of this study was a good fit with the purpose of the study—to explore elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. Qualitative researchers explore perspectives and seek to gain greater understanding of a phenomenon, an approach which aligned well with the purpose of this study (Crawford, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

A key finding included that participants expressed most of their work-related stress revolved around three themes: time, balance, and institutional support. The first theme was comprised of four categories, the second had three categories and the third had two categories, into which the comments related to the research questions fell. Within the theme of time, the categories contributing to stress and answering Research Question 1 included: meetings, adding to workload, paperwork, and extra duties. Within the theme of balance, the categories relating to supports applying to Research Question 1 included personal time, work/life balance, and exercise and coping. Within the theme of institutional support, categories answering Research Question 2 included supports received and supports needed. My intention with this research was to explore the problem

of the increased levels of stress in public elementary school teachers in the United States. Participants in this study reported their stress levels within the workplace averaged 6.4 on a scale of 1 to 10 (see Table 1). Gaining a greater understanding of the viewpoints of the 13 K-3 teachers who participated may contribute to identifying the institutional supports needed to assist K-3 teachers in U.S. public schools and reduce their levels of workplace stress. Chapter 5 contains the findings as they relate to the literature and conceptual framework, the implications, limitations, recommendations for future research, and the conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

The literature review and Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context theory conceptual framework served as the basis for the interpretation of findings. The study findings gave credence to elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. The conceptual framework, the coping-competence-context theory, supported the findings as participants described how they coped with stress, related how their years of experience, or competence, had small influence on the relatively consistent levels of stress, and shared the context of their administrative or districtwide policies and procedures in their environment that influenced their levels of stress. Union membership was not mentioned as an influence on stress levels. K-3 public school teachers' levels of workplace stress hovered around an average of 6.4 on a scale of 1 to 10. Stress reported as ranges were averaged then computed as a single digit (see Table 1).

The research questions were answered through the emergence of three themes: time, balance, and institutional support. The first theme, time, applied to the first research question and consisted of categories including meetings, extra workload, paperwork, and extra duties. The second theme, balance, applied to Research Question 1, and consisted of categories including personal time, work/life balance, and exercise and coping. The third theme, institutional support, answered the second research question and consisted of two categories including institutional support received or institutional support needed. The connection to Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context theory conceptual framework is woven throughout the following sections.

Theme 1: Time

The comments that fell into the first theme, time, took many forms, and helped answer the first research question, what are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress? The stress levels the participants reported feeling for the majority of each week ranged from a 3 to a 9, within a range of 1 to 10, and when averaged, resulted in a level of 6.4. To include the stress levels reported as a range, these were averaged first, then added into the overall average as a single digit.

Research question 1 was what are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress? A response that appeared often throughout the interviews was that time, or more specifically, the lack of it, was a notable contributing factor. In the literature, Herman et al. (2018) wrote in a study on elementary teachers in a public midwestern district that the group which noted high stress and burnout with low coping linked with the lowest student outcomes. This theme confirms the conceptual

framework as the lack of time can influence how teachers cope, depending on how competent they are dealing with it, and how the context can shape the amount of time teachers are given to accomplish tasks (Herman et al., 2020).

Time Constraints

This theme confirms the data as comments about the lack of enough time to accomplish all that was asked of the participants surfaced repeatedly throughout the interview process as an element that greatly contributed to stress in the workplace. P2 noted, “So that’s stressful, mainly the time constraints.” P3 said, “Well, this could be a stress for me, having limited time.” P6 added, “Just there was never enough time. I went home every single day feeling like I had not done enough, that somehow I had failed the kids because there just weren’t enough hours in the day.” McCarthy (2019) noted that coping is difficult when classroom demands such as lack of time and too many tasks outweigh the resources necessary to cope with stress, a finding along the lines of Herman et al.’s (2020) coping-competence-context theory findings. Kaihoi et al. (2022) connected building site influences with stress levels in teachers, which tied into the context portion of Herman et al.’s conceptual framework. Teachers often noted how the time constraints that caused them stress were from administrative policies and procedures such as data entry, time blocking, and feeling their time was not respected. The requirement of adding increasingly large amounts of data throughout the day led P11 to remark, “Now it’s like I’ve got to enter into this database, that database. All of that takes away time from planning lessons which creates stress, because what I want to do is spend my time creating good lessons.”

Stress Level

In the literature, reported levels of stress from teachers were high. Eddy et al. (2019) wrote that current public elementary school teachers in the United States rated the stress level of their jobs at 8 out of 10. Herman et al. (2018) noted that 93% of public elementary teachers reported high stress levels. The NEA (2022) found that 75% of elementary teachers perceived workplace stress as a serious concern, contributing to their decision to remain in or leave the field of education. Parthasarathy et al. (2022) in a study of 862 public school elementary teachers in the United States across 5 cities, found a reported stress level of 85%.

Out of the 13 interviews I conducted, only one participant rated a stress level below 5, making the number of respondents who rated higher than a 50% stress level most days of the workweek 12 out of 13, or 92%. For the participants who reported their averages as ranges, these numbers were averaged first, then entered as single digits. Concerning the level of work related stress, P2 responded, “I would say that it is 8, and I would say 8 because of, mainly, time constraints.” P11 rated the daily stress level at a 9 because of time spent on “the documentation of things that is repeated over and over and over again, not assessing kids, but all the different places we have to upload it or enter it in.” Theme 1, time, provided answers to the first research question, as did the second theme, balance.

Theme 2: Balance

The comments that fell into the second theme, balance, answered elements of the first research question, what are elementary public school teachers’ perspectives on their

levels of workplace stress? An imbalance of internal and external demands on teachers leads to work related stress (Herman et al., 2018; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Furthermore, teachers who are trained in time management and stress relief may be able to better balance the demands on their time (Herman et al., 2020; Tolan et al., 2020).

Participants mentioned both these causes for their lack of balance and supports needed to reduce this stress. The coping aspect of Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context conceptual framework supports my exploration of elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress.

Data from this study confirm the coping portion of the coping-competence-context theory (Herman et al., 2020). I was most interested in exploring the institutional supports received or needed to reduce workplace stress. Comments concerning these supports were either noted as currently provided, or phrased as suggestions for supports that are still needed in the workplace.

Theme 3: Institutional Supports

The third theme, institutional supports, provided additional answers to the second research question, what are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress? Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. (2021) noted that institutional support had a positive impact on teachers' well-being.

Through the lens of the conceptual framework by Herman et al. (2020), this theme confirms the context category. Institutional policies and procedures per location influence teacher's stress levels (Herman et al., 2020). Participants found the provision of literacy or instructional coaches and their modeling of lessons edifying. Relaxation rooms for the

staff were well received, when participants felt they had the time in their schedules and class coverage to use them. Participants lauded grade level planning yet lamented an overabundance of meetings and duties which they said had taken away from lesson planning time. Supports under this theme fell into two categories: supports received and supports needed.

Supports Received

Teacher stress levels can affect attendance (Chambers-Mack, 2019; Jones & Howard, 2019). Chronic teacher stress can affect absenteeism, attrition, and teacher turnover (Eddy et al., 2019; Dilberti & Schwartz, 2023). P2 mentioned how high stress levels lead to taking extra time off from work, and said, “I do need a mental day for myself, whereas if I’m exhausted, I know that I’m not gonna be my best person. P8 mentioned, “We have had several staff members leave just because they have had a mental breakdown.” Participants mentioned institutional supports currently in place aimed toward reducing workplace stress. P4 noted how having an instructional coach “really helped with improving literacy and instruction in my classroom. Although some participants commented on the supports already in place, there were also ideas about which supports were needed to reduce stress in the workplace. The context of the workplace can influence the supports teachers receive, as noted in the coping competence context theory (Herman et al., 2020).

Supports Needed

Authors from the literature included suggestions for workplace supports. Herman et al. (2020), in their coping-competence-context theory, noted that the context of the

work environment often dictates the stress. According to Lambert et al. (2018), institutional supports may be available at low or no cost, such as more professional autonomy, instructional support from administrators, and a positive school climate, all of which may contribute to lessening the workplace stress of public elementary school teachers. Chan et al. (2021) found that feelings of perceived workplace support and autonomy lowered stress levels. Concerning professional autonomy, participants noted that teaching creatively is enjoyable and more autonomy would be welcomed.

Dexter and Wall (2021) mentioned that developing positive self-image may be effective in supporting public school elementary teachers with lowering or preventing perceived workplace stress. P1 suggested that it may be helpful to have a therapist available on days when students have a delayed arrival. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2022), workplace related stress included unnecessary testing procedures, teacher evaluation, and lack of feeling a voice in schoolwide decision making, among others. Regarding teacher evaluation, P14, though happy with the current administration, said former administrators “had strict expectations where, coming in your classroom, if you were 2 days off in your lesson plan you were written up.” Lambert et al. (2018) noted that instructional support from administrators had contributed to a positive school climate. The University of Georgia (2022) wrote that stress is influenced in part by high expectations with multiple tasks and too little time to accomplish them. P8 would like administrators to see teachers as human:

We have those moments when we just need to breathe, and we're not robots. We can't go from the time we hit the door until the time we leave, ... it's almost like,

do this, do this, do this, do this, until there is nothing left. Because the kids are the focal point, and don't get me wrong, I understand, but I'm a focal point, too, and I can't do what I need to do for those kids that are the focal point, if I can't do what I need to do for myself.

Balance may also be necessary to positively influence teachers' health. According to Landsbergis et al. (2020), teachers' stress levels affected their health, when compared to other occupations, and that the perception of feeling respected by coworkers, supervisors, students, and community lowered reported stress levels. P7 suggested that support for teachers should translate into policy changes, "I would like to see real support, not just kind, flowery words, and nice pictures that they send out during a teacher appreciation week. I would like to see real support implemented into policy." Teachers' expressions of needed support confirm the context element of the coping-competence-context theory conceptual framework (Herman et al., 2020).

The purpose of this study was to explore elementary public school K-3 teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. The data from the interviews answered the two research questions, what are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their levels of workplace stress, and what are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress, through the emergence of 3 themes: time, balance, and institutional support. The findings in this study show that workplace stress is being addressed in some ways, and additional institutional supports are still needed in others. The results corroborate the findings of former studies presented

in the Chapter 2 literature review, the conceptual framework, and add additional current data regarding the perspectives of K-3 public school elementary teachers' perspectives of levels of workplace stress and needed supports. The study results validated the ideas set forth regarding public school teachers' workplace stress from the literature review articles and Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context theory (Berger et al., 2022; NEA, 2022; Parthasarathy, 2022).

Limitations of the Study

Limitations may include the modest sample size, the geographic concentration, the gender distribution, and researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Saturation was demonstrated in this study after 12 interviews when no new themes or categories emerged which were related to the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A 13th participant was added to test saturation. Regardless, additional perspectives may have led to a more well-rounded understanding of K-3 public school teachers in the United States.

The second limitation was the lack of regional representation throughout the United States. Three regions were represented, including the northeast, the mid-Atlantic states, and the southern states. There was no midwestern or Pacific coastal representation. Having additional representation may have added alternative perspectives. Gender representation was also uneven, as only one participant identified as male. More male teachers may have contributed more varied views to consider. Finally, researcher bias may be considered a limitation since I currently work as a second grade teacher, which may have resulted in unconscious bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I sought to limit this possible bias with a reflexive journal in which I documented my thoughts as they arose

throughout the process, and I conferred with an expert reviewer, a university level methodologist, to minimize any possible biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Recommendations

Future studies may add to the data gleaned from this study by widening the geographical area to include regions outside the eastern seaboard states. A study featuring male teachers' experiences regarding stress in the U.S. K-3 environment would add an alternative viewpoint to the literature. One could also research how administrators' stress levels may be lessened and if that has a positive influence on the stress levels of K-3 teachers, to build upon the work of Steiner et al. (2022). Researchers may consider exploring and building upon the lessons learned through the comparison of K-3 teacher stress in the United States with that of another country, like Wang et al.'s (2021) study comparing teachers in the United States with China. Future researchers could compare the experiences of teacher stress in the US K-3 environment and explore what successful institutional stress reduction approaches overlap with approaches overseas.

Herman et al. (2018) found that teachers with a high stress and low coping combination had the lowest performing students. One could choose to build upon research with those K-3 teachers who have high stress but also high coping and explore what influenced the teacher to cope well (Herman et al., 2020). Future research may focus on participants who profess a lack of stress in the K-3 teaching environment and how this contentment may influence student outcomes. The researchers may also choose to pinpoint the institutional influences on this feeling of contentment and compare the results to Herman et al.'s (2018) study and current literature.

Implications

As I reviewed the findings from the data gathered during this study, I found that K-3 teachers would like more time, balance, and institutional support to do their best work. This study has implications for positive social change by providing school districts with the data for teachers and administrators to ask for financial or policy related support to address the workplace stress on public school K-3 teachers and the influence it has on their work. Findings may aid district leaders to develop institutional supports based upon the suggestions teachers revealed in this study. In addition, results from this study could influence research on stress reduction for K-3 public school teachers. Teachers with lower stress levels have higher performing students (Berger et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018).

Targeting needed support through professional development or improved policy could help teachers feel more valued, which may lead to work performance improvement (Berger et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018). Based upon the findings of my study, professional development could focus on the areas of time management and strategies for balance. Administrators and policy makers could use the data from the findings to rethink how to address the institutional supports needed most in their contexts. Should the professional development prove to be effective in one district, it could potentially be useful at state or national levels.

Finally, bringing the perspectives of K-3 public school teachers to the fore adds to the body of knowledge. Though multiple studies were conducted regarding teachers' stress throughout the elementary, middle, and high school grades in the United States,

they did not separate out the perspectives of the K-3 public school teachers (Carroll et al., 2020; Georgia Department of Education, 2022; Kaihoi et al., 2019; Levanti et al., 2019; Marais-Opperman, 2021; Oberle et al., 2022; Sandilos & DiPerna, 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Tomek & Urahane, 2021). Results from this study add to the body of knowledge for younger grades and give teachers and school leaders the data to identify stressors so the reduction of stress levels can be addressed. This data could fill a gap in practice by leading to professional learning community discussions or by informing building to district level professional development. Most importantly, this study gives K-3 teachers the knowledge that their voices have been heard and could influence a positive change in practice going forward.

Conclusion

My aim in exploring K-3 public school teachers' perspectives of workplace stress and needed supports was to provide a voice for those who may have otherwise felt overlooked. In previous studies what was currently known about the stress levels of United States teachers in the literature was available in abundance about those who taught grades higher than grade 3 (NEA, 2022; Oberle et al., 2022; Sandilos & DiPerna, 2022). Some research existed for those who educated at the preschool level (DiCarlo et al., 2020; United States Department of Education, 2022). Most mentions of stress in teachers of elementary students in grades K-3 at comparable ages were limited to international studies, or they were combined with studies which addressed all K-12 teachers of both private and public United States schools (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019; Levantini et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). My research was necessary to fill this gap.

Results of my study showed that K-3 teachers felt pressed for time and lacked sufficient work/life balance to feel as effective in the workplace. In the very least, they did not feel heard or valued (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). This study filled a gap in practice as it brought K-3 teachers' views of workplace stress and the supports needed to the body of research, and district leaders may use this data to take action. Specific contributing factors to public school elementary teacher stress include lack of time, teacher evaluation practices, and feeling voiceless in school decision making (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). Participant 8, I believe, said it best, "It's not gonna slow down. And unless somebody speaks up, unless we speak up for ourselves, and someone speaks up for us, it's going to continue. It's, the cycle is going to continue."

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you via (Zoom or telephone) today (insert date and time), (insert name). I am interested in exploring K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress. I will begin with a few questions, and if at any time answering the questions makes you feel uncomfortable, please tell me. Your personally identifying information will be kept private and will not be revealed in this study. You will be referred to as participant 1-15. To analyze the data, I will need to record this interview and I will email a research finding summary for you to review at the conclusion of this study; this will take 10 minutes. You will receive no compensation for participating in this study. May I have your consent to proceed? If so, please say "I consent." Thank you.

Study purpose: The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore K-3 elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress and institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress.

Research Questions (Here as a guide, not to be read aloud):

RQ 1: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on their level of workplace stress?

RQ 2: What are elementary public school teachers' perspectives on the institutional supports needed to reduce workplace stress?

Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Interview questions: (please note some prompts are included beside question and will be used only as needed; these are italicized)

1. How long have you taught?
2. Which grade do you currently teach?
3. In which region of the United States do you teach? (northeast, southeast, midwest, southwest, northwest, pacific coastal)
4. Are you part of a teachers' union?
5. Could you please describe the parts of your work that you enjoy?
6. Could you please go through the stress you may encounter throughout a typical day in the classroom? *Can you please explain what you meant by...*
7. What do you perceive your level of work-related stress to be on a scale of 1 to 10? *Why did you respond with this number?*
8. How many days during the week do you feel this way?
9. From which work-related sources or contexts does your stress originate? *Could you please give me a few examples? Do you have any more examples you would like to share?*
10. Does work-related stress affect you mentally or physically? *How? Please describe.*

11. How do you cope with your work-related stress? *Please give me some details. Is there anything else you would like to add?*
12. Are there workplace supports currently available which help to lessen your work-related stress? *Please describe them.*
13. How are these supports effective at helping you to cope? *Please give more examples.*
14. In your opinion, how would competence or years of teaching experience affect perceived stress levels?
15. In your opinion, how would districtwide policies and procedures within the context of the workplace influence perceived stress levels? *Please give me more details about...*
16. Tell me about any additional supports needed from your workplace, for example, professional development, resources, policies, team meetings, or coaching, which you believe would be helpful in lessening your experience of workplace stress? *How do you think these would be helpful?*
17. If you could make one immediate suggestion for your workplace to lower work-related stress for yourself and your colleagues, what would it be and how would you implement it?
18. What would you like readers of this study to understand about workplace stress and K-3 teachers?
19. Are there any additional thoughts you would like to share on this topic?

Additional probes to be used as necessary:

1. *Please share an example?*
2. *What else did you notice?*
3. *When you said...please explain more about what you mean.*
4. *Please give me more details about...*
5. *How or why?*
6. *Is there anything else you would like to add?*

Thank you very much for participating in my study.

After collecting 12-15 interviews I will transcribe and analyze the responses I receive. I will email you a summary of the results following the completion of this study, and I may contact you sooner if I need clarification for a response. Thank you very much for your time and feel free to email me if you have any questions.

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