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“Be Calm, Be Kind:” A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study of Instruction and Assessment of Stress Management Behavior Education in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Concordia University–Portland
College of Education
Doctorate of Education Program

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“Be Calm, Be Kind:” A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study of Instruction and Assessment of
Stress Management Behavior Education in the Early Childhood Classroom

Rebecca Eugenia Flasz
Concordia University–Portland
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in
Transformational Leadership

Julie McCann, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University–Portland

2019

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. The research questions guiding this study were related to how teachers instructed students in identifying their stressors, how teachers incorporated social emotional learning and stress management into the regular classroom routine to encourage positive behaviors and minimize problem behaviors, and how teachers assessed students' ability to cope with and overcome their stressors. This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive research approach, specifically a case study, rooted in social cognitive theory as developed by Bandura. Through individual interviews with school leaders and teachers, and the completion of a self-assessment survey by in-service teachers at the early childhood level, study participants provided insight into the ways through which stress management education was incorporated and assessed in the early childhood education classroom. The findings of this study identified the capability of students at the early childhood level to identify their stressors, the importance of normalizing stress management education into the school day, and the value of using positive reinforcement in student behavior assessments.

Keywords: stress management, behavior assessment, social skills, student behaviors, positive behaviors, early childhood education

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family—you are my everything.

You, my parents Robert H. and Christine Flasz, have made me the woman I am today, and I will never be able to express in words how much I love you. God chose you to be my parents out of His perfect design, and I am divinely blessed to call you mine. It is because of you that I know what it means to love myself and others, to put the needs of those whom I love before my own, and to live a life of passion and adventure. You are my first, and greatest, role models, having guided me through every phase of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. I still learn something new from each of you every day. Everything I do in life I do with confidence because I have learned from the best and I know that no matter what, you will be there for me to love, guide, and support me.

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You, my godmother Laura Grudecki, personify what it means to be a woman full of beauty, creativity, imagination, and faithful living. And you, my aunt Collette Sargeant, demonstrate resilience and humility that are unmatched. I am so grateful to have you both in my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), mental health issues including, but not limited to anxiety, depression, social anxiety disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and related psychological illnesses may have foundations in the childhood years (ADAA, 2018). Because official diagnoses of mental health challenges often do not take place before the onset of adolescence, statistics shared that over 25% of children between the ages of 13 and 18 have some form of stress-induced anxiety disorder (ADAA, 2018). Stress management training focused on the characteristics of social emotional learning and reinforcing positive behaviors while minimizing problem behaviors must take place in the classroom environment. Often, academic issues like performance and social issues like bullying contribute to the onset of mental health issues (Johnson, 1982). Classroom management techniques aimed at ensuring the positive growth of students in behavior development may aide in addressing the growing issue of childhood stress (Korpershoek, Harms, de Boer, van Kuijk, & Doolard, 2016).

According to Johnson (1982), childhood stressors that take place both at home like socio-economic status and family changes, as well as issues at school, greatly influence the stress levels of young children and contribute to a decline in mental health and demonstrated behaviors. Stressors and stress management hold historical significance in the realm of teaching and learning, and are pervasive issues that are still found in today's educational settings. Hess, Shannon, and Glazier (2016) recognized stress as having played a unique role in the life of every school-aged child, regardless of personal background, as it is a health issue that all students needed to manage. Aiding children in coping with and overcoming their stressors in the classroom environment has increasingly become the responsibility of educators (Fallin,

Wallinga, & Coleman, 2012). The implementation of stress management education techniques in the classroom environment had a positive impact on student behavior response to stressors (Holen, Waaktaar, Lervag, & Ystgaard, 2012). Past research focused primarily on stress management as incorporated into the classroom environment by upper elementary, middle school, and high school teachers and its correlation to academic achievement. Past research also focused heavily on specific stress management practices like the incorporation of deep breathing, yoga, or meditation in to the classroom. The area of stress management as a part of the daily curriculum implemented by individual teachers in an early childhood education setting was identified as being under researched and was the focus of this study.

Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework

Often, most of a student's day is spent in the classroom environment where the teacher is the authority figure. Therefore, knowledge in education beyond academics has become increasingly important. The teacher has long been viewed as a primary educator of students, which dictates a need for the educators with whom students engage daily to instruct them not only in their subject matter needs for academic growth, but also to support them in growth and development on a personal, cognitive, and emotional level. Past research concluded that teaching young students how to deal with stressors in a healthy and productive way was best for their growth and development (Skinner, Pitzer, & Steele, 2016). Harris, Jennings, Katz, Abenavoli, and Greenberg (2015) concluded that incorporating stress management techniques into the classroom environment had a direct influence on students' ability to cope with and overcome their stressors, as well as increasing a students' ability to demonstrate more positive behaviors in the learning environment. Proper support from teachers allowed students to more

fully understand and overcome the stressors that were prevalent in their lives, both in and out of school.

Teachers who themselves understand proper stress management are more likely to pass on positive coping strategies to students. According to Oberle and Shonert-Reichl (2016), there was a direct correlation between teacher stress levels and student stress levels and negative behaviors in the early childhood and elementary school classroom. Yet, despite reports of increased stress levels coming from firsthand student accounts, mental health and stress management in relation to reinforcing positive behavior was often not addressed in the classroom (Sotardi, 2016). There is a need for teachers at the early childhood level to evaluate the classroom environment as shared with students to ensure that there is sufficient space for identifying, coping with, and overcoming stressors and mental health challenges.

The relationships that teachers have with their students are often strong indicators of student behaviors. Wentzel and Miele (2016) asserted that teachers who made stress management education part of the classroom environment on a daily basis instructed students who were more likely to follow the teacher's behavior and prioritize their mental health needs. These students also demonstrated more positive behaviors in the classroom. According to the work of Lillie (2018), teachers must implement the use of stress management to instill proper response to stressful situations in students. The teacher-student relationship aimed at overcoming stress, in addition to the many other facets of teaching and learning is one that is beneficial for both the educator and the learner.

Stress management, behavior instruction, and mental health education has become more prevalent in today's schools. Many educators have chosen to implement stress management practices into the classroom environment as an approach to calming the mind (Britton, Lepp,

Niles, Rocha, Fisher, & Gold, 2014; Butzer, Day, & Potts, 2014; Case-Smith, Sines, & Klatt 2010). Students who were allowed to turn inward in calming practices were viewed as those best equipped to respond appropriately to their stressors (Klatt, Harpster, Browne, White, & Case-Smith, 2013). But these approaches have been limited in scope in terms of truly educating students in stress management. Therefore, it has become necessary to explore more deeply the ways through which educators support stress management education and student mental health needs at all grade levels.

Statement of the Problem

Over 25% of children aged 13 to 18 have been officially diagnosed with anxiety-related disorders (ADAA, 2018). These diagnoses were not based on behaviors and tendencies that children exhibited for a short time prior to being seen by a medical professional, but rather, were rooted in their development stemming back to the early childhood years. Children experience stressors as a result of both their home and school situations. School-aged students are not always educated about healthy ways to manage their stress levels in the home environment. Student responses to the school setting are influenced by a number of factors, including the personally held beliefs of stakeholders in relation to academics and personal achievement (Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Morris, & Jones, 2014). Because an increasing number of students are dealing with mental health issues and elevated levels of stress, there is a need in the classroom environment for stress management education.

Many classroom teachers are beginning to recognize the significance that mental health has on student performance, and have started to incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment. When offered opportunities to manage stress through healthy mediums, students in upper elementary, middle school, and high school grades have

demonstrated gains in mental health, as well as emotional and physical competency (Khalsa & Butzer, 2016). Stress management practices are becoming more prevalent in early childhood settings (Shapiro et al., 2014). This increase in opportunity for early childhood students to engage in stress management may have a correlation to data showing the effectiveness of such practices in older students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. This study explored the incorporation and assessment of stress management education in the early childhood setting through the perspective of both administrators and teachers. This study also addressed the stress management techniques that were identified by administrators and teachers as being most beneficial to students' ability to identify, cope with, and overcome stress-related anxieties, as demonstrated through positive classroom behaviors. This study focused on the ways through which teachers at the early childhood setting in one specific elementary school setting supported stress management education and assessment.

The significance of this study may inform other early childhood settings on the methods through which stress management can be incorporated into the classroom environment on a daily basis, as well as the effects and benefits of such implementations. As a result of the findings of this study, educational leaders and teachers supporting students in various early childhood settings may find meaning in further incorporation of stress management education and behavior assessment in the classroom. This study may serve as a starting point for future research into

stress management education, behavior assessment, and monitoring of competency of social skills in the early childhood education setting.

Research Questions

The fundamental research questions of this study centered on the techniques that were being used by classroom teachers at the early childhood level to aide students in identifying, coping with, and overcoming stressors, as demonstrated by positive behaviors in the classroom.

The main research questions were:

RQ1: How do early childhood teachers instruct students to identify the stressors in their lives?

RQ2: How do early childhood teachers incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment to support positive student behavior?

RQ3: How do early childhood teachers assess students' ability to identify and cope with stressors they experience in alignment with demonstrated positive behaviors?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

The completion of this study held merit in the area of stress management education and behavior assessment as it existed in the early childhood education sector. Past literature primarily focused the scope of study on the effect of stress management education and behavior assessment on the success of students in upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels. The exploration of the instructional techniques used to teach stress and behavior management to early childhood learners was in need of further review, particularly because research into statistics related to the prevalence of mental health issues within young children had recently gained increased attention. This study identified the ways through which stress

management education was experienced, taught, and assessed in one early childhood education setting.

The findings of this study may contribute to the experience of other early childhood leaders and teachers through exploration of methods used to teach students about stressors and stress management as experienced in the lives of children. This study also identified ways through which stress management education aligned with assessment of demonstrated student behaviors. In the early childhood setting where data collection took place, student behavior was assessed by recommendations from school leaders as well as individually identified criteria determined by teachers within the classroom setting. Criteria for positive student behaviors, while slightly varied in individual classrooms, existed on a pervasive level throughout the school environment.

Definition of Terms

Anxiety. Internal feelings related to increased levels of apprehension, fear, nervousness, and worry, that become apparent at isolated times (Felman & Browne, 2018).

Benchmark. An established academic and social goals determined by an individual school, school district, or board of education at a state or national level. Benchmarks exist to measure the ability of a student to approach, meet, or exceed the goal achievement or behavior (Herman & Baker, 2005).

Behavior. An action, activity, or process that is observable and can be measured by the observer (Pam, 2013).

Behavior assessment. The process of studying and evaluating behaviors that have been demonstrated by a subject. Behavior assessment may focus on an area of struggle or problem for the subject (Pam, 2013).

Coping. The thoughts and actions that an individual possesses in relation to reacting to and handling the demands and situations of every day life (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Early childhood education. A learning environment for children who are developmentally between birth and the age of 8 (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

Positive behavior. Any action demonstrated by a student that is supported by instructional methods (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Problem behavior. Any action demonstrated by a student that does not align with teacher and school expectations of student role, and may interfere with the safety or wellbeing of the student or those around them (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2009).

Reproduction. The action of an individual that mimics a behavior that has been observed at an earlier time as demonstrated by someone else in the individual's environment (Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1966).

Social emotional learning. The ability of an individual to interpret and regulate emotional responses, solve problems in an efficient manner, and form and maintain meaningful relationships with other individuals (Ragozzino et al., 2003).

Social skills. The development of children in interpersonal and behavioral ability attainment (Merrell & Gimpel, 1997).

Stress. An inability to cope with one's environment (Dobson & Smith, 2000).

Stressor. Any external condition that causes a reaction of stress within the body (McEwen, 2005).

Social cognitive theory. A theory first developed by Bandura (1977). Social cognitive theory is a conceptual framework based on the understanding of the ways through which

individuals influence and are influenced by the environment around them. In social cognitive theory, the idea that individuals learn by observing others, and reproduce that behavior at a later time, regardless of whether the behavior is positive or negative (Vinney, 2019).

Stress management education. An instructional technique, generally given to a whole group, that varies in content, but is aimed at reducing the level of stress and response to stressors in participants (Ong et al., 2004).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

The researcher was under the assumption that early childhood educators who taught in classrooms at the research site for this study were implementing stress management techniques in meaningful ways in their professional environment. The researcher was also under the assumption that teachers in this school setting were actively assessing student behavior as a result of stress management education. The researcher assumed that participants in this study would be open, honest, and transparent about the ways through which they implemented stress management in the classroom, and how they assessed student behaviors related to instruction.

The study was delimited to the participants who volunteered to be part of the data collection process. Study participants represented different levels of education, age, and tenure, meaning that the sample size allowed for data collection was diverse, however, the researcher limited the scope of the study to include only participants who had a minimum of three years of professional teaching experience, who were currently employed at the school that was the research setting for data collection, and who held the professional role of either administrator or teacher in a preschool, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or first grade classroom.

Limitations of the study were time constraints, as this was not a longitudinal study, a lack of prior research in the area of stress management and behavior assessment in the early

childhood setting, self-reported data from teachers who reported how they incorporated stress management into the early childhood classroom, and bias, due to the fact that the researcher was an educator. This study was also limited by the fact that participants were administrators and teachers in the early childhood setting in one specific elementary school setting in the suburban Midwest. The findings of this research study represented stress management education as it was experienced, taught, and assessed in one school setting.

Chapter 1 Summary

Today's society is one that is fast-paced, and does not allow for recognition of stressors and proper management (Hobfoll & Freedy, 2017). Children are not exempt from experiencing stressors, and as a result, do not always understand how to identify, cope with, and overcome the emotional stress they may be experiencing. At an increasing rate, classroom teachers at the upper elementary, middle school, and high school level have begun to incorporate stress management education and behavior assessment into the learning environment. While there are early childhood settings that have also started to incorporate approaches to student instruction in mental health, the area of exploration into the ways through which this instruction is delivered and student behavior is assessed as a result was under researched at the time of this study. The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors for the potential benefit of informing other school settings on proper incorporation of such techniques. This chapter began with an introduction of the study and the intent to explore the ways through which one specific group of school leaders and teachers

incorporated stress management into the classroom in the early childhood setting of an elementary school.

Chapter 2 of this study will provide a review of the literature that currently existed on the topic of stress management techniques as incorporated by classroom teachers. The literature review focused on how positive behaviors were taught and problem behaviors were minimized through stress management education. The literature review also focused on specific aspects of stress management and behavior education and assessment that have been explored in the learning environment to determine the importance of the use of such approaches. While the literature review focused heavily on research studies that had been conducted at the upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels, there was exploration into the limited amount of research that has been conducted in the early childhood setting. The literature review findings showed that there was a lack of research that identified beneficial stress management techniques used by teachers at the early childhood level. The chapters that follow the literature review offer an overview of the methods used in this research study, provide findings of the research, and draw conclusions based on study findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Children experience a wide range of stressors in both their home and school lives, yet are often not well-equipped to identify, cope with, and overcome the effects of their stressors in their daily lives (Johnson, 1982; Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017). The mental health and wellbeing of students growing up in modern society is decreasing at an alarming rate, and today's students are dealing with environmental stressors in higher measure than children in generations past (Hartley & Henderson, 2018). While educational approaches and curriculum changes in recent years have demonstrated a response to minimizing the stigma of stress management and mental health, school-aged children are not always privy to educational opportunities that support their ability to regulate their response to stressors as they exist in both their school and home environments. Students' personal and academic performance may suffer as a result of unresolved stress (Shankar & Park, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. This study explored stress management techniques that were implemented by teachers in the early childhood classroom setting that allowed for increased awareness of stressors present in the early years of childhood and the ways through which teachers assessed demonstrated student behavior to determine social skills growth as a result of their engagement in instruction. This study also explored how teachers created a learning environment that allowed students to have an space in which they were safe to express

their feelings and stressors, and were taught ways through which they could overcome the weight of the stress that they carried as a result of both home and school life.

Students who are not taught healthy stress and behavior management techniques often experience setbacks in both academic achievement and personal growth including psychological and emotional development. Childhood stress, if not appropriately addressed, may lead to more severe mental health issues and diagnoses of challenges in later life (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegan 1984). Student misbehaviors in both the classroom and home environment have long been associated with high levels of internal stress and a subsequent lack of ability in learning management strategies in response to their stressors (Yoon, 2002). Additionally, an increased level of stress in children has been found to have an impact on literacy acquisition and fluency among school-aged students (O’Neal, 2018). Personal and academic shortfalls that are experienced by students as a result of unresolved stress during the early school years may play a significant role in later life and manifest themselves as severe mental health diagnoses that will impact all areas of the individual's life in years to come.

Students who engaged in stress management education and behavior assessment programs in their school environment were less likely to report feelings of increased stress or depressive symptoms than their non-participating student counterparts (Tsang et al., 2013). The work of Eppelmann et al. (2018) found that there was a direct correlation between student exposure to stress management education in the classroom and decreased levels of stress reported by students. Students who are better educated and prepared to identify, manage, and overcome their stressors are those who are less likely to experience increased levels of stress that may lead to mental health issues and diagnoses in later life.

Authority figures, a term which includes both administrators and teachers, often observe changes in student capabilities to handle stressors in school settings that implemented instruction in stress management. These authority figures reported increased expectations in positive student behaviors as a result of the use of education and awareness as tools to manage stressors in healthy ways (Carsley et al., 2017; Rispoli et al., 2015). The benefits of stress management education and behavior assessment in the school classroom environment are numerous and have been reported by various school stakeholders as being observable.

When stress is addressed in the classroom environment, there are many benefits for the student in psychological, academic, and social capacities. Research has concluded that there was an important association between the process of teaching young students stress management skills and an improved attitude in their perceptions of stress, challenges, and setbacks in healthy and productive ways (Skinner et al., 2016). Students who were offered opportunities to engage in stress management and behavior education reported improved satisfaction related to both academic and personal factors (Moksnes, Lohre, Lillefjell, Byrne, & Haugan, 2014) and increased their capacity to handle stressors in both the school and home environments. Additionally, students who participated in stress management education in the classroom demonstrated gains that allowed for increased capacity in their performance in both academic and social situations (Frank, Kohler, Peal, & Bose, 2016).

There was also a strong correlation between the ways through which teachers implemented stress management education in the classroom and the perceived and demonstrated behaviors exhibited by students while in the learning environment (Lieny, Buettner, Grant, & Lang, 2018). Students' ability to learn healthy responses to stress management at an early age has been identified by teachers as a way through which student stress levels decreased steadily

over time (Hafner, Stock, & Oberst, 2014). The benefits that students experienced as a result of stress management being addressed in school spanned both personal and academic areas.

Stress management, as a beneficial part of the classroom curriculum, has been studied extensively in the middle school, high school, and higher education classroom. However, research focused on stress management education and assessment in the early childhood classroom was under researched. As a result, much literature exists that supports the implementation of stress management education in learning environments for older children, without attention paid to the need for students at the early childhood level to also be afforded education in healthy responses to stress.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Social cognitive theory as pioneered by Bandura in 1977 served as the conceptual framework for this study. Bandura's social cognitive theory posited that individuals learn from their interactions with others through observation of the behaviors that others demonstrate. Learners then imitate the behaviors that they have witnessed in others, and consequently model those behaviors for others (Bandura, 1977). The behaviors learned and demonstrated by individuals can be either positive or negative and influence others to act in ways that are beneficial or harmful. The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. The use of social cognitive theory allowed the researcher to explore the behaviors that early childhood students had been taught, how they internalized those behaviors and rationalized them as applicable to their own school

and home environments, and how they demonstrated social skills development to others as a result of what they had learned.

Social cognitive theory has been applied to many past research studies in the area of education, particularly in qualitative studies that explored the perceptions held by school community stakeholders. The application of the conceptual framework was especially relevant in research studies that focused on the connection between home and school environments, such as in the work of Mirzaei, Ghofranipour, and Ghazanfari (2019). Student behaviors, as they related to classroom performance, have also been assessed with the use of the social cognitive theory (Espelage, Merrin, Hong, & Resko, 2018). The ability of students to demonstrate efficacy and independence in pursuit of their cognitive and social growth is a central focus of this study, meaning that a framework that supports development of the individual on multiple capacities was needed. The use of social cognitive theory was appropriate for this study as it was a conceptual framework that allowed the researcher to explore how teachers provided stress management education to students and assessed demonstrated behavior as a result of education provided.

According to Wood and Bandura (1989), a relationship that can be represented both in a bidirectional and cyclical nature existed in social cognitive theory that represented the relationship between the interaction of an individual with various factors, including cognitive intake, demonstrated behavior, and personal and environmental factors. Social cognitive theory was applied in this study as data collected were related to the ways through which early childhood education teachers instructed with students in stress management techniques, which related to the theoretical concept of cognitive intake, and the assessed student actions demonstrated and observed in the classroom environment which related to the theoretical

concept of demonstrated behavior as espoused by Bandura (1977). Figure 1 shows a concept map related to the components of social cognitive theory and the practical application of the theory to social emotional learning stress management and behavior instruction in the classroom.

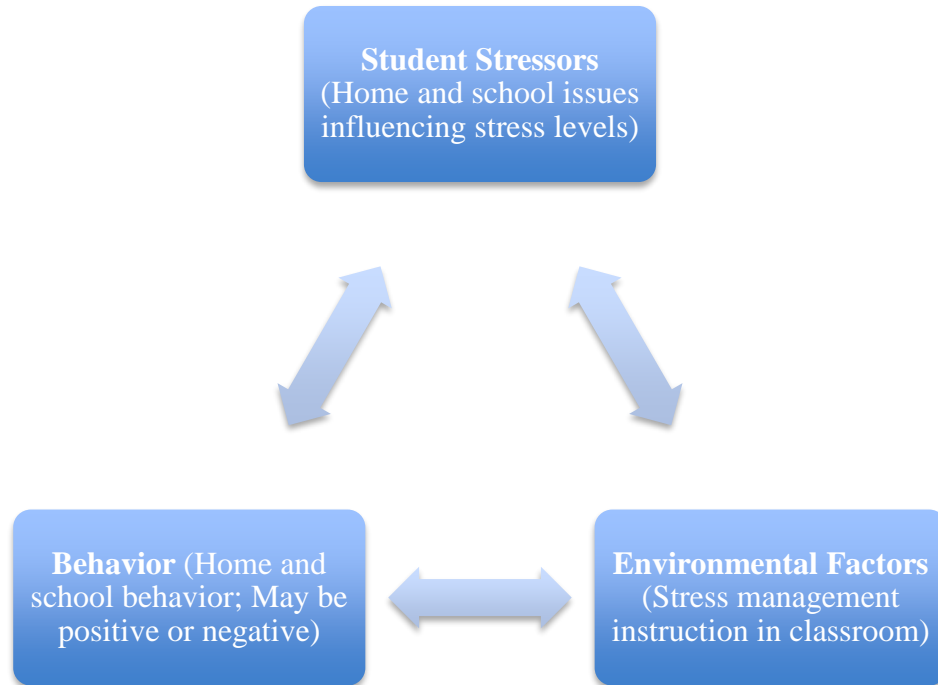


Figure 1. Social cognitive theory concept map.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

To gather information about previous research conducted in similar study areas related to stress management education and behavior assessment in school-aged children, the researcher used multiple sources to gather relevant literature. Sources used by the researcher included academic journal articles, research studies, and dissertations available via the Concordia University–Portland online library, EBSCOhost, PROQuest, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, and Google Scholar databases. The researcher also used physical books that were accessed via the library of the university where the researcher worked as well as online via various platforms. Articles and journals that were reviewed by the researcher for the purpose of this literature

review were limited to only those that were peer-reviewed in order to ensure the validity of the content and findings of the literature. The review of literature related to the areas of stress management in school-aged students, assessment tools used to monitor stress management social skills attainment, and specific stress management approaches used in the classroom setting was relevant in this literature review.

The researcher used several key words in the search for literature that were relevant to the research questions and focus of the study. The keywords and phrases used in searches for relevant literature included: *stress, stress management, stressors in children, stress management in the classroom, stress management assessment in school, stress management techniques, stress in classroom management, social emotional learning, behavior management, positive behavior support, student self control, social skills, social skills benchmarks, evaluation of social skills, social skills attainment, stress management in early childhood education, elementary education, high school education, higher education, teaching stress management, social cognitive theory, stress and social cognitive theory, behavior and social cognitive theory and instruction in stress management*. To complete the literature review, the researcher utilized resources and retrieval strategies aimed at intentional gathering of past research related to the topic of stress management instruction and assessment, as well as ideas for future research in this area of study. The research reviewed studies that utilized various research methodologies, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.

Often, when considering issues of mental health and stress, the challenges faced by adults in today's society initially comes to mind. Research has shown, however, that stress is not an issue that plagues individuals only after their 18th birthday. According to Johnson (1982) and Ortiz and Sibinga (2017), childhood stressors take place during the formative years, in both the

home and school environments. Home-based stressors that school-aged children may face include factors such as socio-economic status, family changes including, but not limited to, the addition of a new child or divorce, abuse, violence, trauma, and anxiety related to perfectionism (Flett et al., 2016; Hornor, 2015; Johnson, 1982). School-based stressors that students often face include bullying, pressure to succeed, and anxieties related to testing (Johnson, 1982). Aiding children in identifying, coping, and overcoming their stressors, whether personal or academic, in the classroom has increasingly becoming the responsibility of educators in the primary grades (Fallin et al., 2012). Through comprehensive stress management education and behavior assessment, authority figures in the school setting are able to more comprehensively influence the mental health of young students in ways that are positive and meaningful.

Many school leaders like superintendents or principals, and some school buildings or districts as a whole, require that teachers implement specific stress management techniques in the classroom as part of the everyday curriculum. One of the most common stress and behavior management techniques found in today's schools is the incorporation of yoga into the school day. Butzer et al. (2014) concluded that yoga was beneficial for use in the classroom as a stress management technique. Students who practiced yoga in the classroom were identified as learners who reported increased feelings of calm and focus, and were the students who were able to satisfactorily control their behavior when interacting with other children (Case-Smith et al., 2010).

Collectively, groups of students who regularly practiced yoga as a stress management technique in the classroom setting demonstrated decreased stress levels and reported an increase in feelings of self-esteem (Ferreria-Vorkapic, Feitoza, Marchioro, Simoes, Kozasa, & Telles, 2015). Not only has a reduction in stress been reported in statistics among students who

practiced yoga in the classroom, but academic performance and scholarly achievement have also been shown as having increased among students who regularly practiced yoga during the school day as a healthy response to their stressors (Williamson, 2013). The practice of yoga was reported to have taught students breathing techniques and proper postures that were not only meaningful during the practice, but could also be accessed by students later in their day when they experienced feelings of stress or anxiety that they needed help in coping with and overcoming (Hartley & Henderson, 2018). The incorporation of yoga into the classroom setting is viewed as an appropriate response to stress reduction among young students.

Mindfulness or meditation practices in the classroom environment have also been increasingly incorporated into the curriculum with high rates of success. Britton et al. (2014) found that students who were encouraged to practice mindfulness or meditation in the classroom were less likely to have harmful or negative thoughts about themselves or others when their psychological state was evaluated at a later time. A decrease in anxiety and aggression was also reported in classroom settings where students were taught a practice of meditation with regular engagement (Yoo, Lee, Lee, Shin, Park, Yoon, & Yu, 2015). Students who regularly practiced meditation during the school day were able to better retain information from lecture style teacher presentations and maintain that knowledge for a longer amount of time than students who did not actively participate in classroom mindfulness or meditation (Ramsburg & Youmans, 2013).

Additionally, the practice of meditation as a stress management technique has been credited with balancing the emotional state of students in response to stressors they experienced both at home and in school (Routhier-Martin, Roberts, & Blanch, 2017). Research conducted by Shapiro et al. (2014) identified the benefit of a contemplative practice like mindfulness in relation to productivity in adults, and concluded that the same would be true of students.

Practicing mindfulness is one of the most popular stress management techniques currently implemented by classroom teachers in the learning environment and has been shown to have many benefits for the learner.

The relationship between teacher and students plays a large role in a student's ability to either regulate their stressful tendencies or shrink back from addressing their stressors in healthy ways. Teachers who themselves demonstrated healthy responses to their own stressors in the classroom often fostered the same response in their students. Young students often mimicked their teachers, in both word and action. Students who mirrored the stress-related nonverbal cues demonstrated by their teachers were more likely to remember and reproduce those mannerisms at a later time when they found themselves in a similar situation to what they witnessed (Zhou & Guo, 2012). When stress and healthy responses to triggers of stress were not addressed in the classroom, teacher burnout and drops in student achievement became evident (Gastaldi, Pasta, Longobardi, Prino, & Quaglia, 2014).

Conversely, when teachers prioritized stress management in the classroom on a daily schedule, students were more likely to follow the behavior, and monitored their own stressors in ways that were healthy and appropriate (Wentzel & Miele, 2016). Implementing stress management techniques in the classroom allowed teachers the opportunity to minimize the frequency of negative student responses to stressors (Lillie, 2018). The teacher-student relationship aimed at teaching stress identification and management is one that is beneficial for both educator and learner.

While stress and behavior management has been identified as an important element of the classroom environment, many teachers do not yet incorporate practices into day-to-day activities. Many teachers, citing high stakes testing and other mandated requirements as the reason for the

limited time they may be able to find for the incorporation of stress management education, often focused the time that they had to spend in the classroom with students to require a focus on formal academic preparations (Copp, 2016). Teaching to the test, or the practice of instructing students solely on the academic content that would later appear on written assessments, detracted from the opportunity of the individual educator to incorporate stress management techniques and stress minimization into the daily routine. Other teachers reported that their school environment did not approve of teachers dedicating time in the school day to active incorporation of stress management into the classroom, as school or district policy and procedure did not afford them the opportunity to do so (Brown, 2018). Finding ways to incorporate stress management into the day-to-day classroom routine and feeling supported in the implementation of such instructional techniques may have lasting benefits for both teachers and students.

Despite the limitations reported by educators in certain educational settings, instruction in stress management techniques is prevalent in other school environments. Several research studies have been conducted on the benefit of stress management in middle school classrooms (Butzer et al., 2016; Viafora, Mahiesen, & Unsworth, 2014). Middle schools are the educational institution tasked with educating students through the adolescent years when stressors are most likely to begin manifesting themselves as mental health issues that can be diagnosed, which gave credit to the research studies that were conducted in classrooms that supported students in the specific age range.

Research in stress management at the high school and higher education level have also been conducted and benefits for students in those age ranges have been identified (Ratanasiripong, Park, Ratanasiripong, & Kathalae, 2015; Morgan, 2017). Offering stress management education to students between the ages of 11 and 21 has been found to reduce the

amount of anxiety experienced in the individual (Burkhart, Mason, & Lazebnik, 2017). While there have been studies conducted on stress management at the elementary school level (Bothe, Grignon, & Olness, 2014; Yeo, Goh, & Liem, 2015; Sanchez & Comer, 2018), the area of stress management in early childhood education was in need of further exploration at the time of this literature review and research study. The goal of this research study was to provide findings about the use of stress management in classrooms with early childhood learners.

Teaching students how to identify, cope with, and overcome their stressors requires assessment in order to determine whether or not the skills that are being learned as a result of instruction are beneficial for student success. Past research conducted on the assessment of stress management education and subsequent student behavior performance was focused primarily on specific demonstrated responses to stress on the part of the student. Laborde, Allen, Gohring, and Dosseville (2016), concluded that students who learned slow-paced breathing activities to manage their stressors showed an increase in academic performance and scoring, especially when they used their stress management techniques as a response to situations in which time constraints were present.

Other research studies drew conclusions about assessment of behavior through observation and interviews, surveys, or questionnaires of children and their families (Cheetham-Blake, Turner-Cobb, Family, & Turner, 2019; Im & Kim, 2018). This research study focused on assessment of stress management education through perceptions of demonstrated student behaviors. Many past research studies, while valuable in offering insight into student behavior changes as a result of stress management education focused primarily on drawing conclusions related to student populations at the upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels and

beyond. Limited research existed in relation to exploration of the implementation and experience of stress management education at the early childhood level.

Social emotional learning. Promoting a positive learning environment and ensuring that students have authentic, meaningful opportunities to obtain knowledge are several of the main points of social emotional learning (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Instruction in social emotional learning has long been valued in the elementary school classroom and has been the focus of research in past studies. The practice of incorporating social emotional learning into the classroom setting was identified as being similar to the need for regular integration of stress management education. Dusenbury and Weissberg (2017) connected social emotional learning with the ability of a student to internalize self-awareness as it related to their role in the academic environment, and concluded that instruction in skills related to growth in awareness was beneficial. Education in social emotional learning has been credited with being necessary in the 21st century classroom (Osher et al., 2016).

This means that as classrooms evolve to best serve the needs of students so too must the educational approaches that are identified as being most meaningful shift with time to a focus on educating the whole child instead of focusing solely on academic achievement. Learning skills such as social-emotional intelligence in the school setting allowed students to grow socially, behaviorally, and academically (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017). Likewise, participation in stress management education and assessment of subsequent social skills development was identified as being beneficial to the cognitive development of young students. In this study, the connection between social emotional learning and stress and behavior management education as it related to demonstration of positive student behaviors was explored and served as an extension of the literature that already existed in this area of education.

The successful implementation of social emotional learning in the classroom setting has been proven to positively benefit students' grades. According to the work of Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, and Houlihan (2015), students who were part of classroom environments where social emotional learning was supported by teachers demonstrated increased grades on the academic benchmarks of their school report cards when compared to the academic marks earned by their student counterparts who were not privy to the same type of regular behavioral education. Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017) found that the benefits of social emotional learning were evident in the academic achievement of students, regardless of the student's socio-economic class or race. Education in social emotional learning has been found to improve the academic success of students, however, the area of literature focused on improvements in behavior improvement of early childhood students was under researched.

The significance of incorporating social emotional learning into the classroom environment is becoming more prevalent in the school setting for the benefit of students. The use of social emotional learning ensured growth in social responsibility, empathy, and executive functioning among young children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). According to the work of Belfield et al. (2015), there were many identified advantages that students experienced as a result of having been educated in a classroom that supported their social emotional learning.

Exploration of social emotional learning in the preschool classroom has focused on predicting behavior difficulties that students experienced as a result of their teacher's instructional strategies (Poulou, Bassett, & Denham, 2018). Through the incorporation of social emotional learning into the classroom environment, students have historically been recorded to demonstrate a decrease in bullying behaviors and an increase in empathy and care for others (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2016). The implementation of social emotional learning in the

classroom has been identified as being necessary for the growth and development of students, regardless of their age or development.

Behavior regulation. In the early childhood setting, assessment of demonstrated behaviors is often informal in nature. Past research has explored the need for increased student assessment in personal achievement gains like increased self-control, among other characteristics, in higher measure than academic assessment (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). This is not to say that academic achievement should not be assessed in the early childhood setting, however students who have been assessed as demonstrating positive behaviors as a result of training in stress management were more likely to feel better adjusted and engaged (Bethel, Gombojav, Solloway, & Wissow, 2016). Supporting student behavior and assessment through positive means was identified as being essential for ensuring that students demonstrated efficacy in their personal growth (Fallon, O'keeffe, Gage, & Sugai, 2015). Teachers working with young children in the early childhood setting are responsible for supporting assessment of student behavior that aligns with self-regulatory behaviors and demonstrations of mastery in self-control while also ensuring that academic gains are made.

Family support. The prominence of stressors in the lives of students from both their home and school environment has been well documented (Johnson, 1982; Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017). Past Research has shown that a student's relationship with their family, whether positive or negative, often contributed to the student's well being in all settings (Newland, 2015). Support from families was found to be necessary in order to ensure that students grew and developed in social and emotional characteristics in a beneficial manner (Tabak & Mazur, 2016). However, students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or low socio-economic

environments did not often receive the familial support that was necessary to aide in their thriving (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015).

Past research has shown that the brain of a young child is not able to thrive and develop in functioning ways when poverty has played a part in the child's home life (Blair & Raver, 2016). Children who came to school from a family background in which low-income was an issue were more likely to demonstrate a lack of knowledge in their social emotional reasoning and their ability to care for themselves in both a both a mental and physical capacity (Schmitt, Lewis, Duncan, Korucu, & Napoli, 2017). Familial relationships that are lacking in support may leave students at a disadvantage in terms of the child's ability to gain the social skills and behavior support that is necessary to grow. Further, past research has shown that school-aged children who lived in homes where their parents or adult authority figures did not, themselves, know how to responsibly regulate their stressors and emotions, were less likely to demonstrate positive responses to stress and healthy behaviors in the classroom setting (Han, Na, & Lee, 2018). Adversity in the home environment has been linked to mental health challenges in children (Porche, Costello, & Rosen-Reynoso, 2016). The incorporation of stress management and behavior assessment in the classroom may be the only opportunity some students have to learn important social skills that are not supported at home.

Conversely, past research has been conducted that demonstrates the effect that meaningful, positive family support has had on the lives of students who were engaged in school curricular programs that focused on stress management and behavior assessment. The work of Garcia et al. (2019) explored the positive impact that was found in the stress management capacity of whole families when they were offered the opportunity to engage in a school-supported stress management based program aimed at increasing mental health and wellness.

Parents and family members who demonstrated higher stress levels of ability in identifying, coping with, and overcoming the stressors in their own lives were more likely to raise children who were less stressed; these students were reported to be more prepared to demonstrate positive behaviors in their learning environment without the added intervention of stress management education in the classroom setting (Gleeson, Hsieh, & Cryer-Coupet, 2016). In terms of stress management, healthy families and healthy homes support healthy children in their ability to thrive in both the home and school environment, whether or not stress management and behavior assessment are part of the curriculum to be presented during the school day.

Review of Methodological Issues

After a review of the literature, it became apparent to the researcher that past studies related to stress management education and assessment have aligned with all types of research approaches. Many research studies focused on stress management education were qualitative in nature, as they used participant responses through interviews, surveys, or questionnaires to gather data and draw conclusions about the impact that stress management education and behavior assessment had on the success of the student in the classroom environment. Other studies implemented quantitative research methodologies aimed at scientific explanations of the benefits of stress management education in school-aged children. Still others used a mixed methods methodology to integrate both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Past research has identified both strengths and weaknesses in using all types of methodology when studying stress management.

Based on the review of the literature, qualitative research presented itself as the most beneficial approach for the purpose of this study, as the use of interviews and surveys allowed the researcher to obtain data from participants in ways that were representative of the personally

held perceptions of each individual study participant. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), qualitative research is the methodology most aligned with human subject research. Since the purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors, a qualitative research methodology emerged as being most useful.

Stressors experienced by individuals change over time; a trigger that elicits a response in an individual on one day may not elicit the same response on another. Conversely, a trigger that has in the past encouraged a negative response from an individual is not indicative of that same trigger bringing about the same response at a later time. Because this is the case, stress management is most appropriately addressed through qualitative research that focuses on an appreciation of social climate and proper response. Smollan (2015) concluded that the stressors that individuals encountered most frequently were fluid; what triggered an anxious response on any given day was not indicative of what would trigger a stressful response in the same individual at a later time. This concept of fluidity applied not only to the stressors of adults, but of children as well, meaning that educators who implemented stress management education and behavior assessment in the classroom needed to remain aware of the possibility of needed deviation on the part of students in their reporting of stressors. Using survey responses, Waters (2015) established the importance of stress management as a method through which both children and families were able to identify their most pressing current stressors and strengthen their coping abilities to response. Similarly, Haskett, Loehman, and Burkhart (2014) found, through the use of qualitative research, that instructing both children and families in specific educational programs to aide in stress management was beneficial. The use of qualitative

research makes human interaction and research accessible to the researcher in an authentic, meaningful manner, making it appropriate for this research study.

Qualitative research has also been conducted in past research studies that focused on specific groups of children and their responses to stressors. For example, Spencer, Walsh, Liang, Mousseau, and Lund (2016) posited that adolescent girls perceived stress as an issue that was more prevalent among their peers who lived in lower socio-economic status conditions. The goal of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors, meaning that a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to focus on the perceptions presented by a specific group of study participants in order to draw conclusions related to how stress management education was incorporated and assessed in one specific early childhood learning environment.

Bandura's social cognitive theory has been used as a conceptual framework in many past research studies that focused on the health and wellbeing of individuals (Bandura, 1998). Social cognitive theory has also been used by past research studies that explored the rising number of children who required medical services in response to their stressors and mental health in order to determine how those children learned efficacy and self-care skills (Janicke & Finney, 2006). The self-efficacy of children, as affirmed by the use of social cognitive theory in previous studies, has been found to influence future successes for children; perception of achievement is often more intrinsically motivating to young learners than documented academic successes (Bandura, Barnaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2003). The conceptual framework of social cognitive theory has been used in past research studies into stress management studies in young

children and was identified as being most appropriate in this research as the research questions and purpose statement for this study reflected the needs of past studies that used this theory as the conceptual framework.

Synthesis of Research Findings

Children, much like adults, experience a number of stressors on a daily basis. According to past research, these stressors may have an impact on both personal and academic performance and relationships (Johnson, 1982; Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017). Mental health has been found to be deteriorating in students who are now of school age (Hartley & Henderson, 2018) at a much higher rate than in students who were of school age in previous generations. As a result of this decline in mental health and psychological stability, stress management education has become a much more prevalent medium through which students are most often educated in identifying stressors, coping with the stressors they cannot control, and overcoming those stressors that they have the cognitive capacity to persevere against (van der Riet, Rossiter, Kirby, Dluzewska, & Harmon, 2015). Education in stress management has become increasingly prevalent in the classroom setting at all academic levels with assessment of skills learned regularly reported as a priority of teachers.

Proper education in identification of stressors and stress management techniques benefits students, both in the short-term and long-term range. When stress was appropriately addressed and assessed in the classroom, student performance in both psychological and academic capacity increased, and unnecessary losses of knowledge did not take place as frequently as found to have taken place among students who were not supported in stress management at school (Shankar & Park, 2016). Further, a lack of stress management education not only had a negative influence on student academic performance, but personal achievement as well, as individuals who had

unaddressed stressors in their formative years were more likely to be diagnosed with mental health challenges later in life (Garmezy et al., 1984). The benefits of stress management education are well documented and support the belief in the importance of implementation in classrooms for school-aged students across varying grade levels.

Social emotional learning, specifically, is an area of stress management education that, while implemented effectively in many school environments, must be further researched for increased positive use in the educational setting (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2015). In past research studies, many classroom teachers recognized the importance of the relationship between their students' abilities to demonstrate mastery of social emotional traits and their behavior successes and failures (Poulou, 2016). The implementation of social emotional learning is essential in the classroom for learners who may be facing stressors both in the classroom and outside of the setting.

Education in stress management for students has been well researched at the upper elementary, middle school, high school, and higher education levels. Specific approaches such as including yoga in the classroom environment have been identified as being beneficial for the increased stress management ability of students (Gould, Dariotis, Greenberg, & Mendelson, 2015; Khalsa & Butzer, 2016). Likewise, classrooms in which meditation and mindfulness practices were incorporated have been identified as those that most fully supported the growth of students in their ability to cope with the stressors they faced both in and out of school (Nwokolo, Mokwelu, & Eneasator, 2017).

A student's ability to self-regulate their behavior and exhibit positive actions reflective of an understanding of stress management instruction directly relates to whether or not the student has had authentic opportunities to be engaged in educational curriculum aimed at helping them to

identify, cope with, and overcome their anxieties and stressors. The use of reinforcement techniques for quelling the prevalence of negative response to stressors was shown to have a positive relationship to demonstrated student behaviors (Bowman-Perrott, Burke, Zaini, Zhang, & Vannest, 2015). As a result of implementing stress management instruction, teachers often reported observing increased positive student behaviors and gains in individual behavior of students in their classrooms (Rispoli et al., 2015).

Family support is crucial in determining whether or not students are in need of comprehensive stress management education and behavior assessment. Stress within the family has been identified by past researching as having had a direct impact on a student's ability to positively develop in their pursuit of social emotional learning skills (Masarik & Conger, 2016). While students from stable family backgrounds may not have required engagement in stress management education to ensure positive mental health growth, or may not have required engagement in programs to the same extent as their student counterparts who came to school from disadvantaged family backgrounds, the benefits of participation in stress management education have been identified as abundant for all students (Newland, 2015). Students who were most at-risk of developing mental health issues that would be diagnosed later in life by a mental health professional were those students whose family background represented a lack of financial stability, safety, or knowledge in self-care and proper regulation of stressors. For students who came from homes where low socio-economic status or financial lack were prevalent issues, the school setting may have been the only place where education in stress management was made available since the priorities of the family may have been placed elsewhere. For those students, instruction in identifying, coping with, and overcoming anxieties became most paramount as

knowledge of stressors may not have only benefitted the student, but their families as well if a connection between the home and school environment were to be fostered.

Critique of Previous Research

Past research conducted in the area of stress management and student behavior assessment has demonstrated several areas of commonality. Through the findings of past studies, researchers have concluded that stress management education is a necessary tool for supporting the social development of school-aged children (Maloney, Lawlor, Schonert-Reichl, & Whitehead, 2016). Yet, past research has found that many teachers and school environments as a whole struggle with proper incorporation of stress management education into the school day in ways that were beneficial for students, especially in environments where educational resources or instructional time were perceived as being limited. In school settings where buy-in from all educators was not found, educating the whole child beyond their academic needs was perceived to be difficult (Kielty, Gilligan, & Stanton, 2017). The conclusions of previous literature have demonstrated the need for further exploration in stress management education with consideration to the potential barriers to success that may be present in the school environment.

Existing literature in this area identified specific stress management techniques that were used in classroom settings primarily at the middle school, high school, and higher education levels. The amount of existing research related to stress management assessment at all educational levels was limited. Research related to stress management in the early childhood education classroom and the ways through which student social skills attainment and demonstrated student behaviors were assessed was even more limited, and in need of further exploration. Many of the research studies that had been conducted in relation to the need for and

incorporation of stress management education and behavior assessment at the early childhood level were reviewed and included in consideration of this research study.

Chapter 2 Summary

Based on the review of the literature, stress management education and student behavior assessment has been identified as an area of needed attention and instruction in the classroom setting, particularly for students in the early childhood years. Much of the existing research in the area of stress management focused on how educational implementations are incorporated and assessed in the school and classroom environments of upper elementary, middle school, high school, and higher education levels. There was a lack of research related to how stress management education approaches were implemented and student behaviors were assessed in the early childhood classroom setting. Past research has concluded that appropriate stress management education allowed children the opportunity to responsibly identify their stressors in healthy ways and to minimize the adverse reactions they may demonstrate to stressors both in and out of the classroom. Stress management education, when incorporated into the school environment, allowed students to grow and develop in their psychological capacity and were less likely to later be diagnosed with mental health challenges.

In many school settings, specific approaches to stress management education like yoga or mindfulness and mediation have been implemented with successful results. Authentic learning opportunities such as deep breathing and proper posture allowed for student use in all stressful situations. For educators in these school environments, stress management education has been identified as a necessary part of the school day and a component that contributed to the overall positive education of students beyond an academic capacity, to foster growth in psychological and cognitive development as well.

Yet, in many school settings, stress management education and subsequent student behavior assessment has been cast aside in favor of teaching to the test and tackling academic rigors. For many educators in school settings that are overwhelmingly focused on academic achievement instead of psychological or cognitive support of students, stress management instruction was not accessible, and student behavior that was demonstrated and observed in the classroom setting was not representative of individual mastery of healthy responses to stressors that were present in the lives of children. The lack of research in stress management education and subsequent behavior assessment may contribute to the current minimization of the importance of these needs in the classroom environment. When further research studies are conducted in this area, schools that do not currently implement such approaches may be encouraged to change established policies and procedures to more fully support the needs of each student on a comprehensive level.

Much of the research that existed in the area of stress management education and behavior assessment focused on instruction that took place in the upper elementary, middle school, high school, and higher education settings. The area of exploration into the implementation of stress management and behavior assessment in the early childhood setting was under researched and in need of further exploration. Because there was a lack of research specifically focused on the implementation of stress management education at the early childhood education level, and the ways through which teachers assessed student social skills growth and behavior demonstration in relation to observed student behaviors, the literature review supported the purpose of this study.

Chapter 3 of this research study will provide a comprehensive overview of the methodology that took place in relation to gathering data for this study. The chapter will address

the individual interviews and surveys that served as instruments that were utilized to gather data from study participants and to ensure honest, transparent representation. In presenting the methodology for the study, Chapter 3 will provide a framework for further understanding of the type of data that was gathered for the purpose of the study and how it was collected for the purpose of meaningful data analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Learning stress management in the formative years has beneficial effects in mental development from a social, psychological, and cultural perspective (Wisner, 2017). The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. In particular, this study explored how stress management education related to the individual student mastery of stressors and assessment of self-control. Children learn stress management and coping skills through observation and mimicking of stress management and coping strategies presented to them by authority figures (McCracken, 1986). This research study used data gathered from interviews and surveys to address how teachers instructed and assessed the stress management skills of students in terms of social skills development.

This research explored how teachers incorporated stress management education into the early childhood classroom as part of the educational experience for students. The perceptions held by administrators and teachers in relation to stress management education and behavior assessment in the classroom were used as part of the data collection process. The findings established in this study may inform other educational institutions on ways to teach other populations of early childhood students' positive responses to stressors rooted in mastery of social skills. This study was significant due to the lack of research, especially qualitative research, based on stress management education in early childhood education and the ways

through which teachers instructed stress management techniques and assessed students on demonstrated behaviors.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do early childhood teachers instruct students to identify the stressors in their lives?

RQ2: How do early childhood teachers incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment to support positive student behavior?

RQ3: How do early childhood teachers assess students' ability to identify and cope with stressors they experience in alignment with demonstrated positive behaviors?

Purpose and Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. In many other school settings, classroom teachers already incorporated specific stress management education techniques into the daily routine however there were often no school-wide stress management initiatives in place for early childhood students found in school environments. Additionally, social skills gained by students as a result of participation in stress management education were often not assessed formally in the school environment.

This study used a qualitative approach to methodology. Qualitative studies are used when a researcher wants to focus on a specific research setting (Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011). Sandelowski (2000) noted that the use of a qualitative design allows a researcher to apply methodology to everyday events in order to interpret meaning. In addition, a qualitative design

allows a researcher an opportunity to interpret findings as aligned with gathered data (Sandelowski, 2010). By completing a qualitative study, a researcher is able to present findings in a straightforward manner that is logically applicable to content (Lambert & Lambert, 2012).

Completing a qualitative study allows the researcher to engage with participants in a manner that reflects a natural, familiar setting (Magivly & Thomas, 2009). Flick (2009) discussed the importance of using a descriptive study to gather data related to social aspects of educational programs. Qualitative studies can be tailored to the need of the context for research (Merriam, 2002). Through the use of a qualitative methodology, participants in this study engaged in the study in an authentic manner that provided insight into the stress management education they offered in their individual classrooms, and the ways through which they assessed the social skills gained by students as a result of education and demonstrated through student behaviors.

This study used a case study research strategy. Many theorists have contributed to the understanding of the case study methodology; however, the findings of Yin (2014) in terms of the components established and developed for use in a case study were the primary source used by the researcher in this study. The use of a case study approach allows a researcher to delve into the exploration of the social existence of a given institution (Angelelli & Baer, 2015). Case studies that are qualitative in nature are synonymous to the arts, where the social sciences are housed (Eisner, 2017). A case study research strategy was well suited for this study as analysis of documentation of internally held beliefs on the part of educators was a main point of data collection.

This study utilized individual interviews as well as a qualitative survey to gather data. The survey used closed-ended, multiple choice questions to gather data, but reflected the content

of the open-ended questions used in individual interviews, and provided response options that reflected the answers the researcher anticipated would be given by study participants. The survey also asked teachers to rank, by level of personal priority, the components of stress management education, addressed in both surveys and individual interviews, as they existed in their own classrooms. The process of field-testing, which is discussed in further detail in a later section, affirmed that interview questions and survey items elicited responses that were reflective of one another, and could be used in the process of coding to determine findings of the study.

According to Jansen (2010), qualitative surveys are an appropriate means of data collection in qualitative research. The use of surveys allows the researcher the opportunity to obtain information that may not be captured through other research approaches that are more fluid in nature and may lead to skewed data (Kelley-Quon, 2018). The use of surveys in this research study allowed the researcher to gather data from a larger group of participants than through the use of other qualitative data methods such as individual interviews alone.

Research Population and Sampling Method

Population. The research population for this study consisted of school leaders and in-service teachers who worked in an elementary school that served students in grades pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade in a suburban city of the Midwest United States. A previous research study conducted in the area of education by Kjaer (2017) gathered data through interaction with educational leaders and teachers as study participants with strong results. Teachers were a critical group of participants in this education-based research as they were able to provide firsthand knowledge of the ways through which stress management education was incorporated into the classroom and how behaviors were assessed. As facilitators of the process of education, both academically and personally, the actions of educational leaders

influence the beliefs and collaborative efforts of teachers. Together, this creation of community may have a meaningful impact on the success of students (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015).

All administrators and teachers in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms of the elementary school with three years of professional experience or more were eligible to participate in the study, with attention paid to diversity. All administrator participants engaged in the process of data collection through their participation in individual interviews. Several study participants elected to participate in individual interviews held with the researcher, while other teacher participants completed an online survey for the purpose of data collection.

Site description. The elementary school in which this research study was completed housed classrooms for students in grades preschool, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade. The school had approximately 38 educational classrooms, and a student population of approximately 500 students. All students served by the public school lived in the same geographic region of the Midwest. Families and students who were part of the school community were diverse in culture, socio-economic status, and background. Educational leaders, teachers, and support staff who worked in the elementary school were diverse in age, level of education, level of professional experience, and ethnic background; however, diversity in gender was somewhat limited as only one classroom teacher was a male while the rest were female teachers.

Sampling method. Purposeful sampling was used in this study, as participants were limited to the administrators and teachers who worked in one specific elementary school. According to Hughes, Chitiyo, Itimu-Phiri, and Montgomery (2016), the use of purposeful sampling allows a researcher to ensure that a varied representation of potential participants is included in the study. Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbon (2015) found that the use of

purposeful sampling ensures that study participants are selected because they possess a certain skill set or knowledge base. Aligned with the work of Colwell, Gaines, Pearson, Corson, Wright, and Logan (2016), purposeful sampling was identified as the most relevant sampling method of this research. The use of purposeful sampling and identification of participants who were able to provide knowledgeable insight about stress management education in the early childhood classroom ensured the quality of the data collected.

Administrators and teachers at the school were made aware of the purpose of the study, via communication from the researcher, and also educated on the criteria for study participation. In order to be eligible, potential participants needed to have at least three years of professional experience and currently be employed at the school as an administrator or classroom teacher in a preschool, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or first grade classroom. The researcher informed administrators that if they chose to participate in the study, they would participate in an individual interview. Teachers were informed that if they met eligibility criteria and chose to participate in the study, they would have the option to choose whether they would participate in an individual interview or complete the online survey. Interested administrators and teachers contacted the researcher, and, in the case of classroom teachers, notify the researcher of their preferred method of participation. The researcher, after affirming that each participant met study criteria, scheduled individual interviews with administrators and teachers and provided an online link to survey participants.

Data saturation. Data saturation refers to the point of effort on the part of the researcher when no new information is gathered and no new themes arise in interview responses (Hanson, Balmer, & Giardino 2011; Roy, 2012). In this study, interviews were held with school staff in roles of leadership (administrators), as well as several in-service teachers. All study participants

were required to meet eligibility criteria of a minimum of three years of professional experience and current employment as an administrator or classroom teacher at the elementary school where data collection took place. The aim of the research study in terms of interview participants was narrow. The number of potential participants for interviews was limited by the total number of staff members in roles of administration and classroom teaching in the elementary school where data were collected. Because of the narrow approach of this study, fewer participants needed to be interviewed to reach data saturation than in a study that would have included participants who were administrators and teachers in multiple elementary schools. Further, because participants in this study possessed specific knowledge about the same elementary school setting, data saturation was reached with fewer interviews performed than in a more extensive study. Data became saturated after the researcher conducted eight individual interviews—three interviews with administrators and five interviews with in-service teachers.

In addition to individual interviews, teacher participation in this study also took place through the completion of written online surveys. When using written surveys in qualitative research, the point of data saturation was determined solely by the researcher, when judgment and experience dictated that enough information related to the study has been found (Tran, Porcher, Tran, & Ravaud, 2017). The researcher created an online survey using the Qualtrics platform. All teachers with a minimum of three years of teaching experience in the elementary school that was the site of this study were informed of their eligibility to participate in the study. Approximately 30 teachers employed at the school were eligible for study participation as they met study criteria of having at least three years of professional experience and current employment in the school where data were collected. Five teachers volunteered for individual

interviews, and the remaining 25 were eligible for survey participation. A total of 21 teachers voluntarily participated in completing the online survey.

Instruments

In this study, the researcher served as the primary data collection instrument. Yin (2014) articulated the importance of the role of the researcher as active in the data collection process. Hua, Holmes, Young, and Angouri (2015) concluded that the researcher is the most important primary tool to collect data. Researchers must remain cognizant of their predominant role and gather data in a responsible manner (Berry, 2015). The researcher served as the primary data collection instrument in terms of gathering data in this study. The researcher gathered data through the use of individual interviews with staff members in roles of administration, individual interviews with in-service teachers, and online surveys completed by teachers.

Interviews. Face-to-face interviews with educational leaders and in-service teachers in the elementary school setting were used as a primary data collection instrument. Interviews are the most commonly used data source in qualitative research (Namey, Guest, McKenna, & Chen, 2016). Interviews are a means through which data can be collected for research that is universally recognized (Litosseliti, 2018). According to Oltmann (2016), interviews are an essential part of research in the qualitative field. In this study, interviews were conducted with both administrators and in-service teachers. All interview participants had a minimum of three years of professional experience and were currently employed in the elementary school where data were collected. By interviewing educational leaders and teachers through interviews, the researcher was able to gather data that represented firsthand knowledge of stress management education and behavior assessment, as evidenced in the early childhood classroom setting. The use of individual interviews in this study was appropriate, as all individual interview participants

understood the purpose of the interaction as a method of data collection. According to Tovar (2014), the actions of teachers influenced the persistence and success of students. Teachers played a role in the guidance of students throughout the learning process (Johnson, 2015).

Semistructured interviews were conducted with participants. Semistructured interviews mimic natural interpersonal interaction and provide comprehensive data to the researcher (Alshenqueeti, 2014). According to Struyve, Meredith, and Gielen (2014) interviews that are semistructured elicit responses from participants that are related to personal experience. Semistructured interviews are an appropriate data collection instrument in qualitative research (Hays & Wood, 2011). The researcher used semistructured interviews to understand school administrator and teacher perspectives of the ways through which stress management education was incorporated into the classroom and allowed for authentic interaction.

The semistructured interviews conducted in relation to this study consisted of open-ended questions. Through the use of open-ended questions, a researcher is able to align questions with research inquiries while maintaining an opportunity for the participant to articulate their experiential perceptions in an authentic manner (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The use of a series of open-ended questions in each individual interview encouraged participant engagement as a means of sharing personal experience with the stress management education and behavior assessment of the elementary school environment. Individual interview participants were asked a series of questions related to their professional role as either an administrator or teacher (see Appendix D).

Surveys. According to Roberts and Allen (2015), the use of online surveys as a method of data collection has become more widely used in recent years. Surveys are an appropriate data analysis tool in qualitative research (Gulliver, Jonas, McIntosh, Fanslow, & Waayer, 2018).

Written surveys in qualitative research allow for data collection that is based on already held knowledge (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). The use of surveys in this study allowed the researcher to gather data from a larger group of teachers in order to explore common and effective approaches to stress management education in the early childhood classroom than would have been possible solely through data collection via individual interviews.

While surveys have largely been viewed as a quantitative data collection tool, the use of surveys in qualitative research has been identified as being just as meaningful (de Vaus, 1986). Self-assessment on the part of the teacher when considering the learning environment created for students is a valuable tool in the process of data collection (Hancock & Carter, 2016). In this research study, a group of early childhood teachers with a minimum of three years of professional experience and who were employed in the same elementary school setting completed the Classroom Support Self-Assessment (see Appendix F). The Classroom Support Self-Assessment was created by the researcher as a combination of the features assessed on the Preschool Behavior Support Self-Assessment (Hancock & Carter, 2016) and attributes measured by the Classroom Management: Self-Assessment (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, & Sugai, 2006).

The Classroom Support Self-Assessment was used in this study with appropriate written permissions from original survey authors. The use of the Classroom Support Self-Assessment as a surveying technique for data collection allowed for comprehensive perceptions about stress management behavior education to be shared. The Classroom Support Self-Assessment encouraged teachers to reflect on the management strategies necessary for the reinforcement and assessment of positive behaviors in students while also allowing for identification and minimization of problem behaviors demonstrated in the classroom.

Member checking. Member checking was used in association with the interviews in this study. Each individual interview participant was provided with a transcribed summary of findings based on the interaction after the completion of interview transcription. According to Harvey (2015), the process of member checking ensures the researcher ethically interpreted findings and allowed participants time to reflect upon the research process in order to provide feedback, if necessary, to ensure the accuracy of gathered data. Member checking has also been identified as a process through which the validity of a research study was boosted (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Simpson and Quigley (2016) asserted that allowing participants the opportunity to review interview summaries allowed each individual to feel engaged in the data collection and research process.

In this study, member checking was used to ensure participant engagement and meaning after individual interviews had concluded. Vural (2016) found that the member checking process ensures that the data collected by the researcher accurately represented the meaning of the interview interaction. Rantavuori, Engstrom, and Lipponen (2016) articulated the importance of presenting the member checking process to participants as an opportunity to interpret interview summaries and ensure transparency. If, during the process of member checking, interview participants noticed researcher conclusions in the interview summary with which they did not agree, they were given the opportunity to schedule a follow-up interview for the purpose of clarification prior to the onset of the data analysis. Member checking added confirmation to the findings of data collection process.

Interview protocol. Interview protocol is included as part of the study (see Appendix C). Interview participants were required to supply a completed consent form before the individual interview took place. The researcher made sure participants were aware of the

purpose of the study before each individual interview. Each interview participant selected the time and place where the individual interview took place. Individual interview participants all selected for interviews to take place during the school day, in the school building, in an office or classroom that was not being used for another purpose at the time of the individual interview, and when the participant did not have other job responsibilities to which to attend. Administrator participants were asked a series of nine interview questions while teacher participants were asked a series of ten interview questions (see Appendix D). All individual interviews lasted for a period of time between 45 and 60 minutes.

All individual interview participants chose to schedule their individual interviews during the school day at the school building. Administrator participants chose for their interviews to take place in between regular job responsibilities, while teacher participants chose for their individual interviews to take place during lunch breaks or when their class was attending a special class like art or music. All participants were made aware of the option to stop the interview at any time or withdraw their participation at any point until publication of the study. Following each individual interview, the researcher used the audio recording of the interaction to transcribe the interview. The researcher then created a summary of the interview based on the contents of the transcription. Each individual interview participant received a written summary of the interview after transcription in order to participate in the process of member checking. Participants verified the contents of their written interview summary before the researcher began the process of coding. All audio recordings of interviews were stored on an external hard drive and were destroyed upon completion of interview transcription. The researcher stored interview summaries per IRB guidelines on a password-protected laptop.

Field-testing. The comprehensive data gathering process includes a focus on clear objectives and meaning (Doody & Doody, 2015). Often, the process of field-testing allows a researcher to understand how a specific approach to data collection must be implemented or adapted for positive gains (Holtrop & Holcomb, 2018). Prior to implementation, interview questions and survey items were field-tested by the researcher using educational leaders and teachers who worked in early childhood settings where data collection did not take place. The individual educators who participated in the process of field-testing were not participants in the study, as they did not meet the criteria of employment in the specific school where data collection took place. Individuals who participated in the field-testing of interview questions and survey items were asked to respond to the items in a mock fashion so as to provide feedback for the researcher to evaluate the effectiveness of the tools. As a result of the process of field-testing, the researcher verified the quality of the responses gathered from interview questions and survey items reflected the overall purpose of the study.

Data Collection

When IRB approval was received from Concordia University–Portland, the researcher emailed a research request to a principal of the elementary school where data were gathered (see Appendix E), and obtained consent for the research study to take place. Gaining consent is essential in successfully gathering data (Speer & Stokoe, 2012). The researcher complied with all school policies shared by educational leaders in terms of recruiting individual interview participants and survey participants, as well as in distribution of surveys to study participants.

A principal of the elementary school provided a letter of intent for administrators and teachers of the school to participate in the study via email. Consent on the part of an organization was identified as being essential for satisfactory interaction with participants who

have been identified for participation based on their professional role (Casimir, Lee, & Loon, 2012; Chester & Khunti, 2012). Plankey-Videla (2012) noted the importance of allowing figures of authority to be the first points of contact in a research study. Interacting with a school authority figure ensured that the study was conducted in a manner that was transparent and had the support of the research site.

Face-to-face interviews were scheduled with each administrator and teacher participant on a date and at a time that worked best for the participant, as no participant was asked to deviate from their normal daily routine to participate. Individual interview participants chose the location where the interview took place, in order to ensure the confidentiality and quality of the interview interaction. All participants chose to meet during school hours, either during a period when they had no meetings or other job responsibilities were attended to, or during a lunch or preparation (specials class) break, at the school building. Individual interviews took place in an office or classroom that was not being used for other purposes at the time of the interview.

Before the onset of the interview, each participant was asked to review and sign the IRB approved consent form related to the research study. Each participant was made aware that the interview would be audio recorded, that their participation in the interview would be voluntary, and that they had the option to stop the interview and rescind their participation in the study at any time until publication. The researcher ensured that all participants knew that audio recordings would be stored on an external hard drive in a fireproof safe during the process of transcription and would be destroyed immediately upon completion of transcription, pursuant to IRB guidelines.

Face-to-face interviews were semistructured. Interviews that are semistructured are considered to be an appropriate data collection instrument in qualitative research (Hays & Wood,

2011). Semistructured interviews allow for themes of response to be identified through the perceptions shared by participants (Baek, Jones, Bulger, & Taliaferro, 2018). Mumm, Karm, and Remmik (2015) found the semistructured interviews allow participants to share varied perceptions of a common topic. A semistructured interview approach was used to support connection and sharing of thoughts in this study. Data related to the firsthand perceptions of participants in terms of school expectations of social emotional learning and stress management education and assessment were gathered within the parameters of a natural interaction. Each individual interview lasted for a length of time between 45 and 60 minutes.

The semistructured interviews consisted of open-ended questions. The use of open-ended questions allowed the researcher to align questions with research inquiries while maintaining an opportunity for the participant to articulate their experiential perceptions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The use of open-ended questions is crucial to gather data, as participants who were given the option of responding to either open-ended or closed-ended questions overwhelmingly withheld open-ended responses in previous studies (Zhou, Wang, Zhang, & Guo, 2017). Dervin and Hahl (2017) espoused the importance of using open-ended interview questions to demonstrate clarity, coherence, and consistency. In this study, participants were asked a series of interview questions based on their role as an educational leader or teacher in the elementary school setting. All interview participants were asked the same questions as other interview participants who held the same professional role (see Appendix D). Dailey and Robinson (2016) found that engaging participants of a study in responding to open-ended interview questions that were standardized allows the researcher to ensure that each participant has an opportunity to express honest perceptions.

Individual interviews took place in a face-to-face setting. According to Zhang, Kuchinke, Woud, Velten, and Margraf (2017), the use of face-to-face interviews allows participants to present individual responses to the researcher in a way that can be interpreted as representative of larger populations. Face-to-face interactions also encouraged engagement in which meaningful responses were provided (Gooch & Vavreck, 2016). The use of face-to-face interviews in this study allowed the researcher to engage with participants in a manner that was pursuant to IRB guidelines. In face-to-face interviews, the researcher gathered data related to the purpose of the research study.

In addition to data collection through individual interviews, the researcher also utilized a Qualtrics online survey as a data collection tool. Teachers emailed the researcher directly and stated whether they wanted to participate in an individual interview or the online survey. Teachers in the elementary school setting with a minimum of three years of professional experience and who had not participated in an individual interview were asked to complete a self-assessment survey. Study participants who had elected to complete the online survey were emailed a link from the researcher. Participants were made aware that the survey would be completed anonymously, and would be automatically sent back to the researcher after completion through the Qualtrics online platform. Like individual interview participants, survey participants were required to provide consent via a click consent page at the start of the survey, and were made aware that they had the option to skip any survey question they did not wish to answer. Survey participants were also informed that they could contact the researcher directly at any time until the point of study publication if they wanted to have their responses left out of the collected data and study findings. The Classroom Support Self-Assessment survey is included in this study (see Appendix F).

Identification of Attributes

Both teacher and student effectiveness in the classroom setting is often related to the relationship between them (Goldhaber, 2007). Effective teachers have been identified as those with the ability practice responsible decision-making and who teach students myriad skills (Bietsa, 2015). In this study, the researcher worked to identify the ways through which stress management education was presented and evaluated in the early childhood education classroom.

Teaching behaviors refers to the ways through which educators deliver instructional content to students (Perrott, 2014). Darling-Hammond (2016) found commonality among strategies or behaviors used by effective teachers in classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors.

The primary attribute explored in this study was stress management education in early childhood education classrooms and subsequent behavior assessment. Confident teachers who are prepared to instruct students in both academic and personal skills have been found to be most effective in fostering student achievement (Klassen & Tze, 2014). Classroom teachers who were prepared to teach students content beyond their academic needs were those who were identified as having demonstrated more efficacy and knowledge in practice (McKinnon & Lamberts, 2013). To gather data related to stress management education as presented by teachers in the early childhood classroom, interviews and surveys were conducted with educational leaders and teachers in an elementary school. The process of data collection provided insight into the unique characteristics of stress management education as presented by stakeholders in one specific elementary school.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data triangulation, as pioneered by Denzin (1978), was used in the study. Data triangulation is a method of research validation that aligns itself with using primary and tertiary data sources of information to draw conclusions about the human condition. Data triangulation relates to the use of multiple data sources to be analyzed together to draw conclusions (Wilson, 2014). The researcher used multiple data sources that included interview and survey responses from early childhood leaders and classroom teachers in the process of data triangulation. The use of triangulation to analyze data that had been gathered from multiple sources allowed for an understanding of stress management education as taught and assessed in the early childhood classroom.

Data gathered via administrator and teacher individual interviews as well as online survey responses from teachers were coded and analyzed by the researcher. Individual interviews were audio recorded by the researcher and transcribed by hand following interview completion. Once each individual interview was transcribed, the researcher created a summary of each interview and provided a copy of that summary to each individual interview participant within a period of 3–5 business days following the interview. The participant then had 3–5 business days following receipt of the summary to either schedule a follow-up interview if the summary was inaccurate and changes needed to be made, or to provide their approval for the contents of the summary as being reflective of the message they intended to convey in the interaction. No interview participant requested a follow-up interview. After this process of member checking was completed, the researcher began coding the data gathered from individual interviews, per the hand coding guidelines presented by Merriam (2002).

Continual analysis was used by the researcher in analysis of the gathered data for the purpose of this study. Categories were identified through the use of multiple rounds of coding. The first coding round made use of In Vivo coding, as espoused by Saldaña (2016). The researcher identified specific words and phrases that were presented in a repetitious manner in individual interview responses. The researcher made a list of these emergent codes before comparing and organizing responses based on the theme that seemed most evident.

The researcher also made use of both Emotions coding and Values coding. These types of coding were used in order to connect notes the researcher made during the interview process with the codes of In Vivo coding related to verbal responses provided by participants. The use of Emotions coding allowed the researcher to analyze and code the interview responses provided by participants that were related to emotions they held in relation to stress management education and behavior assessment as used in the early childhood classroom. Values coding allowed the researcher to analyze data based on the assumptions and beliefs presented by interview participants, as aligned to the guidelines of Saldaña (2016).

Patterns coding was used in order to identify major codes in collected data. Patterns coding allowed the researcher to identify themes that were broader in nature than the first round of In Vivo coding. Categories identified in Patterns coding were used along with the first round of coding to identify commonalities or differences. Themes that were identified throughout the coding process were reviewed by the researcher in order for methodological triangulation to take place in relation to the study. The key themes and subthemes that represented the findings of the researcher were identified after completion of the four rounds of coding. These key themes and subthemes revealed the benefits of incorporating stress management education into the school

day, and the ways through which students at the early childhood level may become empowered in managing their stressors at a young age.

Limitations of the Research Design

Because this research study was focused on stress management education as implemented by early childhood educators in one specific school setting, personal bias on the part of the participant was acknowledged by the researcher as having the potential to influence interview and survey responses. To combat potential bias, the researcher ensured that predetermined interview and survey questions were crafted in such a way as to be as objective as possible to allow for transparent responses from participants. Interview questions and survey items were all written in connection to one of the components of Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, so as to remain grounded in the conceptual framework of the study. Objective interview and survey questions allowed for individual participants to interpret items in terms of personal response.

The researcher also made sure to inform interview participants that their participation in the study was completely confidential, any responses provided would be represented appropriately in the written dissertation, and would not be able to be tracked back directly to them by anyone other than the researcher. The researcher shared with interview participants the steps that would be taken to ensure confidentiality, including storing all interview transcriptions and summaries in folders identified by the participant's pseudonym on the researcher's password-protected laptop, as well as the timeline for destruction of study related materials including audio recordings and study related documents.

This study was only conducted with participants who were administrators and teachers at the early childhood level one elementary school setting in a suburban Midwest neighborhood. Therefore, the interview and survey responses of participants may not have been representative

of the perceptions of stress management education held by school leaders and teachers in another school in the same geographic region or a broader geographic setting. Also, because this study focused on social emotional stress management education and behavior assessment processes as implemented by one specific group of educators (early childhood educators), the identified stress management techniques shared on interviews and surveys may not have been representative of those held by teachers of other grade levels in nearby schools. Likewise, only administrators and teachers who engaged with students on a daily basis participated in this study, meaning that results may have been expanded if other populations of stakeholders such as support staff or families participated in data collection.

Reliability and Validity

In order for this research study to be considered valid, it must have been one in which trust could be placed. Trustworthiness, as established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is the process through which the researcher articulates the importance of various criteria. Qualitative research studies are not required to include all criteria (Connelly, 2016). This research study used multiple factors of trustworthiness, including methodological triangulation to analyze gathered data. According to Amankwaa (2016) trustworthiness is necessary in qualitative research as a needed protocol for ensuring the rigor and significance of the study. The data analysis procedure of this study followed a structured, transparent protocol that aligned with the hand coding guidelines of Merriam (2002). This study also followed the coding guidelines espoused by Saldaña (2016) to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the presented findings as being representative of a supported method of data analysis.

Reliability. In qualitative research, reliability is essential as the study must be able to be reproduced and processed. Reliability is an essential component of a qualitative research study

and must be assessed in order for a researcher to determine the strength of their research findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). The strength of reliability in a research study is crucial for ensuring that analysis of data is well established (MacPhail, Khoza, Abler, & Ranganathan, 2015). The researcher ensured reliability in this study through the use of multiple data sources for data collection and the use of repeated rounds of coding to determine categories and themes without bias.

Dependability. Dependability in a qualitative study refers to the determination of whether or not conditions under which the study has been conducted will remain the same (Connelly, 2016). While the researcher could not guarantee that stress management education in classrooms of the elementary school would remain consistent over time, the techniques used by teachers at the time of data collection for this study were explored to determine how students were taught stress management skills. This research study demonstrated dependability in that participants were asked to share, via individual interview or written survey, the ways through which they have incorporated and observed stress management in the classroom environment and how they have assessed student behaviors as a result. Before participants engaged in interviews or written surveys, they were ensured a level of comfort in providing responses. Participants were not asked to deviate from their daily routines for the benefit of study participation; interviews and surveys were completed at the convenience of the participant, as long as they were completed before established deadlines. Participation in interviews and surveys was optional, and participants had the option to stop the interview or exit the survey at any time if they no longer felt comfortable providing responses.

Validity. In order for a qualitative research study to be considered valid, the integrity of the data collection process and the meaning of the identified findings must be supported (Noble

& Smith, 2015). The concept of validity in a research study also refers to ensuring that the tools used for data collection were appropriate and meaningful to the purpose and scope of study (Leung, 2015). Qualitative research studies in which validity can be assured are those that contribute most meaningfully to the body of knowledge about a given topic.

Credibility. Credibility within a research study is essential to ensure data are collected in an objective manner for the purpose of authenticity (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). The researcher in any study must adhere to the principle of credibility as related to presenting findings with assurance (Krizman, 2011). In this study, the researcher worked to present gathered data in a manner that was transparent. The findings identified by the researcher were representative of the findings of multiple rounds of coding after having gathered data from multiple sources including individual interviews with administrators and teachers and survey responses from teachers.

Transferability. Transferability is applicable to a research study when the results of the research can be applied in another study of the same purpose that explores the responses of a different group of participants (Hanson et al., 2011). The process of transferability is essential when the research study was meant for use by future researchers (Burchett, Umoquit, & Dubrow, 2011). Transferability was an essential goal in the study, as the researcher desired for this work to offer findings that may be extended by the work of future research. Instruction in stress management, as it was incorporated in the early childhood classrooms of one elementary school may be transferred or adapted for use in other educational institutions.

Conformability. Marshall and Rossman (2014) concluded that conformability in a study is essential in ensuring that research remains objective in the data analysis process to determine results. Elo et al. (2014) concluded that participant input in the process of data collection ensured the validity of a research study. Collected data via individual interviews and survey

responses was coded in alignment with the theories of Merriam (2002) and Saldaña (2016). The use of multiple rounds of coding to analyze gathered data ensured that the findings of the study conformed to continued objective perspective on the part of the researcher.

Data Saturation

According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), data saturation occurs when the researcher gathers no new themes in participant responses. Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) defined data saturation as the point in which the researcher is not able to solicit responses from participants that yield new themes to be included in the data analysis process. In this study, data from individual interviews was considered saturated when responses from educational leaders and teachers became redundant. According to Dworkin (2012), sufficient input with no new themes from participants indicated that a researcher has gathered all relevant data and would be able to begin the data analysis process. A total of three administrators and five teachers participated in individual interviews before responses became repetitive and participants shared no new information. The researcher considered data to be saturated after these interviews.

Because written surveys were used as a data collection method in addition to individual interviews, the point of data saturation for surveys was not predetermined. Instead, saturation needed to be determined on an individual study basis by the researcher (Tran et al., 2017). Qualtrics surveys were distributed to all teachers in the elementary school that is the site of this study who met enrollment criteria and expressed interest in survey participation. Per previous research studies that stated when data saturation took place when surveys were used, the researcher anticipated that data would be saturated when a minimum of 10 teachers completed

the online survey. A total of 21 teachers volunteered for and completed the survey, so the researcher considered survey data to be saturated after all volunteers finished the online survey.

Ethical Issues

When qualitative research includes work with human subjects, the basic principles of respect for people, for ensuring the actions of the research are meant to benefit others, and for the authority of participants and for findings is essential in order to affirm ethical practice (Hemmings, 2006). The purpose of this study was meant to explore how stress management education was incorporated into the early childhood classroom setting, however, this purpose was pursued with knowledge and respect to basic principles of respect for human subjects and the human condition. In order to align the study this sense of respect, the researcher maintained confidentiality, obtained proper permissions and consents, and followed all prescribed policies and practices required by IRB, all of which were practices identified by Hemmings (2006) as necessary in this type of research.

Respect for human subjects is accepted as a way of ensuring freedom of autonomy, and is often accomplished with the use of informed consent on the part of participants. Participation in qualitative studies that gather data from individuals in professional roles must be voluntary to avoid any concerns pertaining to lack of consent (Robinson, 2014). Consent in this study took place through the completion of the basic consent form from individual interview participants and completion of click consent from survey participants. Individuals maintained their right to participate in the study, were informed of the purpose of the study and associated minimal risks, procedures to ensure confidentiality for interview participants and anonymity for survey participants, and the right of the individual to withdraw their participation and associated responses until the point of study publication.

The risks associated with participation in this study, either through individual interviews or online surveys were no greater than what an individual may face on a typical day such as speaking verbally with someone else or spending time on their computer; however, the researcher recognized that for some participants, considering the topic of mental health and stress management may have been sensitive. The researcher did not ask participants to speak of their own experience or history with stress management or mental health. In addition, the identity of each participant was protected.

School leaders and teachers who were interviewed for the purpose of data collection were identified by a pseudonym aligned with their role (e.g. the first administrator to be interviewed was referred to as “A-1”, the first teacher participant was referred to as “T-1”, etc.). The use of pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality is of paramount importance when research takes place in the social sector (Lahman et al., 2015). Survey participants were assured confidentiality as well. The email address of each survey participant was the only identifying information that the researcher had. The survey did not ask for any identifying personal information, including email address, which meant that the even the researcher did not know which participant had submitted which response.

The researcher stored all audio recordings of individual interviews per IRB guidelines during the process of transcription. Audio recordings were then destroyed upon the completion of interview transcription. Written documentation of interview summaries and Classroom Support Self-Assessment survey responses as well as any other documents accumulated that were related to the completion of the study are being maintained in a confidential manner. The researcher is storing all study related materials on a password-protected laptop for electronic documents as well as in a locked, fireproof safe for hard copy documents. All study related

material will be destroyed after a period of three years from study completion, in alignment with IRB guidelines. Adhering to IRB guidelines for the safekeeping and destruction of study materials ensured that the researcher has completed this study in accord with all established procedures.

Chapter 3 Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. This study identified the ways through which teachers have incorporated stress management education into the daily routine of the classroom as well as how teachers assessed student behaviors. Data were collected in this study through the use of individual interviews and written online surveys. The research design was a qualitative descriptive case study.

With the recognition that each educator's teaching style was different, this research has identified specific common stress management education techniques that existed in the early childhood classrooms of one elementary school setting. The findings of this research may inform other institutions that educate young students about the benefits of incorporating stress management into the classroom routine and allow for incorporation or adaptation of techniques as they are used in other settings.

Chapter 4 will give an in-depth description of the data that was collected, including background information for study participants. The chapter will also identify the data analysis process that the researcher used to determine the findings of the study. The key themes and subthemes established by the research will also be identified and explored.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. In today's society, the state of individuals' mental health is declining at a more rapid rate than ever before; this decline is seen in adults and children alike (Hartley & Henderson, 2018). Mental health issues like anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and related psychological illnesses may begin forming in the brain during the formative childhood years (ADAA, 2018). Because official diagnoses of these mental health challenges cannot take place before the onset of adolescence, there is an increased need for children in the elementary school setting to receive stress management education in the classroom.

The literature review conducted to support this study showed much use of the social cognitive theory, first developed by Bandura (1977), as the framework for research related to education and support for individual needs. Social cognitive theory is centered on the concept of a relationship between the stressors, environmental factors, and behaviors of a given individual in determining how they will react in a given situation that can be represented as either a bidirectional or cyclical relationship. Hartley and Henderson (2018) concluded that student stressors in today's culture are more oppressive than ever before. Their work went on to identify mental health as deteriorating in children at a younger age than was observed in past generations. Environmental factors including an unstable home life due to divorce, low income, or access to resources, as well as school problems including bullying, test anxiety, and learning deficiencies

have negatively influenced the mental state of students (Johnson, 1982). Environmental factors often served as triggers for problem behaviors in the classroom, whether directly related to academic success or not. Social cognitive theory is represented as connecting three factors of a person's conditions including an individual's sources of stress, environmental factors experienced, and demonstrated behaviors. shows a visual representation of the cycle of social cognitive theory, wherein each of the three factors directly influences the other elements of mental state.

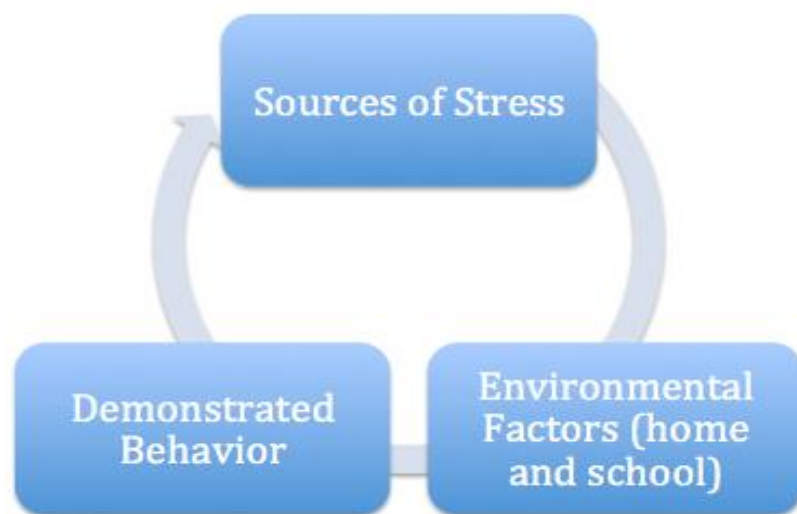


Figure 2. Cycle of social cognitive theory.

Previous literature in the area of social emotional learning and stress management instruction revealed the importance of incorporating instruction on handling stressors into the classroom environment. However, much of the existing research literature in this area and on the topic of stress management education and behavior assessment focused primarily on stress management interventions in the upper elementary, middle, and high school grades. Therefore, this research was implemented to examine the area of stress management education, as it existed in the early childhood setting, to add to the body of research. A series of three research questions were the guide for this study:

RQ1: How do early childhood teachers instruct students to identify the stressors in their lives?

RQ2: How do early childhood teachers incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment to support positive student behavior?

RQ3: How do early childhood teachers assess students' ability to identify and cope with stressors they experience in alignment with demonstrated positive behaviors?

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to understand the ways through which stress management education was incorporated into the classroom, and how student behaviors were assessed as a result of proper implementation. The researcher used individual interviews with administrators and teachers as well as an online survey completed by teachers to gather data related to the purpose of this study.

Description of the Sample

This study took place in one public, early childhood education institution in a suburban neighborhood of the Midwest. The school served students in grades pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade, and had a diverse student population in terms of both ethnicity and socio-economic status. There were three administrators and 38 teachers who were employed at the school at the time of data collection for this study. Of those educators, all three administrators and 30 classroom teachers met the study enrollment criteria of having a minimum of three years of professional experience and current employment at the school. All three administrators and 30 eligible classroom teachers were made aware of their eligibility to participate in the study. The three school administrators and five teachers volunteered for study participation via individual interviews. Of the remaining 25 classroom teachers (not counting those who participated in individual interviews), 21 expressed interest in study participation via

the online survey and provided their responses for the data collection process. Given this information, the researcher could report that 100% of eligible administrator participants engaged in individual interviews, 16% of eligible teacher participants participated in individual interviews, and 84% of the remaining eligible teachers (after deduction of teachers who participated in individual interviews) completed the online survey.

Prior to data collection, the researcher received permission to conduct research, and provided all administrators and teachers with applicable consent forms, and an approval letter from CU-IRB. All administrators and classroom teachers with three years of professional experience or more were asked to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in participating in the study. Administrator participants engaged in individual interviews with the researcher, while classroom teachers had the option to engage in individual interviews or to complete an online survey. A total of three administrators and five classroom teachers participated in individual interviews. A total of 21 teachers participated in the study via the online survey.

Administrators were interviewed to obtain data related to the perceptions held by school leaders in terms of their expectations and observations for the implementation, instruction, and assessment of social emotional learning and stress management education. Teacher participants were interviewed and surveyed to gather data related to both implementation of social emotional learning and stress management education and assessment.

Research Methodology and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers

assessed positive and problem student behaviors. The literature review conducted in relation to this study found that descriptive case studies were frequently used when exploring the perceptions that individuals who are part of a group (like administrators and teachers) held in terms of implementation of instruction for a specific means. The work of Angelelli and Baer (2015) concluded that using a case study allowed a researcher to better understand the actions and attitude of subjects via the use of social interaction. Therefore, the descriptive case study design was selected to ensure the integrity of representation of the social significance of stress management education and behavior assessment. Interviews and surveys were commonly used in qualitative descriptive case studies, and were components of data collection and analysis used in this study.

Field-testing of the interview questions and survey items used in this study took place prior to data collection. Doody and Doody (2015) found that it was only when there were clear objectives and meaning in a study that meaningful data were collected. The researcher enlisted the assistance of school administrators and teachers who did not work in the elementary school setting where the study took place, but who met criteria of having a minimum of three years of professional experience, to respond to interview questions and survey prompts in a mock fashion. This process of field-testing ensured that interview questions and survey prompts elicited responses from educators that were aligned to stress management education and behavior assessment as well as the components of social cognitive theory. The results of field-testing revealed that the interview questions and survey items were all presented in a way that elicited participant responses aligned with the purpose of the study.

Purposeful sampling was used in the data collection process to gather specific perceptions from administrators and teachers in relation to stress management education and behavior

assessment. Sampling that was purposeful in nature was used to ensure that data collected represented a varied group of study participants, per the guidelines established by Hughes et al. (2016). In this study, the researcher wanted to recruit participants who were administrators or teachers with a minimum of three years of professional experience and who worked in the elementary school setting of one specific elementary school. Because the researcher selected participants with similar knowledge and skill sets, purposeful sampling was the best approach, as espoused by the work of Gentles et al. (2016). Individual interviews and surveys took place only with participants who met study criteria.

Data collection, in the form of individual interviews, took place in a step-by-step, prescribed manner. Individual interviews were conducted with a total of eight participants. Of the eight participants, three participants were administrators and five participants were teachers in the same elementary school setting. Each individual interview lasted for a length of time between 45 and 60 minutes. In addition to individual interviews with administrators and teachers, data were collected with the use of an online survey called the Classroom Support Self-Assessment. This survey was created by the researcher and was a combination of the features assessed on the Preschool Behavior Support Self-Assessment (Hancock & Carter, 2016) and attributes measured by the Classroom Management: Self-Assessment (Simonsen et al., 2006). The Classroom Support Self-Assessment was created and used with appropriate written permissions from original authors. The Classroom Support Self-Assessment encouraged teachers to reflect on the teaching strategies they used to support stress management education and how they assessed student behaviors in the classroom.

Each individual interview took place at a time and place of the participant's choosing. All administrator and teacher participants chose to have their interviews take place during the

school day, on site at the school building, either in their office or classroom. Before each individual interview, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, the reason they had been selected for study participation, and how data would be collected and used. The researcher also provided an opportunity for participants to ask any questions or voice any concerns before interview questions were asked. Each participant read and signed a consent form affirming their participation prior to the beginning of the interview (see Appendix A).

The researcher began the interview by providing participants with a copy of the interview questions that they would be asked. Because the researcher interviewed both administrators and teachers, two lists of interview questions existed (see Appendix D). Interview participants were given the interview question list that aligned with their professional role. Both lists of interview questions were written in alignment with the conceptual framework of social cognitive theory. The three components of the conceptual framework are (a) sources of stress; (b) environmental factors (both at home and in school); and (c) demonstrated student behaviors. Every interview question, for both administrators and teachers, was directly linked to one of the three components.

The researcher also reaffirmed to participants that the interview would be audio recorded and gained verbal consent for the recording to take place. The researcher used an iPhone to audio record the interview. The researcher also had a laptop with recording capabilities on hand in the event of a malfunction with recording. In all individual interviews, only the iPhone app was needed for recording. During the interview, the researcher took notes on a Word document on her laptop. Each interview participant consented to the researcher's note taking during the interaction.

Upon interview completion, the researcher transcribed each interview. This process began when the researcher listened to the audio recordings of each individual interview several times to become familiar with the content. To transcribe each individual interview, the researcher typed dialogue, exactly as it happened, into a Word document. The researcher then saved each interview transcription with a file name that reflected the pseudonym of the participant.

The researcher created individual folders on a password-protected laptop, labeled with the pseudonym of each participant to hold study-related materials. Each participant's individual folder contained the audio recording of their interview, the written transcription of the individual's interview, and the notes that had been taken during the interview. The researcher used all study-related materials in combination to create a summary of the interview interaction. Each summary contained specific points of emphasis from the interview and noted attributes of success the participant had identified in their response to each interview question.

Each interview participant was made aware that they would receive a copy of the summary of their interview upon the completion of summary creation. The researcher provided a copy of the interview summary to each respective participant. Each participant was asked to review the content of the interview summary to determine the accuracy and proper representation of the meaning of the conversation that was shared. Each interview participant was asked to respond to the researcher after reviewing the summary to either request that a follow-up interview be scheduled if the summary did not represent accurate information, or to provide approval for the summary to be used in the study. None of the participants requested a follow-up interview; all participants verified that the summary of their interview represented their intended

meaning. This process of member checking ensured the validity of the data collected in individual interviews as gathered by the researcher.

Interviews with administrators. The individual interviews held with administrators took place from mid-April 2019 to early May 2019. All administrator interviews took place during the school day in the administrators' offices. All three interviews exceeded 45 minutes in length, but none went over 60 minutes. After receiving signed consent from each administrator prior to the start of the interview, the researcher audio recorded and transcribed the interview interaction.

The three administrators interviewed for the study were part of the same administration team as they all worked together to lead the elementary school community. For the purpose of this study, the administrators were identified as A-1, A-2, and A-3. All administrator participants held roles in an elementary school that served students in the early childhood grades. These administrators worked together to develop and train teachers on expectations for instruction of social emotional learning and stress management education. Each administrator expressed personally held strengths and interests in the areas of social emotional learning and stress management.

Administrator 1 (A-1). This participant was a female administrator who had worked in her professional role for the past five years. Prior to taking on the role of administrator, she was a classroom teacher. This administrator had a total of 12 years of professional experience in the field of education. She appeared calm and responsive in the interview setting, and shared her perceptions about stress management education and behavior assessment as she observed them in the school.

Administrator 2 (A-2). This participant was also a female administrator. She was in her first year of administration at this school. Prior to taking her current position, she was an administrator in another school building for a period of 4 years. She was also a fourth grade classroom teacher, technology coordinator, and curriculum leader. In total, she had 13 years of professional experience. While she shared many benefits that she has observed in terms of stress management education and behavior assessment in the school, she also shared her belief that the school was not yet doing enough to support the mental health needs of their students by identifying the programs and strategies that she hoped to see implemented soon.

Administrator 3 (A-3). This participant was a female administrator who had worked in school administration as a principal for the past 21 years. Prior to becoming a principal, she was a classroom teacher for nine years. Throughout the interview, she complimented her coworkers for the hard work they demonstrated in prioritizing student mental health.

Collectively, these administrators presented themselves as a knowledgeable, accomplished, and dedicated school leadership team. Their role, as administrators, was to work collaboratively with one another, with school staff, and with other school stakeholders such as families to develop policies and procedures aimed at improving the student experience for the benefit of growth in academic, psychological, and emotional capacity. The role of the administration team was also to reinforce created policies and procedures through comprehensive observation of teachers and appropriate assessment of performance.

Interviews with teachers. The individual interviews the researcher held with teachers took place in the same time frame as administrator interviews, mid-April 2019 to early May 2019. All teacher interviews took place during the school day in the teachers' classrooms during a period of time when students were elsewhere. As was the case with administrator interviews,

all five interviews exceeded 45 minutes in length, but none went over 60 minutes. Again, after receiving signed consent from each teacher prior to the start of the interview, the researcher audio recorded and transcribed the interview interaction.

The five teachers who were interviewed were identified as T-1, T-2, T-3, T-4, and T-5. All teachers interviewed for the purpose of this study were current classroom teachers in an early childhood setting of the same elementary school and had a minimum of three years of professional experience in education.

Teacher 1 (T-1). This participant was a female teacher who had been working in education for 17 years. She reported that she enjoyed being part of an environment where educators made one another feel like family, and she appreciated the flexibility that teaching provided her in her work with students and families. She felt there was much variety in her work and reported that her favorite part of the job was seeing how students figured things out and formed their worldview. She showed enthusiasm in this study, and shared many candid thoughts about her role.

Teacher 2 (T-2). This participant was also a female teacher. She had been teaching for the past 31 years, and had spent the past nine years in her current role. Prior to her current teaching position in the early childhood grades, she taught in the upper grade levels, and believed that there was value in taking on a teaching role in any grade level, whether students were very young or older. She reported that she had many years of experience in teaching stress management techniques like belly breathing and talking about feelings, and often served as a mentor to other teachers in the school who were not as familiar with supporting student responses to stressors.

Teacher 3 (T-3). This participant was a female teacher who had been working as an educator for seven years. She entered the professional field of education later in life, and believed she might not have as much knowledge as other teacher participants. She was confident in her answers, however, and provided a broad scope of responses in her interview.

Teacher 4 (T-4). This participant was a female teacher who held her current position for the past five years. Like other teacher participants, she had three years of previous experience as a classroom teacher in the upper grades, and reported that she enjoyed the challenge and excitement that teaching various grade levels had brought. She discussed how she implemented stress management instruction as part of the daily routine in her classroom, and said she felt that students would not be successful if it were not for a teacher's instruction of the whole child.

Teacher 5 (T-5). This participant was also a female teacher who had been teaching for the past three years. She was the most novice teacher among all interview participants. This teacher offered honest and transparent insights into the ways through which she, as a newer teacher, aligned her approach to stress management instruction in many of the same ways as her more veteran peers.

Administrators and teachers who participated in individual interviews represented a broad spectrum of professional experience, both in their role and their level of experience in education. The responses that these individuals provided to interview questions demonstrated a shared understanding of the importance of successful incorporation of stress management education and behavior assessment into the early childhood classroom as well as varied beliefs and approaches to how stress management education and behavior assessment is represented in action on a daily basis. Table 1 shows a visual representation of the individual interview participants in terms of their pseudonym, professional position, and number of years of experience in education.

Table 1

Interview Participant Demographics

Participant (pseudonym)	Professional position	Years of experience in education
A-1	School Principal	> 10 Years
A-2	School Principal	> 10 Years
A-3	School Principal	> 30 Years
T-1	Classroom Teacher	< 20 Years
T-2	Classroom Teacher	> 30 Years
T-3	Classroom Teacher	< 10 Years
T-4	Classroom Teacher	< 10 Years
T-5	Classroom Teacher	< 5 Years

Surveys. In-service teachers who had a minimum of three years of professional experience in education, and who taught in an early childhood classroom of the research site elementary school at the time of data collection were eligible to participate in surveys if they had not already completed an individual interview. A total of 25 teachers (after deduction of teachers who participated in individual interviews) were eligible for survey participation. Of those 25 teachers, 21 completed the online survey.

The researcher sent a link to the Qualtrics survey to each interested and eligible participant via email. When each participant opened the survey, the first screen they saw was a click consent screen. All survey participants agreed to the click consent terms of participation before they continued with the survey. A total of 21 teachers completed the survey. The researcher knew which teachers participated in the survey because each individual participant was sent an individual link to the survey via Qualtrics. However, the survey did not ask participants to provide any identifying information as part of the survey, so the researcher was not able to track specific responses back to individual participants once the survey was completed, ensuring confidentiality in data collection.

The survey consisted of a series of multiple-choice questions. The researcher created the survey, called the Classroom Support Self-Assessment, as a combination of two existing teacher evaluation surveys, the Preschool Behavior Support Self-Assessment created by Hancock and Carter (2016), and the Classroom Management: Self-Assessment created by Simonsen et al. (2016). The researcher obtained proper written permissions from both sets of creators prior to field-testing and use of the survey in data collection. The content of the survey questions mirrored the content of individual interview questions for teachers, related to the traits of social cognitive theory. For each survey item, participants needed to select how the attribute listed applied to their teaching style as “always”, “sometimes”, or “never” implemented in their classroom. The survey ended with a question in which teachers were asked to rank, by level of priority, the various elements of stress management education as listed on the survey. This ranking was based on personal importance to each individual classroom teacher. The characteristics from which teachers were able to pick were a direct reflection of the content of the survey and interview questions asked in individual interviews.

All teacher participants were informed of the option to contact the researcher with questions or concerns prior to survey completion. No teacher participant contacted the researcher before completion of the survey. All teacher participants were also made aware of the deadline for survey completion prior to the distribution of survey links, which allowed teachers the opportunity to schedule time for themselves to complete the survey in an uninterrupted setting.

Analysis. In this study, data were collected using three methods: individual interviews with administrators, individual interviews with in-service teachers, and surveys completed by in-service teachers. The use of three data sources allowed the researcher to analyze information

with the use of methodological triangulation, as first pioneered by Denzin (1976). According to Wilson (2014), gathering data from multiple sources is necessary for accurate data triangulation to take place. The researcher followed the guidelines for hand coding espoused by Merriam (2002) as well as Saldaña's (2016) guidelines for coding. Four rounds of coding took place in order to identify key themes and subthemes revealed in data collection.

The researcher used continual analysis during the data collection phase of the study. Key themes were identified through the use of multiple rounds of coding. The first round of coding made use of In Vivo coding, as espoused by Saldaña (2016). In this round of coding, the researcher identified specific words and phrases that were presented in a repetitious manner by individual interview participants. To identify repeated words and phrases, the researcher used the highlighting feature in Word as a way to create a visual representation of codes. The researcher highlighted common words and phrases found among interviews from individuals of the same professional role (e.g. administrator interviews were compared to other administrator interviews, and the content of teacher interviews was compared to other teacher interviews).

After the initial round of coding, the researcher identified a total of 36 categories across individual interviews. There were several overlapping codes in both administrator and teacher interviews. Of the identified categories, nine overlapped and were present in both administrator and teacher interviews. These overlapping categories included; (a) basic skills instruction; (b) school rules; (c) safety in sharing; (d) family involvement; (e) behavior reinforcement; (f) empathy and compassion; (g) behavior referral process; (h) encouragement to share feelings; and (i) professional development. These categories were all traced back to a connection with at least one of the components of social cognitive theory.

In the second and third rounds of coding, the researcher created categories based on the frequently identified words and phrases from interviews related to emotions and values. During these round of coding, the researcher identified seven themes related to emotions and seven themes related to values. Again, as was the case in the first round of coding, the researcher was able to see connections between the emotions and values identified in individual interviews and the components of social cognitive theory. Individual interview participants noted the value of caring for students in helping them to identify their sources of stress, as well as the value that teachers presented in teaching students as they formed feelings of self-worth.

Additionally, interview participants discussed how students were encouraged to acknowledge the impact that both their home and school life had on their performance. Participants also identified how they instilled feelings of optimism and a positive disposition in students to understand how their environment influenced their mental state. Interview participants discussed how students' behaviors are reinforced through the use of positive, happy responses to proper behavior, and how teachers and administrators verbalized their satisfaction when students demonstrated positive behaviors. As a result of their satisfaction, participants reported that they had observed gains in students' confidence levels. Table 2 shows a visual representation of the connection between the components of social cognitive theory and the emotions codes that were identified by the researcher in relation to individual interview responses.

Table 2

Connection Between Social Cognitive Theory and Emotions Codes

Component of social cognitive theory	Related emotions codes
Sources of Stress	Care, Worth
Environmental Factors	Acknowledgement, Optimism
Demonstrated Behaviors	Happiness, Satisfaction, Confidence

Survey results were also included in the process of continual coding and data analysis. A total of 21 teachers completed the Classroom Support Self-Assessment survey via the Qualtrics online platform. The researcher used the data reported in Qualtrics to export into an Excel document. The Excel document was imported into MAXqda software, and the software was used to code data. Because the survey utilized multiple-choice questions and was closed-ended, each possible response was assigned a code. The researcher was able to use these assigned codes to identify the rate of response for each possible answer on each survey question.

The survey also provided a place for teachers to rank their priorities in terms of stress management education in the early childhood classroom. Like the other items on the survey, the choices from which teachers selected aligned to the interview questions asked in individual interviews as well as the components of social cognitive theory. The most commonly provided answers were identified as the categories in teacher surveys and included in the process of continual coding along with interview responses.

Continual coding led the researcher to identify the final five key themes and eight subthemes identified in the data analysis process. For the purpose of exploring how students were taught to identify their stressors, how they were instructed in stress management, and how student efficacy in managing stressors was assessed, the researcher completed the coding process. The five key themes and eight subthemes were identified as the most relevant to the perceptions held by study participants. The key themes and subthemes represented how

educators who worked in the early childhood setting of the school site for data collection taught students to identify their stressors, how they presented life skills instruction related to the identification, coping, and overcoming of stressors, and how they assessed demonstrated student behaviors. These key themes and subthemes were directly related to the components of social cognitive theory and the research questions for this study. The researcher determined that these key themes were most relevant to teachers of early childhood students. Table 3 shows a visual representation of the five key themes and eight subthemes identified by this study.

Table 3

Five Themes and Eight Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritization of mental health and wellbeing in students • Adhering to school rules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication about stressors • Appropriate referrals • Establishing policies and procedures to support student growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating caring relationships with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family support • Teaching skills to meet basic needs • Developmentally appropriate instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement in meaningful stress management education • Reinforcing positive behaviors when demonstrated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior incentives • Verbal praise

Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study revealed that all participants shared a positive view of the value of incorporating stress management instruction into the early childhood classroom. School administrators expected that teachers were incorporating elements of stress management in the ways they taught students to identify, cope with, and overcome stressors, and teachers were implemented these approaches with success. Of the importance of teacher dedication to stress management instruction, T-1 stated:

It is so important that we are teaching our students about stress and how to manage it at an early age. When we teach our students the difference between feeling stressed and feeling calm, they become so interested in finding out what they can do to feel happy all the time. Teaching students about respecting and overcoming their stressors puts them in control of how they feel, and helps them to grow developmentally at the same time.

All of the administrator and teacher participants in this study believed that successful implementation of stress management education meant that students who came from disadvantaged backgrounds were offered the tools they needed to become just as mentally healthy as their counterparts who came from home environments where stress was minimized and self-care was a priority.

While administrators and teachers in the school environment where this study was completed reported an overall confidence in their approach to stress management education and behavior assessment on both a school and classroom level, many participants expressed their concern that their building may have been somewhat of an anomaly in the prevalence of stress management education in the classroom. As she reflected on the benefit of teaching in this particular school building rather than another, T-5 spoke of her concerns when she stated:

I know that in a lot of schools, stress management isn't seen as a priority. I know that there is always room for improvement in what we do with our students, and our school is no different, but I can't help but think that we're privileged when it comes to what we know about stress and how it influences our students' performance. I hope that more schools start to incorporate teaching in stress management because it helps teachers to know our students better and think about what is causing their gaps in behavior and academic achievement.

Presentation of Data and Results

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. The guiding research questions for this study were:

RQ1: How do early childhood teachers instruct students to identify the stressors in their lives?

RQ2: How do early childhood teachers incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment to support positive student behaviors?

RQ3: How do early childhood teachers assess students' ability to identify and cope with stressors they experience in alignment with demonstrated positive behaviors?

To answer each of these three research questions, data collection took place through the use of individual interviews with school administrators, individual interviews with early childhood classroom teachers, and surveys completed by early childhood classroom teachers. All data were collected from participants in the same elementary school in a suburban neighborhood of the Midwest. The school served a student population that was diverse in both ethnicity and socioeconomic status. As a result of student demographics, the school had placed emphasis on appropriate incorporation of stress management into the everyday classroom environment.

Data were coded and analyzed to identify results. In response to the research questions, five key themes and eight subthemes were identified. These five key themes are: (a) prioritization of mental health and wellbeing in students; (b) adhering to school rules; (c)

creating caring relationships with students; (d) engagement in meaningful stress management education; and (e) reinforcing positive behaviors when demonstrated.

Prioritization of mental health and wellbeing in students. Participants stated that the mental health and wellbeing of students was a priority in the school setting. Many participants discussed the commitment that staff members had made to create a happy, healthy learning environment for students to feel safe and supported. A-3 shared her thoughts on the importance of mental health as a priority in the school when she stated:

The happier our teachers and staff are when they come to school in the morning, the happier they are going to make the learning environment for our students. When students feel welcomed in their learning space, and engage with teachers and principals who are clearly in a positive mental space, they feel like they're at home, and they're more likely to want to pursue happiness for themselves. When students have no fear of exploring who they are, and what their feelings mean to them, they are more likely to allow themselves to grow. Our students have a good relationship with their teachers and their administrators, and they want to be just like us. So, when we model handling our stressors in a positive way, it shows, and our students start to open up to us and speak candidly about the things that are troubling them and asking us for help.

Communication about stressors. Participants shared that the creation and maintenance of a safe space in the classroom environment where students were encouraged to openly and honestly speak about the stressors and anxieties of their lives was a priority. For some students, the classroom may have been the only place where they were free to express themselves and made to feel connected to an adult who could provide assistance in overcoming feelings of

overwhelm in their lives. A-1 discussed the significance of the maintenance of such a space for students when she stated:

Students who are engaged by their teachers and administrators are going to be much more comfortable to express themselves. Naturally, this means that students want to tell you all about something funny their baby sister did last night, or the what happened in a movie they just saw, but it also goes beyond that. It means that sometimes, students will tell us about how tired they are because they didn't sleep well last night. They share a bedroom with all of their siblings, and their oldest brother came home really late at night and woke them up. Some students come from homes where domestic violence has been an issue, and they don't understand why both parents don't live at home anymore. It's our job to encourage them to open up, address what we can address, and get them help when the problem goes beyond us.

Many participants noted that when students were offered a safe space to share their feelings and learned to ask for help at a young age, they were more equipped to handle mental health issues. Participants discussed how students were encouraged to talk about stressors in classrooms that were free of judgment. Administrators and teachers mentioned that they knew that encouraging students to talk about stressors was not a foolproof approach to mental health obstacles, but felt that allowing a platform for communication was a good start toward diminishing anxieties felt by students.

Appropriate referrals. Participants in this study believed in the importance of teacher and administrator support of stress management through providing aide to students who needed support in identifying and managing their stressors. Many participants noted that sometimes the issues students faced in relation to their mental health extended beyond the services that the

school was able to provide. A-3 discussed the importance of knowing where to draw the proverbial lines in terms of working with students. She noted that sometimes, the benefit for the student was for administrators and teachers to contact the student's family to find help for them.

T-2 shared a similar belief when she stated:

Some students come from home environments that are contributing to their anxieties. We try to work with those families to help them with needs of the child like establishing a firm routine, or making sure the child gets enough sleep before coming to school.

Several other participants stated that sometimes referrals needed to be made for students to outside resources like therapy or counseling when issues extended beyond the scope of what school officials could provide.

Adhering to school rules. The rules that existed in the school environment were created with the student in mind, as reported by study participants. When students were made aware of school rules, they were encouraged to remember them at all times in order to make sure that a learning environment that was comfortable was created. According to participants, being taught to follow school rules gave students the encouragement they needed to share their stressors in appropriate ways. Because the school's rules were viewed as a cornerstone of behavior management, the connection they served in relation to stress management was prevalent among participant responses. A-1 stated:

The school rules have become something of a mantra for our students. We make sure, from the first day of school, that they are aware of what positive and problem behaviors look like. There are also posters hanging in the hallway, and assemblies that happen over the course of the school year to reinforce the rules. As a result, students know when they see a classmate who is breaking the rules, and can identify the behavior quickly. It is not

uncommon to hear a student approach another and say, “I don’t think you’re being respectful. Is something wrong?” And it encourages a dialogue that teachers and administrators can then jump into and take control of. Students are learning to help one another.

A similar response was given by T-1, who noted, “the school rules dictate how students interact with their peers, their teachers, and their administrators. Making sure that students know what is expected of them gives them a baseline for those interactions to happen.”

Establishing policies and procedures to support student growth. In the school setting where data collection took place, school rules had been created to outline reasonable expectations for students to follow, according to participants. These school rules also established guidelines that supported student growth in the classroom. When speaking of the importance of policy and procedure in relation to school rules, and how they were implemented in the school, A-3 stated:

I expect that our teachers are rewarding positive behaviors and focusing on the positive aspects of classroom life. I also expect that each teacher takes responsibility for behavior management of their students, and monitor the data they collect related to what students are doing.

The response of A-2 to the same question also pointed to expectations for teachers in student support in the statement, “teachers should be identifying individual students who may be in need of a stress intervention, and targeting their efforts there, instead of enforcing a blanket consequence for their whole class if one student is having trouble with self-control.”

Creating caring relationships with students. Participants in the study, both administrators, and teachers who engaged in individual interviews and online surveys, identified

the importance of creating relationships with students as being necessary when stress management instruction and behavior assessment was properly implemented in the school. When she spoke about how positive relationships are built and maintained in the early childhood classroom, T-3 stated:

It's important, as teachers, for us to learn all that we can about our students—get to know them on a personal level so that we can connect beyond just seeing them as another face in our room. And that matters. We find out about their families, their likes and dislikes, talk to them about their feelings. And in doing that, we learn about who they are as children. We also learn a lot about what they need, what causes them stress, and the things that they need help with.

Other participants shared similar responses. T-4 stated, “If we don't connect with our students, they can't thrive.” Past literature pointed to the student-teacher connection as being essential in attempting to support the mental health development of young children, and the data collected in this study affirmed the assertion.

Family support. The school staff involved families in knowledge of the instruction that took place within the learning environment, and made efforts to extend the support students feel into their home environment as well. Because the students in this school setting were so young, communication with families was identified as being necessary for administrators and teachers to make sure families understood the purpose of schooling, and how they could help their child to thrive at home. In relation to the idea of familial involvement, T-4 stated:

A lot of the families in our school are financially deficient, but that doesn't mean that they are short on love for their children. They want to help their children to grow, but often, they can't do that simply because they don't know how. In communicating with

families, we can keep them updated on the skills we're working on in class, and encourage them to support that education at home, either through the use of recommended resources, or just by being present in their child's life.

In response to the same question, T-1 noted, "some students come from a home situation where they don't have the family support that others do, but that doesn't mean that we can't teach those students and their families how to work on remediating that problem."

Teaching skills to meet basic needs. According to study participants, students who came to school from home environments that lacked familial support were often deficient in their ability to meet basic needs for themselves. In some instances, a student's inability to meet their needs was solely a result of their young age. However, in other instances, particularly in relation to stress management, students held the capability to learn self-control, according to participants. Administrators and teachers in this school perceived it to be important that students became empowered with knowledge of how to take care of their most basic needs. When speaking of the importance of teaching students how to meet the basic needs they were able to developmentally control, T-1 shared:

We know that having their basic needs met fosters a child's brain-readiness. Some of our students are in a situation where they struggle to have those needs met, and as a result, they aren't able to learn properly unless we take the time to teach them how to meet those basic needs. We need to get creative in integrating those skills into our curriculum so that we don't deviate from expectations, but there's no point in teaching them about an academic subject if there is so much anxiety and worry going on in their head that they can't attend to what is being taught.

Engagement in meaningful stress management education. According to participants in this study, students were more likely to attend and performed better in the classroom when they were engaged in meaningful instruction. While past research concluded that engaging students in academic subject area instruction was essential, the area of engagement in stress management education was under researched. When she spoke about the importance of ensuring that students attended in lessons that incorporated aspects of stress management, T-1 stated:

Making the time that we spend teaching students how to manage their stressors meaningful is so important. These children are dealing with more stressors, and in different ways, than students of the past, that I think it has become part of our job description to teach them ways to deal. Making management techniques like belly breathing or finding an adult accessible and meaningful is required if we want to make sure that students remember what they were taught. When students are stressed, we can't expect them to do much else, so teaching them how to manage is so important.

The response of T-5 to the same question provided a similar response when she stated:

When students are stressed out about things that they prioritize over academics, they're not going to learn anything. We need to engage them first in learning how to deal with their stress, and show them how feeling less stressed is related to performing well in school.

Developmentally appropriate instruction. Participants recognized that not every student in the school environment was in the same place developmentally. Teachers reported that they prioritized meeting students where they were, and provided instruction in stress management that aligned with each student's developmental needs, which helped them to grow. T-2 spoke of the importance of individual student support in the following response:

We operate on the assumption that we need to meet [students] where they are developmentally in terms of how they understand mental health as a part of their life. Because our students are so young, often, that looks like talking about feelings—their specific feelings at the moment, and teaching them that those feelings mean something. If they aren't feeling good, there are things they can do to make themselves feel better. At this age, many of our students lack coping skills, so it is up to us to meet them where they are and teach them how to respond to stressors in healthy ways.

Reinforcing positive behaviors when demonstrated. The biggest behavioral focus in the school environment, for both administrators and teachers, was to catch students being good, and to reinforce student behaviors that were demonstrated in positive and healthy ways. Participants reported that in practicing a positive response to behavior intervention, they found a decrease in the number of problem behaviors demonstrated by students. This may have been attributed to the fact that students wanted to be like their peers who were receiving praise for their problem solving ability and behavior performance. Many participants reiterated that because the students in the school environment were young, reinforcement of positive behaviors, especially in relation to demonstrating a positive response to stressors, was essential. When asked to discuss the value of behavior reinforcement in the classroom, T-4 stated:

Our students are just starting out in their school careers, so they're adjusting to so many things during their time with us. I think, as teachers, part of our job is to support them in all things—from adjusting to spending time away from home to adjusting to having new school rules and expectations on them. Every time we can catch them being good, it's a victory. When we reinforce the positive behaviors, the students are more likely to want to demonstrate them more, and little by little, those good behaviors stack up. They

become comfortable in the classroom—sharing with their teachers and their peers, and working together to make the classroom a happy place.

Behavior incentives. Many participants shared responses that addressed the support plan that was in place at the school in an effort to make sure that students felt encouraged in their ability to self-regulate. The school also used a system of consequences to be implemented when students did not adhere to expectations. The rewards system that existed within the school was based on gathering tickets for demonstrations of honest communication of feelings or positive demonstrations of action. Conversely, the school implemented a behavior referral system that existed to ensure that when students did make a mistake and forgot basic stress management skills, there was a safety net to catch them, made up of teachers and administrators who knew how to respond in a way that was best for the student. The idea of incentivized behaviors was summed up by A-2 who stated:

It's not always about tangible prizes, or being sent to the principal's office for our students. We try to foster a community where we're encouraging them to recognize when they've responded to their stressors or triggers in a healthy or unhealthy way. It's in the small things, too. There is a lot of verbal praise that happens between teachers and students to let children know they're on the right track behaviorally and developmentally. Teachers often make statements like, "I really like seeing you do [insert behavior]" to acknowledge when they see something positive happening. The students light up even when they receive these small compliments, because it validates that they're growing and learning, and it gives other students motivation to do the same.

Other participants' responses echoed the same beliefs, and many stated that the frequency of positive reinforcement of stress management education outweighed the instances of negative responses in a typical school day.

Verbal praise. Many participants mentioned the importance of verbal praise as a tool of reinforcement that they used with the students in the school. Several participants made note of the fact that students often told teachers and administrators that they looked up to them, so school staff members believed in the importance of providing verbal praise for students not only as a means through which to model respectful behavior, but also as a way that adults showed appreciation for a student's hard work. When asked to speak about how verbal praise was used in her classroom, T-2 stated:

I think verbal praise is an area of greatness in our classroom. I try to be a positive role model, and give a welcoming learning environment to my students. I model positive reinforcement by giving praise whenever I can with phrases like, "I like that you're sitting quietly—that makes me happy." I think if you prioritize looking for the good moments and celebrating them when they happen, the students in your classroom will start to do the same.

Connection of themes. Both administrator and teacher participants shared insights, beliefs, and perceptions they held related to the incorporation of stress management as an instructional approach in the early childhood classroom. Participants also addressed the ways through which student behavior was assessed as a result of stress management education. Administrators and teachers identified themes related to the pervasive incorporation and assessment of stress management education as it existed in the early childhood setting.

Administrators and teachers both identified how the use of referrals and family support was a means through which school staff could empower students to learn skills that would allow them to meet basic needs, and feel supported in growth and knowledge of stressors. Additionally, participants discussed how instruction in stress management was a meaningful part of the school day and was a strategy that was valued as a regulator for student behaviors. The value of a positive reinforcement response to stressors through the use of praise and celebration was also identified as being meaningful.

Chapter 4 Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. This purpose was explored through the use of data collection from both teachers and administrators. The primary research questions of the study were:

RQ1: How do early childhood teachers instruct students to identify the stressors in their lives?

RQ2: How do early childhood teachers incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment to support positive student behavior?

RQ3: How do early childhood teachers assess students' ability to identify and cope with stressors they experience in alignment with demonstrated positive behaviors?

Administrators and teachers believed that the early childhood setting was an effective environment in which to instruct students to identify the stressors in their lives through the prioritization of mental health and wellbeing in open, honest, transparent conversations and the

cultivation and support of positive, caring relationships. Participants also believed that the most effective ways through which to incorporate stress management in the early childhood classroom was through the use of developmentally appropriate instruction that allowed students to explore their feelings, feel validated in their emotions, and experience positive reinforcement. Study participants perceived the role of assessment in response to stress management to be one that was fluid, with opportunities for reteaching and regulation of student knowledge when students fell short of expectations.

Through individual, semistructured interviews with three administrators and five teachers as well as the completion of surveys by 21 teachers, all of whom met study criteria of having a minimum of three years of professional experience and current employment in the early childhood setting of the research site where data collection took place, a total of five key themes and eight subthemes were identified. These five key themes are: (a) prioritization of mental health and wellbeing in students; (b) adhering to school rules; (c) creating caring relationships with students; (d) engagement in meaningful stress management education; and (e) reinforcing positive behaviors when demonstrated.

This study found that stress management education, as it existed in the early childhood classroom, was much more prominent than past research had found. Teachers, according to participants in this study, were committed to ensuring that students in their classrooms grew, not only academically, but mentally as well. While all participants reported that stress management education as it existed in the early childhood setting was constantly changing and growing, most reported feelings of excitement related to how knowledge of and instruction in the area of stress management may grow in the future. Chapter 5 will follow, and includes an explanation of the results as related to the literature, and the researcher's recommendations for further study.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This qualitative descriptive case study explored administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. The researcher used a qualitative methodology to complete this research, because the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2008) identified qualitative research as the methodology most aligned with human subject research. The researcher chose a case study design for this study. The work of Angelelli and Baer (2015) asserted that case studies are appropriate for use when the researcher wanted to delve into exploration of the social composition of a particular setting. The use of case studies has become synonymous with the arts, where the social sciences are housed (Eisner, 2017). Because the researcher completed this study by gathering data related to perceptions held by administrators and teachers in relation to stress management education and behavior assessment, this study was aligned with the components of the social sciences. The researcher used individual interviews with administrators and teachers as well as an online survey completed by teachers to gather data related to this study.

Mental health disturbances including, but not limited to anxiety, depression, social anxiety disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and related psychological illnesses are all issues that individuals, including children, are susceptible to developing (ADAA, 2018). Yet, official diagnoses of these challenges cannot take place before the onset of adolescence, meaning that many young children struggle with psychological instability in silence. Childhood stress, if not appropriately addressed during the formative years,

may lead to more severe mental health issues in later life (Johnson, 1982; Garmezy et al., 1984; Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017). An increased number of school officials have begun to recognize the importance of educating each child beyond academic means to support their growth in psychological and cognitive functioning, and have made strides to implement stress management education for the purpose of helping students identify, cope with, and overcome their stressors. However, these initiatives most frequently take place at the upper elementary, middle school, and high school level where student success in the incorporation of stress management education can be more formally assessed. Stress management instruction at the early childhood level has not been addressed with as much frequency as other grade levels, and served as the foundation for this study.

The use of semistructured, open-ended interviews allowed the researcher to engage participants in such a way so as to encourage open communication and honest responses to interview questions. The use of an online survey, called the Classroom Support Self-Assessment, delivered through the Qualtrics platform, allowed teachers who may have been intimidated or uncomfortable by the interview process, or who did not have time to commit to an interview, to take an active role in participation and shared the ways through which they implemented stress management education in the classroom. As a result of methodological triangulation of gathered data from three data sources: (a) administrator interviews; (b) teacher interviews; and (c) teacher surveys, five key themes and eight subthemes were identified.

Overall, study participants reported a positive perception of the ways through which stress management education and behavior assessment were incorporated into the early childhood classroom. These feelings of fulfillment in the importance of incorporating stress management instruction into the classroom aligned with previous literature regarding the value

of such measures (Bothe et al., 2014; Burkhart et al., 2017; Butzer et al., 2016; Carsley et al., 2017; Eppelmann et al., 2018; Fallin et al., 2012; Gouda et al., 2016; Lillie, 2018; Moksnes et al., 2014; Morgan, 2017; Ratanasiripong et al., 2015; Sanchez & Comer, 2018; Skinner et al., 2016; Tsang et al., 2013; Viafora et al., 2014; Yeo et al., 2015).

Throughout the study, the researcher incorporated components of the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) that served as the conceptual framework for the study. Social cognitive theory has been applied to research studies in the area of education, focused on the connection between the home and school environments (Mirzaei et al., 2019). The conceptual framework focused on the sources of stress in the life of the individual, how those sources of stress influence the individual's response to their environment, and the ways through which the individual demonstrates behaviors that are aligned with their mental state. This study was important in the realm of social cognitive theory as it provided perceptions from administrators and teachers on the ways through which stress management education and behavior assessment were incorporated in the early childhood classroom to assist students in identifying and overcoming the stressors, improving their perspectives on their environment, and improving their demonstrated behaviors.

In this chapter, a summary of the study and discussion of the results are presented. Additionally, this chapter contains a discussion of the results of this study in relation to the literature, the limitations of the study, and the implications that the results of the study provide. The chapter will close with recommendations for further research in this area, and a conclusion.

Summary of the Results

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional

learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. After data collection and analysis as well as methodological triangulation of data, this study found that participants perceived stress management education and behavior assessment to be a crucial part of the education of students at the early childhood level.

Following a thorough analysis of data collected from individual administrator interviews, individual teacher interviews, and teacher surveys, five key themes and eight subthemes were identified. Using the coding methods prescribed by Merriam (2002) and Saldaña (2016), the researcher read through each participant's interview individual. Words and phrases that appeared frequently through each interview were highlighted. The researcher compared the highlighted phrases from each of the transcripts to one another. For example, in one transcript of an administrator interview, any phrases that were related to "behavior referrals" were highlighted in green. The researcher then looked for phrases in other administrator interviews that were also related to "behavior referrals" and highlighted them in green as well. In total, counting administrator and teacher interviews, the researcher identified 36 codes that were created. The researcher used values and emotions coding to further analyze the data before using patterns coding to identify key themes and subthemes. The researcher narrowed down the data to five themes and eight subthemes. The five themes identified were: (a) prioritization of mental health and wellbeing in students; (b) adhering to school rules; (c) creating caring relationships in students; (d) engagement in meaningful stress management education; and (e) reinforcing positive behaviors when demonstrated. These five key, and their related eight subthemes, served as indicators of the findings of this study as related to stress management education and behavior assessment in the early childhood classroom.

Discussion of the Results

This study was guided by three main research questions:

RQ1: How do early childhood teachers instruct students to identify their stressors in their lives?

RQ2: How do early childhood teachers incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment to support positive student behavior?

RQ3: How do early childhood teachers assess students' ability to identify and cope with stressors they experience in alignment with demonstrated positive behaviors?

To answer each of the three research questions, all interview responses, as well as gathered data from teacher participants in the form of an online survey, were coded and analyzed. The combination of interview and survey data led to the five key themes and eight subthemes identified in association with this study. The findings of the study are as follows:

Finding #1: students at the early childhood level were capable of identifying their stressors. While there were many past works of research that existed in the area of stress management education and behavior assessment, most focused on the upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels. The area of stress management education and behavior assessment was under researched at the early childhood level because the mental capacities of young children were often not viewed as being meaningful to psychological and academic growth. This study demonstrated the value of exploring stress management education and behavior assessment at the early childhood level, because participants in the study implemented meaningful instructional strategies for student achievement.

Results from this study found that while stress management was seen as a valuable asset in the early childhood setting, instructional implementations must be presented to students in a

way that was developmentally appropriate and meaningful. There was a positive impact when students were engaged to talk about their feelings; it was often through simple interaction when students were encouraged to think about the way they felt and determined whether or not their emotion was a positive one that they were able to more fully understand their stressors. When students were allowed to feel validated in their emotional responses to stressors, whether positive or negative, basic life skills were cultivated. When students were allowed to openly explore their feelings, and interacted with others to identify their sources of stress, the use of stress management education was beneficial.

Teachers prioritized instruction in communication skills. Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory required that individuals understood their emotions. Young students were often not able to verbalize their emotions, feelings, or potential responses to stressors. Among individuals who have worked with young children, recognition of the ways through which students have been taught to verbalize and communicate their emotions in healthy ways was needed. When she spoke of students' lack of communication skills in verbalizing their emotional needs, T-1 stated:

So many of our students can't tell us what's wrong, because they're too young to know that not having eaten breakfast in the morning is going to influence their behavior and performance. That's why we incorporate so much stress management instruction—to let them know that they need to verbalize how they're feeling; that we can help them find solutions to their problems if they let us know what's going on.

Regular incorporation of stress management education was beneficial for early childhood students. There were positive benefits in student performance, both socially and academically, as a result of a student's understanding of how their stressors and feelings

influenced their behavior. The personal and academic performance demonstrated by a student was identified as having a direct relationship to any existing or unresolved stressors held by the student (Shankar & Park, 2016), which meant that instruction in stress management education allowed students to identify their stressors and overcome them for the benefit of gains in both psychological and academic performance. The benefits of having incorporated stress management far outweighed the risks of potentially detracting from academic subject matter instruction. The work of Carsley et al. (2017) discussed the importance of stress management education in the classroom, as students who regularly engaged with techniques designed to help them feel better mentally and emotionally were less likely to struggle with self-control and regulation issues. The response presented by T-3 echoed this finding when she stated:

Students who are able to identify what it feels like to feel good perform better in school than those who feel poorly because they are able to self-regulate their behavior much easier. They know how much happier they feel when they're less stressed.

Skinner et al. (2016) concluded that students who engaged in stress management education were better equipped to handle their stressors in responsible ways than their student counterparts who did not participate in stress management education. The value of the incorporation of stress management education in the early childhood setting was presented by the response of T-4 when she stated:

When we teach out students that feeling good emotionally is going to help them do well, not just in school, but also in all of their activities, they find more of an internal motivation to want to let us know when they're not feeling good, and ask for help in overcoming it.

Stress management education fostered positive relationships between teachers and students. Another identified benefit of teachers' dedication to instructing students in how to identify their stressors was through the cultivation of healthy relationships between individuals in the classroom. Students who felt that their teacher provided a safe space for them to speak openly and freely about their anxieties were more likely to turn to those teachers for guidance when they were in need of help. In classrooms where open communication of stressors was allowed, teachers were able to learn more about their students and draw closer to them, which made it easier for their needs to be identified and addressed appropriately.

When she discussed how relationships were fostered in the classroom environment, T-4 stated,

Relationships are everything for us. I teach my students that they can come to me for help with anything. I'm a safe space, and I'll always try to help them however I can.

They also know that if they have a problem that is bigger than my help, I'm going to support them in finding someone that can get them the help they need.

Relationships between school staff and students were essential in order to create a safe environment in which students were safe to explore how their stressors impacted them, and practiced skills to cope with and overcome them.

Finding #2: teachers normalized stress management education for students in the early childhood setting through appropriate instruction. The most meaningful way through which teachers incorporated stress management education into the classroom at the early childhood level was to normalize its presence. Because students at a young age did not have much experience in the school setting, being taught that it was normal to talk about feelings, to use words instead of actions when they communicated with someone else about why they were

feeling anxious, and to feel comfortable when they turned to an authority figure for help instilled feelings of normalcy for the practice. These behaviors quickly became habits in the minds of students when presented by school staff and were normalized as being acceptable in the school environment. A previous research study in this area concluded that students who engaged in stress management and behavior assessment were less likely to report feelings of increased stress or depressive symptoms over time (Tsang et al., 2013). Students who participated in stress management education reported improved satisfaction related to both their academic and personal goals (Moksnes et al., 2014).

In the specific school setting where this study took place, several administrators and teachers discussed how behavior problems were often not large issues that needed to be handled by school staff, but when students did demonstrate a need beyond standard practice in the classroom, the school had an appropriate response procedure in place. Teachers were encouraged to work with school support staff such as social workers and psychologists, and developed an individual behavior plan for students who demonstrated difficulty in dealing with their anxieties. These individual plans held students accountable, as they were printed cards that were placed on a student's desktop. The printed card had three faces printed on it—a happy face, a straight face, and a sad face. Throughout the day, when the classroom teacher passed the desk of a student who had a plan, they provided nonverbal cues for behavior by tapping on the face that correlated with the student's current behavior (happy face for good behavior, straight face for behavior that could be better, sad face for problem behavior). The teacher monitored the number of taps, and which faces were tapped throughout the day, and sent a report home to the student's family when the school day was done. This small accountability measure allowed

teachers to normalize the function of thinking about emotions and behavior at all times of the day, and students received consistent reinforcement of their demonstrated actions.

Teaching life skills was a cornerstone of stress management. A large number of students in the school's population came from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many were victims of broken homes, and had families who were economically deficient. These students needed to be targeted by efforts of stress management education in a specific way, as the school environment was likely the only place in which they were taught how to respond to their stressors in a healthy way. When empowerment was provided to students in the form of providing basic knowledge of stress response, gains in student achievement both psychologically and academically were observed. This finding aligned with the work of Hafner et al. (2014) and other past researchers who concluded that learning healthy responses to stress management at an early age was a way through which student stress levels decrease over time.

School and home support was essential for student growth. While a large number of students in the school's population came from socio-economic disadvantage, many others came from home environments that provided love and support in terms of acknowledgement of and coping with anxieties and stressors faced by students. Several teachers spoke of the ways through which they had involved families in stress management instruction. When she spoke of the role of familial support for students in dealing with stress in healthy ways, T-4 stated:

I like to think of families as my partners in as much capacity as they will allow. The goal in that relationship is to give them tools, like basic conversation starters or activities that families can play at home to help them overcome the things they might be struggling with. I believe that interventions like that help both the student and their family, no matter the weight of the stressors they're dealing with at home.

Teachers modeled healthy habits and responses to stressors. Teachers who modeled positive responses to stressors and demonstrated healthy habits observed that students responded to their presence in beneficial ways. Past literature found that the relationship between teachers and students played a large role in the learner's ability to regulate their responses to stressors (Gastaldi et al., 2014; Lillie, 2018; Wentzel & Miele, 2016; and Zhou & Gou, 2012). There has also been an identified correlation between the ways through which teachers implemented stress management education and the perceived and demonstrated behaviors exhibited by students (Lieny et al., 2018). In this study, it was when the administrators and teachers demonstrated regulated stress management in their instruction that students were able to comprehend what it meant to care for themselves mentally. Many teachers spoke about how they incorporated stress management into the daily routine of the classroom, and encouraged students to identify and cope with their stressors in ways that were developmentally appropriate. When she spoke of the value of the teacher-student relationship aimed at supporting stress management education and behavior assessment, A-2 stated:

We, as a staff, know the value of starting the morning with our students with a smile, and a cheerful greeting. We're the role models for the students while they're here in school, and we know it is our responsibility to address issues, build relationships, and teach mentally restorative practices.

Finding #3: behavior assessment prioritized positivity. Focusing on the positive behaviors of a student rather than dwelling on the things that are negative was more beneficial for student success. When students were caught being good, they were more likely to intrinsically value the praise that was associated with positive behavior, and felt a sense of motivation to continue to demonstrate such behaviors.

Verbal praise was valuable. The benefit of a kind word of recognition for a student's demonstration of positive behavior was highly valued by the administrator and teacher participants in this study. While tangible prizes were awarded to students for demonstrating positive behaviors over the course of the school year, the value of verbal praise on a daily basis seemed to motivate the openness of students in communicating about stressors and regulating problem behavior in higher measure. A-3 noted,

A group of outstanding students are chosen to receive a prize from the office at the beginning of each month, but beyond that, our students are just so happy when their teacher or an administrator recognizes that they're doing their best or doing something good. Words are powerful.

Students responded to positive reinforcement. There was great value in the benefit of behavior management and assessment that focused on positive reinforcement over negative consequences. When school staff responded to positive demonstrations of behavior and identification of stressors, students were observed to be more likely to behave well. The incorporation of stress management education into the school day provided administrators and teachers with the opportunity to praise students for appropriate responses to stressors. When she spoke about the benefits of positive reinforcement related to stress management education, T-2 stated:

We teach our students that it's okay to fail and try again. Perseverance is part of stress management because no one can always respond to their stressors the right way the first time. Our students are taught that you don't need to react perfectly the first time to something that makes you anxious. We use a lot of breathing exercises throughout the day that have been designed for us to provide positive reinforcement for students when

we see them really trying to respond appropriately to stress.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Stress management education and behavior assessment has been found to be valuable for implementation in the classroom setting for all academic levels of learners. Students who were taught how to identify, cope with, and overcome their stressors were often afforded the opportunity to not only grow mentally, emotionally, and academically, but were also supported in making strides related to their mental health that might prevent them from developing more serious psychological issues that would be diagnosed later in life. Previous literature (Bothe et al., 2014; Burkhart et al., 2017; Butzer et al., 2016; Carsley et al., 2017; Eppelmann et al., 2018; Fallin et al., 2012; Gouda et al., 2016; Lillie, 2018; Moksnes et al., 2014; Morgan, 2017; Ratanasiripong et al., 2015; Sanchez & Comer, 2018; Skinner et al., 2016; Tsang et al., 2013; Viafora et al., 2014; Yeo et al., 2015) has addressed the issue of stress management education, and provided the foundation upon which this study expanded. The results that were reached in this study were aligned with much of the literature that had been reviewed in relation to this study

Social cognitive theory. This study used social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) as the conceptual framework. The use of this conceptual framework allowed the researcher to explore how sources of stress in a child's life influenced their relationship with their environments and their demonstrated behaviors. Social cognitive theory is a conceptual framework that allowed for exploration into why stress management is meaningful in the early childhood setting, and how it is implemented and assessed by school staff. The use of social cognitive theory has demonstrated that student behaviors in both the classroom and home environment are directly

related to levels of stress in children and a lack of ability to learn management strategies for their stressors (Yoon, 2002).

Social cognitive theory has three components: (a) sources of stress; (b) environmental factors; and (c) demonstrated behaviors (Bandura, 1977). When individuals faced stressors that were negative in nature, their performance in all their environments suffered, which led to the behaviors that they overtly demonstrated (Bandura, 1977). The bidirectional or cyclical nature of social cognitive theory posited that the three components were interrelated, and continued to feed into one another until an action was taken to break the cycle. In this study, participants presented positive attitudes toward having helped students to identify their stressors and cope with and overcome them in healthy ways, thus having broken the cycle of continued stress. The school in which this study took place had a culture of identifying stressors as a natural part of life and normalized stress identification and management.

Relationships. The first connection between the findings of the research and the content of studies in the literature review was the value of a strong relationship between teachers and students. Students who had a strong relationship with their teachers were more likely to view the authority figure as a role model, and perform, emotionally and academically, in ways that would be pleasing to them (Zhou & Gou, 2012). In classroom environments where stress management was prioritized, including classrooms at the early childhood level, students were more likely to respond to their stressors in healthy and appropriate ways (Wentzel & Miele, 2016). Teachers who successfully implemented stress management education techniques in the classroom were more likely to experience a decrease in negative student behaviors (Lillie, 2018) than their counterparts who did not implement such instruction. The relationship between teachers and

students that was rooted in stress management education was beneficial for both the educator and the learner.

Social emotional learning. Social emotional learning was another connection between the literature review and the findings of this study. The creation and maintenance of a positive learning environment as well as the work of teachers to ensure that students had authentic, meaningful opportunities to obtain knowledge was an essential part of the classroom. The components of social emotional learning included a safe learning environment and relevant learning opportunities (Weissberg et al., 2015). There was value in using social emotional learning as a tool to drive stress management education. The practice of social emotional learning had been viewed as being closely related to stress management education, and had been connected to a student's ability to internalize the awareness of self that they held in relation to their place in the learning environment (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017).

Education in social emotional learning had been identified as being necessary in modern classrooms where mental health and psychological stability was prioritized (Osher et al., 2016). Stress management education ensured student achievement in social responsibility, empathy, and executive functioning (Belfield et al., 2015; Espelage et al., 2016; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). When students participated in stress management education, they benefited in cognitive development and growth. The use of social emotional learning and stress management was also identified as being necessary for student academic improvements (Bakosh et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2017).

Behavior regulation. Behavior regulation was identified as being a connection between the findings of this study and the literature review. Assessment of student abilities in self-regulation of behavior was identified as being essential (Goldberg et al., 2015). Teachers who

assessed students in terms of demonstrated behaviors reported increased adjustment and engagement after having participated in stress management education. Increased engagement was reported as an identified result of stress management education in past research (Bethel et al., 2016; Fallon et al., 2015). In this study, school staff members who worked in an early childhood learning setting recognized their responsibility for supporting assessment of student behavior that was aligned with self-regulation and demonstration of mastery in self-control among students.

Familial support. The final connection between the literature review and the findings of this study was related to the concept of family support. The relationships that students had with their families, whether positive or negative was identified as having contributed to the student's wellbeing (Newland, 2015). Support from families was essential for students to grow and develop. The benefit of familial support has been well documented (Tabak & Mazur, 2016). Familial support that was positive and engaging was reported as being beneficial to students (Garcia et al., 2019; Gleeson et al., 2016)

While many of the families served by the school site in this study represented economic disadvantage, participants still believed the support of the home and school environment, when they worked in tandem, was important for students' emotional growth. Past research presented that students who came from disadvantaged backgrounds often did not receive support from their families (Hair et al., 2015; Han et al., 2018; Porche et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2017). The incorporation of stress management education and behavior assessment in the classroom was identified as being the only opportunity some students had to learn about social skills that were not supported in the home environment.

This study contributed findings related to the proper implementation of stress management education and behavior assessment at the early childhood level, an area of study that was previously under researched. The findings of this study advocated for the incorporation of stress management education in the early childhood setting as a way through which students would be able to identify, cope with, and overcome their stressors. Participants in this study described that the value of having incorporated stress management education into the classroom was essential in having supported students in psychological and emotional growth.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of the study were related to the constraints that existed as a result of the design of the study. This study's limitations aligned with the limitations that have been commonly associated with qualitative research. This study was limited because it was conducted as a qualitative descriptive case study in one early childhood setting of an elementary school. The number of participants for this study was intentionally limited, as participants needed to meet study criteria of having worked in field of early childhood education for a minimum of three years. The study was not generalized and did not include participation from administrators or teachers in other schools or school districts. This study was also limited by time constraints, as this was not a longitudinal study, and all data were gathered within a time frame of several weeks. There was a lack of prior research in the area of stress management education and behavior assessment at the early childhood level, which also served as a limitation in this study.

This study was also limited in scope as it explored only the perceptions and experiences of stress management education as presented by administrator and teacher interviews as well as teacher surveys. Each individual interview and completion of each survey took place during the 2018-2019 school year, meaning that the results of the study were representative of the

perceptions and beliefs held at that point in time. Interviews and surveys conducted during a different school year may have yielded different results.

The delimitations of this study were those related to the choices the researcher made in terms of data collection. The delimitations included the specific school site where data were collected, and the study participants who were chosen to participate. The study was delimited to the participants who volunteered to be part of the data collection process. While all administrators and teachers who met study criteria were eligible for participation, only those who volunteered for an interview or survey completion actually contributed to the process of data collection. Study participants represented different levels of education, age, and tenure, meaning that the sample size allowed for data collection that was diverse. While the amount of diversity in the school setting where data collection took place was limited in scope as related to gender, the researcher ensured that diversity was represented among the participants who were chosen for the study in terms of level of experience and tenure.

Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

This qualitative descriptive case study was completed because the researcher recognized the implications that a decline in mental health can have on student achievement and growth, both in psychological and emotional development as well as academic achievement. The researcher reviewed existing literature in the area of stress management education and behavior assessment and found that much of the research that existed was related to the findings of research that had been conducted at the upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels and beyond. The area of stress management education and behavior assessment as it related to the early childhood setting was under researched. According to the ADAA (2018), over 25% of young people between the ages of 13 and 18 have been diagnosed with mental health challenges.

The foundations of psychological instability have been traced back to the formative years of childhood, when children are being educated in the early childhood classroom. Yet, research studies focused on the ways that stress management education and behavior assessment was implemented in the early childhood classroom were far and few in between.

The results of this study showed that administrator and teacher participants held positive views on stress management education and its successful incorporation in the early childhood classroom. The use of stress management instruction encouraged students to take ownership of their feelings about stressors at an early age, and allowed them to consider their classroom and school environment as a safe space to share their needs where they learned how to cope with and overcome stressors in a healthy way. T-1 discussed the importance of stress management education in the school setting when she stated:

It cannot be emphasized enough how much our staff and leadership believe in implementing stress management education for our students. Our staff is on board and in tune with why our students need help in dealing with their stressors, and are aware that the culture of the school makes a difference in their ability to cope and grow. The reality of our stress management instruction is that it is a way to teach our students what they need to know, and help them to become healthy kids at the same time.

Implications for practice. When implementing stress management and behavior assessment in the early childhood classroom, administrators and teachers must remain mindful of the limitations of students' minds in terms of cognitive development. Previous literature on the topic of stress management and behavior assessment focused on strategies and techniques that could be used at the upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels. Yet, the area of stress management in early childhood education was under researched. School leaders and

teachers who hope to implement stress management education and behavior assessment in their early childhood setting must prioritize setting attainable goals that are developmentally appropriate for the student population, and acknowledge the stressors that are most often faced by students in the early childhood setting. Incorporating stress management and behavior assessment into the school day is a process that must be integrated slowly for the highest rate of success.

Implications for policy. In this study, the researcher examined the perceptions held by administrators and teachers in the early childhood setting in terms of how stress management instruction was delivered and how student behavior was assessed. The body of research in the findings of this study supported existing literature in the area of stress management and behavior assessment, but presented findings through a unique lens. The findings of this study suggested that stress management instruction was essential in the early childhood setting to support students' mental and academic growth. The findings also suggested that student behavior assessment in the early childhood setting was rooted in positive reinforcement when the most impact was observed in student actions. The findings implied that stress management was an effective instructional method to be implemented in the classroom in order to provide authentic learning opportunities for students to identify, cope with, and overcome the sources of stress that were present in their lives. Stress management education was identified as an effective method of instruction in the early childhood classroom, and was used to increase mental health capacity in young students.

Implications for social cognitive theory. The conceptual framework that was used for this study was social cognitive theory as first espoused by Bandura (1977). Social cognitive theory required recognition of the three components of identification of sources of stress,

acknowledgement of environmental factors, and demonstrated behaviors as being relevant to an individual's mental state. The early childhood setting is one that served as not only an institution of academic instruction and achievement, but also of recognition of the mental state of students, and the ways through which teachers presented instruction to support the whole child emotionally, psychologically, mentally, and academically.

The data from this study have implications for social cognitive theory in that they reflect and support the components of the theory. One of the components of social cognitive theory is identification of sources of stress. This study identified the capacity of a student at the early childhood level to identify their stressors on an independent basis, despite their young age. Social cognitive theory also utilizes a component of recognition of environmental factors. This study found that when administrators and teachers fostered a school and classroom environment that normalized the presence of stress management education and incorporated developmentally appropriate practice for teaching students management and coping skills, a positive culture and meaningful relationships were created. Finally, social cognitive theory uses the component of demonstrated behavior to determine individual ability to internalize responses. The findings of this study concluded that it was when behaviors were positively reinforced, student behaviors improved.

Implementing stress management education and behavior assessment. The participants in this study possessed and discussed a variety of levels of knowledge of and experience with stress management education in the classroom, but all shared the same core value—that it was necessary in the school setting and should be implemented on a daily basis. While the school did not have an established stress management plan to which all teachers were held accountable, the expectation in the school setting was that administrators and teachers

supported one another in ensuring that stress management and behavior assessment was implemented for the entire student population each day. This finding was aligned with the conclusions of Gouda et al. (2016) who posited that the value of stress management education impacted the psychological growth of students who participated in such instruction during the formative years. When she discussed the psychological impact that stress management education had on the success of early childhood students, T-3 stated:

Our children are not necessarily ready, psychologically, for the rigor of the learning environment. That means that we need to use stress management education as a way to offer them opportunities for honest expression of who they are, what makes them anxious, and how they can learn to overcome those stressors in order to be successful.

The value of stress management education and behavior assessment as a tool that not only prepares students to meet the academic goals that have been placed before them, but also as a means through which to prepare students for psychological triumph was noted by interview participants. When she spoke of the value of stress management education at the early childhood level, T-5 stated:

Teaching stress management skills is so important! It cannot be emphasized enough how implementing stress management supports our students. When we focus on helping students to know what causes them anxiety, and celebrating when they overcome their stress, we create such a positive environment full of positive relationships. We're committed to showing our students love and compassion beyond the scope of academics, and in doing that, we can meet their mental health needs more completely.

Results from this study showed that the incorporation of stress management education at the early childhood level created a stronger, healthier school community and allowed for growth in multiple aspects of development.

Recommendations for Further Research

The literature related to the topic of stress management education and behavior assessment focused on identification of the stressors most often experienced by children in both the home and school environments, as well as the relationships between school authority figures such as administrators and teachers with students and families in terms of ensuring that students develop the skills needed to identify, cope with, and overcome their stressors. Past research in the area of stress management education has presented findings related to the benefits of incorporating specific stress management techniques into the classroom setting, and the ways through which skills attained had been assessed. Future research on the topic of stress management and behavior assessment may explore how these programs exist or do not exist in other educational settings in order to gauge student learning and success. The findings of this study have contributed to the body of knowledge that currently exists on the topic of stress management education and behavior assessment, but further research will be needed to more fully explore the intricacies of the correlations that exist between stress management education and academic, psychological, and emotional growth among students.

Through this qualitative descriptive case study, several key themes were identified in relation to the ways through which stress management instruction was incorporated in the early childhood classroom and the ways through which teachers assessed student behavior as a result of engagement in educational initiatives. Several recommendations for further research have been identified. The study should be transferred into another early childhood school setting

where stress management education is taught to students. The study should also be transferred into an early childhood school setting where stress management education is not taught to students to identify areas of potential lack or needed improvement.

Recommendation #1: transfer the study to another early childhood setting that incorporates stress management education. According to the work of Yin (2013), the content of a qualitative descriptive case study is applicable only in the setting where the research takes place. This meant that the findings of this study could not be applied in general terms to all early childhood learning institutions. If the study were to be transferred to gather data about administrator and teacher perceptions about stress management in another early childhood setting where stress management education is prioritized and incorporated in the school day, more information about the benefits of instructional implementation would be identified. Extension of the study into other school environments would expand the base of knowledge regarding the ways through which social emotional learning and stress management were taught and implemented in the early childhood setting. By implementing further research in the early childhood setting, the body of research related to the implications for the incorporation of stress management education and behavior assessment would be expanded.

Recommendation #2: transfer the study to an early childhood setting that does not incorporate stress management education. Administrator and teacher participants in this study believed that the benefits of stress management education were evident in their school through the low number of behavior referrals that took place, and the open and honest willingness of students to talk to teachers, administrators, and one another, openly about their feelings and stressors. A lack of incorporation of stress management education in these educational settings would not necessarily represent a lack of care on the part of school leaders

or teachers, but instead may represent a lack of knowledge or resources in the area of education. In the future, the study should be transferred and applied to an early childhood setting that does not actively incorporate stress management education. Interviewing administrators and teachers and having teachers complete a survey related to a lack of stress management instruction and behavior assessment in the early childhood setting may reveal the challenges and struggles that school staff members face in terms of attempting to implement stress management instruction and offer insight into the ways through which changes and adjustments might take place in the learning environment to better support stress management and instruction and behavior assessment at the early childhood level.

Conclusion

While the role of school staff in the form of administrators and teachers had historically been viewed as one that was aligned with solely teaching academic skills and supporting students' rote knowledge of academic subject matter, a shift in the paradigm of the purpose of education has taken place and continues to be prevalent in today's schools. Supporting students in identifying and overcoming the stressors they may be facing within the classroom environment, as well as the ability to comprehensively identify and deal with the stressors they may be facing away from school in their home environment has increasingly become part of the responsibility of their educators.

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator expectations and teacher experiences related to the ways through which teachers instructed students in social emotional learning and stress management at the early childhood education level, and how teachers assessed positive and problem student behaviors. The qualitative descriptive case study involved one elementary school institution that served early childhood students in grades pre-school,

kindergarten, and first grade. Therefore, this study was unique and added to the body of research that existed in relation to stress management and behavior assessment in the early childhood setting.

There were five key themes that this study identified related to how stress management education and behavior assessment was implemented in the early childhood classroom. Those themes were identified after data collection to gather participant perspectives and data analysis that led to the findings of the study. The key themes identified by the work of this study were: (a) prioritization of mental health and wellbeing in students; (b) adhering to school rules; (c) creating caring relationships with students; (d) engaging in meaningful stress management education; and (e) reinforcing positive behaviors when demonstrated. Educational leaders and teachers in other early childhood settings may use the findings of this study to successfully implement stress management education and behavior assessment in their respective institutions.

The results that were reached in this study were aligned with much of the literature that had been reviewed in relation to this study. While the results were not surprising, they strengthened and extended the body of existing findings to include stress management education and behavior assessment implementations at the early childhood level. The results of this study found that the creation and maintenance of a learning environment that supported stress management education and behavior assessment was essential in the early childhood education setting. The incorporation of stress management was found to be beneficial to students in a number of ways. This study provided a unique perspective on stress management education and behavior assessment as it existed in the early childhood setting and how the use of related teaching strategies influenced the success, both academically and psychologically, of students in the early childhood setting.

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Appendix A: Basic Consent Form

Research Study Title: “Be Calm, Be Kind:” A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study of Instruction and Assessment of Stress Management Behavior Education in the Early Childhood Classroom

Principal Investigator: Rebecca Flasz

Research Institution: Concordia University–Portland

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Julie McCann

Purpose and what you will be doing:

The purpose of this interview is to explore your expectations, as an educational leader or teacher, for the ways through which social emotional learning is taught through the use of stress management and behavior improvement techniques in the early childhood classroom. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment in April, 2019 and end enrollment in June, 2019. You have volunteered to participate in an individual interview. You will participate in an interview with the principal investigator to discuss your philosophy of social emotional learning and stress and behavior management education in the classroom. Following the interview, you will receive a transcribed summary of the content of the interview and will be able to provide feedback on the transcribed summary to ensure the accuracy of the data collected. This process should take less than two to three hours of your time. Interviews will be recorded. Recordings will be deleted immediately following transcription and member checking. All other study-related documents will be kept securely for 3 years from the close of the study, and then will be destroyed.

Risks:

There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your responses to interview questions. However, we will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption. You will be assigned a pseudonym by which you will be identified in the published study. We will refer to your data only by your assigned pseudonym. Your information will be kept private at all times via a password protected hard drive, stored in a fireproof safe, to which only the principal investigator will have access. All study materials will be kept securely for 3 years from the close of the study, and will then be destroyed.

Benefits:

Information you provide will help to potentially contribute to the body of knowledge in the discipline of stress management behavior education in the elementary school classroom. The responses you provide in this interview may be used by other early childhood administrators and teachers to develop expectations for student social emotional learning in the early childhood classroom.

Confidentiality:

This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us about abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

Contact Information:

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Rebecca Flasz, at [email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [email redacted] or call [phone number redacted]).

Your Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

Appendix B: Click Consent

CONSENT FOR ANONYMOUS SURVEY (click consent)

The purpose of this study is to explore social emotional learning as taught through stress and behavior management techniques in the early childhood classroom. We expect approximately 10 volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment in April, 2019, and end enrollment in June, 2019. To be in the study, you must be a classroom teacher who is currently in service, with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience. This survey will ask you questions about your classroom and personal experiences and practices in stress management behavior practices and assessment. Completing the survey should take less than 20 minutes of your time. We will not ask you any identifying information beyond the grade level that you teach.

There are no risks to participating in this study other than the everyday risk of your being on your computer as you take this survey. The benefit is your answers will help us understand the relationship between teachers' instructional practices of social emotional learning and student demonstrations of positive behaviors in the classroom setting. You could benefit by reflecting on your own beliefs and practices in stress management behavior education.

All data is collected anonymously. If you were to write something that made it to where we predict that someone could possibly deduce your identity, we would not include this information in any publication or report. Data you provide will be held privately. All study-related materials will be kept securely for 3 years from the close of the study, and will then be destroyed. You can stop answering the questions in this online survey at any time if you decide you no longer wish to participate.

Please print a copy of this consent form for your records. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Rebecca Flasz at [email redacted]. If you wish to speak with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [email redacted] or call [phone number redacted]).

Click the button below to consent to take this survey.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

What you will do	What you will say
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the interview and set the stage 	<p>Hi! My name is Rebecca Flasz, and I appreciate you taking the time to participate in this research study project.</p> <p>I am researching how social emotional learning and stress management are taught in your school’s classrooms to reinforce positive student behaviors. My central research questions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do early childhood teachers instruct students to identify the stressors in their lives? • How do early childhood teachers incorporate stress management techniques into the classroom environment to support positive student behavior? • How does social emotional learning play a role in the early childhood classroom? <p>I will ask you a series of related questions.</p> <p>I have been a student of Concordia University–Portland for approximately 3.5 years. I have previously worked as a primary schoolteacher for approximately 5 years, teaching middle school English and Kindergarten.</p> <p>Just to reiterate, you have consented to become part of this research project by agreeing to be interviewed.</p> <p>Remember, your participation in this project is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time prior to the data analysis stage.</p> <p>Do you have any questions about the consent form that I previously emailed to you or the informed consent process?</p>

	<p>I will audio record this interview. Your participation in this interview is private, and I will keep these proceedings confidential.</p> <p>Do you have questions or concerns about the confidentiality of your participation?</p> <p>Do you have any questions or concerns about anything else I have discussed thus far?</p> <p>Let's begin with the questions.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch for non-verbal cues • Paraphrase as needed • Ask follow-up, probing questions to get more in-depth 	<p>For Administrator Participants:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Talk about how your school addresses social emotional learning. Is it a school priority? 2. What approaches to social emotional learning do you observe in your school's classrooms most frequently? 3. How do teachers evaluate students' social emotional learning in the early childhood environment? 4. What observations have you made about the ways through which teachers incorporate relationship building in their classroom? 5. What strategies have you observed being used in your teachers' classrooms in terms of positive behavior enforcement? (e.g. how do teachers most often reinforce students' positive behaviors?) 6. What strategies have you observed being used in your teachers' classrooms in terms of identifying and addressing problem behavior?

7. What behavior management systems are most frequently used in your teachers' classrooms (e.g., stoplight system, colored cards, etc.) Do you feel these management systems are effective in encouraging positive student behavior?

8. How does the curriculum you use in your school support aspects of social emotional learning?

9. Is there anything I did not ask about that you would like to add?

For Teacher Participants:

1. Talk about your thoughts and feelings on social emotional learning in your school?

2. What stressors do you observe or do your students most frequently identify as being problematic in their lives?

3. How do you encourage students to manage their stressors on a daily basis? (e.g., talking about feelings, etc.)

4. How do you use your physical classroom environment to support positive student behavior? (posters showing positive behavior, etc.)

5. How do you provide feedback for students' behaviors in the moment, whether positive or problematic, either

	<p>verbally or through other means?</p> <p>6. What classroom expectations do you have to support positive behavior?</p> <p>7. What behavior management system do you have in place for both positive and problem behavior? What are your feelings about the effectiveness of this system?</p> <p>8. How do you ensure that students in your classroom know the difference between positive and problem behavior?</p> <p>9. Do you see a relationship between student behavior management and stress management? Are they linked?</p> <p>10. Is there anything I did not ask about that you would like to add?</p>
	<p>This concludes our interview session. Thank you for your responses.</p>
<p>Schedule follow-up member checking interview</p>	<p>I will provide a summary of your responses to each of the questions to you via email within three business days from today so you can make certain that I have captured the meaning of your responses to the questions.</p> <p>If there are inconsistencies in my transcription and the intended meaning of your responses, we will have a follow-up interview so that you can provide clarification.</p> <p>Thank you for your time and participation. I hope you have a great rest of your day.</p>

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Educational Leaders:

1. Talk about how your school addresses social emotional learning. Is it a school priority?
2. What approaches to social emotional learning do you observe in your school's classrooms most frequently?
3. How do teachers evaluate students' social emotional learning in the early childhood environment?
4. What observations have you made about the ways through which teachers incorporate relationship building in their classroom
5. What strategies have you observed being used in your teachers' classrooms in terms of positive behavior enforcement? (e.g., how do teachers most often reinforce students' positive behaviors?)
6. What strategies have you observed being used in your teachers' classrooms in terms of identifying and addressing problem behavior?
7. What behavior management systems are most frequently used in your teachers' classrooms (e.g. stoplight system, colored cards, etc.) Do you feel these management systems are effective in encouraging positive student behavior?
8. How does the curriculum you use in your school support aspects of social emotional learning?
9. Is there anything I did not ask about that you would like to add?

Interview Questions for Teachers:

1. Talk about your thoughts and feelings on social emotional learning in your school?
2. What stressors do you observe or do your students most frequently identify as being problematic in their lives?
3. How do you encourage students to manage their stressors on a daily basis? (talking about feelings, etc.)
4. How do you use your physical classroom environment to support positive student behavior? (posters showing positive behavior, etc.)
5. How do you provide feedback for students' behaviors' in the moment, whether positive or problematic, either verbally or through other means?
6. What classroom expectations do you have to support positive student behavior?
7. What behavior management system do you have in place for both positive and problem behavior? What are your feelings about the effectiveness of this system?
8. How do you ensure that students in your classroom know the difference between positive and problem behavior?
9. Do you see a relationship between student behavior management and stress management? Are they linked?
10. Is there anything I did not ask about that you would like to add?

Appendix E: Research Request

Dear [name redacted],

As you know, I am a doctoral candidate in the Transformational Leadership Ed.D. program of Concordia University–Portland. I am writing in regards to your school’s potential participation in my doctoral research, as I am focusing on stress management education and assessment as it exists in the early childhood classrooms of an elementary school.

The purpose of my research is to determine how classroom teachers at the early childhood level instruct students in identifying, coping with, and overcoming their stressors and how teachers assess stress management in alignment with the social skills benchmarks present on your school’s quarterly report cards.

It is my hope that you will consent to your school’s participation in this research study, and distribute a written survey to all educators who currently have classroom teaching roles in your school to explore how teachers implement and assess stress management. Teachers will not be asked to share any identifying information about themselves beyond listing the grade level they teach before responding to predetermined survey items related to stress management education and assessment.

Of course, if you have any further questions, I am more than happy to provide further details about the nature and purpose of my study and data collection process. I hope that you will be able to let me know as soon as possible if this research study is something you would be interested in participating in, at which point we can begin working together more closely.

Thank you for your time and consideration! I look forward to hearing back from you soon!

Warmest Regards,
Rebecca E. Flasz, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate 2019
Concordia University–Portland

Appendix F: Classroom Support Self-Assessment

Classroom Support Self-Assessment Grade Level Taught: _____	How Consistently? (Mark the option that aligns most closely with the frequency of implementation in your classroom)			Priority
Feature	Always	Sometimes	Never	After rating all features, choose and mark your top five (5) priorities
I use a predictable, orderly classroom environment to support positive behavior				
I build caring, positive relationships with every child and family				
My classroom uses visual cues to prevent problem behavior (e.g., pictures show students sharing, etc.)				
My classroom schedule balances teacher and student-directed activities				
I integrate teaching about stressors on a daily basis in my classroom (e.g., talking about feelings, etc.)				
I provide students with verbal warnings to indicate problem behaviors				
I provide students with verbal praise for demonstrating positive behaviors				
I define and teach expectations to support positive behavior				
My classroom has at least 3-5 positively stated behavior expectations or classroom rules posted				
I explicitly teach and review positive behaviors in our typical classroom setting				
I communicate with families about our classroom expectations for behavior				
I teach students strategies for coping with triggers of stress				

My instruction actively engages students in observable ways				
I acknowledge appropriate behavior and respond consistently to problem behavior				
I comment on appropriate behavior with specific, descriptive feedback (e.g., “Thank you for sharing your feelings instead of getting angry—you are a kind friend!”)				
I use a system that aligns with appropriate behavior for each individual student (e.g., stoplight system, points system, etc.)				
I have defined what problem behavior looks like in my classroom				
I respond consistently to problem behavior				
I use consequences that are logical and natural				
I collect data and use it to make decisions that support positive behavior				
I regularly monitor and record individual student behaviors				
I take time to review data I have collected based on student behavior and make appropriate changes to my classroom when needed				

Appendix G: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work

Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

Rebecca Eugenia Flasz

Digital Signature

Rebecca Eugenia Flasz

Name (Typed)

June 17, 2019

Date