A Curriculum of Experiences: Environmental Elements That Facilitate or Mediate Stress, Compassion Fatigue and Burnout among Educators

Scott David McManus

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A CURRICULUM OF EXPERIENCES: ENVIRONMENTAL ELEMENTS THAT
FACILITATE OR MEDIATE STRESS, COMPASSION FATIGUE AND BURNOUT
AMONG EDUCATORS

by

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In

Teacher Leadership for Learning

In the

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Kennesaw State University

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before leaving for college my grandpa Mac told me that I could get all the learning that I needed right here on the farm. My grandpa Struble told me to get a good education because it would open the world for me. I have learned along my journey that they were both right. The farm instilled an appreciation for hard work, and a work ethic that I relied on frequently during my formal education. I am thankful for both kinds of learning.

As a student at Kennesaw State University, in the Bagwell College of Education, I often felt like an odd duck. I was the only social worker in any of my classes; there were many classes. The program focus was inclusive education and educational leadership; all of my classmates were educators of one sort or another. In hindsight, this for me was the most challenging, enjoyable, and beneficial educational experience that I have ever had. My professors challenged me to go beyond earning high marks, or just mastering the content of their courses. They individuated their expectations of me, raising my performance past what I thought was my capability. They afforded me the opportunity to construct my own learning by taking what was within their courses and blending it, applying it, and synthesizing it with my own interests and experiences. Their permission for me to be a constructivist learner allowed me to have a multi-disciplinary experience that
included a wonderful blending of knowledge from education, social work, and related disciplines. I could not have asked for a better experience.

I owe a debt of significant gratitude to my dissertation committee: Dr. Reta Ugena Whitlock, Dr. Corrie Davis, and Dr. Harriet Bessette. Dr. Whitlock, you have a knack for always saying just the right thing, particularly when I was unsure of myself or needed a nudge. From your example and through your guidance, unwavering support, and consistent positive energy, you drew out and honed my narrative voice so that it could be a more effective instrument. It is through the grace of God that you crossed my path. Dr. Davis, you once gently pointed out to me, with the help of my classmates, that my writing style is narrative; I thank you for that, it was a happy discovery. I also sincerely appreciate your instruction, and the high expectations you had of me while in your classes and during the process of writing this dissertation. The methods I used in this research were a direct result of the inspiration and learning that I took from you. Dr. Bessette, thank you for welcoming me to this program, for advising me as I nervously made my way through the coursework, for raising the elegance of my work, and chaperoning my discovery of the conceptual framework that I developed and used for this study. Thank you also for the highest compliment that I have ever received when you twice nominated me for the distinguished scholar award. To each of you, every time that I needed your guidance, you availed yourselves, and I am fully aware of how much
had to be set aside each time we talked. I am humbled by the support that you three scholars have given to me; it is a remarkable gift.

I must also thank my support network. There are many friends, family members, and colleagues that gave me encouragement and a kick in the pants when I needed it. I could not have done this without you. I owe a special thanks to my first principal (you know who you are) for hiring me, and bringing me in the bonds of the educational community; it is my calling and where I belong. The motivation for this document began on the day I started working as a school social worker in your building.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the key nurturers in my life that encouraged me to follow my heart and embrace the value of loving others, most notably: my mother, Gloria McManus; my grandparents Robert and Shirley Struble; my great grandmother Olive Saulisbury; and Wayne Green, whose patient love, companionship, and encouragement were instrumental to this accomplishment. This is also dedicated to baby Zachary, my son, who was born as this was being completed, to Ruby Garcia who, through God’s grace and her love, shared her blessing with me, and to the teachers and students that have touched my heart and forever inspire me.
ABSTRACT

A CURRICULUM OF EXPERIENCES: ENVIRONMENTAL ELEMENTS THAT FACILITATE OR MEDIATE STRESS, COMPASSION FATIGUE AND BURNOUT AMONG EDUCATORS
KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

By
Scott D. McManus

This study is a qualitative phenomenological exploration of the curriculum of experiences with environmental elements that contribute to, or mitigate, stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among educators that work with special education students. A convenience sample of 24 participants representing 10 different job types was drawn from four schools in a single school district adjacent to a large metropolitan area in the Southern United States. Focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and prompted journal writings provided data that was systematically analyzed through holistic and contextually sensitive inductive processes to reveal seven emergent themes. Findings include narratives telling the stories of: how participants found their way to the field and what it means to them to be an educator; sources and impact of stress, and related coping strategies consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue, and burnout; elements that mitigate and balance stress; and advice for new teachers reflective of participants’ coping strategies. The study concludes with theoretical, practical, and future research implications.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Recompense

I am not a classroom teacher but I realize that I would not have made it very far in my career, or in my life without them. Where would any of us be, for that matter, without the tireless efforts of our teachers? Teaching is a very stressful career (Kees & Lashwood, 1996; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Robinson, 2006; Sacco, 2011; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000). In the United States there are just over 3.2 million teachers that face a widely written about multitude of stressors to serve some 49.1 million school children (NEA, 2010, December) each day. To these public servants, our teachers and our children’s teachers, much is owed. Teachers are deserving of recompense and this begins with respect and understanding for why they teach, what sacrifices they make to follow this career path, how they influence others, and how they themselves are influenced by a myriad of sometimes hindering and sometimes supporting pressures. Many voices whisper or remark boldly on these craftsmen, of or for these creative souls that dedicate their lives to inspiring generations with knowledge and self-worth.

The National Education Association (NEA) in their quinquennial research on the status of the American public school teacher reveals that most teachers (71%) choose to careers in teaching because they want to work with young people (NEA, 2010, March). They are motivated to choose and remain in a teaching career by a personal sense of responsibility and compassion to work in service of helping others so that their pupils may live satisfying and productive lives of their choosing. The decision to become a
teacher is described by Nieto (2005) as “a calling” (p. 3). It is a passionate choice and nowhere is it better articulated than in the voices of teachers themselves.

I teach because it gives me a purpose. Teaching gives me a really good reason to get up and try my best every day. I may be naive, but I believe that what I do day in and day out does [emphasis original] make a difference. Teachers do change lives forever. And I teach in a public school because I still believe in public school. I believe that the purpose of public school, whether it delivers or not, is to give a quality education to all kids who come through the doors. I want to be a part of that lofty mission. The future of our country depends on the ability of public schools to do that (Welborn, 2005, p. 17).

In the fall of 2010 I conducted a pilot study to explore teacher stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among special education teachers (McManus, 2010). The pilot study included semi-structured interviews of three special education teachers. Each of the three teachers shared that they entered the teaching profession to make a difference in the lives of children. Two of these teachers knew early on that they wanted careers in this field while the third fought against her desire to be a teacher favoring the economic and other trappings of the corporate world. She left a successful corporate career taking less than half her former salary to follow her passions for teaching. In my interview with her she spoke thoughtfully and deliberately. At one point in the interview, while discussing the stress she experienced as a teacher, her cadence slowed and a bright smile came across her face as she said, “my students… they think I am the most wonderful teacher in the world,” it was clear that this was significantly pleasing to her (McManus, 2010).
In my professional practice as a school social worker I have observed the desire to help others to be a common theme among educators and special educators. Around the same time as the pilot study I was invited to give a staff development workshop at a school in my district regarding the therapeutic processes involved in closure and termination with special needs students near the ending of the school-year. The staff members of this school work with extremely challenging students and are charged simultaneously with maintaining a therapeutic environment that addresses the emotional healing needs of students while also progressing through curriculum mandates. Often children at this school become emotionally and behaviorally agitated which requires calling upon specialized training and skills to ease distress and manage emotional crisis and conflict situations. At times staff members have been physically injured in the process of maintaining safety and keeping the children from harming themselves or others.

I asked this group, in the absence of receiving higher salaries than other teachers in the district and with other less taxing teaching posts available, what brings them back to this job year after year? One of the support teachers whom I know to have been seriously injured several times over the past few years raised her hand and quietly said, “It’s the children, they need us. I love these children. They are the reason I come back, to make a difference for them.” I asked her to repeat this so that others could hear her response and around the room other teachers voiced their affirmation of her comment. Lucas (2007) describes this dedication to make a difference in the lives of children as a source of reward and purpose that motivates teachers and is a positive impact of the teacher-student relationship that enhances resilience. Being needed and knowing that you
are making a difference, that you are enriching a child’s life and future, is a tremendously powerful inducement for educators. I know this to be true in my practice as a school social worker as well.

“Mr. Mac,” he said, “I have something to tell you. I got an 80 on my report card, my mom got married again, and my new dad helps me with my homework every day.” He blurted this out in the hallway while smiling and excited like I had never seen him before. I was genuinely happy to see him. I started working with him early in the year before after he told his teacher that he was going to go live [emphasis original] with his dad. He was a quiet boy, polite, amiable and his comment to his teacher was such a simple statement that its significance could have easily been overlooked. His dad had died the summer before. He was sad and grieving his father’s death. In addition to his emotional challenges, he was severely behind in his academic progress. His mom was grieving and struggling to meet the family’s survival needs.

Now, I am someone with good boundaries but I have to admit that I loved this kid. Some days, when I wanted to call in sick, I went on to work because it was my day to meet with him. When he shared how well he was doing, I was overwhelmed with happiness for him. My work with him helped him through the grief process and helped his mom find supportive resources. If the truth is to be told, he was the first boy I was really ready to talk to about grief and death after my own father died. I also helped his teacher to see him differently. His teacher was frustrated with how far behind he was and angry with his mom for letting him advance to this grade.
All of the other third grade students had mastered the shift from learning to read, to learning from reading while he was still learning sight words. He could not keep up with the coursework and individualizing for him was a challenging tax on his teacher. We worked on remediating his academic needs and, in the process, realized that the delays were mainly due to the emotional traumas that the family had been through.

For both the teacher and myself, the humanizing of this child that occurred through understanding of his personal difficulties helped us both to see that we were making a difference for him, which in turn, deepened our commitment.

**Teachers Travel Difficult Paths at Great Personal Expense**

Teachers, in general, invest heavily in their careers with ongoing education and advanced degrees. With respect to the education level of teachers, the NEA (2010, March) reports that 37% of teachers hold bachelor’s degrees, 56% of teachers have master’s degrees, 5% have specialists, and 1% of teachers have doctorates. Additionally, 56% of teachers had invested in ongoing college coursework within three years of the NEA survey and the percentage of teachers with master’s degrees has steadily increased since 1961 while the percentages of teachers with just the minimum educational level, a bachelor’s degree, has steadily decreased since 1966 (NEA, 2010, March). Despite heavy personal investment in education on the teachers’ behalf, teacher salaries have declined in 11 states over the course of the last decade (NEA, 2010, December). Michigan, for example, had an overall decline in teacher salaries of 7.3% (NEA, 2010, December). The average salary for teachers in the last NEA quinquennial study was
$49,482 (NEA, 2010, March), which, as Nieto (2005) points out, is relatively low when compared to other professions of similar training requirements.

While most teachers enter the profession with noble intentions, teaching involves much more than the joys that can come from the teacher-student relationship. There are staff meetings, committee work, parent conferences, fund raising events, department meetings, lunch duty, bus duty, hall duty, bathroom duty, and tutorials. There are paperwork demands, standardized testing requirements, curriculum mandates, and collaborations with counselors, assistant principals, social workers, therapists, speech pathologists, and any number of other internal or external stakeholders. Many teachers find a balance between job demands and the rewards that sustain them. For others, however, a sustaining balance is not achieved. Ingersoll (2003) estimates that between 40% and 50% of beginning teachers leave the profession within five years of entrance. For those that remain, finding a sustaining balance between rewards and stress can be an ongoing challenge.

Stepping into a teacher’s shoes would reveal that teachers spend an average of 50 hours each week on teaching related duties, 3.8 hours per week on unpaid non-instructional duties, they have an average of 31 minutes for lunch, and over a third of teachers eat lunch with their students (NEA, 2010, March). After work or on the weekends teachers may find themselves at the store buying supplies necessary to instruct their students. Nearly all teachers (97%) spend their own money for resources necessary for teaching with an average annual expenditure of $477 (NEA, 2010, March). Teachers in larger systems typically spend more from their own pockets for materials and supplies than those in small systems (NEA, 2010, March).
Teachers, once within the boundaries of the field, are confronted realities that expand their initial awareness of what teaching involves well beyond the idealistic lure that drew them in. In spite of this emergent reality, a great many teachers remain dedicated to the profession (NEA, 2010, March). The reasons they chose teaching careers in the first place serving as an invaluable renewing contribution to their sustainment. In addition, teachers are held within the field by the positive aspects of teacher job security along with the heavy education investment in preparation of teaching, which are both dissonant with leaving for many (NEA, 2010, March). If given the opportunity to re-write their personal histories, 38% of teachers said that they would definitely choose teaching careers all over again, 27% would probably teach, 13% probably would not, and 6% definitely would not choose teaching as a career for a second time (NEA, 2010, March).

The dedication among teachers is particularly impressive given the “mean spirited and hostile discourse” (Nieto, 2005, p. 4) that surrounds and attacks the field of education. Much of this discourse divorces attention, understanding, and respect to the teacher, pupils, and educational process in favor of political agendas and rhetoric serving the firmament of bureaucrats that have promiscuous connections to the congress of teaching and learning. Teachers in the classroom today are witness to rapidly changing demographics, poverty, and both societal and systemic shortcomings that contribute to negative conditions among pupils culminating in frustrating circumstances that must be tirelessly fought by those who care about children and society at large (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 2005). As public servants, teachers are at the mercy of both good and bad influences from within and outside the schoolhouse that can support or
hinder their work with children. One-size fits all mandates governing education, often with swift and severe consequences attached for teachers who fail to produce, are frequently ill-fitted to the unique and specialized needs of individual children, neighborhoods, communities, or to the needs of business and industry for which education serves (Morse, 1979; Ravitch, 2010; Wagner, 2008), contributing yet another source of stress for teachers.

No Teacher sets a Goal to Become Burned out or Compassion Fatigued

The tax of stress can have an enormous toll on the emotional wellbeing of teachers, the educational process, and on students. With respect to teachers, stress can contribute to physiological (Seyle, 1974), psychological, and interpersonal problems (Maslow, 1954/1987, 2011). A build up of stress that exhausts coping resources can result in burnout (Maslach, 2003) and compassion fatigue (Figley, 1999/1995). Burnout is generally thought of as diminished interest and psychological exhaustion that develops over time and reflects feelings that one’s efforts do not make a difference (Stamm, Higson-Smith, Hundall, & Stamm, 2008; Morrissette, 2004). Compassion fatigue is described as a gradual lessening of compassion over time typically reflective of a shift from empathic engagement to disengagement with others (Figley, 1999/1995; Morrissette, 2004; Stamm, 1999/1995; Stamm, et al., 2008). Both of these conditions contribute to challenges with interpersonal relationships marked by conscious or unconscious efforts to distance and disengage from others (Valent, 2002). These interpersonal challenges can be particularly problematic in the classroom where the teacher-student relationship is central to the learning process (Friere, 1993). Moreover, students of teachers that are burned out or compassion fatigued may feel that the teacher
does not care about them or about their progress (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991), a circumstance that does little for motivating student engagement in educational activities.

**Learning From the Voices of Instructors**

The menacing costs of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue are a tragic tax to those who begin their teaching careers with the noble intention of helping others, to their students, and to the education community as a whole. The feelings of inefficacy and interpersonal disengagement that mark the challenged interpersonal relationships of burned out or compassion fatigued teachers do not lend to support of a community of care (Noddings, 2002) or to the engagement of students through vicarious excitement for the content of curriculum demonstrated first by the teacher (Bandura, 1969).

Teachers in this condition that stay in the field are trapped in a hopeless and helpless cycle of distress. Those that leave, including the 40% to 50% of teachers who exit during the first five years, produce a tremendous expense to the field of education related both to the stability of the teaching force and to the recruitment and training of replacements (Ingersol, 2003). To make matters worse, the tone of contemporary discourse and policy regarding education is decidedly unsympathetic toward the plight of teachers (Nieto, 2005), teachers who might be underperforming because they have succumbed to the stressors of the job.

The No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top legislation, through accountability measures, favor schools and teachers that produce gains in student achievement and, in effect, punish those who do not (Deville & Chalhoub-Deville, 2011; Jennings, 2010/2011). These legislative efforts are intended to improve education but they do not seek to know why teachers may be underperforming nor do they directly
promote supports to the emotional wellbeing of teachers in stressful or otherwise difficult circumstances. A critical component to the effectiveness of schools may be related to the emotional wellbeing and consequent interpersonal availability among teachers to connect with and engage their students.

Within the academy of scholarly research the subjects of teacher stress and burnout have been well studied but there have been few contributions exploring compassion fatigue among educators and even fewer focused on special educators. This study explores teacher emotional wellbeing by drawing lessons from educators and special educators themselves regarding stress, compassion fatigue, burnout and elements that mediate these phenomena. The exploration of burnout and compassion fatigue among special educators is novel. Therefore, this study offers the academy of scholarly research an expansion of previous research on stress and burnout along with new research on compassion fatigue among special educators that responds to the scarcity of literature. In addition, this research offers a holistic view into the ways of being and curriculum of influences among educators that frequently is under-represented in contemporary discourse.

Throughout this study the exploration of stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and elements that mediate these phenomena among teachers is conceptually grounded with a holistic ecological approach that views behavior (thoughts, feelings, and actions) as a function of the person and the environment (Lewin, 1946/1951). Behavior, then, is the result of dynamic interconnected, interdependent, and bidirectional interactions between the person and environment. Lewin (1946/1951) refers to this as a person’s life space in which the person, behavior, and environment are viewed as inseparable. The
environment, for the purpose of this study, is considered to be the social world within which a person exists. Environmental influences include, but are not limited to, people, places, situated activities, events, cultural values and beliefs, laws, rules, procedures, organizational structures, and discourse (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005).

The method of inquiry for this study is a qualitative phenomenological exploration of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Data was gathered through engaging participants in focus groups, semi-structured individual interviews, and prompted journal writing. Focus group and semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into written text for data analysis. Participants included a sample of educators and special educators from a single large metropolitan school district situated in the Southern United States. Constructivists traditions were employed for interpreting and understanding participants’ data including a symbolic interactionist (Blumer, 1969) approach to gaining understanding of the meanings that educators ascribed to their experiences that informed their ways of being. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do educators cope with stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout?
   a. How do environmental elements interact with educator stress?
   b. How do environmental elements interact with educator compassion fatigue, and burnout?
   c. How does the culture or climate of the school interact with educator stress?
   d. How does the culture or climate of the school interact with educator compassion fatigue, and burnout?
2. What elements exist that mediate educator stress in service of emotional wellbeing?

The software program Atlas TI was used as an environment within which to manage and analyze data. All data was loaded into the Atlas TI environment and analyzed using a funnel approach to progressively distill the data from the broad guiding questions to specific phenomena, emergent themes, and focused conclusions (Wiesrma & Jurs, 2009). Results of the study are presented within a combination rhetorical tools including auto-ethnographic, narrative, and formal register to document the researcher’s own experiences, the narratives of participants, and related research and scholarship.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Relationships Between Human Beings and the World: Curriculum of Influence

A curriculum of influence serving to describe the relationships that exist between educators and their environments can be found within an ecological framework, which is a conceptual framework drawn from works derived from, and complimenting, ecological psychology. The conceptual framework applied here will provide agency to explore the relationships between educators and their environments along with emotional or behavioral manifestations of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Eisenhart, 1991; Maxwell, 1994; Merriam, 2009). A very broad view of ecological psychology reveals it as the tradition of psychology that considers human interactions with and within their environments (Barker, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Kelly, 2006; Lewin, 1951/1943).

The tradition of ecological psychology emerged at a time in the history of psychology when the field was divided and engaged in debate regarding whether or not the primary influences on individual’s development were related to nature or nurture (Deutsch, 1992; James, 2008; Lewin, 1951/1943). Ecological psychology challenged this debate to consider that both nature and nurture (person and environment) were interrelated and coalesced to influence the processes of wellbeing and human development (Barker, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Kelly, 2006; Lewin, 1946/1951).

Additionally, ecological psychology shifted the phenomena of interest from deductive analysis of the influence of experiences within confined stimulus response experimentation or observation, to inductive exploration of the meanings that were
constructed by human beings to represent their experiences (Deutsch, 1992; Kelly, 1991). An ecological approach, as described by Lewin (1946/1951) and Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005), employs a wide lens accommodating the totality of experience within constructivist traditions to explore the meanings that people assign to life events and situations. For example, the meanings that teachers draw from their interactions with and within the world of education may initially be informed by the pathways that lead to the field followed by their experiences within the field.

Teachers join the ranks of the teaching profession for reasons that vary from pragmatic concerns to issues of philosophy grounded in deep desires to serve others (Nieto, 2005; Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003). It can be very rewarding to join a profession that helps others grow and develop (Figley, 1999; Lucas, 2007) and such work can engage a person’s passions (Noddings, 2002). Joining the ranks of the teaching profession places the educator in the bonds of a community within which a common culture reflecting the ecology of the school is shared (Lewin, 1943/1951; Merriam, 2009). Teachers bring with them their history of lived experiences gained within the social world that inform their values, beliefs, and ways of being, as do the students and other stakeholders that engage in congress with and within the school environment (Blumer, 1969; Lewin, 1946/1951).

Additionally, the environment that awaits the new teacher’s entry, the community, institution, or field of teaching, is ripe with its own history, ways of being, structures, rules, expectations, values, and beliefs along with myriad of other elements that will influence and be influenced by the interconnected nature of the relationship with the new teacher (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Lewin, 1946/1951). This is true whether the
aperture of the environmental lens is set to a narrow focus such as, for example, grade level groupings, the individual school that the teacher has joined, or wider as might be a view set to the district, region, or to the field of education itself. To be certain, the marriage between the teacher and environment is a complex arrangement that is marked by what both parties bring into the union.

Upon entering into the community of educators and the ecology of the school, the process of teaching and learning occurs through influence that is ported within the bi-directional reciprocal attributes of relationships infused with contextual elements of the environment (Lewin, 1939/1951; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Freire, 1970/1993). This implies that the nurturing relationships that teachers have with their students, with each other, and with other stakeholders, are tools of similar importance as a strong pedagogy, a robust curriculum, or a solid grounding in content knowledge (Noddings, 2002). Paulo Freire eloquently captures this arrangement between teacher-student-environment in his statement that,

Authentic education is not carried on by “A” for [emphasis original] “B” or by “A” about “B,” but rather by “A” with “B,” mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it (1970/1993, p. 93).

Stated differently, Freire (1970/1993) is asserting that the congress of education (teaching and learning) is conducted through interactions between the teacher and the student within the context and under the influences of interdependencies with and within the environment.
Kurt Lewin (1942/1951) conceptualizes the interdependent reciprocal and bidirectional interactions between human beings and their environment that influence behavior in a construct he termed “life space.” Lewin (1946/1951) contends that behavior (e.g., thoughts, feelings, and directed action, p. 239) and development (e.g., learning, p. 244) occur through transactions within an individual’s life space. Lewin (1946/1951) defines behavior as a function of the person and environment, which is the life space of an individual, through the equation \( B = f(P, E) = LSp \) whereby “B” refers to behavior, \( f \) refers to function, \( P \) refers to person, \( E \) refers to environment, and \( LSp \) refers to life space. Time interacts within the life space in a manner that includes simultaneous influence from past experiences, present here and now circumstances or demands, and future wishes, goals and aspirations (Lewin, 1942, 1943/1951).

Within the Lewinian (1946/1951) equation for life space, the student, for the teacher, is a feature of the environment and likewise, the teacher, for the student, is a feature of the environment. For both teachers and students, a myriad of other environmental elements exist and levy influence on their individual and interdependent interactions with and within the larger environments of the school and beyond. The concept of environment is vast and complex and benefits from definition and a measure of organization. A basic conceptualization of environment might simply define it as the world “outside of a person’s skin” (Barker, 1968, p. 6). Within the context of ecological psychology, environment is the field within which the person interacts (Barker, 1968; Lewin, 1951/1942). The person and the environment, then, can be considered as married in an interdependent relationship (Lewin, 1946/1951) of which one cannot be easily studied without the other.
Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) provides a model of ecological development that affords utility in organizing the environment into levels named micro-system, exo-system, meso-system, and macro-system. These levels delineate the intensity or distance of environmental influences on and by the person that occur through interaction and interdependence with and within the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 2005) model serves as an appealing compliment to the workings of Lewin’s (1946/1951) concept of life space. In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model, the micro-system level refers to those primary influences ported through interpersonal relationships, roles or activities with significant others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The meso-system level includes primary interrelated settings such as home, school, neighborhood, and community within which the individual interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). The exo-system level involves influences on or by the settings within which the person interacts. An example might be the influence that educational policy such as the No Child Left Behind Act levies onto the school in which a teacher works. The macro-system level refers to discourse, beliefs, culture, or ideology that may influence or inform congress within the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). For example, societal beliefs regarding the value of education or teachers may inform how teachers are characterized in the media (reciprocally or vice versa) and thereby inform the public’s attitudes and subsequent congress with educators.

It is important to mention that the environments within which the teacher interacts are not static. That is to say that they are dynamic and changing. Students, for example, leave the school and go home to their neighborhoods, families, and communities. Each of these places can be considered as an environment that influences and is influenced by
the interdependent bi-directional and reciprocal interactive relationship with the student. As mentioned earlier, influences from one environment of membership are carried into other environments of membership as components of the individual’s lived experiences within the social world. Hence, the student’s interactions at home or in the community may inform his or her ways of being within the school environment. As these external experiences are ported into the school environment they may then interact with and within the ecology of the school, thereby transmitting the nature or quality of influence onto other members of the school environment. This is true of the teacher’s and all stakeholder’s experiences with and within the outside world as well.

The ecological framework that is constructed through the works of Lewin (1939, 1942, 1943, 1946/1951) and Bronfenbrenner (1997, 2005) allows exploration of how teachers interact with and within their environment, what relationships exist between educators and their environment, and how these interactions coalesce to establish behavioral manifestations including stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Likewise, this framework can illuminate how the emotional wellbeing of the teacher might levy influence onto the student (including academic and emotional functioning) through the teacher-student relationship. Within the Lewinian formula (1946/1951), \( B = f(P, E) = LSp \), stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are aligned with behavior (B) in the formula (behavior including emotions, directed actions, and thinking) as functions of the interaction between the person (P) and the environment (E) within the life space (LSp). The elements that comprise the life space (the behavior, the person, and the environment) form an interdependent circle/cycle that revolve and evolve to establish a curriculum of
being and wellbeing that influences the individual and the ecologies with and within which the individual interacts.

Lewin (1942/1951) points out that the features of life space are complex and interdependent which necessitates an approach for understanding them employs both holistic and constructivist traditions of inquiry. That is to say, the dynamic relationships that exist between person and environment to inform behavior and ways of being cannot easily be reduced or compartmentalized for examination in isolation. These relationships are dynamic, interrelated, and reflective of bi-directional reciprocal influences that require viewing the situation as a whole as a starting point for exploring the meaning that human beings assign to the experiences, interactions, and events with and within the external world (Blumer, 1969; Lewin, 1942/1951).

**Situated Phenomena: Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

Stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are all phenomena that are psychological in nature and involve processes that are “situated, never fully isolatable from their context” (Heft, 2001, p. 394). As Heft (2001) asserts, these processes are interrelated and demand a method of exploration that considers the total or gestalt perspective. With respect to an ecological framework as presented by Lewin (1939, 1942, 1943, 1946/1951) and Bronfenbrenner (1997, 2005), the context within which psychological processes occur includes the interactions between the person and environment and the influences that are levied through the bi-directional relationships through which these interactions are carried out (Barker, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Lewin, 1951/1943). This approach, then, is compatible with Heft’s (2001) view of psychological phenomena as inseparable from context and affords a molar view of behavior including the thoughts, feelings, and
actions involved in psychological processes such as the experience of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Baum, 2002).

Molar behavior refers to a holistic or gestalt response to the environmental influence, circumstance, or situation (Baum, 2002; Tolman, 1932) and it is aligned with Lewin’s position that behavior is a function of person and environment and should be viewed as a total or holistic process (Lewin, 1946/1951). Lewin’s positioning of human behavior as a function of the relationships between the individual and the environment pressed the field of psychology to shift the exploration and study of human behavior to the naturalistic settings in which the behavior occurs (James, 2008; Lewin, 1951/1946). Within the Lewinian (1946, 1951) equation, behavior includes, then, the psychological processes involved in the experience of stress, burnout and compassion fatigue. Hence, these phenomena are situated within the life space of the individual (1946/1951).

Stress is at the root of both compassion fatigue (Figley, 1998) and burnout (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 1997) and is described in terms of threats against the human being (Selye, 1974), in terms of needs and development (Maslow, 1954/1970, 2011), and in terms of physiological, emotional and cognitive processes (Carver, Scheir, & Weintraub, 1989; Lazarus, 1993). Stress is most commonly described with reference to the individual but it can also be applied at the environmental or communal level (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1989).

The Nature of Stress on the Body: Alarm, Resistance, and Exhaustion

Given that stress is at the root of compassion fatigue and burnout (Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003), it follows that a discussion of stress should precede discussions of compassion fatigue or burnout. Hans Selye (1974) was a pioneer in the study of stress on
the body and he describes stress as the human being’s response to demands for adaptation
to change and he notes that the nature of the stimulus demand for change as positive or
negative is not as important as the strength of the demand. Stress, as defined by Selye
(1974), is “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made on it” (p. 27).
Understanding the experience of stress requires awareness that each demand is unique as
are each person’s response to stressors. That is, there is variation from person to person
based on the unique internal and external, genetic predispositions and environmental
influences, that are involved (1974).

Selye’s (1974) exploration of stress spanned more than 40 years with a focus
primarily on the physiological processes involved with stress and stress response. He
proposed the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) as a model to describe the way in
which the body responds to stressors (1974). The response to stress under GAS involves
stages including alarm, resistance, and exhaustion (1974). In the alarm stage the body
becomes aware of the threat and initial changes occur such as the body shivering in
response to cold. In the resistance stage, the body adapts to the threat in an effort to fight
it or neutralize it. In the final stage of exhaustion the body’s energy for adapting or
fighting the threat is exhausted and the individual dies (1974, p. 39). Although Selye’s
work describes physiological processes, his work lends itself to the exploration of the
nature of environmental stressors on processes of the mind. That is, on the motivational,
emotional, and cognitive processes involved in experiencing and responding to stress.

The Nature of Stress on the Mind: Motivation, Emotion, and Cognitive Processes

Stress, according to Schwarzer and Taubert (2002), can be described from three
perspectives: response-based, stimulus-based, and cognitive-transactional. Response-
based refers to how the body responds to stress. That is, the physiological response (2002) akin to Selye’s (1974) work. When the focus of inquiry and discourse regarding stress is on the situation that is causing the stress, the stimulus, it falls within the scope of a stimulus-based conceptual framework, whereas when the focus of inquiry and discourse includes a perspective that stress is an ongoing process that is dynamic, thoughtful, and responsive to changing demands and resources, it fits within a cognitive-transactional framework (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

Abraham Maslow (1954/1970, 2011) describes the response of mankind to stressors in terms of satisfying a hierarchy of needs that includes all three perspectives described by Schwarzer and Taubert (2002). Stressors in Maslow’s conceptualization are unmet physiological, emotional, and cognitive needs that are situated within the context of person-environment relationships and their interdependencies. The hierarchy of needs is ordered according to priorities asserting that basic survival needs generally must be satisfied before higher level needs can be considered (1954/1970).

The most basic needs include those that support physiological survival such as hunger and thirst. Maslow contends that all of the faculties of the human being are directed to the service of satisfying these basic needs when deficits threaten survival (1954/1970). Upon meeting the human being’s most basic needs, more advanced needs emerge. Safety needs are ordered next in the hierarchy and they include, among other things, security, protection, law, order, limits, predictability, and freedom from emotional distress including fear and anxiety (1954/1970). The human being, as in the case of the physiological needs, is motivated to satisfy this level of needs and engages in employing all faculties in service of this motivation. Having met the physiological and, in turn, the
safety needs, the human being can then advance to meeting a need of belongingness and
love (1954/1970). This, then is followed by what Maslow (1954/1970) refers to as
“esteem needs” (p. 21), which include self-respect, self-esteem, positive self-regard, self-
confidence, self-worth, and esteem for others. Finally, upon satisfying lower level needs,
the individual moves on to a level of needs related to self-fulfillment which includes
attaining accomplishment in areas of interest that are satisfying to the individual. This
final level of needs is referred to as “self-actualization” (1954/1970, p. 22).

Maslow (1954/1970) points out that most individuals do not attain complete
satisfaction on every level of needs before advancing to the next. Additionally, he
suggests that the hierarchy is dynamic and interrelated with environmental conditions
(Maslow, 2011). For example, if food becomes a scarcity, an individual may regress
from a higher level of need to attend to his or her more basic physiological survival need
for food. Another example might be found with consideration of the economic downturn
of recent times that has thrust many solidly middle class families into conditions of
poverty and homelessness thereby pressing upon them demands to regress to satisfy more
primary survival needs. Maslow (1954/1970) also notes that, although the order is
generally followed, the behavior of the individual may serve multiple motivations derived
from needs on multiple levels.

Interdependency with the environment including resources and relationships with
others play a significant role in the individual’s progress, adaptation, or regression within
the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 2011). The environment, including parents and teachers,
can support the child’s progress of development through the hierarchy of needs if it is
nurturing (2011). If, on the contrary, the environment presents as a hostile or emotionally
threatening place, the individual may enlist coping responses, which, in Maslow’s conceptualization, include regressing to focus on basic safety needs such as seeking defense against such threats or stressors (2011).

**Coping With Stress**

Coping with stress can be described through a variety of means ranging in complexity from survival based regression strategies as identified by Maslow (1954/1970, 2011), to approach-avoidance behaviors or more sophisticated responses described in terms of cognitive and emotional processes. Generally speaking, coping serves to manage the emotional response to a stressor and/or to change the situation causing the stress (Admiraal, Korthagan, & Wubbels, 2000; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). The coping process for cognitive and emotional stress involves similar mechanisms as that of physiological processes described by Selye (1974). Namely, there is a process of perceptive appraisal of whether or not (and to what extent) the stimulus is threatening that is complimented by an appraisal of resources to manage the emotional response and/or change the threatening situation, followed by action consisting of behavioral or emotional response to the threat (Admiraal, et al., 2000; Folkman, et al., 1986; Lazarus, 1993; Salami, 2010).

Lazarus (1993) cautions that assessing the utility of specific coping strategies relative to successful management of a stressor is a function of the person and the situation. In this line of thinking, the outcomes of coping strategies as adaptive or maladaptive are not universal. Hence, to understand the strength, weakness, or functionality of a particular coping strategy, attention must be paid to the individual and the situation, the person and environment. Strategies that may be adaptive or
maladaptive for one person may or may not be so for another person faced with the same stressor. Similarly, coping strategies that are adaptive or maladaptive in response to a particular situation for a person may not be the same when employed in response to a different situation. With respect to the Lewinian (1946/1951) concept of life space, coping is the behavior being considered within the context of the person-environment or life space and it is tied to the interdependencies and bi-directional influences between person and environment.

Coping strategies are described in a variety of ways. Lazarus (1993) categorizes the way coping strategies are conceptualized into style or trait versus process or state orientations. Coping style orientation, for example, is linked to the line of thinking that coping strategies function in service of various forms of psychopathology (1993). For example, phobias might be considered as a projection of personal traumas or insecurities, where projection is the coping style and phobia is the psychopathology. A process orientation towards coping views coping as dynamic and situated within the context of the person and environment. This perspective favors viewing coping as a construct that is adaptable in response to changes in conditions over time rather than viewing them as fixed expressions of personality traits or pathology (1993).

Both trait and state orientations are involved in coping and, according to Lazarus (1993), are useful in understanding coping among human beings. That is to say that employment of specific coping strategies may be functions of both elements of the state of an individual within the context of environmental demands as well as trait characteristics of the individual’s personality type or style (1993). Additionally, cognitive appraisal of the threat interacts with appraisals of available resources or
experience (efficacy) with similar threats, which may result in a re-assessment of the threat as less or more threatening (Carver, et al., 1989). For example, if a person generally feels anxious about speaking in front of a large audience but has recently had a positive experience with this, the prospect of speaking in front of a large audience on a subsequent occasion may be perceived as less threatening than was anticipated prior to the recent positive experience.

Within the literature that describes coping strategies there are a myriad of strategies that human beings employ to defend themselves against physiological, emotional, or cognitive threats. Some of these strategies demonstrate the unique and creative adaptability of human cognitive and emotional processes. The ways or strategies in which people cope with threats and stressors include an extensively broad array of different means. Skinner, Edge, Altman, and Sherwood (2003) conducted an analysis of 100 assessments of coping and comprehensively list 400 different ways of coping that were described in the literature. They assert through their analysis that there is not a unified consensus on a definitive construct of coping within the field (2003).

Skinner, et al., (2003) categorize common coping strategies into families that include: Problem-solving, information seeking, helplessness, escape, self-reliance, support seeking, delegation, isolation, accommodation, negotiation, submission, and opposition (p. 245). They include common strategies within each family. Within the family of escape behaviors, for example, are cognitive avoidance (trying not to think about it), behavioral avoidance (leaving or staying away from a stressful situation), denial (pretending it is not happening), and wishful thinking (wishing it would go away). Helplessness includes confusion (disorganized problem solving), cognitive interference
(self-doubt, pessimism, fear), and cognitive exhaustion. Isolation includes social withdrawal (keeping to one’s self), concealment (keeping others from knowing), and avoidance of others. Submission includes rigid perseveration, intrusive thoughts, and rumination (negative thinking, catastrophizing, anxiety amplification, self-blame, and fear) (2003).

Much of the coping literature is positioned to view coping as an individual process. Lyons, et al., (1998) suggest that coping may also be viewed at the communal level. They assert that coping with stressful environmental or life events is a social process and therefore can be viewed in terms of the communal aspects of coping resources, supports, and actions with attention to the aspects of interconnectedness inherent to group membership (1998). In other words, the individual members of groups who are experiencing distress impact the group as well through the nature of their interdependent relationships and common bonds (1998). This arrangement is reciprocal in that a group under strain also impacts its individual members (1998). The vantage of communal coping provides a platform to view coping within the ecology of a group, such as a school community, as a function of the bonded group. This provides a means to explore how the interconnected members of the group influence one another through relationships within the shared culture or climate of the environment (1998) in support of healthy emotional wellbeing (Noddings, 2002; Seligman, 2006/1990), or in service of stress related maladies reflective of unhealthy emotional wellbeing such as exhaustion of compassion, and burnout (Figley, 1998, 1999; Maslach, 2003).
Sources of Stress for Educators

General educators.

“Stress simply does not occur without provocation” (Reinardy, Maksl, & Filak, 2009, p. 346). Research on educator stress has produced a large body of scholarly work that identifies sources and describes the pervasiveness of stress among educators. With respect to the pervasiveness of teacher stress, Klassen, Foster, Rajani, and Bowman (2009) found that over half of teachers surveyed in two concurrent studies found teaching to be highly stressful. In a study of 184 educators on career satisfaction, burnout, and compassion fatigue as indicators of quality career engagement among public school educators, Robinson (2006) found that 48.4% of teachers studied experienced direct emotional trauma from their work and, of the same sample, 71.1% reported indirect emotional trauma resulting from their empathic engagement with students, 21.74% reported career dissatisfaction, 25% reported symptoms consistent with burnout.

Research on educator stress reveals that it is derived from a myriad of sources (Fimian, 1984). Kyriacou (2001) indicates that a majority of research on teacher stress has utilized self-report measures aiming to survey the presence and degree of severity of specific stressors. Self-report measures often include inventories that assess the presence and/or magnitude of items and therefore the results produce lists of factors that are considered stressful. Other research has measured the physiological, psychological, and behavioral manifestations of stress and still others have employed interview and case study approaches (2001). Kyriacou (2001) points out that at the sources of stress reflect the teacher’s perspective as well as environmental and cultural contexts that are dynamic.
Research on teacher stress reflects the strength of influences in the micro-system level as evidenced by an array of findings positioned at this level of environmental influence. Structures within the micro-system of the teacher may include, but not be limited to, direct and bi-directional relationships with family, co-workers, administrators, and pupils (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Sources of stress at this level include: Pupil motivation and discipline (Kyriacou, 2001), and classroom management (Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007). In addition, stress was also attributed to heterogeneous student groupings, (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003) time pressures, workload, role conflicts, and role ambiguity, (Kyriacou, 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009).

Other findings reveal stress from relationships with colleagues, lack of collegial and administrative support, educational change demands (Clausen & Petruka, 2009; Kyriacou, 2001), low salaries (Botwinik, 2007), and non-teaching functions that take time away from lesson preparation (Reig, et al., 2007). Teacher stress was also related to demands to adjust pedagogy, observation by supervisors (Reig, et al., 2007), conflict with administrators (Yan & Jian-Xin, 2007), and pressures related to standardized testing and accountability (Botwinik, 2007; Reig, et al., 2007). School leadership that employs a top-down inspection and control models of leadership that strip control and autonomy from teachers were also identified as sources of teacher stress (Hoffman, Palladino, & Barnett, 2007; Loonstra, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2009: Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010: Yan & Jian-Xin, 2007). Finally, relationships with student’s parents and accelerated work pace concurrent with diminished recovery time were identified as additional sources of teacher stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009).
Special educators.

Themes regarding stress among special education teachers are somewhat similar to those of regular education teachers although they may reflect nuanced differences relative to the variations in special education teacher’s roles and responsibilities. With respect to stress among special educators, it is helpful to consider the specialized roles and responsibilities that emerge within the scope of their job. Special education teachers are faced with a wide array of student disabilities for which they must be knowledgeable and able to accommodate within their classroom routines and instructional pedagogy (Rowe, 2010). This requires the special education teacher to have an intimate knowledge of their students needs for individuation in order to effectively engage the student in the congress of learning (2010). Additionally, these teachers may spend a greater amount of time with these students during waking hours than other adults and therefore the relationship with the special education teacher takes on additional importance to the growth, development, and learning of the special needs child (2010).

As Friere (1970/1993) so eloquently points out, learning is the product of the relationship of the teacher with the student. The importance of this collaboration is heightened among special education students and their teachers relative to the diverse abilities, disabilities, needs, and demands among special needs students, which places a high tax on the educators empathic engagement (Tepper & Palladino, 2007), and adds significantly more to the special educator’s job design and workload (Hoffman, et al., 2007).

Special education teachers manage the individual education plans of diverse student populations that present demands for creative application of teaching pedagogy,
behavior management, sensitivity to the child, and specialized accommodation of each child’s unique needs within the larger school context (Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendorffel, & Dyck, 2009). In order to effectively progress toward academic achievement goals, special educators frequently must perform numerous ongoing collaborative and consultative activities with general educators in order to align curriculum and delivery to their student’s needs (2009). Often these special educators serve as co-educators within the same classroom as general education personnel. Dettmer, et al., (2009) describe the concept of collaborative school consultation as follows:

The concept of collaborative school consultation and teamwork denotes an interactive process whereby school personnel in general education and special education, related services and support personnel, families of students, and the students themselves are working and sharing their diversity of knowledge and expertise to define needs, plan, implement, assess, and follow up on ways of helping students develop to the fullest (p.9).

They add that co-educators are “persons who collaborate, consult, and work in teams to provide appropriate learning experiences for students’ diverse needs (Dettmer, et al., 2009, p. 9).”

Themes in the literature regarding sources of stress among special educators, although somewhat similar as those among general education teachers, appear to include amplification of stressors related to paperwork demands, diversity of students, stakeholder interactions, lack of collegial and administrative support or understanding, and additional stressors from compliance with laws governing special education that include threats of litigation (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). For example, in a study of 117
special education teachers in Baldwin County in Southwest Alabama Plash and Piotrowski (2006) identified stress from job demands, inadequate planning time, wide diversity of student needs, class size/caseload size, excessive paperwork, threats of litigation, and demands associated with IDEA compliance as significantly stressful. These factors contributed to stress and attrition among special educators (2006). Piotrowski and Plash (2006) also identified lack of administrative support along with lack of mission and organizational purpose as additional sources of educator stress that contribute to attrition.

Similar findings were found in a study of 77 special educators in Montenegro (Grbovic, Pranjic, Selmanovic, Brekalo-Lazarevic, & Jatic, 2011). Grbovic, et al., (2011) found that significant sources of stress among special educators included perceptions of the work environment that included low levels of control over the work, work as mentally and/or physically strenuous, a low level of support from superiors, urgency to get the work done, work phases that are too difficult, feeling a low level of satisfaction with present work, and little influence over work. Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler (2005) point out that first year special education teachers may be at risk of stress leading to symptoms of burnout including negative thoughts and self-doubt regarding their effectiveness.

Ackerman and MacKenzie’s (2006) query into teacher leadership roles reveals that the process of collaboration, or person-to-person (teacher-to-teacher) influence, can produce stress and possible conflict. Hence, special education teachers engaged in advocating for what they believe is right for their students assume some risk of conflict with the general education teachers whom they are collaborating or co-teaching with. The special education teacher is responsible for implementation of strategies to support
their students, but sometimes they administer this responsibility by proxy through their collaborative and consultative efforts with general education teachers. This is particularly true in co-teaching formats (Dettmer, et al., 2009). Role incongruity among special educators is described as a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Wilkerson, 2009; Yan & Jian-Xin, 2007). This may occur as the special education teacher employs distribution of responsibilities for implementation of strategies in the Individual Education Plan through the proxy collaborations and consultations with other educators also serving the child.

To be certain, the systemic, occupational, environmental, and relationship stressors described within research on teacher stress all contribute to influences on the educator’s wellbeing through the bi-directional interrelated and reciprocal interactions between person-environment. The acute and chronic stress that teachers experience places them at risk of compassion fatigue and emotional burnout (Keys & Lashwood, 1996; Maslach, 2003; Robinson, 2006). As in Selye’s (1974) description of the human body’s response to stressors (alarm, resistance, and exhaustion), emotional and cognitive coping strategies can also be exhausted leading to stress-related maladies such as compassion fatigue and burnout.

**Stress and its Relationship with Compassion Fatigue and Burnout**

Both compassion fatigue and burnout begin with stress, a build up of stress (Figley, 1998; Maslach, 2003). Compassion fatigue and burnout have been described as syndromes that develop related to psychological processes in which a person’s coping resources are exhausted with exposure to stress events (Figley, 1998; Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). The strain from stress on the individual that is experiencing
exhaustion of coping resources may also elicit physiological consequences as well through the interrelations between the mind and the body (Ulrich-Lai & Herman, 2009).

Broadly speaking, the literature regarding both compassion fatigue and burnout reveal them to be evolving constructs (Morrissette, 2004; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). This is evidenced by a lack of agreed upon definition, universal application, and means of measurement (Devilly, Wright, & Varker, 2009; Robinson, 2006). Both constructs appear to have originated from helping professions to describe the helper response to stress influences derived from relationships with and within the work environment when the stressor exceeds available coping resources (Devilly, et al., 2009; Morrissette, 2004; Schaufeli, et al., 2009). Both appear to have growing bodies of empirical research with burnout complimented by a seemingly broader scope and presence in the research literature relative to educators (Devilly, et al., 2009; Morrissette, 2004; Robinson, 2006). Additionally, research efforts on burnout have expanded to include application in a wide array of occupational settings including education (Schaufeli, et al., 2009), while compassion fatigue remains primarily associated with a more limited slice of the helping profession narrowly ascribed first responders, medical professionals, and an array of therapeutic agents (Devilly et al., 2009; Morrissette, 2004; Robinson, 2006).

Both of these constructs, at a most basic level, describe negative wellbeing that impacts individuals in pervasive and unfortunate ways. In a most simplified definition, Schaufeli, et al., (2009) suggest that burnout is “increasingly considered as an erosion of a positive psychological state” (p 204). That is, diminished interest and psychological exhaustion that develops over time and reflects feelings that one’s efforts do not make a
difference (Stamm, et al., 2008; Morrissette, 2004). A similarly basic definition of compassion fatigue is a gradual lessening of compassion over time typically reflective of a shift from empathic engagement to disengagement with others that occurs with prolonged exposure to, and absorption of, stress and trauma material from others in the environment (Figley, 1999/1995; Morrissette, 2004; Stamm, 1999/1995; Stamm, et al., 2008). Both compassion fatigue and burnout have been described as costs associated with caring for others (Figley, 1998, 1999/1995; Maslach, 2003).

Hallmark symptoms common to both burnout and compassion fatigue are coping responses that serve to emotionally distance the individual from others perceived as contributing stress (Valent, 2002). The function of these distancing coping measures centers on protecting the individual from additional emotional harm. These distancing measures may emerge as cynicism, statements that reflect a depersonalizing of others, lack of empathy, judgmental assessments, emotional numbing, feelings of dissatisfaction, reduced personal accomplishment, and interpersonal problems (Kees & Lashwood, 1996; Lucas, 2007; Robinson, 2006; Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley, 2007; Valent, 2002). Valent (2002) includes a sense of burden, depletion and self-concern, resentment, neglect, and rejection within the symptoms of compassion stress. He adds that burnout includes inability to achieve goals accompanied by frustration, diminished morale, poor performance, irritability, and difficulty concentrating (2002).

Compassion fatigue.

The term compassion fatigue is employed within the scope of two fields of study, traumatology (Figley, 1999) and burnout (Maslach, 2003). Both of these fields address an individual’s empathy and empathic engagement in relationships that they have within
the environment and with other people (Figley, 1999; Maslach; 2003). The description of compassion fatigue and the symptoms associated with it appear similar across both fields of study. Compassion fatigue refers to exhaustion of an individual’s compassion for others that is generally arrived at through exposure to stressful circumstances within the environment or stress having to do with another person or people with whom the individual interacts (Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003). Compassion fatigue is sometimes referred to as compassion stress, vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, secondary traumatic stress disorder, and client-related burnout (Divilly, et al., 2009; Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003; Morrissette, 2004; Robinson, 2006; Schufeli, et al., 2009; Valent, 2002).

Within the Lewinian (1946/1951) construct of life space, acts of compassion appear interdependent with an individual’s empathic resources for engagement within the bi-directional relationships through which influence is ported. For the teacher, empathy and compassion underpin healthy engagement with students necessary for growth and learning to occur (Friere, 1993; Noddings, 2002; Seligman, 2006).

Within the field of traumatology compassion stress was first described as an aspect of the relationship between the therapist and traumatized client (Figley, 1999). The transfer of stress from the traumatized client to the therapist is described as countertransference (Valent, 2002). Countertransference is the process by which the therapist’s empathy, concern, and regard for the client facilitates the therapist absorbing the stress of the client relative to the client’s trauma material and then participating in similar stress responses as would the client (Valent, 2002). The therapist is thereby affected secondarily by the distress of his client (Valent, 2002). Lucas (2007) puts this in other terms, “children who have been traumatized tug at the souls of early childhood
teachers who have big hearts and open arms” (p. 85). Broadening the terminology to helper and the recipient of help allows for consideration of a broad array of professionals or non-professionals that assist others through processes of healing, growth, development, and learning. Tepper and Palladino (2007) suggest that any profession that engages in helping others is at risk of compassion fatigue. Figley (1998) and Maslach (2003) also extend this concept to the strain within families that care for infirm relatives.

It would appear that the construct of compassion fatigue is evolving in response to widening application and, as such, terminology has changed and taken on different meanings depending on the time, culture, and context of which it is researched, written about, or used in application (Deville, et al., 2009; Morrissette, 2004; Shaufeli, et al., 2009; Valent, 2002). For example, the terms compassion fatigue, secondary stress, secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and burnout can be found used interchangeably in the literature (Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Valent, 2002).

Complicating this further, some scholars distinguish them from one another, describe them as differing by matters of degree, or contend that they exist on continuums (Lucas, 2007; Valent, 2002). These conditions within the literature present challenges for developing uniform understandings of the construct.

The parliamentary and measurement challenges within the literature regarding these phenomena are illuminated in a study conducted by Devilly, et al., (2009) in which compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress disorder, and burnout were assessed and compared using separate measures. Their sample included a group of therapists that worked with traumatized clients and a group that did not. They found that there was not a significant difference between the two groups of therapists on the
measurements. Furthermore, they point out that much of the previous research on trauma among the helping professions has not used a control group, resulting in a probable overestimation of work related stressors among the helping profession attributable to secondary or vicarious trauma (Devilly, et al., 2009). They also suggest that measures of vicarious trauma, secondary stress disorder, and burnout appear to be measuring similar things. This may offer some explanation of the overlap, interchangeable usage, and general lack of construct delineation found elsewhere in the literature. Their findings reveal that the measures they used for vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress correlated better with the measure for burnout than they did to one another (Devilly, et al., 2009). The correlation with burnout suggests that empathic engagement related stress, such as compassion fatigue, might be nested within the scope of burnout and akin to client-centered burnout (2009).

Within the study of trauma, some researchers use the term compassion fatigue synonymously with burnout (Robinson, 2006; Valent, 2002) while others distinguish compassion fatigue as related to empathic engagement and countertransference (Morrissette, 2004). Sprang, et al., (2007) describe compassion fatigue and burnout as residing on a continuum. Other scholars describe secondary trauma and burnout as features or elements of compassion fatigue (Stamm, et al., 2008).

A search of research on compassion fatigue among educators yields extremely limited results and even fewer for research on compassion fatigue among special educators. In 1996 scholars Kees and Lashwood wrote an article describing a need to explore compassion fatigue among educators. They likened the trauma content brought to teachers by students and their families to that brought to therapists and other trauma
workers (Kees & Lashwood, 1996). Teachers, then, by virtue of their use of empathy in
developing and engaging in relationships with students, can be considered as members of
the helping professions (Kees & Lashwood, 1996; Robinson, 2006).

Ten years after the Kees and Lashwood (1996) article was published, compassion
fatigue emerged as an element of study in a dissertation by Robinson (2006). Robinson
was looking at indicators of career engagement that included career satisfaction, burnout,
and compassion fatigue (Robinson, 2006). Robinson (2006) suggests that educators can
become emotionally injured through their empathic role inherent to educational congress,
which places them at risk of distancing themselves from their students, families, and
colleagues in an effort to protect against additional stress or strain. The build up of high
amounts of cumulative stress can erode resiliency and put teachers at risk of compassion
fatigue (Gentry, Baranowski, & Dunning, 2002).

In 2007 Tepper and Palladino studied compassion fatigue and burnout among
special educators as it relates to attrition. They employed a qualitative approach to
explore special educators experiences in the field, symptoms (physical, mental, and
emotional) experienced related to their career, recommendations to administrators and
teacher preparation programs, and how their experiences relate to compassion fatigue
(Tepper & Palladino, 2007). Among the findings were recommendations for
administrators to provide increased support and understanding of special educators roles
and responsibilities, and exposure to stress and coping curriculum within teacher
preparation programs (2007). Additionally, they identified verbal and physical
aggressiveness among students along with physical management of students in distress as
significant contributors to stress and emotional exhaustion (2007).
More recently, Davis and Palladino (2011) conducted a qualitative study of compassion fatigue and burnout among special educators that explored the training, stresses, job requirements, and supports made available to special educators. They note that burnout is considered to be a leading influence on special education teacher’s decisions to leave the field and, while literature is available related to burnout, there remains little research that includes a compassion fatigue perspective (Davis & Palladino, 2011). Findings from their study reveal that high levels of administrative support were found closely tied to a higher likelihood of teachers remaining in their positions (2011). Additionally, supportive relationships with peers and the ability to separate school life from work life were associated with lower levels of compassion fatigue (2011). Changing paperwork requirements related to special education documentation were cited as sources of stress and participants suggested that their teacher preparation programs did not adequately prepare them for the demands of secondary special education (2011).

**Burnout.**

Schaufeli, et al., (2008) trace the origins of the concept of burnout to the 1970’s through concurrent explorations by Fruedenberger in New York and Maslach in California. Fruedenberger was describing the gradual exhaustion of emotional resources and motivation among volunteer workers (2008). Maslach was describing how human services workers “coped with their emotional arousal using cognitive strategies such as detached concern” (2008, p. 205). The term “burnout” is a reference to the metaphor of a candle changing from burning brightly to suffocating or burning out (2008). Arriving at a single definitive understanding of burnout is challenged by conflicting descriptions of
its scope. For example, some researchers limit burnout to exhaustion, or to systemic stressors such as workload, level of support, and student behavior, while others include empathic engagement (Stamm, et al., 2008; Robinson, 2006; Valent, 2002). Much of the research on burnout measured the phenomena with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which according to Shufeli, et al., (2009), is considered the premier tool of measurement. This tool, however, measures one perspective of what constitutes burnout and does not afford room for other contexts or applications (Devilly, et al., 2009). More recently the field of burnout has expanded to include context specific perspectives such as client-centered, professional-related, and personal-related burnout (Shufeli, et al., 2009; Sprang, et al., 2007), which may afford room to narrow the scope to examine stress and burnout related to empathic engagement.

In a review of 35 years of research on burnout, Shaufeli, et al., (2009) explain that the construct has evolved over the years having been influenced by social and cultural factors. They note that the meaning of the term burnout varies with context and that debate exists within the field of study with regard to the scope and assessment of burnout. While they hold that the construct of burnout is conceptually linked to work, they also acknowledge that other researchers have broadened the scope of burnout. Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, and Christensen (2005), for example, include contextual linkages such as work-related burnout, client-related burnout, and personal burnout. Van Der Linden, Keijsers, Eling, and Schaijk (2005) note that burnout is a stress-related disorder brought on by prolonged repeated exposure to high levels of stress. Clausen and Petruka’s (2009) case studies support the Van Der Linden, et al., (2005) findings noting that symptoms of
burnout among their participants emerged after prolonged exposure to either a single stressor or stressors from a combination of sources.

Joinson (1992) described compassion fatigue as a unique form of burnout related to client interaction among nursing professionals. Joinson’s (1992) description lends support to the positioning of stress related to empathic engagement, such as compassion fatigue, within the dimension of burnout that is client-related and therefore dynamically within the larger umbrella of burnout. Research efforts in this area of the field, however, seem to be struggling to catch up and effectively incorporate the nuances of each dimension of burnout within empirical inquiry (Devilly, et al., 2009). Other researchers position burnout and empathic related stress such as compassion fatigue on a polar continuum to describe job satisfaction and career engagement (Robinson, 2006).

With respect to career satisfaction and engagement, Robinson (2006) connects career engagement with empathy, stress, and burnout. She suggests that viewing the quality of teachers’ career engagement offers insight to their level of stress. In her model, burnout is multi-faceted and can be related to empathic engagement, systemic problems, or a poor fit between teacher and roles. All three forms of burnout represent features of career disengagement in Robinson’s (2006) conceptualization. At the other end of the spectrum, Robinson (2006) describes healthy engagement as equivalent to empathic fulfillment and systemic fulfillment. In other words, healthy career engagement includes a general sense of efficacy and reward from one’s role as a teacher along with overall career fulfillment (Loonstra, et al, 2009). Robinson (2006) uses the term career over-engagement to describe teachers experiencing stress related to empathic engagement
that has lasted for up to a month and empathic trauma if the stress has persisted for greater than a month.

**Symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout.**

Valent (2002, p. 7) organizes symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout into the categories of cognitive (i.e., concentration, self esteem, preoccupation, thoughts of self/other harm, etc), emotional (powerlessness, anxiety, guilt, fear, rage, sadness, being overly sensitive, etc), behavioral (impatience, irritability, withdrawal, elevated startle response, sleeplessness, etc), spiritual (questioning God and beliefs, loss of faith, etc), personal relations (decreased interest in intimacy or sex, mistrust, isolation, intolerance, conflict, etc), somatic concerns (sweating, rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing, aches and pains, etc), and work performance (low morale/motivation, task avoidance, negativity, staff conflicts, absenteeism, withdrawal from colleagues, etc).

Within the discourse regarding burnout, the three most commonly described dimensions of burnout include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment (Figley, 1998, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Emotional exhaustion is described as a tired feeling that develops over time concurrent with the depletion of emotional resources (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Depersonalization is a sense of detachment and social distancing typically at the expense of personal and professional relationships (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Depersonalization can be thought of as an unconscious protective coping mechanism that serves to protect the teacher with emotional distance from additional stress or emotional trauma that might occur within the teacher-other (student, parent, co-teacher, administrator, etc…) relationship. It allows the teacher to view the source of their stress as outside of personal control or responsibility
(Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). For example, a teacher employing depersonalization with students that present challenging behavior might begin to see them as a group of troublesome children rather than as individuals with whom she has relationships. Grayson and Alvarez (2008) note that depersonalization is often accompanied by cynical attitudes towards stakeholders and the school itself marked by indifferent, cold, or distant attitudes and manifested by generalizing, derogatory labels, or distancing behavior. Low levels of personal accomplishment refer to a feeling that a teacher’s efforts are meaningless and ineffectual. Other associated symptoms within the literature on stress and burnout include: cognitive difficulties (Van Der Linden, et al., 2005), coping difficulties (Wilkerson, 2009), low levels of personal satisfaction (Wilkerson, 2009), poor job satisfaction (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Robinson, 2005; Yan & Jian-Xin, 2007), cynicism, health problems, and a lessening of wellbeing (Yan & Jian-Xin, 2007). Schlichte, et al., (2005) adds that insomnia and intrusive thoughts of failure or worry are also frequently symptoms of burnout.

**Interconnected influences: teacher-environment and bi-directionality.**

Stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are psychological processes that are situated within the context of the person and environment (Heft, 2001). This means that these phenomena are interdependent upon, levy influence onto, and are influenced by constituents of the environment including the teacher and others with whom the teacher interacts. The Lewinian (1951/1946) concept of life space coupled with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979/2005) ecological model delineating levels of the environment reveal environment to include people, places, activities, and cultural beliefs that interact dynamically through bi-directional relationships with the person. This framework allows
consideration of how influences occur between the educator, stress maladies including compassion fatigue and burnout, and the constituents of the environment. Specifically, this allows exploration of how teacher stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout influence and are influenced by the culture and climate of the school, pupils, stakeholders, and environments beyond the school including the discourse reflective of cultural attitudes and beliefs of society at large relevant to education and teachers.

Figley (1999) describes the relationship between the helper and the recipient of the help as bi-directional. The helper that experiences stress from the helping arrangement, or from characteristics or conditions of the recipient of help, can become exhausted of compassion. When this happens, the helper may unconsciously or unintentionally inflict pain or injury onto the recipient of help (Figley, 1999). This occurs as coping mechanisms are deployed to protect the helper from receiving emotional tax or injury from the relationship. These coping strategies function to establish emotional distance and disengagement. If the teacher is considered a helper within this context, Figley’s (1999) description can be applied to viewing how teacher stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout may serve injury to the pupil or other members of the school environment.

Consider, for example, the assertion by Paulo Friere (1993) that the process of learning is a function of the relationship between teacher and student. If the teacher is experiencing symptoms of stress and employing emotional distancing, depersonalization, or related coping mechanisms, the relationship between student and teacher is obviously degraded. Likewise, the relationship between the teacher and other stakeholders are similarly compromised (Klassen, et al., 2009). In the balance of this relationship are
students whose effective learning is dependent on the healthy functionality and wellbeing of the relationship with the teacher. Hoffman, et al., (2007) suggest that student achievement is dependent upon the relationship to the teacher, and by proxy, to the teacher’s emotional wellbeing. Hence, if the teacher-student relationship is faulty, so too is the learning that is ported through it. Similar outcomes can be surmised if the environment itself is under the duress of stress as it interacts with the teacher and, subsequently, the students through the mechanisms of interconnected bi-directional relationships.

Van Der Linden, et al., (2005) conducted research that offers insight to the how the interaction of stress related maladies such as compassion fatigue and burnout influence perception and cognition as it relates to relationships with others. They utilized a comparison group of individuals not working and in treatment for burnout, individuals working but reporting high levels of burnout, and individuals working that did not report symptoms of burnout. They found a positive relationship between burnout and the executive functioning activity of information processing. Executive functioning, according to Van Der Linden, et al., (2005) is defined as the set of cognitive processes that combine to produce effortful voluntary regulation of perception, motor processes, and response to demands. Hence, as individuals reported higher levels of symptoms of burnout, they also reported increased difficulty processing information related to demands thereby hindering appropriate perception and response to environmental demands. For example, teachers with a high level of burnout are more likely to have difficulty interpreting student behavior and responding to it appropriately (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Van Der Linden, et al., (2005) also found that burned out individuals
also had greater difficulty with attention on tasks, they were more prone to distraction and exhibiting behavior guided by automatic cognitive processes (such as fight or flight responses) than individuals that were not burned out. Within the context of reciprocal bi-directional influences ported through relationships and mediated by environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Lewin, 1951/1946) the challenges to executive functioning and responses to environmental demands illuminated within the Van Der Linden, et al., (2005) study suggest that teacher experiencing such distress will likely influence students and other stakeholders as well.

Clausen and Petruka (2009) suggest that teacher burnout often affects the whole climate of the school. This aligns with the idea of bi-directional reciprocal influences between the individual and community of which the individual is a member (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Lyons, et al., 2002). If, for example, the culture of the school community is hostile and lacking collegial support, conditions may be present that foster isolation whereby the teacher experiencing stress, burnout, or compassion fatigue is expected to deal with it on their own (Clausen & Petruka, 2009; Tepper & Palladino, 2007).

Influences that chip away at the emotional wellbeing of teachers and other stakeholders can also come from the macrosystem level of the environment by way of hostile discourse. Nieto (2005) describes this as parliaments reflecting cultural and political attitudes toward education that diminish respect for teachers and depersonalize the field of education with business terminology such as markets, consumers, producers, and quality control that serve to discredit the complex human-to-human work that occurs within the schoolhouse walls. Additionally, Darling-Hammond (2010) describes the
relationships between the national discourse of varied and sometimes questionable positions and intentions that facilitate policy decisions and laws that broadly influence the daily lives of educators and all other stakeholders. She highlights a wide array of examples including, for example, debates over property tax limits in California that ultimately resulted in reduced educational funding coupled with a top-down centralized control model of school leadership that led to dramatic declines in the quality of education (2010).

In contrast, if the culture or climate of the school, neighborhood, city, state, or society reflects a community of care (Noddings, 2002) and optimism (Seligman, 2006/1990) expressed respectfully through hope, mutual values, and support, the wellbeing of an individual teacher experiencing stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout may be viewed as a responsibility of the collective (Clausen & Petruka, 2009; Lyons, et al., 2002). Clausen and Petruka (2009) beautifully articulate the notion of a community of care (Noddings, 2002), relative to communal reciprocity applied to stress management (Lyons, et al., 2002), as follows:

While we all must look out for our own little plot of sanity to see that the fruits of our labor do not wither on the vine, it is important for all members of the school to understand the symptoms and provide support and relief (p. 191).

As the literature reviewed here demonstrates, the experience of teacher stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue does not occur within a vacuum. It is a function of interconnected relationships with and within the various layers and aspects of the environment with and through which the educator interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Lewin, 1946/1951). Teachers are members of the helping profession and are at risk of
compassion fatigue (Keys & Lashwood, 1996) and the scarcity of research on this topic as applied to educators remains a call for action. Friere (2005) says of teaching, “It is a task that requires those who commit themselves to teaching develop a certain love not only of others but also to the very process implied in teaching” (p. 5). If this love is to be nurtured, supported, and protected, scholarly attention to those factors that undermine it must be engaged.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Researcher Positionality: Window Into the Soul, my Soul

Within the traditions of qualitative research, it is important to provide a measure of transparency regarding how the researcher’s lived experiences, personal biases, assumptions, beliefs, theoretical orientation, values, and relationship to the study, enter and engage within the process of research. This is accomplished through a written narrative that delineates the researcher’s positionality, and in this instance it is my positionality. My narrative articulation of positionality identifies how I engage with the process of inquiry, exploration, analysis, and presentation of findings (Merriam, 2009). This is intended to afford the reader insight regarding how I fit and interact within the context of the study in order to establish a level of integrity that would otherwise be left to question.

It is a matter of some significance that this particular research would not have been conducted were it not for my own lived experiences having led me down a path to see distress among educators, to ask questions about causes and remedies, and then position myself with knowledge and skills to find answers. Creswell (2007) identifies five philosophical assumptions that coalesce to form researcher positionality: Axiological, how values interact with the research; Ontological, the researcher’s beliefs about the nature of reality; Epistemological, the relationship that the researcher has with the subjects or phenomena being studied; Rhetorical, the language used by the researcher; And methodological, the process of research (e.g., inductive, contextual).
The manner in which these five philosophical assumptions interact through me within the research process might be thought of as akin to how my orientation and ways of being engage with the process of research. Illuminating these philosophical assumptions allows the reader to better understand where I stand by affording insight to the influences that have resonance with me and inform my lens as a researcher. As Creswell (2007) asserts, “all researchers shape the writing that emerges” (p. 179). The writing, then, is reflective of my lived experiences within the social world.

**Axiological positionality: values that inform my disposition.**

Axiological positionality refers to the values that I carry with me into the process of research. My axiological positionality is a reflection of my regard and compassion for others. These are deeply rooted values that have been shaped and influenced by my 20 plus year accumulation of experiencing love for the artistic, scientific, therapeutic, holistic, technological, innovative, patient, nurturing, humanistic, and compassionate processes involved in the teaching of children. My values are additionally influenced by my roles as a school social worker, a visiting teacher, child advocate, and chaperone of student rights, a peacemaker, therapist, change agent, and a humanitarian.

My disposition and value orientation are also influenced by life experience and familial exposure. I was raised in a family of nurturers. My mother was an aid on a special needs bus, my grandfather drove a bus for special education students by day and worked as a psychiatric nurse by night, and my great grandmother was a psychiatric nurse for over 40 years. I am a social worker and my sister is a nurse. My father, God rest his soul, was a poor farmer that died of Leukemia at age 54. Before his own
A diagnosis was discovered, he held fundraisers for friends and relatives with cancer during the off seasons when the farm was not in production.

The experiences with my family taught me deep lessons in charity, in valuing diversity, in caring for others, in appreciating the struggles of friends and neighbors, and in trying to imagine the world as others see and experience it (e.g., to imagine walking in their shoes). “Never judge a book by the cover,” my mother told me. “It is good to want because it builds character and determination,” my grandmother told me. “Get a good education because it will open up the world for you,” my grandfather said to me on his birthday, which was the day before he died at age 58.

These lessons, ported through generations of my family and learned through countless discrete experiences over a lifetime, unite within my ways of being as a reflection of my own values. They engage and interact through me in this research as a cornerstone built from love and compassion for others. Together they establish the foundational basis for why and how this research was conducted. Axiologically I approached this dissertation research in honor of my family and in service of the promise to get a good education that I, at age 17, made to my grandfather 28 years ago at his birthday party, the day before he died. I have absorbed the strong value that my grandfather placed onto education as a characteristic of how I advocate for equal opportunities to learn among all children. This value comes into play as I strive to understand those environmental conditions that influence the learning process for children, including the emotional wellbeing of educators. It is from my love and compassion for others that I have taxed myself with executing this research.
Ontological positionality: seeing the world through the eyes of others.

My ontological positionality is influenced by my lived experiences, familial exposure, and training as a social worker. Put in other words, the way that I see the world and my beliefs about the nature of reality, including my own reality and realities among other people, have been informed by my experiences. For example, when I was a little boy we visited my grandmother Shirley’s house almost every day. My great grandmother Olive lived with Shirley in later life, but her old house was a block up the street and I would walk up to see her. The following narrative is what I remember of her and how she influenced me:

Olive Saulisbury was born to French immigrants on a farm out on the Lelenau Peninsula. This narrow peninsula separates Grand Traverse Bay from Lake Michigan and is situated near Sleeping Bear Dunes. In the days of Olive’s childhood, this was a great distance from anything big enough to be called a town. Developers hadn’t yet discovered the beauty of the lake views, and the close proximity to an Indian reservation, in those days, diminished the land value.

She grew up dirt poor, married, and had three children, Douglass, Guy, and Shirley. Somehow she studied nursing and found work as a psychiatric nurse in a Regional State Hospital in the next town, some 40 miles from the farm. Not long after her last child was born, her husband left her to face the sorrows of the great depression as a single parent. She made a home in a small pink bungalow in town not far from her work. Douglass, her oldest boy, left for war and did not return. Guy married and began his own family on a chicken farm over in the next county. Shirley married Robert and started her own family.
Shirley and Robert lived in Olive’s home through the birth of their third child and then bought a city lot one block away on Clinch Street and built a home of their own. Robert, a psychiatric nurse and special education bus driver, built their house with his own hands. Olive lived in the nursing dormitory at the State Mental Hospital until Robert and Shirley moved out.

Olive was poor through much of her life and yet managed to keep her family fed, warm, and together through the depression. The hard times required a frugal approach to life. Her small pink bungalow had two bedrooms upstairs and one on the main floor. The rooms were small and the ceilings were low. The front of the house had a living room and dining room. Just beyond those rooms were the kitchen and the downstairs bedroom. A small hallway off the kitchen led to the back door and a bathroom that was added to part of the back porch when running water was installed sometime during the 1950’s.

When Olive retired she fancied going to yard sales, the Red Shield store, and to the K-Mart to catch a good blue light special. The Red Shield Store is the Salvation Army’s second hand thrift shop. Around the time of Olive’s retirement, Shirley’s oldest daughter Gloria had given her a great grandson. It would be nearly 10 years before the next wave of three great grandchildren would come. Olive would live to see them as babies and have her picture taken with them on her lap.

Olive kept an active daily schedule in her later years, entertaining herself by lumbering around in her old light green Buick to yard sales and the blue light specials. The car had just enough space left in it for her to sit behind the steering
wheel. The rest of it was filled with little treasures piled up solid to the headrests in the back, and dash in the front. She dared not round a corner fast.

Olive was not rich but those years of frugal living along with her nursing pension and social security afforded her enough to fund her thrifty shopping trips. Her collection of treasures grew until her little pink house was filled chest high with boxes and things that, to use her words, “might just come in handy some day.” She bought herself a trailer when the pink house got too crowded. The trailer had a tiny little lot half way down the third of ten rows of trailers. It was a half-mile around the corner from the pink house and, while she stayed in the trailer at night, she was at the pink house most days.

The pink house was her home. Inside the house there was a path through the piles of treasures that led from the front door to the gas stove in the living room, around through the kitchen, to the bathroom and to the door leading out to the back porch. Even the back porch was piled high with little things that she had collected. After a while she filled the trailer too and, about that time, her health required that she move in with Shirley.

“Where is grandma Olive?” I would ask as we arrived at grandma Shirley’s. We visited just about every day. “She’s up at the pink house,” grandma Shirley would reply. I’d walk up and find her in the back yard where she had some bird feeders that drew in cardinals, yellow finches, chickadees, and blue jays. Robins would sometimes dot the ground in the back near the burn barrel where the soil was soft and rich with worms. “Robins are the first sign of spring,” she would tell me.
Olive was out back when she was at the pink house. She’d go inside to make sure the pilot light on the furnace was still lit and everything was okay, but she spent her time, when the weather was right, tending to the iris or other flowers in the yard, raking the leaves, or organizing her things. I mostly remember her sitting in those old metal chairs or on the double glider watching the birds. As time grew on, she raked less and I’d sit with her and she would tell me about the birds that were coming around.

After a while, mom would pull in the driveway and join us. When it was time to go she would say, “go up on the porch and get you something to take with you”… and I did. I know now that what I took away I got long before reaching that porch.

Olive collected things that she thought would help her kids and grandkids out. From an outsider’s perspective she might have looked a little odd, eccentric, or perhaps her collections might have been pathologized as hoarding behavior. To us, she was thoughtful and fair, and always had something to give. Maybe this is why Shel Silverstine’s book, “The Giving Tree” is one of my favorites, or why I still find time to sift through a flea market for a piece of USA or McCoy pottery.

She taught me the value of being still and letting the birds come in to feed. “You have to be quiet and still for them to trust you. They have to trust you for you to really see them.” We would sit there, quiet and still, letting them birds come in. I think about this when I’m with my students sometimes. My great grandmother Olive Saulisbury taught me love, compassion, and nurturing. She taught me about beauty in simple things.
Olive Saulisbury, along with the other nurturers in my life, taught me many lessons that continue within me as persistent influences on my ways of being. One of those many lessons has woven a path into the way that I work therapeutically with children and the way that I approached this research. “You have to be quiet and still for them to trust you. They have to trust you for you to really see them.” In my work with children, I know that I have to earn their trust before I am allowed into their inner worlds. I know that I will not be able to interpret or understand their behavior, emotions, or much of anything until they trust me enough to let me know what things mean to them.

This approach is consistent with Husserl’s (1973/1948) concept of processing epoche, also known as bracketing, I have to “be quiet and still” and suppress my own thoughts, ideas, and investments in what their behavior or emotions represent to me, or how they might be classified within the scope of some diagnostic criteria. This means suspend my own ideas, perceptions, and projections so that I can objectively and systematically understand the meanings of things as defined and experienced by my students and, in the case of this research, my participants. Within the parliaments of social work this refers to starting where the client is (Coweger, 1994; De Jong & Miller, 1995).

Thus, I approached this research with an ontological assumption that the meaning that my research participants ascribe to events is a better definition of reality for them than I could predict or project from my own beliefs, values, or lived experiences. My approach of viewing the meanings of reality through the eyes and experiences of the participants, my ontological assumption, is aligned hand-in-glove with Kurt Lewin’s (1946/1951) concept of life space along with constructivist traditions of inquiry.
Together they demonstrate how this ontological positionality engages within the process of research.

**Ontological positionality engaged: life space and constructivism.**

Life space, according to Lewin (1946/1951) refers to the basic assumption that behavior is a function of both the person and the environment. That is, a person is inseparable from interconnected, interdependent relationships with and within the environment that serve to influence his or her behavior (thoughts, feelings, and actions) through bi-directional interaction. Constructivist traditions refers to the context for interpreting or understanding a person’s behavior as having residence within the meanings that they construct to represent their lived experiences within the social world (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Blumer (1969) refers to this as symbolic interactionism and notes that it is the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences that is of interest to the researcher. For example, behavior viewed in isolation without the context of the person and environment might illuminate the frequency and possibly the intensity of the behavior, but not much that is helpful in the therapeutic process. The therapeutic process, like this research, requires awareness of deeper meanings, of what the behavior represents to participants. My great grandmother’s “hoarding behavior,” for example, could have been interpreted through a lens defining it as negative, as pathology. I knew it to mean something else, something good and wonderful, something generative and reflective of her personal self-actualization (Maslow, 1987/1954). My knowledge of the qualities of this aspect of her existence could not have been established through deductive inquiry, by counting the number of items she collected or the frequency of her shopping excursions.
No diagnostic checklist or taxonomy could describe the rich experience that I had of her generosity, her own self-defined values and ways of being.

**Epistemological positionality: interconnections and related beliefs.**

Epistemological positionality refers to my relationship with the subjects and phenomena being studied. I am a school social worker and, as such, I am a member of the education community. Together, the participants and I are members of a bonded group that is interconnected and united by sharing in a common culture and through our collective efforts, roles, and activities to educate children (Cresswell, 2007). My relationships with the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are established within my life space and informed by both direct and vicarious experiences through bi-directional interactions within this bonded group. To put it another way: I have personally felt the influence of stress from seeing compassion fatigue and burnout root in and take hold among my peers; I have witnessed and experienced the ripple of negative influence associated with these phenomena as they exact tolls on my peers and, by proxy, on my students; My heart has been broken when good teachers, friends and colleagues, have left the field because they lost their compassion, became burnt out, or otherwise fell victim to stress.

My epistemological positionality is thus reflective of my membership within this bonded group and it is also reflective of my role as a school social worker within this group. As a school social worker I am charged with removing barriers to the education of children and lessening the negative impact of environmental stressors on children’s opportunities to learn. Hence, I approached this research with a vested interest tied through my role as a social worker to lessening the negative ripple of influence associated
with these phenomena. I approached this research with hopeful desires of gaining insights useful to safeguarding or improving the emotional wellbeing of teachers in the service of enhancing their relationships with children and, in turn, the learning that occurs through those relationships.

Epistemologically I approached this research as a member of the educational community, a school social worker, a healer, and a helper. My relationships to participants and to the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are hinged by my roles as a school social worker. This means that my approach to practice as a school social worker enters into the relationships with participants and the phenomena through interactions. Therefore it also enters and engages with the research within my epistemological positionality through the experiences and training that inform my approach to the practice of school social work.

My approach to school social work employs a holistic, analytic, and constructivist orientation that is centered and grounded on the golden rule; treat others as you wish to be treated. From this grounding are beliefs that guide my practice. I believe that all children can learn. I believe all teachers have, or have had, love in their hearts for children. I believe there is good in everyone. I believe that behavior (good or bad) communicates as loudly as words. I believe that all behavior is purposive. I believe that all children should have equal opportunities to learn. I believe that quality relationships with students (and their families) are just as important as sound pedagogy and diverse curriculum. I believe that behavior (thoughts, feelings, and action) is connected to both the environment and the people in it. I believe that if we are to understand what a behavior is communicating, we are required to view it analytically through holistic and
contextually sensitive means. I believe that the emotional wellbeing of teachers influences the relationships they have with students. I believe that a teacher who loses the love and joy that comes from teaching is no less painful or tragic than a priest losing faith in God.

I have seen this heartbreak first hand among friends and colleagues as I, helplessly watched and felt the sting of this loss vicariously in my own heart and witnessed the sad ripple of its influence among those connected, including students. This is the distress that I saw that engaged my compassion and love for others, that led me to ask questions about causes and remedies, that guided me to a doctoral program, and informed the reason for this research. This is what informs my epistemological positionality.

Rhetorical positionality.

This auto-ethnographic disclosure of my positionality is intended to afford the reader a window into my soul to establish a measure of integrity for how I fit within the congress of this research. Within this auto-ethnographic disclosure are examples of the ontological, epistemological, and axiological influences that shape my ways of being and inform my approach to this inquiry. Additionally, this statement of positionality also models the rhetorical style that I employ within the scope of this research. Specifically, I include a combination of auto-ethnographic, narrative, and formal register to respectively document my own experiences, the narratives of participants, and contributions by other researchers and scholars.
Methodological positionality.

With respect to the final philosophical assumption, my methodological approach mirrors the approach I employ when working with children (minus the interventions). It is a phenomenological exploratory approach that champions the inductive exploration of the lived experiences among study participants. It incorporates a constructivist orientation that honors the meanings that participants assign to represent the things and events they have encountered in the social world. My methodological approach employs sensitivity to the life space among participants in order to establish rich contextual understandings of their experience of stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and elements within the environment that mediate the strength of influence among these phenomena.

Methods

Research Paradigm

This research is an exploration the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among educators and special educators. Little research exists that explores compassion fatigue among educators and special educators. This study was designed to be exploratory, utilizing a qualitative research paradigm in order to gain insights to the unique experiences of these phenomena among the participants. A qualitative research paradigm was selected for this research because it well suited to both the topic of inquiry and the participants. That is, it afforded an opportunity for inductive holistic exploration of phenomena that is socially situated and sensitive to contextual influences including the interrelated and interdependent relationships between person, environment, and behavior (Creswell, 2007; Lewin, 1946/1951). In addition, the qualitative research paradigm affords flexibility to accommodate a reflexive or emerging research design (Cresswell,
A quantitative paradigm was not selected because of the limiting nature of deductive inquiry that is central to that approach (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

**Phenomenological exploratory inquiry.**

There are different traditions of qualitative research and the one that best fit the nature of the subject matter and participants was a phenomenological exploration of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. That is, how stress and these related phenomena were experienced by participants through the interdependent relationships between person, environment, and behavior within the social world. The phenomenological approach allowed holistic insights to the lived experiences among participants uncorrupted by interpretation, classification, or other organizational taxonomizing practices (Van Manen, 1990). It allowed a view into the life space of individual participants where behavior could be understood as a function of the person and the environment (Lewin, 1946/1951). Stated differently, it allowed insight to the meanings that participants had constructed to represent their experiences within the social world that served to inform, through interpretive processes, their behavior (Blumer, 1969).

**Elements of Inquiry**

This study is a phenomenological exploration of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among educators. Specific elements of inquiry were drawn from the conceptual framework and broad research questions to establish a foundation of inquiry. Additionally, the participants themselves are the primary source of investigation and therefore constitute an element of inquiry. The central elements of inquiry, the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, have already been described in detail but benefit further from operational alignment with the research paradigm. The
experience of these phenomena among participants and the meanings that participants
assign to these experiences are of central concern. In order to make clear the salient
value of participant experiences of these phenomena, additional elements of inquiry must
be operationally defined. To this end, the principal elements of inquiry requiring
operational definition include: behavior; stress compassion fatigue, and burnout;
environment; and educators as a bonded group.

**Behavior.**

Behavior, with respect to this study, is considered to include thoughts, feelings
and directed actions (Lewin, 1946/1951), all of which are involved in the experience of
stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Figley, 1999/1995; Maslach, 2003). Stress,
compassion fatigue, and burnout are manifestations of psychological processes that are
situated within the context of the relationships between human beings and their
environment (Heft, 2001). Both Heft (2001) and Lewin (1946/1951) assert that behavior,
as defined here, is a manifestation of psychological processes and should be examined
holistically with inclusion of contextual linkages. Their assertion aligns with a
qualitative approach to exploring the phenomena of stress, burnout, and compassion
fatigue as behavior linked to the lived experiences in connection to the relationships the
person has with and within the environment.

**Stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.**

With respect to compassion fatigue and burnout, they are both described with
relation to stress as the products of an accumulation of stress that exceeds an individual’s
coping resources. They are, therefore, contributors to a state of negative emotional
wellbeing (Figley, 1999/1995; Maslach, 2003; Schaufeli, et al., 2009). The syndrome of
physiological, emotional and behavioral symptoms associated with compassion fatigue and burnout (e.g., emotional distancing, depersonalization, social avoidance, etc) might be described in terms of their utility for protecting the individual from further emotional injury and, as such, can be considered as strategies for coping (Lazarus, 1993), or defending against threats to the individual’s emotional wellbeing (e.g., sense of emotional safety) (Maslow, 1987, 2011).

Conceptualizing stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout as elements of negative emotional wellbeing, with wellbeing considered as a continuum, brings into focus the utility of including positive emotional wellbeing as an important element of holistic exploration within the scope of this study. In other words, the absence of compassion fatigue and burnout in the presence of stress among educators and special educators offers opportunities to explore environmental conditions or elements along with coping strategies that contribute to positive emotional wellbeing. This, then, might serve as insight to potential mediators of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. The qualitative approach employed in this study allowed for an in-depth analytic exploration of both negative and positive emotional wellbeing, considered as situated phenomena (Heft, 2001) within the context of life space (Lewin, 1946/1951), as explored through the tradition of phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 2007).

**Environment.**

Environment, for the purpose of this study, is considered to include elements that are influenced by, and levy influence onto, the individual within the course of social congress through bi-directional relationships (Lewin, 1946/1951). In other words, environment is the social world within which the person exists. Environmental
influences include, but are not limited to, people, places, situated activities, events, cultural values and beliefs, laws, rules, procedures, organizational structures, and discourse (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005).

**Levels of environmental influence.**

The environment itself can be conceptualized as multifaceted interdependent concentric circles with each circle representing differing intensities of influence on the individual. For example, the most influential level of the environment, the micro-system level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005), includes influences ported through direct contact within interpersonal relationships and activities involving the teacher’s significant others such as family, friends, colleagues, and pupils.

The next layer, the meso-system level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005), includes influences that occur through the interdependencies between the teacher and places such as home, neighborhood, school, and community. Teachers who work within impoverished communities, for example, may have to rely on parents or other helpers to aid in the remediation of school readiness skills that are not factors within wealthier communities where children enter school with requisite skills and expanded funds of language and knowledge.

The exo-system level of the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) includes the influences that are levied back and forth between settings by virtue of their interconnectedness that indirectly influence the teacher. For example, the exo-system might include indirect influences on the teacher that result from interconnected economic conditions. The recent recession, for example, contributed to job losses within the community that impacted the housing market with a spike in foreclosures resulting in a
decline in home values. The decline in home values resulted in a lessening of property
tax revenue and, consequently, a reduction in funding for financial and material resources
for the school.

The outer ring of the concentric circles is the macro-system level of environment
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) and includes indirect influences on the teacher from
societal beliefs and values reflected by cultural, political, ideological, or discursive ethos
that are ported within and among all other levels of the environment that comprise the
social world. Fairclough (2003), for example, in describing discourse asserts that,
“language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other
elements of social life, so that the social analysis and research always has to take account
of language” (p. 2). Irregularities from too many erasures among score sheets on
standardized testing might, for example, be characterized by the media as scandalous and
thereby, indirectly implicate teachers as scandalous serving to inform or reflect public
opinion about teachers and, by proxy, the value of their craft. Thus the discourse about
teachers and testing may weigh influence onto teachers through direct or indirect
engagement with the discourse. Direct engagement with the discourse, for example,
might include stress or other emotional impacts that this kind of characterization has on
the teacher. Indirect engagement with the discourse, in this instance, may include
inspection and control measures layered onto the testing process in response to the
speculative scandal by agents within and outside the schools.

Within this study, a holistic perspective on teacher stress, compassion fatigue, and
burnout, required the exploration of contextual influences ported from elements of the
environment. The complex nature of contextual environmental influences on educators
and the congress of teaching and learning demand a qualitative approach. The
phenomenological tradition of qualitative inquiry was well suited to this study’s
exploration of the unique and diverse meanings that individuals construct to represent the
lived experiences within the environments that establish the social world (Blumer, 1969;

**Educators as a bonded group.**

The participants in this study are the primary source of inquiry. All of the
participants in this study were engaged in educational activities with students served
through special education for a wide range of disabilities and, by virtue of membership
within a common field and engaged in similar activities, these participants are considered
as a culture-sharing, or bonded, group (Creswell, 2007). All participants in this study
were drawn from four schools within a single urban school district in the Southern United
States that is adjacent to a large metropolitan area.

This study is phenomenological and exploratory in nature and queried the
phenomena of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue within this bonded group. The
contributions drawn from participants are organized into ethnographic narratives
representing the group’s collective story (Richardson, 1990). Ethnography is a specific
methodological strategy within qualitative research that refers to in-depth and rich
descriptions of culture or aspects of culture (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Wiersma & Jurs,
2009). Collective story refers to a narrative voice illuminating the story of a group that
has been silenced or otherwise marginalized (Richardson, 1990). This term is used in
reference to educators and special educators as a reflection of the scarcity of research
telling the story of compassion fatigue among educators and, in particular, special
educators. The use of narratives is also a specific methodological strategy within qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

**Research Questions**

The aim of this study was to explore the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among educators and special educators. Since stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue are phenomena that are contextually situated within the influences derived through interaction between persons and their environment, the research questions, then, were designed to explore these phenomena with sensitivity to those interactions (Heft, 2001; Lewin, 1946/1951; Maxwell, 2005). The research questions for this study include:

1. How do educators cope with stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout?
   a. How do environmental elements interact with educator stress?
   b. How do environmental elements interact with educator compassion fatigue, and burnout?
   c. How does the culture or climate of the school interact with educator stress?
   d. How does the culture or climate of the school interact with educator compassion fatigue, and burnout?

2. What elements exist that mediate educator stress in service of emotional wellbeing?
Sampling Procedures

Accessing Participants

Participants for this study were drawn from a convenience sample from within four schools located in a single urban school district in the Southern United States adjacent to a large metropolitan area. The measures for accessing research participants within this district began with submission of a research proposal to the Department of Research and Development within the district. The proposal was reviewed and approved by a committee of evaluators at the district level thereby granting permission to approach individual building principals to obtain permission to conduct research at the building level. For the purpose of this study, schools were selected strategically to include a sample of large and small schools that afforded a range of special education service delivery models including self-contained, resource, and co-teaching models serving students in grades ranging from kindergarten through high school. The schools that were selected included schools within which I have had working relationships with various staff members through current or previous work as a school social worker. Within qualitative research the researcher’s relationships with participants is an important element in gaining access and establishing trust (Maxwell, 2005). Inclusion of schools within which I was familiar as a helper facilitated easier access to participants and the rapport building that is necessary for qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

I met with building principals and provided them with a written and verbal overview of the proposed research along with a district generated local site authorization form. Each principal signed the local site authorization providing consent for the research to be conducted within his or her school. The local site authorization forms
were turned into the district Department of Research and Development prior to data collection per the district guidelines for research. In a locked location that was separate from any data that was collected, I maintained a copy of the local site authorization forms.

After gaining building principal permissions, I scheduled a time to present the study to staff. Within these presentations, I provided an overview of the research project including what was to be asked of participants and the possible benefits to the educational community that were anticipated from the research. Participation was invited from all educators present during the meetings. Staff members interested in participating were provided with a written overview of the study along with an informed consent form to be signed and returned. The informed consent form explained the measures of confidentiality and explicitly stated that participants could terminate participation in the study at any time without penalty. In each presentation there were an abundance of educators that indicated initial interest and took consent forms and written overviews of the study. Over 75 consent forms were handed out during the meetings with potential participants.

**Applying reflexive study design to participant recruitment.**

The study was initially intended to target general educators and special educators to be participants. Given the abundant interest in participation among a much broader array of educators than the initial target participant types, a reflexive study design was employed to accommodate the emergence of a broader collection of participant types. This was executed to capture a potentially richer and more holistic collective story. There were 25 educators that returned consent forms and agreed to participate in the
study. The signed informed consent forms were maintained in a locked location separate from any data that was collected. One participant signed a consent form but asked if he could provide written contributions rather than participate in the focus groups or individual interviews because of conflicts with a second job. I provided him with the journal prompts and invited him to contribute to that part of the study. He later elected to drop out of the study after previewing the questions that would be asked. He apologetically indicated that he could not continue with participation because the questions regarding stress that he felt as an educator caused him to reflect on his dissatisfaction with being in the education field and served as motivation for him to establish a plan to pursue his preferred career opportunities. He later followed up to report his positive progress on actualizing his career goals outside of the field of education.

Participants that remained included 24 educators drawn from four schools and represented an array of 10 different participant types including: six self-contained special education teachers, two self-contained special education para-professionals, six special education co-teachers, one special education resource teacher, one general education co-teacher, one lead special education teacher, three school counselors, one assistant principal, two special education instructional change coaches, and one principal. There were seventeen female and seven male participants and the number of years of experience among participants ranged from two to forty-three years.
Study Design

Data Collection

Within qualitative research it is important to establish consistency among the findings. This is often accomplished by drawing data from multiple sources to establish that findings or emergent themes occur across the data sources (Merriam, 2009). This is sometimes referred to as triangulation or qualitative cross-validation (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). This study explored psychological phenomena (stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout) that are situated within the context of the relationship between the person and his or her environment (Heft, 2001; Lewin, 1946/1951). Lewin (1946/1951) refers to this as a person’s life space which includes the interconnected relationships between a person, environment, and behavior that were explored within the present study. Life space reflects a highly personal and individually unique relationship for each participant, their situation, the environments with and within which they interact, and it is sensitive to the changing nature of environmental demands or influences. That is to say, for example, that a particularly stressful day might influence a participant’s responses on that day. In order to accommodate the need for internal consistency among emergent themes or findings with sensitivity to the life space of participants, data was collected from multiple sources including focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and prompted journaling.

Focus groups.

Three focus groups were conducted as a part of this study. Audio recordings of the focus group sessions were made and I transcribed them into verbatim written text on the same day that the respective focus groups were conducted. The focus groups were conducted within the familiar surroundings of each school that participants were
employed. These sessions were conducted after students had left for the day so as to reduce the opportunity for distractions among members. I collaborated with the building principal to find a location within the building that was private and could accommodate the focus group. Measures were taken to ensure that focus group sessions were not interrupted. In order to allow freedom of expression without potential consequences or challenges to the working relationships between teachers and supervisors, the supervisors of participants were not be allowed to participate in, or observe, the focus groups. In addition, any contributions made to the research by participants of the focus group or any other part of the study are written into findings in such a way that the identity of the participant was not tied to the contributions. Participants were not named or were assigned different names in writings generated from the research. All data collected from focus groups and all other aspects of the study were kept in a locked location separate from any of the schools and separate from consent forms.

The focus groups were guided by scripted questions that explored the teachers’ relationships with stress and the environment or ecology of the school (Appendix A). The focus group questions were scaffolded by a central premise within the conceptual framework of this research that behavior is a function of the person and the environment (Lewin, 1946/1951). Behavior is operationally defined as thoughts, feelings and actions, which include the teachers’ coping strategies and their emotional, cognitive, and physiological experiences of stress. With this in mind, questions were designed to explore teachers’ perceptions of sources of stress, the relationship between stress and the culture or climate of the learning environment, the relationship between stress and the practice of teaching, and the relationship of stress and the teacher-student relationship. In
addition, significant features of compassion related stress and burnout include emotional exhaustion, distancing behaviors, and physiological responses (Bride, Robinson, Yegidis, & Figley, 2004; Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003). To accommodate exploration of compassion related stress and burnout, focus group questions also queried the experience of symptoms related to these phenomena, means of coping, and the availability of supports to lessen or relieve these symptoms. Finally, with consideration that compassion related stress and burnout are indicators of negative wellbeing (Figley, 1999; Schaufeli, et al., 2009), participants were asked to describe features of the environment that influenced their emotional wellbeing positively. Environment, for the purpose of the focus group queries, was defined simply as the world “outside a person’s skin” (Barker, 1968, p. 6) including people, places, situated activities, events, cultural values and beliefs, laws, rules, procedures, organizational structures, and discourse (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

**Semi-structured individual interviews.**

The semi-structured individual interview questions (Appendix B) for this research were designed to explore aspects of positive and negative emotional wellbeing. There were 15 participants that were interviewed for this data source within the research. The nature of the questions elicited information regarding the relationship of these states to environmental elements and coping strategies. The organization of questions was intentional and began with a relatively benign question regarding what drew the teacher to the field of education. The simplicity and benign nature of this question was intended to establish rapport and a foundational description of the teacher’s initial motivations. This question also follows Lewin’s (1946/1951) assertion that influence on a person’s life
space includes past experiences, present situations, and future goals simultaneously. The second question asked the teacher about an interaction with a student or significant other person from the course of their experience as an educator that stood out as particularly meaningful, or as a source of pride. This question was also intended to facilitate rapport while additionally establishing that the teacher has had positive experiences in the course of teaching. The interviews then progressed to questions about current students, sources of stress, responses to stress (cognitive, emotional, and physiological), symptoms of compassion related stress or burnout, and coping strategies. The interviews concluded with questions that were future focused, designed to elicit projective ideas from the teacher about what might be helpful regarding stress. Each of the individual semi-structured interviews was audio recorded and transcribed into verbatim written text on the same day as the interview.

**Prompted journal writings.**

The third source of data was prompted journal writings. Teachers were asked to work on these writings individually and to refrain from sharing their responses with other participants in order to avoid influencing or corrupting other participant’s contributions. Given the high demands on time among teachers (Piotrowski & Plash, 2006), they were given eight weeks to complete the journals and were afforded flexibility to do them over the course of a single weekend or to space them out over the course of the eight weeks. Participants were welcomed to add any additional entries of their choosing regarding teacher emotional wellbeing that they felt would be helpful to the researcher or the broader educational community.
As in the focus group and semi-structured interviews, the journal prompts included a scope of inquiry that attended to positive and negative emotional wellbeing, stress, coping, and support elements. The prompts were different from, but intentionally aligned with, themes that were included within the focus group and semi-structured interview queries. The purpose of this alignment was to support consistency across the data sources. The journal prompts (Appendix C) were open ended to afford flexible, personal, and rich responses.

With respect to participation in writing the journals, eight participants that were interviewed during the semi-structured individual interviews agreed to contribute journal writings to the study. The other seven interviewees limited their participation to the interviews. In addition to the eight interview participants, two additional participants offered to contribute journal writings to the study. I offered to provide writing tablets along with printed copies of the journal prompts, but in each instance the participants indicated that they would prefer using word processing programs on their personal computers. I conducted weekly follow-up with each of the 10 participants that agreed to contribute journal writings for a period of eight weeks in order to manage and collect the journal writings. During the eight weeks that participants had to complete the journals, five participants indicated that the paperwork demands of the job had become so stressful that they would not be able to complete their journal writings for the research. One additional participant indicated that she had completed the journal writings but her computer became infected with a virus and the document was unrecoverable. Apologetically she indicated that she would not be able to re-create the writings given the demands on her time from paperwork and other school related duties. Hence, of the
initial 10 participants that agreed to the journal writings, four were able to contribute to this part of the study.

Data Analysis

Analysis Overview: Funnel Approach to Systematic Distillation of Data

This study explored participant experiences of the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. These phenomena are situated within the context of the educators’ interconnected relationships with and within the environment (Heft, 2001). In order to analyze data collected regarding these phenomena, contextual variables were included within the analysis in order to provide a holistic account of the meanings that participants constructed to represent their experiences (Blumer, 1969; Heft, 2001; Lewin, 1946/1951). In addition, these phenomena are described as features contributing to a state of negative emotional wellbeing (Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003) and, for the purpose of this research, their absence was considered an indicator of positive wellbeing. Hence, to thoroughly explore these phenomena, analysis attended to the interconnected bi-directional relationships between the person, the environment, and behavior (Lewin, 1946/1951).

The data sources within this study included materials from the focus group, individual semi-structured interviews, participant journal writings, researcher reflections, and memos. In order to facilitate data management and analysis, the computer program Atlas TI was used. Atlas TI is a computer software application that allows for the storage, organization, classification, coding, management, and analysis of qualitative data (Wiesrma & Jurs, 2009). Within this electronic software environment are tools to assist with coding, organizing coded data by families, diagramming conceptual links among
themes, annotating memos, and identifying the emergent themes (Creswell, 2007). In short, it provides a platform and tools to conduct interpretive, or hermeneutic, analysis of large sets of qualitative data within a virtual environment (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Transcripts from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews, along with the journal entries, researcher reflections, and memos were uploaded into the Atlas TI environment as the primary source documents for analysis.

Within the Atlas TI environment, a funnel approach of analysis was employed. In simplified terms, the funnel approach, according to Wiesrma and Jurs (2009), is a method of data analysis that begins with examining data within the scope of the general research questions that guide the study and, through a progressive series of analysis, narrows the scope to specific phenomena, emergent themes, and focused conclusions. This study explored the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue and burnout as experienced by participants. All participants are educators and, while they represent a broad array of different job types, they are considered to be members of a common bonded group by virtue of their work with students and common experiences from within the congress of teaching and learning (Merriam, 2009). As a bonded group, their narratives coalesce to form a collective story within themes that emerged through the process of data analysis (Richardson, 1990).

The analysis of the data for this research involved a progressive process of examining and re-examining the data through emersion within deeper and deeper levels of exploration. While data analysis was conducted systematically, the process was not linear. Data analysis involved frequent revisiting of the primary source documents, quotations within the primary source documents, codes, and the memos that were written
during analysis that documented the process. The first level of analysis was the processing of epoch.

**Processing of researcher epoch.**

Processing epoch, the first level of analysis, involved listening to the audio recordings to facilitate a gestalt experience of each interview and/or focus group. This was done within hours of the conclusion of each interview or focus group. The immediacy of listening to the audio files within such a short time allowed recall of details within the interactions between participants, and with me, that were not captured by the audio recordings. In addition, this activity facilitated recall of thoughts or assumptions that occurred to me while I was conducting the interviews. The value of this first listening was to capture and process my initial epoch in response to the gestalt experience of reflexive listening through a process of reflection, writing memos, or a combination of the two.

Processing epoch refers to levying controls onto my experiences with the phenomena through deliberate efforts to document and then suppress any preconceived ideas or judgments from being projected onto participant contributions during interpretive analysis (Husserl, 1973/1948). In essence this is akin to actively engaging, through deliberate processes, what my grandmother taught me: “Be quiet and still,” in order to suppress my own thoughts, ideas, and investments in what the participants’ narratives represent to me. To divorce myself from my own automatic cognitive processes that would otherwise inform my view of the phenomena from my own personal frame of reference, my own reality. “Be quiet and still,” so that I might “really see” the phenomena that participants described as they saw it (Moustakas, 1994). By beginning
the progressive levels of analysis with attention to processing epoch, I aligned the process with Van Manen’s (1990) suggestion of using personal experience (epoche) as a starting point for phenomenological exploration. This research is an exploration of the educator’s lived experience with the intention to, in the words of Van Manen (1990, p. 9), “…gain insightful descriptions of the way we [educators] experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it.”

The processing of epoch continued during the transcription of the audio recordings into verbatim text. Transcription of audio recordings was completed within 24 hours of each interview or focus group. I utilized a Sony digital audio recorder to capture audio recordings of the interviews and focus groups. The Sony digital recorder was then connected to the computer and I used Sony Scientific Software to transcribe the audio files manually. The Sony Scientific Software is a computer program that interfaces with the digital recorder and allowed for the slowing down of the audio playback to a pace that was consistent with my typing speed. Thereby I listened to the audio files at a reduced playback speed and typed them into verbatim text. This software also allows the audio file to be marked, paused, backed up, or advanced. During the course of verbatim transcription, epoch was processed intermittently by pausing the software and transcription process to allow for writing reflections and or memos to address my thoughts, reactions, biases, or assumptions in connection to the data being captured. The transcription process, therefore, was an engaging and interactive activity rather than a rote mechanical exercise.

Upon completion of the transcription of audio recordings into verbatim text, the text files were loaded into a computer software program named Atlas TI as primary
source documents, and the audio recordings were loaded into my ipod, a digital playback device. I then continued emersion within the data by playing all or parts of audio recordings of interviews or focus groups while driving to and from work. This permitted opportunities to reflect on the process of interviews and focus groups, questions for participants, the data itself, and my epoch. This also served to keep the data alive and fresh throughout the data collection period.

Coding.

Once the data collection process was complete and all primary source documents (focus group transcripts, individual semi-structured interview transcripts, and journal writings, researcher reflections and memos) were loaded into the computer software program Atlas TI, I established an initial code list of umbrella codes. This was accomplished by a process of re-reading all primary source documents for an overall cumulative gestalt experience of the collected data while making notes of potential codes. I also reviewed the conceptual framework, literature review, purpose of research, and research questions while noting potential codes. The umbrella codes that were developed from this review included key descriptors reflecting elements of the conceptual framework, the broad guiding research questions, and key textural elements that emerged in the initial readings of the collected data. In addition, three codes for basic information about participants (male, female, years of service) were also included in this group of umbrella codes in order to collect this information during the first level of coding.

Initial umbrella codes.

Initial umbrella codes aligned with the broad guiding research questions included elements such as stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, stress management, rewards,
positive elements, negative elements, collegial stress, and collegial support. Initial umbrella codes aligned with the conceptual framework included elements such as bi-directional influence, culture-climate, government, relationship, structures, family, and student. Initial umbrella codes aligned textural elements drawn from the initial readings of primary source documents include contextual elements such as administrators, curriculum, draw to field, thinking of leaving, training, and voice for positive change. In addition to the umbrella codes aligned with the conceptual framework, broad research questions, and textural elements, additional umbrella codes were added in vivo during the first level of coding that included elements such as advice for new teachers, learned helplessness, regular education, special education, significant statements, and resources. In total, there were 29 initial umbrella codes identified for the first level of coding. To return to the funnel metaphor of data analysis (Wiesrma & Jurs, 2009), these 29 initial umbrella codes constitute the broadest part of the funnel and were aimed at gathering and codifying broad and large groups of similar data for further examination and analysis in subsequent levels of coding.

I then read all of the primary source documents that had been uploaded into Atlas TI again and, during this reading, linked salient quotations from the text to one or more of the initial umbrella codes. Hence, I coded the primary source documents with the initial 29 umbrella codes. Within the virtual environment of Atlas TI are tools to name each quote in order to capture the essential meaning of the quote. I then reviewed each quotation captured during the initial coding and named them to succinctly identify the essential idea within each quote.
Funnels within the funnel: conceptual links and logical groupings.

The next level of analysis included constructing a list of significant statements (Moustakas, 1994) or the common expressions linked to the phenomena from within the data (Van Manen, 1990). This is akin to, but broader than, the individual codes for significant statements. That is, within each of the initial 29 umbrella codes (including the initial umbrella code named “significant statements”), there were important common expressions that were examined. These specific statements were organized and explored for the meaning that they represent to the participants (Creswell, 2007) and aligned to logical groupings of like themes, or common expressions. The quotations under each umbrella code were then diagrammed, moved around, paired, and linked to one another to form logical conceptual groupings. Each of the 29 initial umbrella codes was processed individually in this level of analysis.

The emergent logical groupings of quotations within the initial umbrella codes were then assigned and linked to new codes to capture and organize the essential thematic and textural elements of the grouped quotations. This level of analysis also included a review of the goodness of fit between the codes and the quotations linked to them. Quotations that were superfluous were un-linked and removed. A memo was then created documenting the salient themes within the larger umbrella code, the story that the larger umbrella code captured along with the story of each of the newly created codes affixed to the emergent logical contextual groupings. This memo created a history, or narrative map, of how the new codes were established and the rationale involved. Hence, a funnel approach of analysis was applied to each of the initial umbrella codes to distill the content under each initial umbrella code down to the smallest salient themes. This
resulted in an expansion of the number of codes from the 29 initial umbrella codes to a total of 122 descriptive codes (including the original 29).

*Expansion of the code list and subsequent integration to emergent themes.*

While seemingly counterintuitive to the data analysis metaphor of distilling data through a funnel, the expansion of the code list does not mean, however, that the funnel expanded. Rather, the data within the funnel for each umbrella code had been organized for further distilling through additional analysis. The new codes capturing the salient themes were then analyzed to determine families of codes containing quotations of like, collaborating, or complimenting content. This level of analysis aligns with Lewin’s (1946/1951) concept of life space in that it included a holistic examination of the interaction and bi-directional influence between person, environment, and behavior. The codes were examined and grouped for contextual alignment of content. This process resulted in the distilling of the data down to seven groupings of like content that constitute the emergent themes. They are as follows:

1. Draw to field.
2. Distant from decisions, the educator’s place within the world.
3. Sourness in relationships.
4. The whittling away of individualized education.
5. Erosion of educator resolve: stress compassion fatigue, and burnout.
6. Keeping stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout situated and molecular.
7. Advice for new teachers.
Focused conclusions

From the meanings within each of these emergent themes, written descriptions are drawn to illuminate what the participants have experienced relative to the phenomena including verbatim narratives from participant contributions to the data (Moustakas, 1994). This informs writing that describes the gestalt of the participant experience along with the context within which it occurred. Hence, the resultant themes constitute the findings that inform the collective story for this bonded group of educators in relation to their experience of the phenomena of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Richardson, 1990).

Validity

Building a Foundation of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, validity refers to the believability or trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Within the scope of this study, there were deeply set personal motivations to establish validity. Among them included a desire to understand educator experience of these phenomena with a goal of finding ways to mediate or lessen the negative ripple of their influence. While this was and remains a personal interest, it was also hoped that the results here would aid other helpers, healers or educational leaders as they draw from this work to engage with potential beneficiaries of these understandings and findings in their own circles.

With respect to establishing validity, there is no shopping list of methodological strategies that will ensure the absolute validity of qualitative research findings (Maxwell, 2005). My goal, then, was to establish a foundation within the description of all aspects of the study that affords a level of credible trust for the understandings that arose from the
research. Within this study, this was conceptualized as the strength of a curriculum of coalesced influences that inform understandings of relationships that exist between educators, their environments, and dispositions of emotional wellbeing including the negative states associated with stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. The influences described are reflexive in that they interact with the external reader of this research and therefore establishing validity requires consideration of whether or not the findings will be logical and believable to someone outside the worlds of the researcher and participants.

**Positionality and epoch.**

Within the present work, several methods or strategies were woven in to the fabric of the study to aid in establishing validity. Maxwell (2005) describes researcher bias as a threat to validity. One measure to address this bias was to inform the audience of my positionality as a researcher. This allows the reader insight to the philosophical assumptions that interacted with my lens as a researcher (Creswell, 2007). Transparency of positionality to the reader is not the end of efforts to address researcher bias. In addition to this measure, this study also includes what Van Manen (1990) refers to as exploring the researcher’s pedagogy of a theme. This involved reflexive reflection of the essence of a phenomena and my experience of it in relation to the meaning assigned to it by participants. Specific activities within the present study that support the ongoing reflective analysis of my pedagogy, or bias, include writing researcher reflections, memos, and starting the analysis by processing epoch. That is, writing of personal experiences of the phenomena in order to set aside these experiences and establish what
Husserl (1973/1948) refers to as the processing of epoche, or suspension of personal judgments or beliefs about phenomena in order to see it as others see it.

**Triangulation**

Within the construction of the study there were also measures to establish validity through triangulation of data. Wolcott (2009) describes triangulating data as a process of including data from multiple sources. Triangulation was accomplished in this study by including data from focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and prompted journal writings. Including data from multiple sources strengthens the data by lessening the likelihood of incidental themes serving as informant to overall emergent themes within the findings (Van Manen, 1990).

There were three sources of data in this study and the clearest triangulation occurs when the code is present across all data sources: Focus Groups, Individual Interviews, and Journal Prompts. When this study was developed, it was targeted toward special education teachers as being the primary participant pool. As data collection began, it was clear that other participant types wanted to contribute and have their stories included and, given that this is where the data was leading, additional participant types were added. Hence the sample was expanded to accommodate a fuller and more robust collective story. The added participants provide a second means through which to view triangulation. That is, triangulation across participant types. In all there were 10 participant types that contributed data to this research. This includes educators from a wide array of positions ranging from para-professional teacher to principal. This second means of triangulation was applied for codes that did not meet the threshold of
triangulation across all three data sources but had two of the sources and also had five or more of the 10 participant types represented.

These two methods of triangulation offer an additional benefit of strength of triangulation. The strongest triangulation included codes that exist across all data sources and all participant types. The next strongest level of triangulation included codes that exist across all data sources and a wide array (five or more) of participant types. The next strongest level of triangulation included codes that exist over two data sources and a wide array of participant types.

**Member Checking and Peer Review**

Two additional strategies that were employed that have not been discussed thus far are member checking and peer review. Member checking is also referred to as respondent validation and it is a process by which input is sought from participants regarding whether or not the emergent themes accurately represented the meanings that they intended (Merriam, 2009). This allowed for checking to make sure that the participant’s contributions were understood accurately and not misinterpreted in the findings (Creswell, 2007).

Within the present study, participants were asked for feedback to make sure that their contributions were accurately represented in the research on more than one occasion in various phases of analysis. During the interviews and focus group sessions a questioning style was used that mirrored back what participants said from time to time to gain clarity. In addition, member checking was conducted at various points during the data analysis. During the early stage of data analysis, when the emergent logical groupings within the umbrella codes were established, seven participants were queried to
gain their input on whether or not the quotations within the emergent logical groupings accurately reflected their statements during data collection (Merriam, 2009). All seven of the participants found the emergent logical groupings consistent with their contributions. Member checking was conducted again at the emergence of the overall themes from the data analysis. In this instance, eight participants were engaged in discussion of their contributions and the emergent themes. All eight participants indicated that the seven emergent themes were consistent with their contributions.

Peer review is a process that involves having an individual knowledgeable about the topic, but not involved in the present study, to serve as an outside reviewer. The peer reviewer examines the data and methodology to assess whether or not the findings are reasonable and credible (Merriam, 2009). For this study the research has been conducted within the context of a doctoral dissertation and, as such, peer review has been sought from doctoral committee members who are experts in the field of education, educational research, and narrative writing of qualitative research.

**Limitations**

This study has limitations. Bryant (2004) describes limitations as, “those restrictions created by your methodology” (p. 58). This study has data drawn from focus groups, interviews, and journal writings. These are all brief encounters with the participants that are highly vulnerable to acute environmental influences that might be mediated were the study to be conducted over a longer period of time (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the study drew the data through interactive engagement with the researcher and others within the focus groups, with the researcher in the semi-structured interview, and through independent reflective activity for the journal writings. The interactive and
reflective nature of these activities elicit contributions from participants that may differ from those that might be obtained by observing them in their classrooms or other environments where their actions are less likely to be mediated by memory and other social or cognitive processes. Most noteworthy, this study is limited by the sampling procedures. The sample is drawn from a single school district and as such the data is vulnerable to environmental conditions and systemic idiosyncrasies unique to the district.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations, according to Bryant (2004), “are the factors that prevent you from claiming that your findings are true for all people in all times and places” (p. 57). Bryant (2004) is referring to the factors of the study that impact the generalizability of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Within the present study, the participants are drawn from a single large school district within a large urban metropolitan city in the Southern United States.

Challenges within the district include a declining tax digest due to reduced property values relative to an economic recession. This has produced reductions in pay and resources, downsizing of teaching and support staff, increased class sizes, furlough days, instability within district leadership including the superintendent and board of education, and other processes, structures and practices unique to the district. All of these environmental attributes unique to the district present delimitating factors. Additionally, at the time that the study data was collected, the State in which the district is situated adopted a standardized curriculum, which resulted in a change to the curriculum and curriculum delivery within the district. This presents as a delimitating factor as other districts might not be in the midst of similar changes. Additionally, the
politics and ways of being within Southern culture that interact with, and influence, the participants of this study may not be consistent with other regions and, as such, may be a delimiting factor for this study. Likewise, the school district from which these participants are drawn from may differ by size, resources, student population, leadership, and a by host of other environmental influences that may be unique to the district and thereby be a delimiting feature. The participants themselves may not be a representative sample of all educators, which also presents as a delimiting factor. Finally, social conditions of the present day such as the political climate, recent economic downturn and elevated unemployment, may produce influences on participants that may not be factors in the future and are therefore delimiting characteristics of the present study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical considerations have already been addressed. For example, confidentiality, informed consent, and data management are all aspects of qualitative research that have ethical implications (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Within the study, each participant was provided with a letter of informed consent and a written overview of the study. The letter of informed consent addressed confidentiality by explicitly stating that no identifying information regarding participants or the district will be included in the writing or publication of findings. The letter of informed consent also explicitly stated that participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time without penalty. In addition, the data was maintained in a locked location away from the school. All informed consent documentation, including the local site authorization forms, was kept in a locked location away from the school and separate from any data that was collected.
This study explored stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, which are all phenomena that are psychological in nature. Asking participants to describe their experiences with these phenomena could, in and of itself, be stressful to participants. Within the study, sensitivity to this possibility was incorporated to include methods of reducing the likelihood of emotional injury through disclosure. Within the focus groups, for example, boundaries were established for participants to agree upon before data was collected. This included establishing a focus group agreement whereby participants agree to respect each other’s contributions, to maintain confidentiality regarding what was shared in the focus group, and to treat one another with dignity and respect while engaged in focus group activities. The purpose and potential benefits of the study were also reviewed, assertion that participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time was revisited, and the measures of confidentiality that were to be employed were outlined. A list of community based therapeutic support resources including the local district Employee Assistance Program (EAP) was also created prior to data collection so that it could be made available to participants should they be interested in them or in the event that a need for them arose.

Within the semi-structured interview, the interaction was more intimate which may have been challenging to some participants as they could not remain quiet or rely on others to answer questions. To accommodate any potential stress related to semi-structured individual interview questions, participants were instructed that they had the right to omit any question that was perceived as too difficult to answer or emotionally distressing to them. In addition, the organization of the semi-structured interview questions began with questions that elicited positive experiences and ended with
questions that elicited, empowering, and optimistic, or hopeful questions. Questions regarding stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout were in the middle of the interview protocol. The sandwiching of questions that were potentially more emotionally taxing by less threatening questions allowed building rapport in the beginning and ending on a more positive note. This organization was intentional so that the effects of primacy and recency (Schunk, 2008) were positively controlled for.

Finally, Creswell (2007) includes reciprocity between the researcher and participants as additional ethical consideration. This research would not have been possible without the contributions of participants and as such, the potential benefits of their participation must reciprocate their efforts. This study included within its motivations and purpose, the aim to contribute scholarly research to fill a void in the literature regarding compassion stress among special educators and general educators. It was hoped that this would inform the education community of the nature of this phenomena, its impact on stakeholders, and ways to lessen negative outcomes for educators in general. In addition, this research sought understanding of educator experiences of the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout in service of finding ways to lessen or mediate the negative outcomes associated with them. One participant remarked that the experience of “going down memory lane” to recall various aspects of his teaching career was positive, helpful, and therapeutic. He suggested that everyone should be afforded this opportunity, particularly during stressful times. To this end, I will offer to apply understandings from this research in a workshop format for educators that will be offered to the principals of each school that authorized research. Additionally, this workshop will be offered to the social work department within the
district so that they may offer delivery of these understandings to each of their schools and thereby potentially distributing understandings gained from this research to the entire school district.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In author, poet, and therapist Virginia Satir’s (1970) poem titled “Self Esteem,” she writes of the uniqueness of individuals as she champions a grounded healthy sense of self-esteem and positive emotional wellbeing. The following excerpt is from the beginning of her poem and eloquently introduces a central tenet from the conceptual framework for this study, life space (Lewin, 1946/1951); a tenet that is infused throughout all aspects of this study including the results.

I am me.

In all the world,

there is no one else exactly like me-

everything that comes out of me is authentically mine…(Satir, 1970)

Life Space refers to the notion that behavior is a function of the person and environment mediated by time; the calculus for this is $B=f(P,E)=LSp$ (Lewin, 1946/1951). Time interacts within the life space through simultaneous influences from past and present experiences along with future wishes, goals, and desires (Lewin, 1942, 1943/1951). As Satir (1970) points out value within the uniqueness of individuals in her poem, life space illuminates the value inherent within the unique experience of individuals through their interactions with the social world -past, present, and future.

The term “social world” is a reference to environment and, within the context of this study, it was delineated further to compliment Lewin’s concept of life space (1943/1951) through alignment with Bronfenbrenner’s Model of Ecological Development (1979, 2005). In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 2005) model, the environment is viewed as a
series of four concentric circles, each levying a different intensity of influence onto the
individual’s life space through interactive distance. The most intense influence is ported
in to the individual’s life space within the micro-system level of the social world through
the vehicles of interpersonal relationships, roles, or activities with other people. In the
next circle, the meso-system, the vehicle is the interaction with the person and primary
interrelated settings such as home, school, and community. This is followed by the exo-
system, which includes indirect influence on the person from elements that influence his
or her primary settings. Finally, the macro-system level of influence includes culture,
discourse, beliefs, or ideology that may exert influence on all other levels of the social
world either through direct or indirect interaction.

The calculus of life space broadly encompasses elements of the richly complex
environment, attributes of the person, the interaction between person and environment,
and those thoughts, feelings, and directed actions that comprise the person’s behavior.
Life space, then, informs the voice among participants as they describe their unique
experiences with stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and mediating elements. These are
the elements that were qualitatively studied through phenomenological exploratory
methods by the present work. The purpose of the study was to explore these phenomena
while also seeking insights that might be used to lessen or remove their negative
influence on teachers, students, and the congress of teaching and learning.

The results herein are the product of distilling data from the contributions of 24
participants. These results were arrived at through multiple levels of systematic,
progressive analysis with sensitivity to life space. The results explore the stories of what
drew educators to the field, experiences they have had once there, what sustains them,
and what they would want new teachers to know. These stories are revealed through 7 emergent themes arrived at through analysis and representing the collective voice among participants.

The first theme is “Draw to the field.” This is followed by four interconnected themes related to stress: “Distant from decisions, the educator’s place within the world;” “Sourness in relationships;” “The whittling away of individualized education;” and “Erosion of educator resolve: stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.” The sixth theme is “Keeping stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout situated and molecular,” and the final theme is “Advice for new teachers.” The themes, presented as results here, include descriptive narration, quotes from participants, and linkages drawn to elements of life space, including the different levels of environmental influence. The results are presented here with minimal researcher interpretation. This is intentional, to afford the reader contact with data content and an opportunity to engage reflexively.

**Draw to the Field**

Draw to the field explores the story of how participants found their way to the field of education. Some of them began their journey in early childhood. For example, an assistant principal who was formerly an elementary school teacher and reading specialist describes wanting to be a teacher as a young child:

> I’ve always wanted to do this, I studied all my teachers, I could probably tell you about every teacher I had. Of course, my father didn’t want me to do this, he wanted me to be a doctor so he never bought me chalk or a chalkboard or that stuff… My mother kept telling him that she’s going to be a teacher.

Another participant who works as a special education self-contained teacher describes his
desire to be a teacher throughout his education:

I have always seen myself as a teacher, I’ve always thought about teaching, even in elementary, middle, and high school I did. In high school I got an opportunity to be a teacher cadet. So I actually was a teacher half of a day as a senior.

A seasoned school counselor and former special education teacher with 43 years experience describes how the nurture she felt from a young student teacher when she was a child helped inspire her to come to the field:

Being a child that would have been most likely to not succeed [emphasis original], I, in elementary school, I just didn’t feel like there was a lot of attention paid to me. I was real shy but I had this student teacher to come in and she really did take up time with me and showed some interest. I was in third grade. I will never forget it. So then I decided that I would like to do that for someone, you know, especially someone that nobody else seemed to have paid any attention to. She was an inspiration to me because she was doing her student teaching and she would ask me personal things about what was going on at home, how did I feel, you know, and help me with just getting acquainted to the school setting because we moved a lot so, you know, when you move from school to school to school you’re really shy because if you make relationships you know you’re going to have to move again. I didn’t really talk that much but she really helped me to get through that year and that was the first time that I thought, I might want to do this.

Other participants delayed entry while they pursued careers in the corporate world, or related fields including the likes of selling books, church ministry, psychology, juvenile justice, driving school bus, and the military. Several saw, from their vantage in
related fields, a need within the education community to help children to be more successful and they entered to fulfill that need. Take, for example, the draw to the field for a former military leader who now teaches in a special education co-teaching model:

I was in the military prior to coming into education. I was getting 18 year old young men and they were getting 50 and 60 thousand dollar bonuses and they didn’t even know how to fill out a check, the money management skills weren’t there.

He adds that seeing the skills that these young men were missing when they had completed their education made him angry with educators and especially with the educational system. He adds that after seeing how the education system had let his young recruits down, “I had made my mind up that education is where I wanted to be.”

Another participant worked in a bookstore selling books for a living and spent time volunteering with kids at the Boys and Girls Clubs and other service organizations. His friends and relatives had always told him that he should be a teacher. He describes the kind of teacher he imagined being and how he saw himself connecting with kids:

I always knew I would be doing this. I had this idea of the kind of teacher that I wanted to be, the kind of teacher that is intelligent and intriguing, got you excited, but at the same time, there was a certain dullness about him, …that… erudite individual. You know, I want them to see me as intelligent, like… he knows this stuff. I would… build a relationship through the material, because I want to strike them first through the material, more so than I want to connect with them through what’s going on with them. …I try not to be involved in any of the things that they’re into, I don’t’ listen to their music…
He goes on to describe the teachers that he drew inspiration from:

I remember as a kid the teachers I had, I didn’t have anything in common with those teachers. They were adults and they were intelligent … they gave information, and you connected with them through that. Teachers were here [put’s his hand up high], so I just think that we need more of that, you know, I think we need more of that. … When I was a kid, teachers were professional.

All of the participants described the draw to the field and their being an educator as a calling. One participant, for example, describes how her son had a kidney transplant and she doesn’t feel she has to worry about him because, as she says, “… I’m doing God’s will… I don’t have to worry about my son because I’m doing what God wants me to and He will always take care of my son.” Another participant, a former pastor, who now works as a special educator in a self-contained model describes how she views her interactions with students as an extension of her ministry:

What I’ve come to understand is that ministry is not talking about God; ministry is living the love of God. … I believe that God is love, and if I present love to these kids, that’s a way to present God.

Another participant shared that she worked in the corporate world until the birth of her son. Her son, now in his 20’s, is disabled. When he was a child, educators and social workers guided her on what to do to help him. As she tells it, “So it’s like me giving back to the community and really giving God thanks for where my child is now. So me, you know doing that, coming to service, that’s the only way I can give back…. ” She adds that she volunteered in her son’s school during his childhood and found her way to the field of education to give back to honor the help that she received and those that
helped her. She came to the field to follow a call to service.

**Four Interconnected Themes of Stress**

Regardless of the various routes these educators took to find their way into the field of education, they all have immersed themselves in the congress of teaching and learning. Through their engagement with activities, structures and processes, and people within their day-to-day roles in the school, they are presented with stressors. Stressors that come from all of the levels of environment: The Micro, Meso, Exo, and Macro system levels. Stress, the human being’s response to demands for adaptation and change (Selye, 1974). Stress is a constant process within educational environments because the process of education involves reciprocal demands for change and growth through bi-directional interaction and engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Four emergent themes were identified by participants that are connected to stress: distant from decisions, the educator’s place within the world; sourness within relationships; the whittling away of individualized education; and erosion of educator resolve: stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

**Stress: distant from decisions, the educator’s place within the world.**

Distant from decisions, the educator’s place within the world, explores the story of how priorities are established and how decisions are made for the field of education at some distance from the educators themselves. It explores how discourse levies direct and indirect influence on the field. It explores the stress from resource scarcity, training, teaching assignments, and workload that result from direct and indirect interaction with the macro-level influences of media and government. It explores a desire for meaningful interaction between the macro-level influences and the “boots on the ground,” the
unheard voice of teachers. Participants describe these macro-level influences within the context of the direct and indirect influences on their life spaces.

**Media.**

The media is a macro-system level influence on educators and the field of education that can sway how educators and the field of education are viewed. Participants report that environmental interactions with the media have influence on the perceived credibility of educators as well as on their interconnected relationships with stakeholders and decision makers. Nearly all participants reported the media’s portrayals of educators as negative. The following quote, for example, is how one participant describes media coverage of education:

It’s generally very negative. It’s very disheartening. Of course the media thinks that they have to focus on the negative. That’s what they think, because that’s what gets …their sales and …people to watch. It’s unfortunate because it steers people away from education and it continues the horrible trend we have with educators not being respected.

She goes on to say that the media contributes to lessening of respect for teachers among parents by negatively influencing their attitudes, which in turn, negatively influences the children’s attitudes toward teachers. This, she says, is a horrible cycle that plays out in the school. It is an example of how macro-level influences (discourse in the media) interact with Micro-level elements (teacher-parent-student interactions) within the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Another participant illuminates this further:
The way that the media portrays the school is really rough. If you watch the news, the stories that make the news, are always the problems… The thing that doesn’t make the news is, 70% pass CRCT, or 120,000 students graduated last year, the teachers who are going out and using their small salaries to pay for supplies for the kids, …those don’t make the news. So it is, it is real discouraging and what it does, to a degree, is it puts a target on teachers… so now every time that there is a situation where a parent feels uncomfortable about her child… those parents don’t come to the school first, they go to the news. So… [Media are] shedding light on the situations that don’t happen at large, but when it’s portrayed on the news, it’s generalized and that is the way outsiders look at it.

Yet another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher, shared that he and his wife who is also an educator, regularly scan the media for positive stories about teachers but rarely find them unless it’s in a journal about teaching. The network news is, according to another participant, “doing the horrors” of education. Nearly all of the educators in this bounded group joined voices to call for an accurate representation of the complexities of contemporary education to be included in stories told within the discourse. In addition, they want these complexities to be understood by stakeholders and decision makers at all levels.

*Censorship stifles educator voice.*

The participants all reported that they themselves are constrained from, and powerless to, project their own voices to outsiders on matters regarding their roles as educators, the process of teaching and learning, or student needs. They cannot tell how the demographics of their classroom or needs among their students differ from other
classrooms. They cannot tell how differences among students impacts the achievement scores that are used to judge their effectiveness. They cannot tell of how their children might need higher levels of resourcing to remediate academic skill deficits that don’t exist among students in other classrooms. They cannot illuminate how transience and instabilities in the home lives of their children influence the classroom and learning that occurs. They cannot tell that judging their performance as educators against other educators based on children’s academic achievement is an unfair assessment.

Participants revealed that their voices are constrained on these matters because district policy prevents teachers from communicating to outsiders like the media on behalf of their students, classroom, school, or the district itself. There is a district spokesperson that is charged with speaking on district matters and, as one participant illuminates, “the question is whether or not they’re actually going to report it and convey it in the way you would convey it.” Another participant adds that the advocates for educators and for sound educational practice are quiet because they are, “trying to keep their jobs too.” There is no structure within the district to convey the voice of teachers, not even to the district spokesperson. There is no collective voice to represent the educators and special educators within this sample.

Participants describe the influence on education from direct and indirect interaction with the media as negative. They report being powerless to disrupt or counter media characterizations from their positions within the world of education. The media levies an influence that, as participants point out, frames a reference of how teachers are characterized and assessed by outsiders that is one-sided. The limitations on educator voice does not end with the media, it also applies to governmental discourse and
decisions.

**Government.**

Government, like the media, is another macro-system level influence on educators and the field of education. Participants identified Government as a significant primary source of discourse and decision making for educational policy and practices. The decisions made at this level regarding what educators should do trickles influence down to the State and then the local schools through standardizing mandates like, for example, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) or Race To The Top (RTTT). What trickles back up to these decision makers, according to participants, are the performance ratings on rubrics or scorecards with an absence of teacher voices; voices that might offer a context for making sound decisions. One participant points out that the information that trickles back up to decision makers gets molded and interpreted so that it presents to them a picture that demonstrates conformity and compliance with the rules and rubrics sent down from the top. He says that, “…things get sugar coated, as they move up things get sugar coated.”

With respect to the decision makers, participants described them as out of touch with the practice of teaching and disconnected from the needs of students and, in particular, special education students. Part of the problem, according to participants, is that decision makers create policies and mandates that are standardized, intended for all schools and all students regardless of the unique and varied educational needs among individual students and groups of students. A seasoned participant with more than 30 years experience working in special education stated that decision makers “start moving at the speed of light and then forget about the people.” This is reflected by another
participant who shared that their school’s mantra used to be that, “It’s all about the kids!” Now, she says, “its all about the standards that somebody tells us that we have to do.”

With respect to the NCLB Act specifically, another participant shares that he “had much more freedom and do whatever would hook and engage students” before the NCLB act. He goes on to say that the NCLB Act was executed in his district with “heavy emphasis on following detailed lesson formulas and judging teacher effectiveness by students’ standardized test scores.” The distance between educators and decisions that impact their practice was cited as a significant source of stress among all participants. This was reflected by a nearly universal call among participants for decision makers to come into the schools, to re-acquaint themselves with the complexity of needs within contemporary education that are often discordant with standardized or one-size-fits-all programming or methods. As one participant puts it:

Whoever they put on their advisory panels… they need to have been in the trenches like we have, and not so disconnected from what we’re still doing. …I feel like a lot of times, people out there making decisions, they’ve never taught before, or they taught and forgot that times are changing.

**Discordant bedfellows hold the purse strings.**

Intertwined with decisions about policy and practices made at the macro-system level are decisions regarding resource allocation. Decisions about resource allocation, made at some distance from practicing educators, are also cited as source of stress among participants. Participants highlighted decisions regarding resource allocation that have direct and indirect influence over funds for teacher pay and benefits, classroom materials, funding for teaching and support positions, the student to teacher ratio, funding for
educational programming targeting special education students’ vocational training needs, and funding for appropriate and specialized training tailored to working with special education students. The funding for education in the participants’ district comes from a blending of Federal, State, and Local dollars. Money from each of these sources comes with variety of strings and conditions that impose on the schools to align with the priorities of the funding sources.

*Purse strings and programming priorities.*

Participants describe how district level priorities have swung to conform to Federal priorities and mandates endorsed by the State. The consequence of this alignment was re-prioritizing of district efforts, expenditures, and resources to support satisfying the rubrics of educational success set at the Federal level and then by virtue of alignment, the State mandates. This is an example of how macro-level decisions can have indirect impact on teachers (the experience of stress) through the exo-system level of the environment by direct influences on primary settings (mandates tied to funding)(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Put another way, it is an example of the hand of government reaching through the world to touch the individual, the educator, and the special educator.

One special education self-contained teacher describes the impact of the district’s alignment with the NCLB Act on his practice with special education students. He described how district priorities shifted from meeting the children where they were by creatively engaging them through authentic learning, to tracking all students toward college readiness with paced and uniform lessons. In his words:
That was just the death nail because it became all about the academics. All of the things we used to do to hook the kids, the camping, the art, the shop, the basketball team, the cheerleaders, the student government, all of those things are gone. They’re gone!

A principal with more than 30 years working experience with special education students adds that when the singular focus on academics within NCLB initiatives were prioritized within the district, there was less emphasis or resourcing for other aspects of helping students to develop and learn. In her words:

I think we became less masterful at managing behavior because the teachers were so worried that they would be judged if they left the class to deal with an issue… because they weren’t teaching [when they helped kids with issues]. They were always afraid that they would be in trouble.

As principal she was expected to support the district mandates. She had to, as she said it, “play the cards” dealt by the State Department and her supervisors.

The decisions to tract all students to college was described by participants as discordant with serving special education students with individualized and relevant education aligned with the goal of helping them to be functional adults. As one elementary special educator puts it, “these kids are not going, they’re not going to college… and we’re not teaching them any skills… to transition from school to the workplace.” A special education instructional change coach shared that only around 20% of their special education students are successful in college. The sad irony is, as he points out, that the other 80% of their students are not being served by the focus on college readiness that has become the priority and there is little else to offer them. Other special
educators in the same school estimate that the percentage of their students that go on to college is even lower, between 1% and 10%.

Purse strings and training opportunities.

Middle and high school special educators lamented that before the decisions to program around the NCLB Act, they had funding, training opportunities, and teaching positions to support pre-vocational training, job skills, job readiness, and community based vocational training. The funding for training that is available now, according to participants, is allocated to professional learning that supports academic rigor in alignment with the district priority of readying all children for college. Participants add that this is the case even though the NCLB Act is not in effect anymore because the Race To The Top program parallels it in their district and continues the same foci; college readiness for all pupils.

Several participants described being sent to district sponsored trainings that do not help them with their special education students. As one participant points out, “we go to these workshops that we’re required to… and they send us to different areas, like go to a class or something, and maybe they’re [general education teachers] learning something, but we’re not getting anything that deals with our kids.” Another participant illuminates this further, “we have a [child with] traumatic brain injury [TBI]; we don’t know how to work with him. We get all this other stuff but we don’t know how to work with TBI.” Yet another special education teacher echoes this further by saying that they’ve had plenty of trainings about assessments and curriculum delivery but, “it’s never about the kids and what their needs are… types of disabilities… how you can help a kid that is hyper and off meds to sit down? That’s never happened!” A lead teacher for special
education adds,

I think as far as where teachers are, I think they’re frustrated; I think they’re stressed out. I think they feel like they don’t have the control that they should have. I think we lack the resources that we should have… to handle kids, …behavior, and also as far as …exceptionality and how to deal… with our kids.

_Purse strings and teacher compensation_.

The distance of educators from decision-making authority regarding resource allocation was cited as a source of distress regarding pay, classroom materials, and even workload and class assignments. The participants reveal that the cost of living has steadily risen over the past six or seven years while educator salaries have declined. They point out that they were called to the field with noble intentions to serve children, but pay is still a factor because they have families and financial responsibilities of their own to take care. For example,

Teachers are not getting paid, it doesn’t matter the credentials you have. We’re not here for the money, but it’s an issue. The pay for the teachers and the pay for the paras, everything has went [sic] down, but guess what, [the costs of] health benefits have went [sic] up.

Another participant candidly said, “I need more money.” She adds that the last time she saw an increase in her salary was over five years ago while the cost of living and the amount she is required to pay for health insurance has gone up every year, “Everything has gone up,” she remarks, except her salary. Another participant who describes himself as a head of household shared that he took a 50% salary cut to leave the military and become a special education teacher. As the economy declined and teacher salaries were
lowered it was a “game changer.” He and his wife are both teachers and the impact on his family income was a “double hit.” He describes how this nearly caused him to leave the field so that he could support his family:

Nobody comes into this to get rich, but when I came in I looked at the pay scale and the charts and the years and… you know my family, we live a pretty modest life, we don’t’ do a lot of elaborate spending… my moment came last spring when we were told that we weren’t getting a raise, we hadn’t got a raise, they weren’t paying into our retirement and we were going to take a pay cut. I was like wow, now I gotta work two jobs…

My household took a double hit… I had that moment; I was like man… I actively began to look over the summer and early in the school year. I got my Federal time, I’ll go into the department of V.A., you know, a number of things I could do …and I’ll just ride my Fed time out and be done with it. But then I said, you’d just be doing what you said you didn’t want to do when you came out [of the military], you’d be kind of like a corporate Joe; you’d just go to work to do this job and get this check… I told my wife, I said, baby if I get offered this job, I don’t know if I really want to take it because I’m really seeking this for the money. So she, you know, she just kinda reminded me, she was like, well if it is for the money, then it’s not what you should do.

He goes on to say that there, “aren’t many professions that you can do in society that you can really put your passion into,” and he chose public service in the field of education because he could engage his passions for helping others.
Purse strings and resources for material and human supports.

Doing more with less is what participants say is being asked of them by decision makers. Participants explain that this is about more than just teacher salaries; it’s also about human and material resources for the classroom, teaching assignments, and workload. Nearly all participants shared that they use their own money to purchase supplies needed to do their jobs.

Participants reported that simple things like toner for printers and copy paper were in short supply –sometimes out for weeks at a time, not to mention the books and materials in the classroom. One special education teacher states, “we’re the step-brothers and sisters of the County. Everything we have to do, we have to buy; we don’t get any help.” “I don’t even have books,” another special education teacher remarked. An elementary special education resource teacher shared that she works with students that are significantly below grade level in multiple academic areas yet she does not have books and materials to meet their needs. This is despite being evaluated based on the expectation that she teach the children grade level curriculum that is individuated down to each of their levels of understanding.

As a resource teacher, I think when it comes to materials; I’m to get my materials first. I do not. They issue to the general ed teachers first and then tell me there’s no more books.

She goes on to say that, while she does not get more pay than other teachers, she has to use her own salary to purchase materials to meet the wide range of needs among her students.

Decisions about resources allocations also impact the workforce and help
available to a classroom. A special education instructional change coach describes how decisions about resource allocation have resulted in fewer human resources available to her school. She draws it down to how it impacts her job as well as the students and teachers she works with. In her words:

There’s not enough help. If there are three [students] hallucinating, and maybe suicidal, if there are three of them at the same time, it used to not all fall on my lap and it does now… Class sizes have increased significantly… we have lost positions in the last two years. Not every teacher that we’ve lost in the last couple of years has been replaced. The demands are harder… the part that is hard is [that] some kids that are very mentally ill, they need a therapeutic approach; they need a lot of… well-trained staff.

She adds that with the staffing resources that they have, it is extremely difficult to manage meeting the diversity of needs, the wide array of disabilities among their students.

Purse strings and service delivery models.

Participants also describe that decisions about resources and district priorities coalesce with respect to the spectrum of special education service models offered throughout the district. The district embraced the co-teaching model and closed down a majority of self-contained classrooms. Participants report, however, that “not all kids are right for the co-teaching model.” A general education co-teacher shares that she had exposure to special education students during her student teaching but she did not go to school to teach special education students. She adds that, “there are some students that still need self-contained… and even the resource teachers have to keep certain numbers,
so some [students] are still kept out.” She suggests that children’s needs cannot be effectively met because the district does not offer an appropriate array of service delivery models.

An elementary special education resource teacher points out that children who are pushed into a co-teaching model before they’re ready become frustrated; “it’s frustrating the teachers and frustrating the children.” Furthermore she adds that with the co-teaching model there fewer para-professional support teachers and the general education teacher and special education teacher don’t always see eye-to-eye. An elementary special education co-teacher illuminates this further,

When you’re teaching …in your own room it’s just you… The thing that makes co-teaching stressful is the blending of two different dynamics, …you have your general ed teacher and …then you have your special ed teacher and …they’re having to ensure that they’re ...doing certain things …in order to meet the needs of their particular students.

He points out that the special education teacher is required address the special education students’ IEP goals and objectives while also working with the general education students, many of whom he says, “could very well be classified as a special needs student because they’re struggling.” It is the collaboration with the general education teacher that he describes as stressful because the general education teacher is not taxed with the same level of responsibilities. Another special education co-teacher suggests that some of the general education teachers might not want to be in a co-teaching model and their difficulty accepting it influences their willingness to collaborate on behalf of the special education students. “People get territorial,” she says and then adds:
I’m the general ed teacher, I’m the special ed teacher. The children have two teachers in the classroom. It’s not you’re kids and my kids! It does not work like that. So I think they need to go back and re-visit the inclusion model that they’re trying to use and instead of throwing teachers into it.

Let it be a volunteer… let it be a process where the general ed teachers who are willing to volunteer to become inclusion teachers go for training during the summer… because they’re saying that they don’t know what to do with the [special education] children and I think if they are volunteering to do it, they’ll put more into it. If they’re just thrown into it… they …resent it because they did not go to school to be a special education teacher. That’s what I’m seeing here a lot of resentment from the general education teachers!

Another participant that is also a special education co-teacher adds that the general education teachers have “a negative attitude toward special ed students and special education.” She speculates that, “maybe they just see us as co-teachers as coming into their room to take ownership of their room; like we’re taking over their class.” She adds that the general education teachers do not always value the special education co-teachers’ expertise or suggestions. For example:

Like if I say, I think it would benefit us if we do the parallel method, you do this side, I’ll do this side and we can pick which one does which… [She interjects] Because when the state comes in, they want to see this type of co-teaching. …If it’s not coming from administrators, [they’re] not going to do it.

These results reveal that participants all identified the distance from decision-making authority about district priorities, resource allocation, and special education
delivery model as sources of stress. They reveal that district policy restricts educators from advocating or reaching out to macro-level decision makers. Participants all call upon those with decision making authority to visit them and incorporate the voice of special education teachers, their collective voice, in the decision making process.

**Stress: sourness in relationships.**

Sourness in relationships explores the story of stress related to micro-system level influences. It involves roles, activities, or interpersonal relationships with others. The influence felt at this level is most intense and ported through interactions between people, person-to-person. It includes collisions of stress from all participants involved in the interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Lewin, 1946/1951). This means that all of those influences that weigh in on a person through experience and interaction with the social world are ported bi-directionally through interpersonal interactions into relationships. Sourness in relationships explores strain in relationships between teachers and students that are interconnected with other elements of the environment including parents, administrators, and other teachers. The strain in these relationships is activated by interactions.

The story of sourness in relationships between teachers and students is comprised of two stories of stress that converge within interactions; one about the stress that students carry with them, and another about the stress that teachers bring into the relationship. These results reveal that stress enters the interactions between teachers and students from both participants to cause strain on in their relationships; it is bi-directional in nature. Nearly all participants reveal that stress in the teacher and student relationship affects teaching and learning.
Stress that students carry with them.

With regard to the stress carried by students, one participant, a special education teacher in a self contained model shares that it is really hard to predict how the day is going to turn out because of the stressors that students bring into the classroom:

Every day they’re going to throw something else and there’s going to be a kink in the process that comes from their behavior, or whatever situation that they’re dealing with… You just don’t ever know what it’s going to be, and you don’t know how it is going to affect your classroom, your teaching, and just the entire dynamics of the class.

A self-contained special education instructional change coach explains this further by saying that, “Stress results in a drop in positive emotional connections between teacher and student. This leads to less student engagement and more discipline issues.” Another participant, a high school special education self-contained teacher, shares that it is hard to know what children might be dealing with from their lives outside of school. “They carry everything,” he said as he explained that the stressors from their lives are distractions to their learning.

Anything that’s had even a small impact on their lives …you can tell that they’re distracted, that there is something going on somewhere else. …They are surrounded by drugs and alcohol, abuse, neglect, … just not having enough food to eat on a daily basis. They don’t have enough food, or any food. Sometimes they don’t have clean clothes. …You might not find out until later that somebody who lived in the house is not there anymore. Mom’s boyfriend is not there anymore, or dad.
He adds that “the ones that are typically having a hard time, they show up and you can
tell because they’ll do whatever it takes,” to get attention and have their needs met. The
students that don’t have food, for example, he describes as, “almost like hoarders, ...if
they have access to food, they’ll get as much of it that they can, even if they put it in their
pockets or store away a little of it in their locker.” If they’re deprived of material things,
“they’ll constantly ask other students for things, this is all day long; can I have this, do
you have any extra?” Their focus, as he points out, is on having their primary needs met
and because they are distracted by the pursuit of satisfying basic needs, academic
learning becomes secondary.

Even elementary students carry in stress from their outside lives that can be
distracting. A special education co-teacher in an elementary school shared that his,
“students these days are dealing with a lot of distractions.” He goes on to describe a
former student that was struggling and points out how important it is to look beyond the
surface behaviors to figure out what is really going on:

I can recall a student… who displayed a lot of behavioral problems at school,
wasn’t really interested in academics. …I realized after some time, …this student
was going home by himself and …was taking care of a younger brother and sister;
…having to play the grown up role when he got home.

Getting the homework done wasn’t important; he was trying to make sure
that his brother and sister ate. They have… things on their mind and until they
can… wrap their minds around those emotional things that they go home to
everyday, and those challenges outside… it makes trying to come to school and
learn …a lot harder.
The students’ emotional and other primary needs, as this participant points out, take precedence over the academic learning.

Another participant, a principal, became emotional as she shared how students let their stress be known and how this factors in to the teacher-student relationship:

You know they present in very aggressive and disruptive, and …you’re going to make me cry [emphasis original]... you know, they come from very troubled and very challenging situations and they come here and they show that behaviorally. So, they’re going to be a mess everywhere they go, they’re going to act out, attack verbally, physically lash out, withdraw, try to hurt themselves, that whole realm of inappropriate emotional and behavioral responses... Poor peer relationships; they’re just going to want to take out all the anger and hurt inside on everybody around them, especially if you try to care about of them because they don’t trust that it’s real and they don’t trust that you really are who you are...

Along the same lines, a middle school special education co-teacher shared her struggle with children that are often angry. She pauses to wonder out loud what the sources of their anger might be:

We were talking about this today at lunch, …how angry some of them are at 8:15 in the morning. What are you so angry about, this early in the morning? What have you come in contact with that’s making you this angry, or what are you missing that’s making you this angry [emphasis original]?

She goes on to say that it is harder to connect with the children, that it’s more difficult to establish trust with them when they’re so angry. She struggles with this and then adds, “Maybe it’s the trust, …the closeness or the trust in the relationship; they don’t trust me...
It doesn’t feel like I’m reaching as many of the kids that I feel like I need to reach.”

*Students act out their stress.*

Participants also describe how the behavior that students display that is connected to their stress interacts with the teacher-student relationship. A novice special education teacher with two years in a self-contained model points out that children show you their stress, “they’re going to show it to you through their actions.” He adds that they do not sit quietly with their stress while academic learning happens all around them; they act on their stress, which disrupts the class. A high school special educator recalls his experience of student behavior and emotion when he began teaching:

The cursing is what got me when I first started… It was like a total culture clash. I mean I was never exposed to that much cursing. I would think, OMG [Oh My God; emphasis original], I have just heard cursing all day long! … It’s just kind of like, always the underlying aggression. I think that is what would be a surprise for a lot of people. Even with younger kids, they’re just mad a lot. They’re mad for the most part of the day! That’s hard, you know, [working] with people that are angry a lot.

He goes on to describe how students’ emotional distress interacts with his responsibility to teach them:

Your trying to calm them down, but you’re also trying to get them to do some work. [Laughs] So, I know you’re mad but you have to read this story [emphasis original]. I think people would be surprised about the level of aggression.

Participants were able to connect student aggression to the stress that students carry with them. All participants identify student aggression as a source of educator
stress. They add that the way children show their stress is not just through verbal aggression. For example, “there could be verbal [aggression], but it could be like when you lay a book on a student’s desk and they knock it off; that’s aggressive.” Another participant adds, “they jump up on the furniture, they throw the furniture, they throw things. They talk while you’re talking. The cursing, I’ve gotten to where I tune it out.”

It can also, according to participants, escalate to physical aggression. For example, a special education teacher talks about a fight that erupted in his classroom:

I’ve had fights in here. I just had a fight the other day… it was terrible. …I’m like right away, I don’t want to see it; you’re not going to do that in here if I can help it. I was like man, why are you fighting? And [then] I’m in the middle of it, I jammed my thumb man and its still sore, you know, and then the one kid, …his medicine is up really high so he’s not able to really defend himself… sometimes you feel like you make it worse; you’re holding a kid and another kid is punching the kid …really kind of, a brutal kind of thing.

In addition to fights between students, participants also reported being attacked by students. For example, a special education teacher in a self-contained model shares that she doesn’t speak sign language and one of her students who is deaf “slapped the hell out of her.” A self-contained 6th grade special education teacher described being assaulted by her students while she was teaching:

I was teaching all subjects to the same group of kids all day. They were a very aggressive group verbally and physically. There were times when I was teaching that I was being pelted with stuff. There were days when I was just sitting in front of the door to keep them in the classroom …and they were just tearing it up.
Other teachers have been injured while trying to keep students safe while they were self-injurious or trying to hurt others. For example special education self-contained para professional talked about being hurt while trying to help children, “ah, been so many times… my back is still wacked up.” She shares that she’s had to go to the hospital around eight times in the course of 21 years for injuries to her back. She walks with an odd stiff shuffle to her gait from the injuries.

*Student stress, behavior, and needs port into the learning milieu.*

Regardless of the type of behavior that children employ to show their stress, the teachers are charged with educating them. The nature of this charge also requires them to first address those emotional elements that distract the students and cause their difficult behaviors. For example, a high school special education teacher describes the nature of some of his students’ stress and what they need from him:

Oh man, a lot of them they’re, …they’re in DFCS [Department of Family and Children’s Services] custody, …a lot of abuse. …I know we’ve serviced, in this classroom, three or four homeless students. …They can they kind of come and go because you get a lot of arrests and hospitalizations and changes in medicine. He goes on to say that they are “needing an ear”, someone to listen:

…Usually it will come down to, …if you can pull them away, …and you can say hey, what’s going on today, and then they’ll tell you, …I’ve just got a lot going on at home. And you’ll say, what’s going on at home? Oh man, it’s… then they share and usually, what I find and it’s interesting, they’re really willing to share. You generally don’t have to twist any arms; …they’re usually more than willing to let you know.
Stress that teachers carry with them.

The participants describe the vicarious experience of student stress in addition to the stress that they themselves have that enters in the interactions. They add that meeting the children’s needs, pulling them away and helping them with their personal crisis and stressors, can be challenging. They describe this as a convergence of competing goals: help the student through the crisis or get good evaluations from their supervisors for satisfying the expectation that they teach rigorous instruction from bell to bell. This is an example of time’s mediating influence within conflicts of the life space; help the child in the here and now, do what you need to do to satisfy the wish for a good evaluation later.

A special education instructional change coach points out that it takes time to help a kid through a crisis. She laments that they used to be able to take the time to address student emotional needs without the pressure to quickly get them back into the classroom for rigorous instruction. She says:

…Now if you talk to them too long, they’ll [the supervisors] be after you. You hold them out [of class] too long -It takes time [emphasis original], you remember how it used to take time? Not now, you get them in, you get them out! You’re pushing them back in here [the class] and therefore the behavior goes up, …and then its rubbed off on another student because you bring them back in here when they’re not ready to come back. But you’re trying to get them back in here so they get rigor. So you’re damned if you do, and damned if you don’t.

A middle school special education self-contained teacher adds that teachers feel pressure to teach the standard of the day, “but you can’t teach the standards if there is a crisis.”
She goes on to describe what happens when students decompensate into crisis and the problems this can create for the teacher:

…You have got to remove your class to a different classroom. You have to take them to the media center so that lesson might be on Wednesday instead of Tuesday. …If a supervisor comes in to evaluate a teacher, she’s on a lesson on Wednesday that should have been on Tuesday… it’s a strike against the teacher because she’s supposed to be teaching the standards.

The stress that teachers carry into interactions with students can come from a wide array of sources. In addition to the stress that teachers experience from students, participants also identified stress ported into their roles and activities with students from interactions with parents, administrators, colleagues, and the culture and climate of the school.

**Teacher stress and parent involvement.**

With respect to parents, participants all describe stress from a lack of parental support, parents that are disengaged, and parents that are not doing enough to help their children. An elementary special education teacher shared that he is required to teach children at the grade level standard. His evaluations are tied to his student’s success with the grade level standards. The problem, as he describes it, is that many of his special education students are not on grade level and need remediation. This, as he points out, creates a situation where collaboration between home and school is crucial to remediating the child’s skill level and is dependent upon parental involvement:
Each year we get kids and their initial skill set is lower. So the first struggle is that, as a teacher, I have these kids that have a lower skill set that are not coming on grade level yet I’m held to the standard of teaching grade level material and maintaining a pacing chart that says you need to have this taught by a certain day and you can’t do that if you have to go back with kids that don’t have that foundational knowledge. So you have to remediate them. The consequences of that is, as a teacher, what happens in your classroom is that you don’t end up reaching all of your students. And you know this kind of ties back to the parental support piece.

What a lot of teachers have tried to do …is to tell the parents; hey we’re going to go ahead and continue to teach them the grade level material, we will contact you and let you know what areas that they need to be remediated in and if you could go back and cover those previous skills and we’ll continue to teach the current ones, that will make up the gap.

He goes on to share that this is not a failsafe approach, as many parents are not equipped to do this. They may be, as he says:

…Working two jobs and they can’t put in that type of time, then that student never gets those gaps covered. Because as a teacher, you only have so many hours in a day and you have 30 plus kids in the classroom.

Along the same lines, an elementary school general education co-teacher shares her frustration with parents that do not or cannot do more for their kids. She says:
The main stressor or stressors would be the parent-child [relationship]… Some parents, …they just send their child to school and *that is it* [emphasis original].

Whatever we do here at school, *that’s it* [emphasis original]. You can send letters and, you know, make phone calls or whatever, and you never get a response…

An elementary special education co-teacher adds that the frustration he feels is not just because the parents do not do enough, they do not “see the urgency in the situation.” He describes how crucial parental support is for kids that are behind:

If you have a student that needs remediation, as a parent you have to actually put more time into that student than the student who is on grade level. So …let’s say that the normal third grade parent needs to spend about an hour with their child a night. [For] a student who needs remediation, as a parent you may have to be willing to put in two and a half hours a night. …At the end of the day, eventually that student is going to turn 18 and have to step out into the world on their own and they need to be able to function. They need to have those skills, and if they don’t we suffer as a society.

An elementary special education resource teacher adds to this by sharing her frustration with having very little participation from parents at her students’ school functions or even their I.E.P. meetings:

The majority of them does [sic] not come to an IEP meeting when you call them.

I think the majority of them do not understand, or they might not have the transportation to come to some of the meetings, but some don’t care! That’s what I think, that some don’t care!

She goes on to describe the emotional struggle that this causes for her:
I try not to let it effect me. It’s not the child’s fault. I have to blame the parents. Because it boils back down to the child is innocent, because they’re just doing what they’re told to do… they’re a child…. So I can’t blame them and I cannot break the relationship with the child. I cannot take it out on the child. I have to… I’m frustrated at the parents!

*Teacher stress and parental aggression.*

In addition to lack of parental support, participants also described parental aggression as a source of stress. Several participants described the IEP meeting as the function during which much of the parental aggressiveness was played out. A middle school special education teacher describes this happening to her. She had worked with a particularly challenging student and his mom. The child’s needs exceeded the services available at the school and, because of this, he was frequently in trouble and his mom was often called upon to help. The teacher established a close relationship with both the parent and the child and helped them both through these difficult times. She even helped the parent with him in the community, outside of school. When it became clear that he had exhausted the supports available to him in the local school, she helped with the transition to a program that had more to offer him. At the I.E.P. meeting to make the school placement change, the boy’s mom turned on the teacher:

The mother kind of wailed into me! It was like wow, she like called me all these curse words… When he got sick and went to the hospital, …I left school and said oh my God! …I went there to see him that night. I went there the next day to give her some relief. “You’ve been here all night, …take a break and I’ll stay here with him.” …and then …act like this, I wanted to strangle her!
Another participant, a high school special education self-contained, describes challenges with parents that bring their marital conflicts into the IEP meeting and play them out when it comes time to make decisions about the child’s IEP. He shares:

It’s not just the idyllic mom and dad coming at you about their kid. It’s dads over here coming at you this way, moms over here coming at you this way, the services people are coming at you from another direction about the same kid. So you just have more people from multiple areas and multiple viewpoints coming at you. Nobody wants to be left out, but nobody can make a decision because we all got to be together in order for decisions to be made, so it gets hairy at times.

An elementary special educator in a co-teaching model adds to this by describing how difficult it was to work with an aggressive parent during his first year of teaching:

My first year I had a very aggressive parent that called for an IEP meeting every other week and brought a tape recorder and …advocates. …This was … my first year and we had our coordinators coming over, we had advocates sitting at the table.

He describes that the stress from this was extreme and lasted throughout the year that he worked with this student. He added, “I’m sitting here like I don’t want to say anything because everything is being recorded …that was a real uncomfortable feeling.”

Nearly all participants identified parent aggressiveness and low parental involvement as a source of their stress and frustration. They describe the urgency and importance of parental involvement to student success, and by proxy to the teachers’ evaluations. Stress from parental interaction is interconnected with other sources of stress within the life space of participants. One of those sources of stress, according to
participants, that educators carry with them in their interactions is the stress experienced in relationships with administrators.

*Teacher stress and the behavior of administrators.*

All participants identified interactions with administrators as a source of stress. They suggest that stress felt by teachers from the actions of the administrators can influence the teachers’ interactions with students. They reveal sourness in relationships with administrators from leadership actions, methods, lack support, and instability. With respect to the life space of participants, the administrators in the building are an element of the micro-system level of the environment that imposes influence on them through behaviors and interaction.

Participants identified leadership behaviors that cause stress to include micromanagement and poor treatment of teachers. For example, a middle school special education teacher describes that her principal focuses energy and attention on controlling staff through “nit picky” demands and a quickness to write teachers up for minor issues. The principal’s approach, she adds, created a “negative ripple” across the building; from teachers, to students, and then it returns to her. Teachers respond to this principal’s micro-management by doing less than they could to control student behavior because it puts pressure back on the principal. As she describes it:

I know a lot of people are just stressing out because… right now it’s just because a lot of people have been written up for being late to work. If you are only one or two minutes, give me a break! …Nit pick me with that, but you want me to stay until the buses leave, or you want me to stay and do these little faculty meetings, or you want me …to help you look good, but you’re not going to give me a break.
She uses a fictional name of “little Johnny” to describe how the teachers return the stress to the principal: “To deal with little Johnny, …I really can control little Johnny, but you’re on me and so I’m just going to send little Johnny to the office.” She goes on to say that teachers in the building are aware that a novice teacher was fired for being late, which just adds to their stress. Another middle school special education teacher candidly shares, “I have a target on my back.” She states that feels the principal has something against her. She gives an example of how she is required to write her three-part lesson on the board and have it displayed there all day so that the children know what they are learning and if an administrator comes in the room, they can easily see what she is doing. The challenge, as she explains, is that she changes rooms throughout the day. She was given administrative direction to use the Promethean board to display her three-part lesson plan since she changes rooms, but then later chastised in front of other teachers by the same administrator for not writing it on the board. She adds, “to me that is a knit picky thing and that takes the focus away from what are we doing.”

Another participant, an assistant principal, describes how it can be difficult to leave a school where the unsupportive leadership methods of the principal cause stress:

I’m not nervous like other people are nervous, …I have quit places before and it’s always been better the next place where I go… There’s some stress that just comes with it [the job], but additional stress I don’t need. So I have done that [quit] and said oh, this is, I can’t do this anymore.

She goes on to add how the decision to quit is forced because of the particular leadership style or tactics:
Depending on the leader, I had to quit because you’re [the principal] not going to give me a good recommendation because you don’t want me to go. You’re not going to give me a good [recommendation], so I have to quit because that is the only way to get out. You’re not going to let me transfer, because transfers are polite, …your principal allows [emphasis original] you to go. They don’t have to release you, so I can’t transfer.

In the assistant principal’s example, she describes both poor treatment from the administrator and a lack of administrative support. In this instance, the lack of support comes in the form of not supporting her in her desire to move on with her career, attempting to bind her in her present job by withholding recommendations or transfer approvals.

*Teacher stress and lack of support from administrators.*

Participants also describe other circumstances in which they feel stress from a lack of support for children and teachers from administration. For example, one elementary special education co-teacher describes stress when administrators employ cut-and-dry rote responses to student concerns or behavior without stopping to consider a more holistic approach that incorporates teacher insights and input regarding the child’s needs and life context to the decision making process:

I’ve had some disagreements in philosophy and at times I’ve voiced it. I feel certain that each administrator that we’ve had …generally wanted to do things in the best interest of kids, but the process and the decision-making; looking at things from all angles and considering how everyone involved in the situation will be effected, I don’t think was always taken into consideration.
Another participant, a special education resource teacher, draws this out further as it relates to the way administrators work with her special needs children and what it does to her heart, her stress. She, along with other participants, feels that administrators should embrace a wider array of responses to special education student behaviors. For example, she suggests that administrators help students to learn from mistakes by making them teachable moments instead of rote reliance on suspension or consequent oriented actions:

Personally, I feel that the majority of them does [sic] not want to be bothered and I’ve heard one or two of them say that [they have] worked in special ed before, but when it comes down to the nitty gritty, that’s what we call it, comes down to the bottom line, I don’t see where you’ve worked in special ed because there’s no empathy right there. Many of them have said that they’ve worked in special ed and that’s telling me that they’ve been trained in that area and you’re not showing me that you know what to do with these children.

It angers me; it really, really angers me. …I just do what I can do on a daily basis for the students. I do as much as I can for them but decision is not for me to make. They make a decision and I just follow through and I just do as much as I can… There is just something that really bothers me to see how they treat them and bothers me the things that they want them to do, but again, I’m me and I do what I can on a daily basis just to help those students. I try to handle …the problems [that] I have in my classroom so that I don’t have to engage them. Sometimes, it all depends on the individual, I can get support maybe from one or two, but the others; I think that they blow things out of proportion. They make too much out of a little thing.
Another participant, a middle school special education self-contained teacher, shares that administrators, “all have strengths and weaknesses but we also have to understand that they are overloaded too.” She goes on to say:

I don’t think we get the support we need. I don’t think they can give us the support we need because they are under pressure too. Nobody works harder than [our principal], she’s here on weekends and stuff and yet I don’t feel that we get support from her in a lot of areas. Although, I think that she wishes she could.

A high school self-contained special education teacher candidly shares a different point of view regarding what he thinks about administrator support and the lack of it:

I think I’ve come to a different place [nervous laugh]. I think that the support is just an illusion, that it’s just a bunch of bullshit. I don’t come here thinking or expecting that I’m going to get any support, or that they are going to meet my needs in any way whatsoever. I come here because I want to teach a class and I feel like that is what I was put here on earth to do. I know that sounds corny, so that is what I come to do.

I don’t expect anyone from the front office to give me a pat on the back or anything because that is just not going to happen [emphasis original]! …If you buy in to that, it’s been my experience that what you get is to a more fucked up place. …What you get is a more friendship relationship and that is not what it is, it’s more of a dysfunctional work relationship.

He goes on to describe how he believes administrators view people that need support and how this translates within their working relationships:
If you have a lot of need for support, then you’re the person in their face asking for stuff, and the more you’re in their face asking for stuff, the more of a problem you are, then the more bad evaluations you get. So as I’ve come to detach, loving detachment, that’s what I do. So okay, I’m going to just lovingly detach from that and go over here and take care of what I need to do; I get better evaluations. I don’t need anything from them, so they like me better. So it’s better for me really because it’s not fake and maybe that’s just where they are, maybe they just don’t have anything to offer like that.

I know that when I drop my granddaughter off, it seems like the support at her school is real. Maybe its because I’m on the outside looking in. They seem to have more people that carry other parts of the puzzle; that the teachers not required to do all the stuff that we do here. So it’s just a different framework that they have. Maybe they have more resources, I don’t know. I certainly don’t think that this school is high up on the totem pole for getting stuff, …I don’t think that we have a lot of resources. I think they’re covering their own asses, they’re not covering my ass. They’re covering their own ass from a bureaucratic point of view.

An elementary special education teacher describes administrative support that ends up causing bigger problems in her relationships with students. She calls on them to help with student behavior through protocols within the school structure that are aligned with positional roles and responsibilities. When she enlists their support through these operating procedures, it doesn’t always result in collaboration or well thought out support.
…When you send a referral for a student’s behavior, instead of them
[administrators] coming back to you, …the kids are suspended for a day or two
out of the building… I’m not a big person on having them suspended out of the
building. They come back with a negative attitude because obviously the parents
are home cussing us out, so the kids come back with a negative attitude towards
us.

She goes on to add that the authenticity of administrators offers to help is questionable.
She points out that when it is crucial, when there is a crisis or an emergency situation, she
has not been able to rely on them. Furthermore she adds that she is held liable when they
do not come through with support:

All you are hearing from administration is that, “we’re here for you and if there is
a problem, call us and we’re here for you.” When you send a referral to them, or
when you say we’re having problems with this student or whatever, it’s like

*nothing* [emphasis original]! …Perfect example, one student I had that was a
runner, would try to escape work, very argumentative, just wanted to sleep, and
that child would leave out of the classroom; sometimes try to leave the building.
…I remember one instance the child left my room, I was by myself because the
help I had at the time was placed somewhere to cover another class. …After the
child left, I think I had about 8 or 9 students in the room by myself; multi-level,
basically cognitive level was, it varies… I can’t, I can’t just leave them when I
run after this one student.

This was a crisis for her, it was a potential safety issue, and she needed help from the
administrators to find this child. She describes her actions to enlist help with this
situation, the response of the administrators, and how she learned about the outcome of the situation:

I called on the radio, three times, this is so and so, so and so has left my room and nobody answered and I, specifically after the fourth time, I called an individual name. That person never came back on the radio to say okay I got the message or whatever. It was about 45 minutes later, one of the assistant principals called me on my phone to ask me what I needed. …By this time I realized that the child had left the building and was across the street. Nobody came to me and said anything.

Then, I guess it was a conversation to say I allowed a child to leave the classroom and I did not call. So I had it documented how many times I called, so when I finally, when they finally came to me. I said, this is how many times I’ve called, showed them in the book, and nobody answered so I assumed that the child was confiscated at the door. Or somebody had the child because nobody came back and said okay Mrs. So and So, I have so and so. So when I found out that, I was told in a conversation that, …at the end of a meeting …the meeting was directed at me, …that we have to be careful what we do and if we need additional training, come and say something and so I just didn’t say anything because I knew everything was gearing towards me but I knew everything that I did and I had my documentation and I had myself covered. …Then the individual came to me and was talking to me and that’s when they were telling me about [the Directors of Special Education and Internal Affairs were] going to interrogate me and all this other stuff. But, because I had my notes and my documentation it didn’t bother me, that didn’t phase me at all.
Another participant, a high school special education teacher, describes how the priorities that administrators embrace create a situation where they are concerned with things that are not necessarily the priorities of the teachers, especially during crisis situations or when student stressors unravel the carefully planned lessons. This leaves teachers feeling misunderstood, undervalued, and unsupported. In his words:

A lot of your energies are going into corralling behaviors and getting people okay and knowing where people are at and kind of sensing the room and all that stuff and that’s kind of hard when somebody comes in and they’re only looking at the academic piece. When you’re dealing with all these behavior things and somebody wants to know why your standard isn’t written out or why you didn’t have it written in child language. [Giggle] That’s when you just want to go, what are you talking about? I was just trying to get through the last two hours of nightmare and I didn’t have time to write it up there [emphasis original], but they don’t get all that.

An elementary special education co-teacher adds, “you know what gets me is that the administrators say they have been classroom teachers, but I think that they get disconnected.” A high school special education teacher adds that some of the priorities among administrators at the school level are decided upon and enforced from well above building level administration.

They have to follow …some kind of rules from the top. So when the superintendent tells them to do something and the region tells them to do something, they have to follow those rules. I think some of them feel the way we feel but they can’t, they have to follow directions, … rules, and policies.
He points out that administrators have to show their allegiance to those above them, “even though they might not like it.” He adds:

That’s what you have to do if you’re in a leadership position… You can’t have personal feelings about how we should teach the kids and how we should do this or that and they can’t change the rules unless they go through the County or the State.

He also suggests in his narrative that administrators themselves may not be able to act upon or actualize what they believe to be in the best interests of students if it conflicts with mandates from top leadership. Another participant draws this out further by sharing that her administrators agreed with her over a misguided policy but said that, “this is what we’re getting from the County, so this is what you have to do.”

Teacher stress and instability within the leadership.

Participants also describe instability within the leadership as a source of stress. In a period of six years the district has had four acting superintendents and a nearly complete change of all of the Board of Education members. The accrediting agency has been involved by raising questions about top-level administration, and even the State Governor has been taxed with looking at the conduct of district leaders. One participant points out that during the last six years there have been four different principals leading the building in his school. One of the principals, he adds, replaced all of the assistant principals too. In addition, the lead teacher for special education has changed nearly every year. He says that with all this change, “basically, you just make due.” He goes on to describe how the shifting sands of leadership interact with teaching and educator’s roles:
Anytime a new administrator comes in of course, …they have their own way of doing things; it takes time to adapt. The problem is with not having the continuity and it taking that time to adapt, you lose time and it hurts children. It hurts children academically because one administrator may cater more to the affective side whereas another one is strictly instructional, so you may lose a lot of instructional time, you may lose a lot of time in the way of doing things, and you don’t get to the well roundedness of the child.

…As far as teachers, it has a large effect because they have to learn each administrator and figure out what means the most to them, and of course you have different dynamics with each different personality and, as it so turns out, that our administrators, each one has been the opposite of the other. So if you have one that is real strong in one area but laidback in a different area, the next one that comes in is just the flip side of that. So it’s definitely called for a shift in the mentality of the culture in the building.

Another teacher, a general education co-teacher, from the same school adds that teachers were not getting the kind of nurture that they needed when the leadership kept changing. She described coming in to a great environment under her first principal that changed as principals were changed, “the one that just left, you know, moral kind of dropped and everything was in disarray.” The impact of instability in leadership is more than just learning a new person’s ways and personality; it can harm morale and even impact the students. Another participant shares that instability in leadership also manifests as inconsistency in rules, differences in how administrators respond to children, and disorganization in their approach to teachers:
I’ve encountered a lot of … inconsistency among the rules in the school; behavior problems, when you write children up, or when you try to send them through the process of SST [Student Support Team] for behavior concerns, somebody drops the ball in between. I guess it is inconsistency between administrators; they don’t communicate with each other on certain things that they need to communicate. So one may tell you to go ahead and do one thing, whereas the other one may say, no you can’t do that, and then you’re going backwards and foreword from administrator to administrator instead of them talking and coming as a united front when they’re making a decision. That’s one source of stress.

She adds that when administrators are novice and don’t really know the teachers, they are more apt to question the teachers and “second guess” them. She describes this as being in sharp contrast to being respected as a professional. The stress from administrator instability is not just felt by the teachers. For example, another participant who is a principal shared that higher-level administration has failed to provide a clear mission and goals. She says, “I’ll be honest with you, I don’t know if we have vision or a goal… I’m waiting for it to be stated… it’s a mystery to me and I should certainly know what it is.”

**Teacher stress and collegial interactions.**

In addition to stress from their interactions with administrators, participants also report that stress from collegial interactions is another source of sourness in relationships. Collegial stress, like administrative stress, is felt within the roles, activities and interactions that educators have with other educators. Participants define collegial stress as negativity that comes directly from other educators through interactions, or indirectly as a by-product from the effect it has on their students. “*How do you work with them*
“how do you work with them?” is a question that one participant, a special education resource teacher, describes as offensive it is to her coming from other teachers:

When I look at some of the other teachers’ behavior, especially with the kids with special needs, and one statement that the majority of them make that I cannot stand is, “how do you work with them?” Because they are human beings, and [just] because they have might have a learning deficit or be diagnosed with Autism, or Intellectual Disability, or Down’s syndrome, they’re all human beings. These kids, it’s not a sin, it’s a disability. So you know, they can function to a certain level, but they just don’t function like other kids. They can learn just like anybody else, they may take a longer time to learn, a longer time to do something, but they’re all human beings and they need to be treated as humans.

Participants frequently cited co-teaching conflicts as a source of stress. One participant indicated that the special education teachers are not understood or respected by the general education teacher. She adds that she has had to deal with situations in which there was stress from the way that general education co-teachers want to structure the classroom and share the co-teaching responsibilities:

The [general education] teacher feels that all of the special education teachers should have to deal with the special education students, and that makes the child undermine the other teacher’s authority, not listen to the other teacher, only listen to the special education teacher.

She goes on to say that if you’re a special education student in a co-taught class, “you know who cares for you and who can help you and who’s like, I don’t want to be
bothered [emphasis original].” Another participant shared that the general education teachers show prejudice against the special education students. An elementary special education co-teacher adds that her special education students have had prejudices among general education co-teachers acted out on them. General educators that she notes were resentful of being placed in a co-teaching arrangement treated the special education students in their class poorly, gave them, for example, a coloring sheet to work on during the lesson rather than differentiating the instruction.

A lead teacher for special education describes the stress she feels from other educators that have negative attitudes that just don’t put the time into doing their job well:

I had another teacher who told me she had never had a child with Down’s syndrome and was waiting for me to give her some material. Now I don’t mind giving you materials, but again this is a doctor… this particular teacher has a title to her name, and I’m like okay, you’ve never had a child with Down’s syndrome? [emphasis original] Today’s technology, you don’t have to wait for somebody to give you training, you can get on the computer and go to any site.

[If] you told me in today’s technology that you’ve never had a child with Downs syndrome… -[If it were me] I would feel the opposite; let me try to see what I can find on line, let me try to call [an expert] let me see… is there some kind of an association [in this State] that they have, you know, something for Down’s syndrome. Maybe I can go by the CDC [Centers for Disease Control]; maybe I can call the CDC and see if they can give me something.

She goes on to describe her frustration with the interaction with this highly educated
teacher that, to her, is not putting in the effort that should be expected of someone with this level of education and credentialing:

She has a Doctorate [emphasis original] in education! That’s what gets discouraging because in my position, I have to rely on other people and what I mean by that is, with my students, I have to rely on my teachers to do their best to teach the kids. I have to rely on that they will be creative enough to do a behavior intervention plan. I have to rely on you [the teacher] enough that you will do what you can for the students in your classroom. I have to trust that, and when I know that is not in place and then I have to be like this, checking every day, and it’s just; …it leaves me thin. I had to sit with that same doctor and I had to show her different behavior charts; there are behavior charts on line. I have Googled behavior charts and they come up done! I just have to put the child’s name in there, you know. But I did it, and we spoke about it and so forth. It discourages me sometimes when it’s like that and I feel like, okay, you know what, I just need to go back into my classroom and get a class and be with those kids.

She goes on to say that she transitioned from the classroom to become a lead teacher because she saw it as, in her words, “an opportunity to help more students than I can just being in my classroom.” Another elementary co-teacher shares that he thinks that some of the other teachers are negative because they have lost their compassion; “it’s the compassion, I’m convinced that many of our teachers have become like corporate America: it’s just a check, it’s just a job.”

An elementary assistant principal points out that within the leadership there has to be attention to culture and climate of the building, otherwise the stress and negativity can
contribute to a caustic environment. She describes being a new administrator in a
building that has a lot of negativity:

Trying to maintain in a building with the culture that this building has, a very…
very caustic… So I’m new coming in and they’re trying to figure me out and I’m
very straight by the book because that helps. …They were trying to figure me out,
but they’re very high school in nature in that they’re concerned about my dress.
They’re concerned about my personal life. *These are grown people* [emphasis
original]! They’re concerned… just all of that and it’s just ridiculous.

The conversations didn’t get to me though because my personality, I think
they knew that I’m not listening to that because that is so inappropriate at this
place. …This is the 7th school that I’ve been at and this is the first culture that
I’ve ever been in that was like this and it’s always amazing to me that people
would stay because I know that when I was a teacher, if I came into a building
like this, at this point in my life. I don’t know what I would have done if I came
here right out of college because you don’t know anything else. I might have just
ended up as carcinogenic as they are. But at that time in my life, had I come in as
a teacher, I would not have stayed. It would have ate me up, because I have
been… I know this is not how it is supposed to be.

You know, schools are supposed to be, you know, we take care of each
other, and we care about each other, we’re not trying to tear anybody down! You
know what I mean? You have some that do that, but not visibly and nasty and
talk; it was just amazing to me how all those people just stayed here *year after
year* [emphasis original]! What does that say about you?
She goes on to say:

…Especially when this is not the only place you’ve been, unless everyplace you’ve been was like this. …This culture, it’s just very high school, that’s the only thing that I can say. What I told [the principal] is, you have to find somebody else to work on culture because I can’t. Somebody else has to be the culture piece. …I think the way to really address any major issue is head on. You have to say there is a culture issue. You can’t dance around and worry about, you know, these people are wounded I think; I think a whole bunch of wounded people.

The stress that participants describe associated with students, with parents, with administrators, and with colleagues all influence teachers within the context of their life space. More important, it comes out as they interact with students within the bi-directional nature of the student-teacher relationship; it is a sourness that exists in the relationships between teachers and students. All of the participants reported stress and sourness is an influence exchanged within the teacher-student relationship that, during the congress of interactions, interferes with learning.

Stress: the whittling away of individualized education.

The whittling away of individualized education is the third of four emergent themes related to educator stress. This theme explores the story of elements in the environment including systemic processes within the field of education. That is, components of educational practice related to curriculum, student assessment, special education student needs, and teacher evaluations. It explores the story of demands exerted by these elements and the impact within the life space of educators that results
through interaction. While nearly all participants expressed some degree of uncertainty regarding the etiology of decisions governing these components of educational practice, they all reported feeling stress related to them. One participant, for example, shares his view:

I fear that teachers today deal with ongoing stress to: always run their class according to a detailed, standardized formula that an observer can walk in and check off; to stay on the curriculum’s pace even when students aren’t ready; to continually give benchmark/standardized tests and measure success by how students do on them, even when the students are significantly behind, with large gaps in learning, and with opposition to school work. This ironically sucks out much of teachers’ ability to actually lead classes that engage their students, leading to more problems and stress with less ability to respond.

**Stress from conflicts in programming for special education students.**

A common theme among the participants was stress felt from incongruence between the curriculum and what students’ need. Participants explain that the district has adopted a curriculum that is intended to ready pupils for college and has organized and paced instructional delivery to serve that goal. Self-contained classrooms have largely been replaced with co-teaching models and, as participants point out, within the co-teaching model the curriculum guides instruction. Special education students, however, are supposed to have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that identify educational goals for them based on their present levels of functioning. The IEP is supposed to direct educational practice in alignment with student needs for the special education students. This is not the case according to a majority of the special educators that participated.
Stressful conflicts with the IEP, curriculum, and district service models.

Participants share that development of IEPs in their district has been re-interpreted and modified so that the IEP reflects the curriculum and/or what can be taught within the spectrum of delivery models offered by the district. Participants point out that, for example, the goals on the IEP are written to the grade level common core curriculum standard, not to the child’s present levels of functioning. Two participants offered alternative approaches to the practice of writing IEP goals to the grade level common core curriculum standard. One participant, a lead teacher for special education, shared that the grade level common core curriculum is written as the goal, but objectives can be written following the goal that address the child’s present levels of functioning. Another participant, an elementary special education co-teacher, shared that he continues to write the IEP goals to the child’s present levels of functioning:

I’m writing it for the present level of function. The IEP is an individual plan for that student, so that’s my justification for writing it as such. It does our students no good to be in the 5th grade and to be reading on the 1st grade level and they cannot formulate sentences and not to have a goal to formulate sentences, basic sentences. I make that as the goal. In my opinion it has to be the goal because that is the present level of functioning, period! And I mean that is just the bottom line of it. I’m telling you for a fact that other people, many people aren’t doing it that way because as the kids transfer from 4th to 5th grade and I get the IEP and it’s written on a 4th grade level but this child is still on a 1st grade and all the data says this, but that IEP is written for a 4th grade curriculum. See I don’t’ delusion the parents, …lets just talk about the truth.
Hence, the academic level of the curriculum evokes questions of its accessibility and utility to meeting student needs as defined by their present levels of functioning and IEP goals. A novice teacher in his second year as a special education self-contained teacher points out that it’s not just the academic level of the curriculum, but the content as well. He describes dissonance between the content of his courses and student circumstances:

You have to be so many things, you know, like I’ve got to be entertaining, ...I’ve got to be real, …especially to them. Like I’ve got to be able to hit you where you are, …and that becomes so much different than a traditional classroom because I could come in and I could say this is what we’re going to do today, you know what I mean, and somebody like Jimmy [fictional name] has some previous knowledge and he has educated parents, parents that have knowledge that has been instilled in him, you know especially if you go with the pacing guide. Like I’ve got a British lit class and we’re reading Beowulf, and I’m teaching them Chaucer and I’m teaching them Pardoner’s Tale and Wife of Bath’s tale and these tales are interesting but then when that question comes up then, from a student who is homeless, you know, and he’s asking me like okay, well why are we doing this? You know then the question becomes okay, why are we doing this [emphasis original]? You know, and I ask myself… WHY ARE WE DOING THIS [emphasis original]? You need something more fundamental than this, don't you? That’s a hard question. Yeah, you take it to people, I mean… I’ve run it past people. The response is: I know, we gotta do something different for him, you know.

Another participant, a middle school special education teacher in a self-contained model,
candidly adds:

The point is to do the same curriculum. They’re not worried about the kids and living after they get out of 6th period or living when they get out at 18. They’re worried about what’s presently going on and they don’t want to look beyond the so-called no child left behind, they want to make sure that everybody is on the same pacing chart, everybody is going to college, but everybody is not going to college.

An elementary special education co-teacher shares that IEP goals are written to the curriculum now and she points out that this practice is not a child-centered approach; it is a State-centered approach:

It’s written to the curriculum now. It used to be written to the present levels and specifically for the child, but now it’s more State centered, what the State requires, what the State wants, so it seems like it’s moving from what the child specifically needs to what should benefit the State and what looks good for the State. When I say “to the curriculum,” I’ll give you an example: a 5th grade student, you have to, because that’s the rule, pick a 5th grade standard but this child is on a first grade-kindergarten level.

Participants also point out that the IEP is written so that goals can be executed within what the district offers as a spectrum of service delivery options, not in response to the child’s needs. A middle school special education co-teacher, for example, explains how the focus of special education has shifted to a more academic emphasis and how he writes the IEPs to fit the co-teaching service delivery model, the setting for instruction:
I think it’s more focused on the academic achievement, which is… [pauses], which is good as long as the students are learning. But not for trying to meet some standard you know, to make your school look good; and I think it’s more that now, okay. I think it boils down to money. I mean that’s just the way I feel, because everything has a price tag.

…At one time there used to be a bank of accommodations. But right now, accommodations are pretty standard. …I mean they’ve used them so long, I think they’re pretty common, …shorten lessen assignments, those types of things; they’re just basic. …If you took some IEPs …and compared them, they would be very similar. One student may have less [sic] accommodations than another student, it depends on who’s writing the IEP, …but many of the standards, I mean many of the accommodations are pretty standard. …That’s the way it is

…When you begin to learn to write IEPs, the thing is, what do you put in this section? What do you put in that section? You have to look at what can you actually do in the classroom. So if I have this on there, can I actually do that in the classroom? Can I actually do that? Do I actually have the time to do that?

…Look at the situation we have with co-teaching. …They have given us a, sort of like a model. …There are different models, …but the county wants us to do parallel teaching and stations. Okay, how can you do something one-on-one when you’re doing those sorts of things, you know, when you have to break off in groups? So whatever you set up, if you do parallel teaching, I mean, there’s no one-on-one, you can’t just pull the student off to the side and forget about all the others even though you want to do it sometimes.
Hence, participants suggest that the curriculum and setting are defining the IEP goals for students rather than the student’s present levels of functioning. This weighs heavy on the hearts of special educators because it causes challenges for them as well as the students. For example, an elementary special education co-teacher points out that in practice you cannot differentiate the 5th grade curriculum standard down to a first grade-kindergarten level without exposing the child’s deficits to others in the class. In her words:

If they’re working on fractions and you come up with a pizza and that signals out the child because that child is supposed to be sitting in a co-teaching setting. Because how is he doing pizza when everybody else is doing fractions and they’re like, well I want to do the pizza, but that’s the only way you can get him to do the fractions because you have had to whittle it down so much for his level and he still can’t comprehend that. Then you’ve got a whole bunch of other students off task because he’s doing something that looks fun.

She adds that in addition to distracting the other students, it also has an impact on his motivation, “it would make him angry and frustrated because he can’t do the same level of work as his peers.” A middle school special education co-teacher shares that “as long as I don’t care about written up” I can teach the child what he might need, what should be in the IEP, for him to be successful in the world. He goes on to say that there is testing involved, “there’s benchmarks that we’ve gotta meet, there’s benchmark testing, you know” and administrators put pressure on teachers to yield good scores on the benchmarks. He says that, “I guess that their hands are tied too” when it comes to supporting him as a teacher as he tries to help the students learn what they really need to know.

A high school self-contained special education teacher adds that students that
need significant remediation should be offered additional service delivery options, such as being pulled out. He says, “It’s not that I can’t provide the work, it’s a self-esteem issue.” The other students would be aware of the child’s deficits and “they would know he can’t read, it’s that obvious. He’s not going to set himself up that way.” Another participant, an elementary special education resource teacher, adds that:

If the child is in 5th grade and functions at a second grade level, we should be able to teach the child on the second grade level to build them to where they need to go instead of trying to teach them on a fifth grade level. Fifth grade curriculum, fifth grade vocabulary for kids that are on the second grade level. I could write a book about this because it is totally ridiculous.

She goes on to say that the curriculum drives the IEP goals and objectives, not the child’s present levels of functioning. To put this in perspective, she shares an example:

For instance, take a perfect example, I have one fifth grade student … [pauses]… right now that I’m still teaching alphabets and number recognition up to 10, at fifth grade! And I’ve been working with this child for three years, and this child cannot identify numbers out of sequence from one to ten. I have to use the fifth grade curriculum and break it down so far to teach the child alphabet and phonics.

I have to go on the Internet; basically I’m on the Internet searching for things to work with this child. I’ve pulled the kindergarten curriculum to see how much… I can pull … to tie it with this fifth grade standard to work with this kid. Math, science, social studies, language arts, reading, writing… Okay, if the child is learning the alphabet, how is this child going to write a five-paragraph essay?

She adds that this child would be better served in a more supportive environment but no
one is supporting her as she stands up for this child’s rights:

The first thing, this child is not in the correct placing because this child is supposed to be in a self-contained class. I have filled out paper work four times. I’ve filled out paperwork and submitted paperwork four times for this child to be in the self-contained class. That has been approved and the mother says no. She does not want the child to go there and we allow the child to stay in this building; all they are doing is appeasing the parent.

Now we have to be doing the State Alternative Assessment on this student… I had to do it for two years. Another teacher did it for a year. Now another teacher is doing it because I’m tired. I can’t do it all, so another teacher is doing it this year. This is a portfolio that you have to put together for the State on all the content areas… and they look at it. Thank God last year, …when it was submitted, they claimed that this child basically is making progress.

I don’t mind doing it, but here it is, I have all the students that I have to prepare for the regular standardized test. I had no support. I had no help. I have to create all the assessment. I have to score it. I have to find books that needs to be read, I have to write the lesson plans, I have to find the most, the most appropriate standards that I think this child can work on, …I have to tape the child answering questions, I have to type up the whole script; it’s a lot of work, it’s a lot of work for one person. There’s [sic] many nights that I leave here at 7:30pm. I have a family to go to. I have a special needs child that needs me. On weekends I’m working at home.

She shares that this child and others like him need a different curriculum, an adaptive
curriculum, and will eventually benefit from vocational training in later years but they
don’t, however, offer an adaptive curriculum in her elementary school.

**The context of teacher stress: structural discrimination of students.**

A majority of participants described misalignment between what the district offers
to special education students and what the students’ needs are. This misalignment is a
tremendous source of stress and they describe it as an example of structural
discrimination against special education students. It includes the lack of appropriate
curriculum available to special education students, the State’s practice of counting
students that earn special education diplomas as dropouts, the way special education
students are tested, and the States Alternative Assessment program’s (State AA) practice
of providing intellectually disabled students with college preparatory diplomas in order to
count them in the graduation rates. Students served by the States AA program, according
to participants, function in the lowest 1% of cognitive ability in order to be eligible. They
are, according to one participant, so cognitively impaired that reading is beyond the grasp
for most of them and for many, if standardized tests were administered, they would be
unaware that they were being tested. In his words:

> The student has to be so low that, basically in a nutshell, you have to be so low
> that you don’t understand that you’re taking a test, because… [the guidelines say]
> that if you are able to sit for a standardized test and say that you don’t know an
> answer, then you’re high enough for a standardized test.

These students, he points out, the students that are served by the State AA program, count
among the children that earn college preparatory diplomas, while students that might
“spend 6 years learning all sorts of wonderful things” pursuant to a special education
diploma count as dropouts. The State AA program is also a very time consuming process for the teacher. An elementary resource teacher explained that “for every 5 minutes of instructional time, there’s about an hour of paperwork.” Another participant draws this out further as he describes how strict district adherence to mandates regarding teaching the grade level common core curriculum standards plays out with severely intellectually disabled children served by the State AA program:

This one kid is literally, …I mean the teacher is literally taking a student’s hand and picking up a seed and putting it in the dirt and writing about how they are learning the life cycle of plants; instead of teaching them to recognize a human coming in the room, and that’s what get’s teachers frustrated.

The teacher does all the writing about how the child is learning the life cycle of the plant in order to satisfy the accommodations provided to the child.

A special education instructional change coach described how in the past their school provided comprehensive educational programming for special education students but, when the No Child Left Behind Act shifted the district’s focus to college readiness, the vocational offerings were cut from their school. Most recently he had a student who was on the State AA program that was being considered for a change in placement to a school that provides vocational training. He describes being cautioned from encouraging such a change because of how it might conflict with how the child was counted for graduation rates through State AA program:
We had a kid that we were trying to send to [the technical school] and a person who is higher up [in the district] said, well be careful about that because if we send them to [the technical school] they will not be eligible for a [State Alternative Assessment] diploma. The LTSE [Lead Teacher for Special Education] said rightly that I have a real problem that we’re saying we shouldn’t do what’s best for our students so a school can get a diploma.

*Stress from systemic decisions made at a distance from actual practice.*

These are systemic problems that, according to participants, have practices built around them to benefit the district and State without appropriate consideration to the impact they have on the children. Another participant shares his thoughts about State and district decision makers: “I think there were some good intentioned people but the ignorance is, well …there’s no real awareness of who special education students are and what their needs are and what this is doing to them.” These misalignments, these examples of structural discrimination against special education students, are elements that interact with the teacher in the life space during the congress of teaching and learning. They cause stress through conflict with the teachers’ values of doing what is right for children. Participants report being aware of what children need, but being prevented or otherwise unable to meet the children’s needs because of the interaction with district practices and State mandates.

The curriculum itself, according to participants, is difficult for special education students. Nearly all participants call for a wider array of curriculum options for special education students; options like an expansion of vocational training and functional adaptive curriculum that would open additional success paths for students that are not
going to go to college. Participants report that the college preparatory curriculum is presently considered as the “gold standard” within the district, but it is paced at a rate that is too fast for special education students to grasp and master and it does not engage them to synthesize and apply their learning to the real world, their lives outside of school. A lead teacher for special education shares that the curriculum is out of date. In her words, “I think it is what we think the kids need in the world but it is based on years ago ideas.” She adds that:

Our kids are lacking creativity because everything in the school is structured for them. You know when I was a kid you used to go out there and create a game and use your imagination and make up a game. There are some things that you can’t learn in school. There are some things that you just have to make up; you just use those skills that you just have, just innate skills that no one has to teach us, and we stifle it.

She goes on to add:

Look at a typical kid three, four, or five [years old] and they can tell you what they want to be when they grow up. By the time they get to fifth grade and eighth grade, they don’t know what they want to be; we stifle it. We zap that creativity away from them because we start telling them what they’re supposed to do and how they’re supposed to do it, you know, we don’t’ allow them to solve their problems anymore, we try to solve them for them.

Another participant, a middle school special education teacher, draws this out further by sharing that before the curriculum became so structured, scripted, and paced, she had the flexibility to engage the children, to present lessons that were hands on and creative. She
adds that, “I think kids felt better about themselves doing those things.” She lamented that she actually enjoyed her job much more when she had the professional autonomy to create lessons that worked with her students. Another participant adds that the delivery of curriculum with strict adherence to performance standards and pacing doesn’t take into consideration the impact on students that struggle academically. In his words:

They don’t think about the emotional toll that it takes on the student that goes in that class and can’t do what the other students are doing for that semester. Then if they find out that it’s not working, no harm no fowl, we’ll just switch them to a special ed diploma. They would rather that you throw them in for college prep and then after a semester or a year you have to switch. They allow you to do that, but my point is that then you have a traumatized kid that has built up a year of unsuccessful high school; more likely to drop out, more likely to not try, and most of the teachers that worked with him could have told you that he couldn’t do it. If there’s a gray area, I’m always for giving a gray area kid a chance, but if all the teachers are saying this is not going to work out, it used to be we could say that, but we’re in a system right now that is saying push toward regular ed diploma.

A high school special educator describes how district curriculum mandates interact within her life space during the congress of teaching students that need more than what she can provide within the confines of the paced common core grade level curriculum standards:
These kids are being left out, sitting in the classroom. Stress that I experience is kids that are like 16 and 17 and can’t read. They came through from elementary school, to middle school, and they still can’t read. They can read their names because they know their name, but anything other than that… If their name is written on a paper and if they’re just reading and looking at it, they won’t recognize it as their name. So it’s frustrating and stressful to see a kid go through that and want to try to teach them to read and teach them how to do things and its like, you can try to go back and go back, but if the kid is 17 or 18 they need more help with daily living things, like how to shop, knowing how to wash clothes, knowing how to survive.

She adds that the:

Policies that the government makes for education, especially for special education, it’s not logical a lot of times. He’s 19 and I can’t necessarily slow down to teach him how to read, I’m supposed to be teaching him the standards and he needs to be learning vocational, maybe it is a State thing, they don’t have the appropriate vocational training, maybe it’s a District thing, because college is not for everybody, you need to learn a skill and not sit in a classroom all day, and that’s what they need and that’s what they’re not getting.

A middle school special educator in a co-teaching model adds that the curriculum is “preparing them to take the test; just to take the test and pass.” This is a source of stress for him and he goes on to say that children in special education will need the basic skills that education can offer, plus they will need to be able to get along with one another, they will need drive, determination, motivation, creativity, and greed to be successful in
America. He adds that neither the curriculum nor the tests are aligned with what these children will need to be successful in the world of American business.

An elementary special education co-teacher adds that he does not have authority to exercise the professional autonomy and judgment to meet the needs of students even if he can see them. He says, for example, “we have a new reading program that basically has a script and it limits your creativity to be able to teach to things that you know that those children need to be successful.” Another participant, a lead teacher for special education in a self-contained model, candidly shares:

I feel it’s almost abusive to put a child in the curriculum and in coursework that they are so far behind. I equate it to as if I moved you to France right now and put you in a public school and… tell [you] to function at this level; you know it’s just not fair! It’s just not fair to expect them to perform at that level and it’s also not fair to tell the teacher that you have to teach them the curriculum at this level.

...The teachers are taught how; differentiated instruction has become the, you know, the terminology of the last few years, and when you have so many levels far behind, that’s not realistic.

She goes on to describe what this looks like in practice and the irony of how transparent this is to students:

…You put them in an algebra class where they’re doing polynomial equations and all these equations, and the kid has never been taught fractions. Well, why are you thinking he’s going to do a fraction with algebraic equations on the top and on the bottom when he can’t even grasp ½ plus ¼?

She goes on to describe how this becomes problematic for the child in the classroom:
…When you walk in class it’s full of variables on the top and on the bottom and we have a kid in there that I don’t even think could do ¼ plus ½ and he says, he told us this today, he said this to me, do you realize that I had two weapons charges in elementary school and they moved me from school to school, do you know how many math lessons I missed? And one of the weapons charges was for scissors, they just exaggerated, one was for a knife, I really did bring a knife to school. Because for me, he’s acting up every day in math; really it’s funny to me because I’m not the teacher, but I forget what he said today but it was a phrase from a movie that he said out loud repetitively, like a parrot like, and yesterday [his teacher] said yeah, and yesterday it was a profane word, because he can’t do the work he disrupts the class.

He wants to go back to learn last year. I had a kid [say], “could you just, why don’t you go back and teach me like seventh and eighth grade? And then I’ll do high school even if I have to graduate later [emphasis original].” We have kids that want to learn how to read, [pause]… why is it if a kid is not learning reading at the third grade level, because that’s when they’re supposed to be reading by, If they’re not reading at that level, why aren’t they being taught reading in the fourth, and fifth, and sixth, and seventh until they get it?

**Teacher stress and the standardized assessment of students.**

Participants reveal that keeping up with the pacing chart for the grade level standard on the common core curriculum has become more important than meeting the students’ needs. Three participants in a focus group all laughed when asked if the intensified focus on academic curriculum has resulted in improved student achievement
scores among special education schools. They said that achievement has not increased, but behavior problems have; there is “more acting out, because the kids can’t do it, so they act out.” Another participant, a high school special education instructional change coach adds that she did not believe that the increased focus on academic instruction yielded achievement gains among pupils. She says, “our instruction got better, the academic part got better, got significantly better, although some of those teachers have left.” In response to being asked about whether or not the improved academic instruction resulted in increased student achievement, she says, “I don’t think so,” and goes on to say:

Well first of all, what they used to measure had no impact on high school. You know, they put all these things in place, but in high school, the whole FAY [Full Academic Year] thing, you know our high mobility knocked a lot of kids out because they weren’t here for the amount of time that they needed to be here for the measures to count. And then in high school, the real measure was either end of course test, but mostly the high school graduation test, which is in the 11th grade. We don’t usually keep that many 11th and 12th graders, especially those on a college prep diploma, and the transition kids don’t count. Okay, so there was no measure to really measure the academic progress of the kids in the high school, at least among those that we’re interested in measuring that for.

An elementary general education co-teacher sums it up by saying that there are gaps between the curriculum and what the children are needing, along with gaps in service models available within the district, all of which leave special education kids behind. Another elementary special education co-teacher explains that some of gaps
occur because there is a lack of vertical alignment of the curriculum. He describes challenges with vertical alignment of the curriculum in his school:

We’ve had some discussions but I think that the thing is that it doesn’t happen often enough. Last year we started to get into vertical alignment where third grade teachers are talking to second grade teachers so those teachers know that these are the prerequisite skills that the kids need to come to us with. And then third grade turns around and has that same conversation with fourth grade teachers so that they know the skill set that the students need to come to the next grade with.

He goes on to say that the students that come to him without the pre-requisite skills. They are starting the year out behind and he is expected to remediate them. The challenge, as he points out, is that in order to keep up with the pacing charts, he cannot take time out to remediate them and his evaluation as a teacher is tied to how well his students do on the testing for the grade level common core curriculum standards. Hence, he is teaching students that are behind and do not have the skills to succeed on the grade level common core curriculum standards. He is required to teach the grade level standards in pace with a district mandated pacing chart and he does not have time or resources to remediate the children so that they will have an adequate opportunity to learn the grade level curriculum standard. The children are evaluated through standardized assessments on their mastery of the grade level common core curriculum standards and his evaluation as a teacher is tied to how well his students do on these tests, tests that he knows they are not academically ready to take.

With respect to the standardized tests given to students, several participants point
out that testing is stressful and imposes a large tax on time and emotional energy. Nearly the entire month of October was spent testing, according to participants, and in addition they take benchmark tests every three weeks. “Children take the COGAT, the ITBS, the CRCT, the end of course tests, the high school graduation tests, and all those benchmark tests.” With respect to the benchmark tests, one participant points out that they are not aligned to the students IEP goals and objectives. Another participant, a general education co-teacher, points out that the benchmark assessments do not reflect student mastery of concepts and the scores do not reflect the strength of student academic skills. She adds, “surprisingly, those that are the beta club students, the safety patrols, supposed to be the cream of the crop, you didn’t achieve anything higher than those that are just getting by.” Another participant considers what it must be like for a special education student that is below grade level and forced to sit through district mandated benchmark tests:

It’s a lot of work that is doing something that is not a value to our program or our students. We don’t get good results from testing and, in fact, the County’s policy now about doing benchmarks is making sure; you take a student that’s two-three grade levels behind and you give them a standardized test that’s over their grade level every three weeks. Well, you’re going to assure that they’re not going to try; they really don’t want to.

We get some kids that probably do try but probably the majority, we have a significant part, maybe half of our student population, even when they come to us, we know they don’t try on the CRCT or the ITBS. The kids on regular diploma probably really do try on the end of course test, but anyway, I’m saying it’s frustrating.
He goes on to add:

What bothered me was taking special ed students, special ed diploma students, and taking them and sitting them in and giving them the [State] high school graduation test, which is not going to keep them from graduating but they have to sit for it. You know, or the most abusive is really the writing test because year after year you have students that cannot understand the prompt. So they can’t follow. At least on the other test you can bubble along, but it’s very embarrassing for most students to come in and we give them something and they look at it and

…I remember a student raised his hand and said, I don’t understand, I don’t know how to begin, and I said, well, I can’t help you. Literally, just remember the things you learned in class, like, well, take your time, try to do an outline, that’s what this page is for, and he’s like, you don’t understand; I have no idea what they’re asking. I hope they get over it but you know that our system, in a way, abused that student that day.

He goes on to describe how another special education class comprised of students with low average intelligence scores that were preparing for the writing test. He said that the teachers really worked with them and made the classroom experience positive for them. They were all significantly below grade level. They all showed progress on average of two or three grade levels of improvement before the test but they were still significantly below their grade level. He adds that they worked hard and:
They had good grades, and they talked about how they were making better paragraphs and introductions and stuff, and they all walked in the writing test and they all tried real hard and they all felt really good about it and a month later they all got their results and they all failed. And they all said, I WHAT [emphasis original]? Because they’re not on grade level, and it’s really not realistic to expect them to be there and it’s really sad that part of the testing thing for our students is kind of unfair and it does hit hard. A lot of those students were really hit hard because they worked hard, they had these people give them stuff, they had seen improvement, they were feeling good about the progress they made, and they got slammed.

Another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher explains that testing kids above their present levels of functioning, at their grade level, is setting them up to fail and it causes stress for both the child and the educator. In her words:

I think when you say that a child can read or perform on a grade level that is so below where they are, but then you give them a test on the grade level, that produces stress for me. Because your seeing this child can’t, you have a legal document saying that this child can only perform on this level, and you are giving them something on THIS LEVEL [emphasis original], it seems like you are setting them up to fail, for failure.

She adds that tests, the State tests and the district benchmarks are too frequent and it is causing kids to have “test fatigue.” The children tell her, “We don’t want to take any more tests. We’re tired.” She adds, “and when we are testing these kids like that, are we really getting good data?” The testing, she says, is very stressful to the children because
it disrupts the normal routines of the school, they can’t change classes and they are essentially held in one room all day. As she says it:

Because like even now with them not being able to move, they’ve just been doing their reflection in the classroom all day. You know you try to give them something to work on and they freak out. Is this a test? No it’s not a test, this is just your daily work that you need to be doing. And they are, they’re freaking out, like I am tired of being tested. Even while we was testing this week and last week, you saw some kids who were just marking, and I don’t know if the kid really read that or they just want to be done and put my head down and wait for it to finish.

_Teacher stress and the standardization of teacher evaluation._

All of the participants describe testing students as a source of stress, but not just because of the stress it causes to children, it also causes stress to the educators. They point out that student test scores are used to evaluate the teachers. This is a significant source of anxiety for teachers. They point out that there is wide variation in children’s’ abilities that makes this type of evaluation unfair. In addition, there is discourse regarding linking teacher pay to student achievement scores. One participant, a special education self-contained teacher that works with children who are below grade level and have severe emotional and behavioral problems shares that, “Every year there are more things that we have to take care of and have in place to prove to people that we’re doing our jobs.” She goes on to articulate her concerns about how the evaluation process and possibility of pay for performance will impact the field of education:
The goal of all this is to improve test scores and they’re going to pay us on student achievement eventually, that’s what they say. I don’t see that ever happening, but if they do, who is going to teach at an inner city school? If your pay and ability to do well in your profession is based on that standardized test, who’s going to voluntarily teach in places like this except us poor dupes? I know there are schools where the parents are involved, the kids are well fed, and they do better than an inner city setting where there’s one parent, if there is a parent [emphasis original], where the parent has to work all the time. How can you say that the norm here is the same as the norm there?

I remember one meeting and they were talking about the last curriculum standards when they were new, and they talked about how everybody would be tested on this, and I said well, when you get a kid that reads on a second grade level, how can you…? And she said, well you have to catch him up dear. Okay so it’s taken him eight years to get to the second grade reading level and in one year I’m supposed to catch him up the other six? That’s crazy talk!

An elementary special education co-teacher shares that with the way the evaluation system is set up, teachers may have to focus energies on the children that will make the greatest gains. In his words:

For your heart, it is very disparaging. …Going forward to this pay for performance model is really going to put pressure on teachers to focus on the students that …make the greatest gains; the students that they think that they are actually going to be able to move forward. …If they don’t see the gains, then their pay suffers.
He adds, “you know, no one really gets into this field because of the pay, but we all have to maintain our way of living… it’s definitely some difficult decisions.” Another participant simply states, “I don’t think it’s fair; I don’t think it’s fair to use the child to evaluate me.” She goes on to say that the child’s performance depends on many elements that are out of her control such as the value placed on education in the home or whether or not the child is interested in what she is teaching:

You can give a child something education wise, but if they don’t want to accept it or if they don’t try to get it… Why is that a reflection of me? What’s happening at home to reinforce what I’m giving to them?

In addition to using student test scores to evaluate teachers, there are other elements of the evaluation process that also cause stress to the teachers. For example, what administrators look for when they observe or set their priorities regarding what they expect of teachers is often disconnected with the complexities of actual teaching practice. One participant, a middle school special education teacher, points out that administrators are looking at:

Our pacing, and our chart, and your lesson plans, and make sure whatever you are doing is at least shown on that week, that what your doing is on your lesson plan and it relates to your instruction, and that you can find the ways to do assessments or something; that’s all they’re concerned about.

Another participant points out that the administrators require them to spend time engaging in practices that have little or no value to the students or the practice of education:
I was observed on the third day of school. I didn’t even know what I was teaching yet, the subjects. They gave a list of things that we were supposed to teach, no subjects were taught, just the rules and regulations. You see I have my standards on the board, my three-part lesson plan. I have to have it up or I’ll get written up. The kids don’t give a care about it. I understand it gives me direction about what I need to be teaching them, but the fact that a kid knows?

Another participant adds, “the kids can’t even read the board with the standards, but then you have to have your three part lesson plan.” She goes on to say:

The first thing they look at is the teacher, they don’t look at the kid and their problems and this kid isn’t on medication, his mom is in jail, they don’t look at those factors, they say they do, they’ll look at, okay this kid is this, this kid is that, but they always come right back at the teacher or the para professional in the room and say, “you’re doing this, and you’re doing that wrong, you need to do this or you need to do that.” But all they’re saying is that you need to give them more work, more structure, because structure isn’t everything [emphasis original].

When you have a kid that didn’t take their medicine, structure means nothing to them. …That kid might work after they realize okay, she really understands, she cares about my feelings. It’s not the structure; it’s the relationship [emphasis original]! A kid will work for you if you have a good relationship with them.

Another teacher adds that the administrators tell her she’s got to make her lessons engaging. “You can make it the most engaging thing, you can stand on your head and do a cartwheel across the room but if they’re not on their meds, it doesn’t matter.” A special
education instructional change coach points out that the instrument used to evaluate teachers uses a standardized formula to check that teachers are performing on a set of rigid criteria. He references a scene in a movie where a teacher has the students walking outside behind him while he’s ripping up a book. The students in the movie are thoroughly captivated with what the teacher is saying and doing, “their minds are on fire,” he says, and yet,

The sad thing is, in our current system, that would be a failing PDP [Professional Development Plan] sort of teacher; doesn’t matter that the kids are engaged and thinking. People could tear him apart because he doesn’t have a word wall, he doesn’t have the standard on the wall, and he didn’t do an introduction.

A middle school self-contained special educator shares that:

They would come in to observe and I would be observed while I was teaching and being pelted with stuff. …They would come in and make sure that I had my standards on the board. And that didn’t stop them from doing it, so I’m being observed while I’m being pelted with stuff while I said, Oh look, this is the standard, this is the essential question, this is the work we’re going to work on, this is my word wall, this is my student work up on the wall so that I can meet all those things that they are watching me for and all the time, chaos is raining.

Another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher, adds that the administrators are quick to mark a teacher down for not meeting some “nit picky” item on their checklist but they rarely recognize the teachers’ efforts to stay late and help with extra things for the school. A high school special education teacher in a self-contained model explains that he experiences a lot of stress from doing all the paperwork and other
stuff to make the administrators’ job of evaluating him easier:

There’s that stress of just doing classroom management stuff and then there’s the stress of the paperwork and all the stuff you have to do to, you know, to cover yourself, and have all your stuff organized so that if people walk in they can see at a glance what you’re doing. That’s hard [laughs] because you may be doing something that’s way off but you have to, if someone comes in, you have to be covered so that at a glance they can get a good assessment of what’s going on.

You have to have your three-part lesson plan on the board so that when somebody walks in they have to know, even if you’re not doing it; that has to be up so that they know that was your intention. And if somebody is asleep, you have to be able to say that we tried to wake so and so, …you have to be able to cover yourself. That can be stressful because you may have gone through two or three hours of rough classes and you’re already kind of tired and somebody walks in for an observation and you gotta, [snaps his fingers] have to make it look good, and that can be kind of stressful. Not that your not doing what you’re supposed to be doing, its just that you have to make sure that it is easily identifiable when somebody walks in.

An elementary special education co-teacher states that administrators use the teacher evaluation process to “throw you under the bus.” Another elementary special education resource teacher adds that:
It’s like okay, you see a teacher that needs help, …or needs to improve in something. …Instead of saying okay, “I understand, probably you might need help in classroom management. Let me assign you a mentor or another teacher to help you with classroom management and you guys can sit down and work on some strategies how you can do it,” it’s like it’s an “I got you!” …To me, it’s like they’re always looking for weaknesses in people to say, “I got you!”

A big part of the problem, according to participants, is that the stakes involved with teacher evaluations are high and what the administrators are checking on their forms, or what the State has mandated, may not align with what the teacher sees as important to his or her students to grow and be successful in the world. The IEP’s might not be properly aligned with students’ present levels of functioning or needs. The curriculum might not be addressing students’ needs. The students may not be performing at their best on student assessments. The student assessments might not be capturing individual student growth on academic or IEP goals.

All of these factors, these elements in the environment that participants illuminated, have been decided upon, put into practice, and have whittled away at the concept and practice of individualized instruction for their special education students. Within the life-space of participants the interaction with these elements produces stress, anxiety, and frustration. It is a conflict that exists in the interaction between what they know their students’ need and what they are allowed to, or mandated to, provide. One participant points out that if the teacher or the students don’t perform well on what administration sees as important, the teacher may lose their job, “if you don’t have …a satisfactory, …you may or may not get a renewal of contract which means you could lose
your job. This is stressing me out just talking about it.”

**Erosion of educator resolve: stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.**

The sources of educator stress that were identified by participants were discussed in the preceding three themes. They explored the stories of stress from censorship, powerlessness, situational helplessness, and repeated exposure to circumstances and conditions that participants felt did not help their students. They explored stressful interaction with systemic policies or practices that some deemed abusive and others said systematically discriminated against special education students.

Erosion of educator resolve: stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout is the last of the 4 emergent themes related to educator stress. This explores the story of how the sources of stress, the environmental elements, influence the educator within the life space over time and result in response behaviors to cope with their experience of stress. Response behaviors consist of thoughts, feelings, or directed actions to accommodate the demands of the stress. Some response behaviors are positive and support a healthy emotional accommodation of the demands, while others are negative and align with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. The response behaviors that align with compassion fatigue and burnout are what are described within this theme.

**Contextualizing stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.**

In very simplified terms, stress is the process whereby demands are made on human beings resulting in physiological and/or emotional responses made to accommodate them (Seyle, 1974). Compassion fatigue is the wearing down of resolve and emotional resources in response to the stress and related empathic engagement inherent in the care of others (Figley, 1999/1995; Morrissette, 2004; Stamm, 1999/1995;
Stamm, et al., 2008). Burnout develops over time and is an erosion of interest for other people, roles, or activities along with psychological exhaustion and a feeling that one’s efforts do not make a difference (Stamm, Higson-Smith, Hundall, & Stamm, 2008; Morrissette, 2004).

Compassion fatigue and burnout are similar and each is identified by the presence of a wide array of overlapping symptoms. Both are the result of a building of stress that exceeds available emotional coping resources. Within the spectrum of burnout there is a type of burnout that is related to working with clients and this is where compassion fatigue might be considered to fit (Devilly, et al., 2009). Valent (2002) points out that both of these conditions can contribute to difficulties within interpersonal relationships marked by conscious or unconscious efforts to emotionally distance and disengage from others. With respect to teachers, these interpersonal difficulties may enter in their relationships with students, families, and colleagues.

_A view into the workings of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout._

In human terms, compassion fatigue and burnout are the processes involved when educators’ resolve to help students is worn down and their hearts are broken. A good example for illuminating this rests within a conversation during a focus group between two high school self-contained special educators, a male and a female. They describe the burden of having so many competing demands that they are forced to make uncomfortable decisions that “bargain” with their sense of purpose and mission. The weight of these decisions is tremendous because they have to decide which students they can actually help and which they cannot. The nature of having to make this kind of decision is dissonant with why they became educators, that calling to help young people
to have good lives, and it erodes their sense of resolve to help each child. The conversation is as follows:

She gasps for air in response to a question of what it does to her heart when she has to make these decisions, and then tearfully she says, “We’ve let that child down… That’s probably the biggest stress; knowing that I personally am letting these children down.” She describes one of her students, “he is a really bright kid; anything he hears or sees, he remembers. He can’t read. There’s something going on up here [points to her head].” He adds, “he’s not retarded, he’s very intelligent. But the thing about it is, …it makes you sad and angry…” She interrupts and emphasizes “angry.” He continues:

Because you get a student and you think that, well, it’s all up to me [emphasis original]! [Nervously Laughs] Well I know that seems unreasonable, but like during your language arts class …you think that it’s up to me. …They need to make some progress, not just because you’re going to be evaluated, but it’s kind of like I need to move them in some kind of direction somehow.

She adds, “and some times the things that you feel like you need to do to help them will hurt you on your evaluation.” He agrees and continues:

Right you can’t do that and so you feel stymied by that in some ways. But then after a while, after a couple of years, you think, well I can’t save everybody [emphasis original]. Well I can’t save everybody, throwing my hands up [gestures with his hands]. So you get to the point that you think, well I can’t focus all of my energy into that one student that can’t read because I’ve got seven more people that need just as much so maybe I can do something for them.

He adds that, “it’s almost like you have to make these bargains with yourself. Like, okay,
he’s just going to have to sit over there and do stuff. …I know he can’t read.”

Slowing her cadence, she responds in a quiet emotion-filled voice, “We have to decide who is dispensable. …[She pauses]… I hate think of these kids as dispensable; I’m sorry.” He responds:

Right, but that’s the bureaucracy of it. That’s the bureaucracy, and so we’ll go [to administrators], like we both have and said, well we’ve got him over here and …he doesn’t know his ABC’s, what am I going to do? And …they handed me a little book that looks like a Dick and Jane novel. I thought: …I can’t give that to him. That would be a violation of his trust. That would be horrible.

So you have him in there and you know that he can’t read and so you have to try, the only thing you can do, is try to preserve his self-esteem and preserve his place in the group while your trying to get someone else moving, and you know you’re not going to give him what he needs but you’ve got seven others that need stuff too, …and you still feel guilty. It makes you feel guilty, like you should be able to teach this kid how to read. I’ve never been taught how to teach kids how to read. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know why they don’t have an adult literacy program. What do we do?

She adds that this student, “he has been with us since seventh grade, I am a reading specialist, I said let’s do something,” and then goes on to point out the resistance and challenges she faced with trying to help this child:

Well, to schedule something …we can’t use this, we can’t do that. Then we get these special reading programs, like Read 180, it’s a really great program but you have to be on second grade level.
She interjects, “guess what, we have lots of children that are not that far along,” and then continues:

So they’ve given… him the reading lab for a while. They move us around where we can’t build it. Now I have basic reading and that child is in my class and what I need to do is set up the lab and guess what, the main disk is gone… It’s $250 and we can’t afford to replace it. So it’s just, do what you want. Don’t have the materials that I need. Can’t afford the materials that I need. Told to do what I want, and they haven’t given me enough time to go in there and set things up. I’m coming in on weekends and I’m still not having enough time. Adult literacy is different and that is what we need.

He agrees and adds:

That’s what we need, and you kind of have to bargain like that, and that is hard! You have to carry that guilt. When I see [that student] in the hallway, I can’t help but feel like I’ve let him down, that I’m a part of the school that has let him down. They describe caring about this child, wanting to help him, but not being able to, and the guilt that this causes them. They describe circumstances in the school that render their desires to help this child mute. They describe bargaining with themselves to cope with their inability to help this child and note that this does not resolve their guilt. They describe empathy and regard for the child that induces them to want to help, but it is in conflict with competing environmental demands, available resources, and time.

Throughout their description of the interaction with this child and the circumstances that impact all of them, their empathy and compassion for the child remains solvent but the conditions, as they describe, erode their resolve and efficacy to
help him. They describe situational helplessness related to this child over a period of years for which they cope by bargaining that maybe they can at least help the other students. When they see this child’s face in the hallway, however, they’re reminded that they have been a part of something that has failed him. The dissonance and guilt that this produces does not go away; it is, as several participants shared regarding similar situations, “heartbreaking.”

*The interaction of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout with the educator.*

The tremendous stressors felt among all participants are what wear on their resolve, their emotional resources and empathy to help each child. Among the participants, several described interactions with stressful elements within the environment situated within the congress of teaching that resulted in coping behaviors that align with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. They described cognitive symptoms such as having difficulty turning their thoughts away from stressors related to students and work once at home. They described emotional exhaustion and somatic problems. They described how stress entered into personal relationships and relationships with students causing distancing and negativity. They also described how stress interacts with work performance. Some of their observations were of other colleagues and others were of themselves. All of the participants that described seeing or engaging in coping behaviors consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue or burnout; they described them in response to situated stressors that interacted with the roles of educating.

With respect to specific response behaviors that align with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout, participants revealed that collectively they have experienced: insomnia, waking up at night worried about the children, physiological
problems like high blood pressure or diabetes, feeling overwhelmed, headaches, fatigue, and physical illness from the stress. One teacher reports that she became mentally and emotionally withdrawn. Other teachers report that they observe their colleagues taking their stress out on the children, becoming detached, losing their empathy for the kids, and losing their passion for the field.

A principal reflects that, “educator stress causes burnout.” She goes on to say that when her teachers are stressed or burned out, they are not at their best and, “you can’t have student achievement when that’s the case, …it’s a cycle.” A middle school special education co-teacher adds that, “once an educator shuts down, I don’t think that the child is getting what they could be getting.” A counselor observed that teachers sometimes become so frustrated that, “their stress controls them and then they cannot connect effectively with students.” A middle school special education co-teacher shares that when teachers get stressed, “they stop coming to work, they take their sick days, you know, they take FMLA [Family Medical Leave Act]… and then the kids are losing out.” An instructional change coach adds that emotionally unhealthy teachers are not able to balance their stress:

The emotionally unhealthy teacher is not able to maintain this balance. She either overworks and eventually burns out or does just enough to get by. She either can’t let go of her concerns for students when she needs to or avoids any emotional connections.

An elementary special education resource teacher shares that she has personally experienced the impact of stress from paperwork demands on the work done with children. She says, “if you are asking me for all this paperwork on a daily basis, how
much time is left for me to teach? I can’t! So sometimes you find yourself not giving the
kids your all.” Another participant describes her experience with compassion fatigue and
burnout while teaching in an alternative education setting:

The students ranged in ages from 12 to 19, and most had no intent to gain a
valuable education. They were there because the judicial system said they had to
be. Parents were frustrated, staff was extremely stressed, and students were not
involved. Each day was focused on discipline and making sure students remained
at school for the required hours for funding; and not to teach children. I felt
overwhelmed each and every day, and often had severe headaches, fatigue, and
lack of interest in my own personal life. As a result of the stress, I became not
only mentally and emotionally withdrawn, but physically sick. I had no desire to
continue educating children and resigned from my position.

The feelings that she describes of being overwhelmed, the headaches, the fatigue, the lack
of interest in relationships, the mental and emotional withdrawal, and the physical illness
from stress, are all consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. The
stressors involved in this job ultimately eroded her resolve to teach the children to the
point that she resigned.

A special education teacher in a self-contained model shared that she has fatigued
compassion. She draws this out by sharing how her stress interacts within her
relationships with students:
I wake up at night with it. I find myself being short with kids. I’m being judged for [their] bad behavior. Because I have to fight so hard, I find I have less patience. I also think about what its doing to my health and its no longer balanced. I’m desperate to get out of it but there is a part of me that says gosh I really hate the idea of leaving it. I also have a fear of what’s out there when I leave.

Another participant, a high school self-contained special education teacher, states that he has never questioned his decision to become a teacher but the stress and impact on his health is causing him to be uncertain if he will last:

I have never questioned it. I have questioned my viability, because I’m fading now. I haven’t been well. Man when I started in October I had to actually leave, man my blood pressure was like, 159 over something. The doctor had to give me medicine. Man I was taking medicine for a little while; I was stressed out! I had to slow down, because… I’m up in the morning, you know, I’m typing and I’m thinking, and I’m looking up videos to go with, you know… to coincide with the… the content.

Stress, as Seyle (1974) points out, can have physiological impacts on the health of individuals. Somatic problems associated with stress, such as those that this participant describes, can be a symptom of compassion fatigue (Morrissette, 2004).

A special education co-teacher talks about how difficult it is to turn his concerns for students and teaching off when he goes home:
Finding a balance [laughs] is a balancing act. Whether you want to or not you take it home and your mind replays the events of the day. It takes a while, for many of us it may take a couple of hours, to finally come down when your home, to come down mentally. You’ll find yourself even waking up from your sleep with ideas for instruction or ways that you can help that problem student out, or trying to figure out what were they going through, what were they dealing with at home right now.

Morrissette (2004) identifies insomnia, waking at night with worry, and intrusive thoughts or cognitive preoccupation with distressing client-related material as symptoms of compassion fatigue.

Another teacher describes the toll that stress has on him mentally, emotionally, and physically in response to a question about the impact of stress on him:

Fatigue, I mean just fatigue. By the end of the day I’m just so tired that I just don’t have a lot to give. I mean I do enjoy the time in my car that I can just listen to the radio, that’s good. But it’s like when I’m here and somebody tells me something that I have to do... my first thought might be curse words. That can be kind of stressful. It’s just the fatigue and the low lack of energy, not having a lot of energy to give to people at home because you’re tired. You know we talk all day. You know all day I’m running my mouth to these kids and trying to be reasonable and fair and when you get home, I might not want to be reasonable and fair. I might like it my way. Sometimes I just don’t want to talk when I get home.

He reflects back to when he was a novice teacher and describes how his coping has
evolved over time:

When I first worked here and I would go home and I would tell these people all these stories from here. You know, it was fun to see their reaction, because it would make you feel so powerful because you could handle it and it would make you feel so great. Then after a while I realized that I don’t want to tell all these stories, I just want to leave it there. So now I rarely tell any stories about work. I leave it here. I just drive off and leave it here. It will still be here. I’ve found that if I carry it with me on any level, it would just mess me up. I have to just compartmentalize that way. You know, leave it here and then I would go out and do other stuff …because you’re trying to make it to the end of the year, not just to the end of the day.

Here this teacher identifies negative thoughts, emotional distancing, and fatigue as the toll from the intensity of stress in his work with students. All of these response behaviors are consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue.

An elementary resource teacher describes health problems that she is dealing with that are a result of her stress:

I can’t sleep because of stress. Stress has caused me to have diabetes. I have high blood pressure! *High blood pressure* [emphasis original]! I have to take medication every day. Sometimes the workload is so much, it’s like, what else do I need to do? But at the end of the day, I can’t throw my hands up because I have a responsibility… I have to do this to educate these children.

She adds that she takes her responsibilities very seriously, they’re part of her oath to the State Professional Standards Commission, “This is something that I have to do, because
it’s my job and I take it seriously. So I can’t, I can’t throw my hands up and say I don’t know what else to do.”

A high school special education teacher in a self-contained model describes seeing one of her friends and colleague become emotionally distressed. She describes a mismatch between what the teacher needed from her interactions with students and what the students could actually give back to her. In this description, the teacher’s response is severe and demonstrates a pervasive impact to stress related to her compassion, her warmth and love, for the kids:

We had a co-worker that I’ve become friends with... She would go home and get on the couch and she would just cry and she would go into depression because she needed the kids to give her something, respond to her in some way, and we know that we can’t count on it. …She was very giving to our kids and she expected warmth and loving back. …Our kids can’t do that and so it just ate her completely up and she would go home and get on the couch and cry and get in depressions and she wouldn’t come to work.

*Empathy, engagement, and prolonged exposures to situated stress.*

All of the participants in this study describe empathic engagement with students. The care and regard that they have for students is allied to their calling to become educators, to help children to have better lives. Each of the educators in this study described ongoing chronic exposure to situated environmental stressors over which they have little control. As Robinson (2006) points out, the fact that these teachers care so deeply for their students while being presented with such difficult and stressful circumstances puts them at risk of emotional injury. Some teachers are able to
accommodate this within the calculus of their life space. Others find that the compounding of stress over time causes them to consider leaving the field.

A principal, who during the previous year had a heart attack, describes the extreme intensity of demands on her and how the cumulative build up of stress from these demands are causing her to consider leaving:

Maybe it’s because of my position, but I don’t think I ever disengage. The stress of the job and the impact it’s had on my health and my family has caused me to question what my priorities should be at this point in my life. Because I have sacrificed so much and I feel like now I’m at a point where there is not a lot that keeps me here. That’s why I have to retire. I’m serious. I drive home… eat a quick dinner; I work more until I go to bed. I do that every night and I do it on Sundays.

It’s very hard to disengage because I get nothing done during the school day that relates to my job as a principal. You know, today I haven’t checked my email, today [she points at the mess of papers on her desk] this is my desk, it looks good today; junk everywhere. I have to sort and sift, and I can’t even get to the computer. I have to hire, I have three positions; I haven’t even started looking. I can’t even get home at a decent hour and even spend a little bit of time with my family… My position its continual triage and you’re always hit with more than one thing at a time so, it’s multitasking of a huge type, truly. …I’ll be talking with somebody and I’ll respond [she points to the two-way radio] and they’ll say, you heard that? And I’ll say yeah.

She describes how she might look to an outsider as having pathology but within the
context of her roles and responsibilities, it is adaptive:

[The director] used to say that I was ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder], but I think it’s by necessity because there is so much that I have to focus on… Part of it too is that the kids do a lot and I want to support the staff, and that to me means that I really have to kind of be on top of my game at every moment. So if I hear somebody calling five times and nobody responds, or even twice and nobody responds, then I’m responding because the staff need to know that they have that support too.

An assistant principal shares that she considered leaving her role because of the stress. She says, “the stressors compound with the years. The first year of course was very stressful just because I did A LOT [emphasis original]… as the new A.P.” She was at a school that did not make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and it was under the leadership of a new principal that was a novice leader. She says, “I did the testing, I did the scheduling, I did the grade levels, I did…discipline… and I’m thinking, oh my God I’m going to freak out!” She says that they were, “pulling me and pulling me and pulling me, that was very, very stressful.” She had to confront the rest of the administrative team and tell them that she could not take on all of those responsibilities by herself; the load would have to be balanced with the other two assistant principals. She adds, “so I expressed that and I said if we cannot divide it up, you need to tell me now because I will not sign the contract and I will go on.”

Another participant shares that she loves the kids and her work with them but the cumulative stress from so many changes and so many problems in the processes of
educating children have eroded her resolve. She has an awareness of the problems but because of the intensity of demands placed on her, she does not have the time to talk about or address them. She says:

I do think this was the year for me to retire, like I should have been retiring now. This was the time to retire because there’ve been so many changes; I don’t like them. I see problems and I don’t have the time to talk about them.

Another participant shares that during the last year of their former principal, he was overloaded and spread so thin that he thought he could not take it anymore and started to look for a way out. He says:

I was actually going to leave here. I mean I’m still stretched but there was one year, I mean the last year of [our former principal], and that was the year… I went on and took my [test] to be certified to be an inclusion teacher and I … was looking for that role.

He said that he went so far as to put his application in at another school but the school he applied to was in transition from one principal to another and there was a delay in responding to his application. In the meantime, the principal that he was having difficulty with was demoted and moved to another school. He adds:

By the time they responded, I withdrew my application because our new principal came in, but if I would have had a response back earlier, and had gotten it, I would have gone.

He goes on to say that the incoming principal was someone whom he knew well and had worked with and it was because of her personality that he stayed. For him, the stress was from the leadership, he says, “the kids’ stressors in and of themselves don’t hardly every
push me over the edge.”

Another participant, a special education self-contained teacher, shares that her previous class was so aggressive and so challenging that she felt herself becoming burnt out over the course of the last year. She says, “last year I was done. …I was done because…they… self-contained me with these sixth graders. They were a very aggressive group, verbally and physically.” She said that she was going to leave because she could not take the intensity of stress with that group but her principal offered her a chance to work with older students. She stayed and describes the current cohort of older students as, “a wonderful blessing.”

A middle school special education co-teacher jokes that if a bus came by their school to pick up all the teachers that were stressed and wanted out, “there would be a line.” “Every year,” another participant says, every year she thinks about leaving, “yes every year! Every year and then I think about kids and I’m like dog, they need me; I gotta come back.” She goes on to say that even, “the kids keep asking, why do you keep coming back here each year? You know it’s not the money; it’s about them. I just feel like if everybody left, who would be here for them?” Another participant, a para professional that has been physically injured numerous times by students, shares the same sentiment, “it’s the kids, they’re the reason I come back each year.” An elementary school special education co-teacher laughs as he says that he “absolutely” has been frustrated with the job and has thought about leaving. He shared that he was warned that the burnout rate is high for special educators, “I remember, …someone explained to me, probably my first year. They told me that working in exceptional education, the burnout rate is five years. I’m a little past that.”
A middle school special education co-teacher shared that the reason he stays is, “definitely not the money. It’s the love that I have for trying to teach the students, you know, but I will say that I’m quickly losing it. I always say the point that I retire is when students do not respond.” He goes on to describe how teaching has changed and how this is making it harder to connect with the students. He says that there is, “a certain mindset about teaching kids with challenges” that is endorsed by leaders and is at odds with his training and beliefs. He adds:

It’s starting to shape my attitude in a different way. It comes from the responsibilities of teaching now. I cannot go out the box as much as I used to. They really don’t allow us to go out the boxes much now; my creativeness would have to come within the parameters of the curriculum, you know what I mean? It hampers it sometimes. The one thing that keeps it going is that the kids still want to come in and be around me. No matter what I say to them, no matter how I push them away, and I’ve had kids that say you’re, you’re just different… It’s like you care more. I care more? I kind of remind them what we did yesterday and what I said to them. But evidently what I’m saying to them, I guess it’s not phasing them the way I think it is, you know, it’s not “I hate you” or something like that. At times kids will say that and then the next day they’ll come back and they’re right up under me; they really don’t hate me.

**Stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout reveal a concurrent story.**

The results here reveal the presence of behaviors among participants that are consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. Collectively, they report a wide array of the characteristics of these phenomena. The participants reveal these
behaviors within the context of a broader picture, a bigger story. All of the participants of this study described situated stressors that interact with their roles and activities as professional educators. The response behaviors they describe align with compassion fatigue and burnout but their utility is for coping. Several even identified as being or having been burnt out and/or compassion fatigued. Many described approaching the point of leaving the field because of the toll stress took on their emotional and physical health.

The results here also show that nearly all participants shared within their narratives that there were other elements; other situated elements within the congress of teaching and learning that operate within the life space to draw them back. The results reveal that their resolve and sense of efficacy may erode, but something occurs in the life space through the interaction of time and other elements to mediate the phenomena of compassion fatigue and burnout from claiming a molar stake to the educators’ emotional wellbeing.

**Keeping Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout Situated and Molecular**

The previous themes explored the reasons participants became educators, stressors that they experience within the field, and how those stressors impact their wellbeing and the process of teaching. The results presented in these previous themes identify the presence of response behaviors consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. With few exceptions, the presence of these symptoms did not exact a molar stake on the educators’ wellbeing. Within the narratives that educators shared to describe their stress, the emotional toll of their stress, and the impact it had on relationships and the teaching and learning process, there was an underlying story that ran
concurrently with these themes. It is a story of connected elements that mediate stressors. This concurrent story is key to understanding what prevents the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout from decimating educator resolve and engagement.

The theme of keeping stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout situated and molecular explores these mediating elements within the context of relationships. This theme explores how the power of the call to service described by participants can reach forward through time to mediate stress in present circumstances. This theme explores how love, regard, care, concern, empathy, and engagement with students all coalesce with faith, hope, and belief that things will get better. It is a theme that explores how these hopeful positive elements from the past and future engage with the present inside the life space of educators to mediate current stressful circumstances with emotional strength grown from the deep roots of humanizing values. It is a theme that explores the self-sacrifice that is possible when a broader sense of purpose, a broader context, can be erected that grants leave to the strength of influence among stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout by making them small in contrast. It is a theme that explores behaviors that support wellbeing.

**Love.**

Participants all indicated that they were called to the field for the children, to teach the children, to help the children unlock access to better lives. It is the children that they love and the children are the reason that they, like Don Quixote, battle on despite the challenges. Their work with children is firmly planted within those deeply rooted human values of caring for others. The relationships they have with children are characterized by bi-directional influences; the teachers influence the children’s growth and learning.

and, in return, the response of the children reinforces the teachers. For example, an elementary special education resource teacher states that she remains in the field of education because, in her words, “I’m doing a civic duty.” She adds that her decision to stay is rewarded and reinforced when:

…I see a child is able to grasp something it makes me feel good and that’s why I still, that’s why I do it. Because I know they can learn. …We just have to have the patience and the tolerance to persevere.

An elementary special education co-teacher shares that she keeps coming back year after year because, as she says it, “I truly do care about the kids, just like I care about my own children, and I do want to make a difference.”

An elementary lead teacher for special education shares what she does when she becomes discouraged:

What I try to do is, although I have a title of supervisor within a school setting, I try to stay connected to the kids. I try to …bring them in and still make that connection, to help them academically. I will do that or I’ll go in the classroom and just try to stay and help the ones I know are struggling so that they do not become discouraged and give them a little bit extra if I am able to and just a word of encouragement or a word of I understand that you’re having some difficulty with organization, I do to and that’s why I have an agenda, so don’t feel bad. …To kind of relate to them so that they understand it’s not just you, you know, there’s a lot of other people in the world that are struggling in different areas.

When she gets discouraged from the stress and strain in her role as a lead teacher for special education, she returns to her calling, her work with children. She reconnects with
that nurture, love, and care that is involved in helping a child. She returns to the relationship she has with children, it is what sustains her amidst her stress. The relationship with children mediates her stress and provides the context, the perspective, and the bigger picture of what she is doing and why it is important. A general education co-teacher adds to this story by describing the raw experience of seeing a little boy that she was working with improve and how it made her feel:

Oh, [she gasps and tears form in her eyes] it was wonderful. It was wonderful. It made you cry [she catches her breath] and I think he felt good about himself, you know, the more and more he made that transformation.

A middle school co-teacher contributes to the story by sharing how her work with children is rewarded:

Most of us work with what we have. We can only work with what parents send us. There’s not a magic pill. We will do what we can do with what we have. You know what really, really has me smiling and my husband thinks you are just so weird. If a child that I’ve had a long time ago, ...they see me in a store and they remember me. I think wow they remember me! ...I am here because I love my job, not because of the salary. Because I love my kids, I love my job.

She goes on to talk about meaningful work she did with kids that lived in a rough public housing project area near her school, “the kids, it seemed they wanted something from me; education, they wanted it! I don’t know if it was because they didn’t have anything. They wanted it. They wanted to do well. Those parents were up here and involved!”

She adds that, “two of my kids last year, came back, one was going to ...college and the other one was going to Job Corp. ...They came back, to tell me.” This, she describes, as
among the greatest gifts that her children, her students, have given her.

A high school special education self-contained teacher says that he works with the “neediest” of kids, knowing that he is not going to measure up well against other teachers based on his students’ academic progress, knowing that they will present him with greater challenges. In his words, the reason he works with this group of particularly challenging students is:

Because there is always a kid that changes despite everything else that is happening around them when they’re not here in the building, that it gets better for them, that mentally they feel better about themselves.

He adds that he does this work for the kids and his work with the kids is what motivates him to keep his focus off the stress. “They’re here and they deserve a lot of attention, …all of my attention when they’re here.” Another participant, a high school special education self-contained para professional, draws this out further:

I just feel like, when I’m not around, I just feel lost. …When I first started I felt like if I could just, I wanted to come in and save all these kids, that was my goal. Just to come in and try to help these kids, I wanted to save everybody. …Through the years I’ve learned that if I could just help one child, …then I’ve made an accomplishment in a lot of things. So now I just take each time, each day by day, to try to help one child, …listening, just really sitting down and listening to them and …not interrupting. Listening to their side of the story and trying to help them.

She goes on to share a particular interaction with a student that she’s worked with for a couple of years. School, for this young man, is like a home because he doesn’t really
have stable and close connections with people outside of school. He appreciates the teachers and she says, “he does articulate it a lot,” which reinforces the their motivation to help him, to do extra things for him to make his chances for success better. In her words she describes a recent interaction with him:

We stayed late up here on Friday. He had an incident with …a girlfriend of his, I guess you want to call it; …she tore up his probation papers, …tore them into like a million pieces and just threw them in his face. Staff came together and, sitting there, …we put his papers back together like a puzzle and was [sic] able to get his papers back together and make a copy of it because he had to see his P.O. [Probation Officer] on Friday.

…We forgot about the things that we had to do to sit there and try to help this child because he was about to lose it, and we was [sic] able to get these papers back together, put them up, piece them back together, little pieces like a puzzle, and to make a copy. …He was so proud of that, it was amazing. He said, *you all spending your time on Friday here to help me?* And we said yea. So he was very proud.

Another participant reflected on work that she did with several young ladies that had been rescued from bad situations; their parents had prostituted each of them.

I made a big difference in their lives. I had two or three young ladies that went to college and they’re making more money than I am right now. I keep in touch with them on yahoo and talk to them through emails. Some kids up here, that were here that graduated with special ed diplomas, …they got good jobs.

She adds that the most important tool to help these kids was, “relationships and not
judging them, not judging the things that they already did, or the things that happened
before they got here, and taking it day by day.”

The children weave their way into the hearts of these educators. Another
participant illuminates this as she describes one of her students:

He doesn’t have anybody else, so I think he kind of you know, I think he, you
know [she struggles], I have got …a little special place for him in my heart; more
than anybody else, more than anybody else really through the years because I’ve
known him since seventh grade. He’s not really a bad kid but he has a lot going
on at home and I think he really appreciates what we do because he doesn’t have
anybody else.

Along the same lines, a middle school special education teacher shares how special it is
to her when she thinks of her work and her relationship with a young lady that came to
her in rough shape and on the wrong path. In her words:

There’re always kids that I connect with… We had a young woman who came in
as an eighth grader and she was a pistol. I mean the boys were all afraid of her.
They knew that she would whoop the… [laughs] …and she tried a few times.

You know, we had some tough times that year. We went through a period
where we took P.E. [Physical Education] away from them because of their
behaviors and we all started referring to it as *that bad time* [emphasis original]
[Laughs], but she got her act together and …did great. We kept in touch through
the years and, now she had my… [she leans in and interjects] *I don’t give my
phone number out*, [she leans back and continues] I gave her my phone number
and she gave me hers and we just kept in touch.
Her facial expression softened as she continued:

…She’s in college now, she graduated and she called me and, you know I haven’t talked to her since she started, but just every once in a while she’d call me. She didn’t have a good home life; her mother wanted her to be crazy because she got the SSI [Supplemental Security Income]. So, she had a lot to overcome. …She worked her way out of [Special Education]. She got into regular classes, she made honor roll. She just did all the right things. Well, not all the right things, but you know, she’s in college.

I don’t know how she managed it because of her home life. Her mother, her mother kept her grandkids that lived with them and she had a lot of responsibilities… but, you know, I did things. I bought her an outfit for graduation and just helped out if they needed a ride. You know, I just did the extra things. I always did that. If a kid needed help, I bought whatever they needed; their clothes for eighth grade graduation. It’s really special to think about her.

A principal, a Caucasian lady, describes some of the challenges she faced at one point in her career when she changed from working with students that were primarily non-verbal and had Autism to work with students that were verbal and had challenges with their emotions and behavior. In particular, she talks about a young lady, an African American girl, who was filled with anger and quite often acted on her anger through verbal or physical aggression. Underneath the anger, however, this principal described this child as quite bright and creative. She described the relationship with this child as significant to her. In her words:
You know, when you were asking about that significant thing? My first year here I had this middle school class that was, [she pauses]...they were ...emotionally disturbed kids and they talked back and I was shocked because I worked with non-verbal autistic kids, and these kids would cuss me out and I didn’t really know how to respond and now not only were they responding but they were cussing at me and I was like holy crap [emphasis original]!

One of the things that I always remember, …there was this girl in the middle school who was really awful, she really was, and I was the department chair overseeing the program. One day she came to school and she was so proud of herself, …she had made this necklace… So she had this necklace that she had made; she took two saltine crackers that she smooshed together on a string and she attached something to it that said white cracker Mrs. [the participant’s name], and she came up to me and she was just so proud of herself and she looked at me and I said, Oh my God! You are so creative! I can’t believe how creative you are! And it floored her that I responded that way. She expected me to be mad, to get her in trouble, how dare you… I don’t know what she expected but it was not what I gave her. Many years later she came back and apologized to me. She came back to the school.

The principal points out that this young lady worked through all of her difficulties and turned her life around. She came back to the school to apologize, but more than that, she acknowledged the love and care she received from the educators that found ways to help her let go of her anger, to reframe and redirect her unpleasant behaviors so that she might find a way to access her potential, her brightness, her creativity. She came back to let
them know that their efforts made a difference and mattered to her. The principal adds that the significance of this to her, “was something else.”

An elementary counselor who has worked for over 40 years in a number of jobs within education including special education shares, “I keep in touch with a lot of students because they are the reason I worked this long.” She goes on to say, “Oh, my God, I don’t care if they remember me or not but just to see them blossom.” She then describes her history with child that encountered during the early part of her career, a child that had a significant impact on her whom she carries in her heart:

The counselor from another school called and said, *I just want to prepare you that there’s a student that will be coming to your school and she’s burned very badly. I just didn’t want to send her over there the first day without talking to you about her.* She was in the kindergarten, and ah, she, she… she… [She struggles and slows her cadence], …I tried to …pray and prepare myself and …get myself ready and just imagine …what I would say or what I would do… I practiced some things you know, because I wanted to be ready when she came…

When she came, … [her voice weakens and her cadence slows more] she was burned *severely* [emphasis original]. [Sighs heavily] Her hands were folded, her hands couldn’t open, and her ear was burned, her face was burned. She was burned on every part of her body except for the bottom of her feet and her some parts of her head where her hair was thick. I [pauses] …I truly loved her. I still have her picture [she points to her bulletin board].

She goes on to describe the child’s family and circumstances:
…She had two other siblings and they all slept in the same room because they stayed with some other family members. …The mom needed help… she was developmentally delayed. So I took her to …the clinic, to all of her [parenting] classes, and we got her on some SSI [Supplemental Security Income] because she needed support. …I was driving them around and sometimes I would have her by myself, she could take a story book … she couldn’t read, she was in kindergarten, but she could make a story up by just looking at the pictures, so I knew then that there was some intelligence about her, spark about her… The teachers, …they just didn’t seem to have that closeness with her, because… she was different.

She smiled and said that the child had settled in and was doing very well but things at home started to unravel and the family was forced to move. She became very attached to this child and when they moved, she lost touch with them for a while.

Her sister moved out of the apartment …they were sharing the rent. …When her sister moved, they had to move. I tried to keep up with them and it just so happened that they came to the principal’s church one time and he said, I saw your family and …I touched base with them again. Then, after that, I lost touch with them again.

She kept the child’s picture on the bulletin board in her office and after several years one of the itinerant staff that worked in her building and in other buildings saw the picture and said, “I found your child. She’s a senior now. Do you want to call so we can go visit?” The child’s mother had died and she and her two autistic brothers were living with their aunt. She describes the visit:
I went to visit her, she didn’t remember me, but that didn’t bother my heart because I remembered her. I saw her, she was a young lady, finishing school, and I was satisfied. I felt so good inside because she was a senior and had gone to the prom and she was doing better.

This counselor has kept track of many of her former students, students that she taught and students that she worked with as a school counselor. She added with pride that she has students that are teachers, media specialists, nurses, and doctors. Seeing these young people blossom is what keeps her grounded, it gives her perspective and allows her to see that the stress of the moment is nothing compared to the joy that comes from helping a child to grow and learn. It is, as she describes, “the relationship with the children that matters.”

An assistant principal shares that during her career, her favorite job was when she was a reading specialist. She said that what appealed so about this job was the intensity of her relationships with the kids, “I mean my focus could be completely them.” The children were referred to her because they had failed a standardized test and, in her words:

You got to see them through their maturity level and get better with reading, …then the next year when …I told them, …you passed, it was kind of like, I passed? So ...you’re not coming to get me, what do you mean? …I liked that.

She adds that the relationship was as important as the work she did with them and then describes an experience that took her by surprise:
I was at the salon and [this woman], she asks me, “did you used to be a teacher? I mean were you were a teacher?” Yes. “Are you [she says her name]?” Yes. And then she told me who she was and …I could, I remembered her. …She said, “well I’m married now and I’m trying to work and I really want you to mentor me.” …I thought, oh my goodness, because she remembered me from when I was her teacher.

She shares that she had this student some 13 or 14 years earlier and describes her as a quiet girl that didn’t really say anything. She adds that for this former student to approach her, “that was huge [emphasis original] to me.” It has been two years since they have re-connected and she says, “that made it really full circle for me, because I, every now and then, see some students out or whatever and we will talk, but that one, when she asked me, ‘I want you to mentor me,’ it meant a lot.”

An elementary special education co-teacher smiles as he says that there have been many students that have touched his heart. He recalls a student that he worked with when he was teaching in a high school. He said:

Her mother never graduated and she was determined. This young lady was actually pregnant, …she had been struggling to graduate, pass graduation test, and she struggled with comprehension and reading, but we worked. We worked hours on end after school, on the weekends. Many of times in education we come across a lot of students that just take it for granted, so when dealing with students that struggle cognitively, for her to put forth that effort and to get it, …the icing on the cake was her passing the graduation test, that was just awesome.

He goes on to say that the student expressed her appreciation to him and how her success
impacted him:

She wrote a letter to me and just thanked me for all the time and the effort… I told her, I said, it was you, it’s you that I need to be thanking because you really did my heart some good to see that there are still students that still want to be to better themselves.

He described another student that he worked with in the high school. A 10th grade boy that played football but felt like school was a prison. He shared that the boy had a 1.8 grade point average in the 10th grade. “He was dyslexic and didn’t know it.” He began working with the boy because, as he puts it:

He would get picked at, picked on, laughed at. This was a nice sized kid, played football, …so as I’m looking like some thing is not right, like he almost has this word, you can hear him break it down and chunk it and pronounce it and couldn’t just pull it out.

…We ended up getting speech involved and also the social worker. Come to find out, his mom actually took him to get tested on her own dime because she said that our process is a little slow, and she was just like, I don’t want to lose my baby because he was getting in fights on the regular. So we found out what it was and we got him help and he went from a 1.8 GPA [Grade Point Average] as a 10th grader to when he graduated he had like a 2.6 and he had a full ride [scholarship] to the University of South Carolina.

In both of these examples he draws satisfaction and reward from his work with these kids. He describes them as two of many kids that he is proud of and proud of the work that he did with them. He adds that the key to being successful as an educator is having
compassion:

Don’t come into education if you don’t have the compassion. You won’t get rich, but you have to have the compassion …to have the sustainability to keep …going over the years.

An instructional change coach shares how meaningful a relationship that she has with a former student is to her. She describes this as her “most career shaking” experience:

There was a young lady, …I had her and her boyfriend for many years, and she was …a very involved child… and she left the program and then, after a while, would get herself in a mess and call me from time to time. For many years I worked with a para professional while she [the student] was still in the program. I was friends with the para professional I worked with for many years and she would call both of us and you know, “Oh I moved, this happened to me, that happened to me” [emphasis original].” Sometimes she got in messes but she got her life kinda back together, you know sort of, and she gets married and invites me and the para to the wedding. The wedding is on the border of Georgia and Alabama, Bowden Georgia. I wasn’t really planning to go, I feel bad about that now.

The para professional talked her into going, “come on let’s go, let’s both of us go. So we went to the wedding.” She describes being humbled by what she experienced once she got to the wedding. It highlighted to her how significant she was in this person’s life. In her words:
Okay, trailer park wedding, very pretty trailers, very well manicured and taken care of, but it was a trailer park and I had never been to a trailer park and in the middle of nowhere. This is the impact of this job: …people came out of a lot of places to that wedding, out of different trailers. People that were there, and they said to me, and the para, “oh, you’re Mrs. [she says her name], oh we’ve heard so much about you. …Oh you’re Mrs. [she says the para professional’s name],” and when I heard that, I just couldn’t believe it. They were people with no teeth, there were all kinds of people there telling me that they’ve heard so much about me. She had talked to these people like I was her mother. She went on, and we would lose contact and she would call me from time to time. She had my home number.

She called me to tell me she was getting married, she had three children, she called me as she was having each child, and so I heard from her. She never abused having my phone number, she would just call me for her life events and then her husband died in an accident at work many years, many, many years later. Oh, we had a big reunion and she came from almost Alabama [emphasis original] with her husband and her three kids to the reunion, and then a few years after that, her husband died in an accident at work; some machinery or something killed her husband.

Now talking about having these mental health issues, everything she had put together, after that death, kind of fell apart. So she headed to some hard times. She didn’t call me right away, when she thought she was doing better she called me. She called me about the death right away, …but then, …hard times.
She goes on to describe how this former student struggled and then re-connected:

She couldn’t manage the kids …she needed some help for herself. You know the husband dying really unglued her. She called me to admit that she had fallen apart and was trying to get it back together. She hasn’t called me in quite a while but she’s tried to Facebook me quite a few times. She taught me more than anything of the impact that you have on lives, working through this program. I taught her in the 80’s and my last contact with her, my last contact with her was early this year.

She adds that the impact that this had on her personally and in her heart for all of these years is tremendous and has deepened her resolve. She says:

Oh my gosh! I mean everybody in my family knows the story of this girl. Like there are people out there that, that [emphasis original] is all they have, and what it does as a person is make you appreciate everything you have. Like I can’t, just can’t even imagine, what these kids go through.

Every participant described experiences with students like these that reminded them in the midst of their stress why what they do is so important. Every participant described being reinforced and rewarded from relationships with their students. Their relationships with children through their work hold the molar stake when it comes to the gestalt experience of their roles as educators. Participants described that their relationships with students are the primary mediator that make small the influence of stress. These relationships help to balance the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout by keeping them situated within the broader context and molecular by comparison. Participants describe these past experiences as having resonance that
Hope.

Participants describe their relationships with students, their love of students, and the rewards they experience as students respond to them through learning and growth as a primary mediator. The results here reveal that the love that they have for students is reflected through their narratives detailing histories of experiences that extend back to their calling to serve. The results demonstrate that this love comes forward through time into the present and engages with them in the life space to strengthen them as they cope with stress. Second to this for participants is hope.

Hope encompasses those wishes and beliefs for the future that, without having yet happened, reach back to the present and interact with the educator within the life space to strengthen their courage and resolve. Participants point out that it is for the students that they hope and wish for things to improve. It is love for the students with the promise of hope that they continue the self-sacrifice of immersing themselves in stressful circumstances to live out their callings. These values from experiences and beliefs grounded in hope add to the thoughts, feelings, and directed actions that comprise their behavior, behavior that establishes balance and perspective to support the emotional wellbeing required among educators to teach.

Each of the participants shared ideas of what they hoped would change to make education better. Each participant held out hope that things would get better. One participant said simply that what is needed, what he hopes for, is more “concern,” and then he added, “from everyone.” His hope is that there is more concern about teachers
and education from the world that education sits within and serves. He went on to describe how he believes outsiders and decision makers regard teachers and education:

I think we’re regarded with the same … care as the person… who changes my trash, you know, empty’s my trashcan. I don’t give it a lot of thought, which is sad you know because even him, I kind of get more on myself about showing concern. About just really being concerned, … because I’m not as concerned, as I should be, about the people that I always encounter. … That’s the issue.

He continues on to say that there is too little compassion and regard shown to educators and the field of education; the connection to people with the power and influence to make things better is tenuous and distant. He adds that if there were more concern, more compassion and regard:

I think people would feel better about what they did… and if people feel better about what they did, then, man that’s magical. If you think about a building like this, this forgotten building, you know what I mean, then you got people here that are really good, I mean everybody in this building is really good you know, but I think through … how negative this place can be sometimes, I just think because you get lost in it and you don’t feel the concern, … and then you begin … to think what you do is insignificant, so you don’t get people operating at their full potential. At the end of the day they come back for a reason, it’s not the money, it’s not any of those crazy kinds of things, it’s because somewhere they genuinely have care and concern for the children.

A high school special education self-contained teacher says that “it will get better, it has to. There has to be an advocate, it has to get better, at some point, some day, it’s
gotta click somewhere, and not just this program it has to be everywhere else too.” While participants pointed out their voices are censored from speaking out on behalf of their children or schools, they all shared a hope that decision makers would gain awareness of their plight and advocate for change. Many hoped that decision makers would reach out to solicit their voice, to visit their classrooms and learn first hand what the current circumstances are. For example, a participant talks about what she hopes decision makers become aware of with regard to teachers:

I think what they need to know is, really how hard teachers do work, how limited it is what they work with as far as resources, how much they have to …spend their own money to bring some creativity into their classroom; to buy rewards for the kids. I think they need to know how much they’re not appreciated.

She goes on to add what she hopes will change for the children in contemporary education:

We need to have better resources, smaller class sizes. We need to have different programs within our school settings, whether it is technology or vocational opportunities for our kids while they are here. We cannot do the same things for our kids of this generation because this is a generation that is truly different. This is a generation of technology. It has to be different. It cannot be just pencil and paper anymore. …It’s a different generation and if we don’t put that technology in place very young for them and for very early for them, we’re going to lose them because paper and pencil is not what they are used to. That is our generation, not theirs. …They need to know how to be creative, and we need to bring that into the school somehow.
A general education teacher describes that what would help her to do her job more effectively, what would help the children in her class, is if she were to have more support. She says, “I want to be supported, not only through my administrative team, but parents and the community; everyone needs to be involved. We always have moms but I want to see more dads, more dads involved.”

A special education instructional change coach passionately explains his wishes for how things could change and be better for his students:

We still just give lip service to vocational exploration. It doesn’t have enough time and we really should be …spending a lot more time on career exploration, helping kids discover what they like doing, what they’re good at, get past the core of what everybody in our society knows and then have all that rest of their time to study what they’re planning to go into…They can change their mind but they need a lot more flexibility to do that.

His hope is that time and flexibility can be afforded for authentic education for his students, education that connects with their interests and readies them for life after school.

A school counselor says that she hopes decision makers become aware of the pressure on teachers and their need to feel accomplished. She adds that, “teachers hardly get recognized for the time they put into what they do.” She goes on to say that decision makers need to be more aware about how funding and resource allocation decisions impact the teachers:
They should be aware of the lack of support the local school system provides. They should also be aware that the furlough days and pay reduction has impacted our career and home lives. There should be an accountability piece to how systems allocate the money.

She concludes with a wish for the school systems to attend to teacher stress, to provide stress management resources designed to improve health and emotional wellbeing among educators. An elementary special education co-teacher sums it up by stating her belief that, “someday somebody will come to their senses, something will happen.” Something will happen to make it better for the teachers and the children they serve.

Within all of these statements of hope there is a collective cry for the voices of teachers to be heard. Within their voice there is guidance for new directions to be taken that can improve the experience of students and special education students while they are in school and in their lives once they graduate. Participants reveal in these results a deep desire for the future to be better. A desire for decision makers to understand how current systemic problems cause stress and undermine children’s opportunities to learn through misguided priorities and compromised implementation. They reveal a desire for decision makers to have a closer connection and greater understanding of contemporary education with regard to student needs, complexities of meeting those needs, and fair resource allocation. The hopes, desires, wants, and wishes, about the future, a future that is better, coalesce with the teachers’ love of children. They coalesce together as values and beliefs within the life space to strengthen teachers’ resolve and help make molar the congress of teaching and learning. In so doing, they help to provide a balance to outweigh the
phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, help to designate them as situated and molecular, or small, by comparison.

Help.

The participants that contributed to this research are members of a bounded group. They execute their roles and activities to educate the children as a collective of individuals united by a common culture and common calling. By virtue of being members of a bonded group, they are interconnected. They all revealed as mediators to their stress and difficult circumstances, the love they have for children and hope that things will get better. In addition to these primary and secondary mediators is a third, which has to do with the help that they give to, and receive from, one another along with what they do to help themselves. Help includes directed actions that educators perform within their interconnected group; directed actions that are enlightened by their values and beliefs and executed in response to their circumstances and stressors. Help, when complimented by values and beliefs, produce mediation to stress for these participants and thereby foil the seed of compassion fatigue and burnout from finding earth and growing roots.

All participants described the importance of collegial support. An elementary special education co-teacher, for example, talks about how important support is to her from colleagues. She came to the field to help children after having worked in a related field. At great sacrifice she put her life on hold while she took classes and became certified so that she could follow this calling. As a new special education teacher she was assigned to the most challenging students in her school. The stress was so overwhelming that the calling and the love for children were not enough. She says that, “if it was not
for [she names two teachers], I would have said forget this, maybe some other words [laughs], and left.” These two teachers provided her support when she began and they continue to help one another as they move through the years. She added that in her first year, “I saw my principal twice.” She goes on to add:

Although she said, *oh, let me know if you need me,* …I saw her twice, and those two times, she was bringing a student into my room and said, *how are you doing* [she says her name] and walked out. She didn’t even wait for the “I’m fine, or I’m alright; nothing.

Another elementary special education co-teacher describes how having support from others at her previous school during stressful circumstances impacted her:

I mean it made you feel like you had some sense of worth. You’re just a teacher but we’re all in this together. …I mean when I was there it was everybody from the janitors to the cafeteria, everybody was in on it, it wasn’t just one person; everybody supported everybody.

A counselor shares that, “teachers are human too and sometimes they have bad days, and sometimes we have things going on in our personal lives.” She adds that in her role she, as she says, “can kinda tell when the person just needs some relief.” If there is something that is causing stress or a child that is acting up, “…if you can just sometimes give them … a little breathing room, …just take the child out of the environment,” it can make a world of difference. She goes on to say that sometimes it is even “more helpful for the child than it is for the teacher to take the child out of the environment for a little while.”

A special education self-contained teacher shares that it is important to pay
attention to one another when they are working with students and offer help and feedback to each other. Students, he points out, respond to how they believe the teacher feels about them. Sometimes the teacher is so caught up in the moment that they are not aware of how they are coming across to students. He describes how important it is to have the courage to let a fellow colleague know when their way of approaching a student is causing stress or conflict to continue or worsen. He shares an example from his own experience when he helps a teacher understand why a student has conflicts with other students. The teacher had become frustrated with a male student because of the constant discord with other students and was showing his frustration through tone of voice, agitation, and attributing blame to this particular student whenever conflict arose. He tried to offer the other teacher context to engage the other teacher’s professionalism and empathy. In his words:

I told him I said, hey man, … I know he’s got issues, …but he can feel how you feel about him. If you could just keep your calm around him, he’s here …because he’s got … some coordination issues and sometimes he’s got some hygiene things that are pretty bad, and so he’s just an easy target for students.

The help that this teacher offered to his colleague is what was needed to humanize the child to the other teacher and help that teacher to disengage from his stress related response behavior that were making the situation worse for all involved. By helping this other teacher, the participant was also lightening his own load because this child was in his homeroom and when things fell apart for him in other classes, he would return to his homeroom teacher in a state of emotional crisis. Hence, this teacher was interconnected with his colleague and his directed action to offer guidance helped them both.
All participants identified help through collegial support as an important source of strength and mediation to their stress. Collegial support included primarily support from fellow teachers but there were examples of support from administrators and family members of their students. The support from administrators and family members of students, however, did not triangulate across all data sources or a wide array of participant types and therefore it is not included here.

In addition to the help that participants received from and gave to peers, participants also described behaviors that they practiced to help themselves with stress. Behaviors, as defined within the calculus of life space, include thoughts, feelings, and directed actions (Lewin, 1946/1951). For these participants, behaviors that they described to help themselves cope with the stress include habits, beliefs, and directed actions. Some of these are woven into their prevailing tendencies, their dispositions. Faith, for example, is among those behaviors that contribute to many of these educators’ dispositions. “I am doing God’s will,” one participant says. “God has put me here and will always provide for me so I work like there is no tomorrow and take care of what I need to take care of today,” says another. “If I present love to these kids, that is a way to present God,” says another. “…It’s like me giving back to the community and really giving God thanks for where my child is now,” adds yet another participant. It’s not just faith in God; it is also faith that in the future things will get better that participants shared through their narratives. They weave these powerful messages into their dispositions as beliefs, informed by hope and values that shape their approach to stress and working with children. By engaging these hopes and beliefs, participants help themselves with reassurance that their work is aligned with a bigger power or part of a greater cause. As
one participant puts it, “…my balance is through my faith.”

In addition to faith, participants also reported specific activities and directed actions that they engage in to help themselves. Included among these are taking care of their physical health, exercising, avoiding negativity, treating others the way they want to be treated, taking time out for themselves, being emotionally and cognitively present and engaged within their own families, and talking out their stress with supportive members of their kinship networks. Nearly all of the participants described how important it is to disengage from work. They described this as difficult at times, but important.

**Advice for new Teachers**

The final theme includes the advice that participants offer to new teachers. Each participant gave suggestions that they hoped would make a new teacher’s experience better. The advice given is reflective of participants’ generative and nurturing ways and it is also a mirror to the behaviors that they try to practice themselves in support of a healthy emotional wellbeing. There were a few participants that half-jokingly said that the advice that they would give new teachers is to find another calling, but this was from the context of the stress that they themselves were feeling in the present moment and this advice did not triangulate across data sources or participant types. By and large the advice for new teachers included guidance for relationships with students, learning from peers, and self-care. While the advice was directed at teachers in general, it was arrived at through participants’ work with special education students.

With respect to students, a middle school special education co-teacher says to “remain calm” when you are working with students. A high school special education self-contained teacher suggests that new teachers, “celebrate the small gains, … don’t
feel bad if all your kids don’t pass the standardized test or if everybody doesn’t pass your class.” He goes on to add:

Don’t take ownership if everybody fails. I think you have to look at how far did you move these kids, did you help them grow in whatever way from where they came in to you to the time that they left.

Along the same lines, a special education instructional change coach adds:

Balance between working hard to do a good job and not overworking; caring for students but also setting enough emotional boundaries to not be overwhelmed.

The “serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

A special education para professional shares that it is important to “get to know the kids.” She offers that it is equally important to avoid taking their behavior personally.

Along the same lines, a special education self-contained teacher says that it is crucial to know your students and see each of them as individuals. In her words, “don’t go in there blind, you might get hit, and its not going to be the kids fault because they have a disability.” She goes on to add:

Don’t try to reach a kid like you reach your own kids, because every child is different. …You might remind them of their mom, their mom might have molested them. You don’t want to be a trigger to a kid; the way you talk to them, the voice, the way your voice carries, it might be a trigger. …You got to watch what you are doing, you got to read the IEP.

An elementary special education co-teacher suggests that new teachers should, “start each day anew, and give each student a new slate.” He goes on to say that it is
important to do this “because we actually ask them to do that for us. … We are human and we do make mistakes, … so we want the same thing… it’s almost treat others the way you want them to treat you.” A counselor adds that new teachers should “really love children and have a passion for what you are doing.”

Advice that participants offered for new teachers regarding learning from peers centered on finding a support network of veteran teachers that could mentor them and help them as they acclimate into the routines of teaching. All participants reported the value and importance of having a collegial network to learn and draw support from. They suggested avoiding teachers that are negative or do not treat children in a way that they feel is right. For example, middle school special education co-teacher offers that new teachers should absorb knowledge from seasoned teachers. He suggests to, “listen, watch, [and] observe,” those around you and, “in the right forum, if you have questions, ask questions. Get guidance when you get off track,” it will help the new teacher to persevere. Similarly, an elementary special education teacher suggests to, “act like a sponge.” He goes on to say:

Gather as much information as you can in your first year. There is no way to get it all, some things you are going to have to learn the hard way, but find you a veteran teacher who you have watched, that seems to do things the right way, that has high integrity and … ask the person questions and … see how much information you can glean from them. The knowledge piece is so important. Keep your integrity, stay honest, keep your confidentiality, and realize how good things, you know, such as testing are harassment. Those things are huge. … Know the policies and understand how they work, how to deal with parents.
The advice that participants offered for new teachers regarding self-care addressed how they approach the school setting and included taking care of themselves emotionally and physically. For example, a special education instructional change coach suggests that new teachers learn to, “balance honest self-criticism in order to improve with self-acceptance.” He also offers that it is important to, “learn to do the crappy stuff enough that it doesn’t get you in trouble but never let yourself be fooled into what’s valid and what’s not.” A lead teacher for special education adds, “go with your heart, and do what’s best for kids. …Be an advocate for kids, …think outside the box, …stay on for what you know and feel to be right.” Another participant adds that keeping a unit journal to reflect on your practice and experiences while teaching can give much better information than the test scores:

After you give the test, …reflect on what you think worked well and what didn’t.

It would give …much better information and would help the teacher much more because it would be a much more valid reflection experience.

A middle school special education co-teacher offers that it is important to, “keep an open mind; …don’t be quick to judge and to criticize.” Similarly another participant suggests that, “chaos is not always a bad thing,” if the children are engaged and learning. He adds, “just do your best,” and provide yourself with “forgiveness when you don’t accomplish what you started out to do when you began the day.”

Another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher, suggests, “You’ve got to take care of yourself because if you don’t take care of yourself, you can’t care for anybody else.” He goes on to say that it is important to reflect on what you are doing and keep focus on the value of your work: “Every night before you go to bed, you
ask yourself, is this is what I really want to do?” A counselor suggests that:

You have to be organized, you have to be punctual, you have you have to get to work before the children get there, because you have to be prepared, you have to be willing to give of yourself, your time, you have to be...willing to go that extra mile.

She goes on to say:

You cannot get into education thinking you’re going to be rich; you’ll be disappointed! What is rich? …I say that to people, …having money does not make you rich. I would rather be rich in spirit, heart, mind, soul, and body than to be rich in money because if you live as long as I plan to live, you will not know if you have any money or not, somebody else will be managing it.

A special education self-contained teacher suggests that if your stress becomes too much and it is interfering with how you work with peers and students, take a mental health day to regroup, “call in to say, I’m sick, I can’t, my throat hurts, I might need a mental day.” “Just stay away,” for a day to take care of your self. A para professional offers the following advice: “know that you cannot save the world. Come in here, to try to do the best you can and try to see if you could help one child.” She adds that if you are able to do that, “you’ve done good.”
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the curriculum of experiences that influence stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among educators and special educators. The primary goal of this research was to explore environmental elements that interact with educators to mitigate stress from becoming debilitating molar experiences of compassion fatigue and burnout. Participants were engaged in semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and prompted journal writings designed to gather data regarding their values concerning education, sources of stress, elements that reinforce positive emotional wellbeing, and the presence of symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. There were 24 participants in this study representing 10 different job types ranging from para-professional special education teacher to principal. All participants in this study worked directly with special education students as teachers or para-professional teachers, or through roles, activities, and interactions inherent to their job types. This investigation addressed the following research questions:

1. How do educators cope with stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout?
   a. How do environmental elements interact with educator stress?
   b. How do environmental elements interact with educator compassion fatigue, and burnout?
   c. How does the culture or climate of the school interact with educator stress?
   d. How does the culture or climate of the school interact with educator compassion fatigue, and burnout?
2. What elements exist that mediate educator stress in service of emotional wellbeing?

**Reason for This Research**

**The Beginning of This Project: Positionality and Statement of the Problem**

I began this work because I saw and experienced the sadness of loss among my friends and colleagues. I am a school social worker and I work alongside teachers as they educate children. I am conspicuously involved in helping them by removing distractions or barriers to children’s opportunities for learning. In my role, I engage directly and indirectly with teachers, I form interpersonal relationships with them, and relationships to them through the eyes of my students. Some of these relationships have grown into friendships. For nearly half of my career I have worked exclusively with special education teachers and their students, the remainder has included a blending of general and special education.

Through my engagement with teachers I have observed the pain and collateral damage that occurs when they lose their passion for children and teaching. In every instance, my observation was that the stress experienced within their roles as educators became overwhelming, molar, and the joys of working with children and the value of their calling were displaced, subjugated, made molecular, less significant by comparison. The emotional costs for these friends, colleagues, and once wonderful teachers, grew to outweigh the rewards, and insidiously came to represent their overall experience of being educators, the gestalt. When this occurred they had become, what is referred within the parliaments of social work and psychology as, burned out and compassion fatigued.
I have found that it is not easy to be around people who have compassion fatigue and burnout. They tend to be negative, to view things negatively, and may be abrasive during interactions. They are unlikely to see silver linings or to have the emotional, or even physical, energy to do all that might be necessary to perform their jobs well. They appear distant and disconnected. I have had countless discrete direct interactions with individuals compromised by these maladies and even more exposures through the eyes of my students.

During the course of a single day a few years ago, I worked with a student that had been kicked out of class and, later that same day, his teacher. They both came independently to me for help and, in so doing, illuminated the impact of stress ported bidirectionally between teacher and student through their interaction. The following narrative documents my experience with them and demonstrates the collateral impact of compassion fatigue and burnout:

Midway through a very busy morning a student knocked on my door and asked if he could talk to me. He was a seventh grade student and I knew him very well, he had been referred to me for academic and discipline problems earlier in the year and we had been meeting every week to work on these areas. On this day he had been kicked out of his class.

In my work with him, I knew him to be a young man that had goals; he wanted to go to college and study veterinary science, he was good with animals, bright, and articulate. His grades did not reflect the intelligence or potential that I saw in him. He was well aware of right from wrong and his moral code dictated that if respect should be given to him, he would reciprocate.
I also knew him to have a troubled life outside of school. There wasviolence in his neighborhood, his family lived in poverty, he lived with hisgrandmother who was aged and had health problems, his mother lived elsewhereand alternated between being verbally abusive toward him and breaking herpromises, and he had few positive connections with other adults. Theseconditions nurtured strong coping mechanisms in him to defend himself frominjury against threats or perceived threats to his sense of self and wellbeing.

At school he had difficulty with authority but this was not universal. He took direction well from teachers whom he believed to genuinely care for him. His discipline and academic problems stemmed from interactions with the other teachers, those from whom he felt targeted as a lost cause, a troublemaker. He did not have conflicts with other students.

I encouraged him to seek support when he felt mistreated, rather than acting out. The logic for this, I told him, was that these teachers all had something that he needed. They all had parts of the knowledge that would help him escape the difficult circumstances that he saw his family and those around him struggle with, knowledge that could grant him access to the life of his choosing. Each of these teachers, I told him, had part of his future salary locked within their lesson plans. He didn’t have to like them, but he owed it to himself to take the education that they were offering. This was an appealing rationale to him but it took some time for me to earn his trust, and he did not embrace my suggestion right away.
“Mr. Mac,” he said, “she kicked me out again. Do you hear her over there?” My office was directly across from her classroom. We could hear her yelling at the students, the anger in her voice traveling through her door, my outer office door, and my inner office door; all of which were closed. I acknowledged that I could hear her and asked him what had happened for her to kick him out of class. “Mr. Mac, I really tried to do what you told me, but it was hard. I was sitting at my desk. She has me sitting in the back. I was doing my work, but the students around me were talking. I was not talking with them; I was doing my work. She didn’t say anything to them for a long time, so I guess they thought it was okay. Then she called my name.

Mr. Mac, I honestly thought she was going to ask me about my grandmother, she was in the hospital again last night. I stayed with her and that’s why I was doing my homework in class. She said she would call and let my teachers know why I was unprepared.

When I responded, she yelled at me to get out! Get the ‘F’ out of this room! I just looked at her. Then she yelled, ‘what are you looking at? I told you to get out!’ I asked her why? She said, ‘don’t talk back to me! You were back there talking, now get out!’” In the past he responded to these kinds of situations with verbal aggression, with curse words and sometimes threats. He had a history of exaggerating the assault. They reminded him of when his mother would yell at him. In this instance he picked up his books and left without saying anything else to her and came to my office. “Mr. Mac, I didn’t even look at her, I just left. I can’t learn from her because she hates me.”
I am embarrassed to say that I did not believe him at first, and I quizzed him about each part of the interaction. After talking this out, there was nothing from his behavior that I could imagine would provoke her actions toward him, so we called in additional support to address the maltreatment. We engaged seventh grade administrator and called his grandmother. I was so proud of him for not reacting the way he used to, and I told him so.

I must admit that after working this out with him, I was very angry with the teacher and I made sure that the principal was aware. She had violated a code of conduct for teachers regarding treating students with dignity and respect. Mistaking him for another student that was talking was a forgivable error, addressing him with vitriolic anger accompanied with the suggestion of a curse word was an indefensible transgression. It was abusive to him and offensive to me. “She did not say the whole word,” he told me, but the meaning was clear; he knew what she meant, the other students knew what she meant, and so did I.

Midway through the afternoon of the same busy day I was walking up the hall to deal with a student emergency at the front of the building when I heard the familiar voice of the same teacher the boy had come to talk to me about. It was during a class change and the halls were filled with staff and students. It was loud but she called me out above the din. “Mr. McManus,” she called, and I, still angry from her treatment of my student, did not want to talk to her so I pretended not to hear. This tactic did not work. She quickened her pace and caught up with me, “Mr. McManus,” I paused and acknowledged her, “when do you make time to talk to adults?”
I felt guilty about this later but I was already on my way to deal with an emergency, and I didn’t want to have to answer any questions she might have about what our student told me, so I deflected her question with sarcasm. I replied, “I know, right! We all need someone to talk to; I need someone to talk to, who is going to talk to me?” The truth is that I am discouraged from providing therapeutic emotional support to staff. I have been told that there are liability issues with it because my certification is for working with students. My role is to provide this kind of support to students and refer staff to the employee assistance program. The student emergency that I was hurrying to, presented itself before me in the hall, and with that, she went on her way. Soon, however, I would learn that this was not the end of it.

It took about an hour of intense crisis intervention to resolve the student emergency at the front of the building. When I was finished, I started back to my office so that I could document the incident in my case notes. I rounded the corner to the hallway just as the teacher was leaving her room. “Mr. McManus, you thought I was kidding, didn’t you?” I realized, of course, that she was not kidding. I saw the distress in her face, and quieted my feelings from earlier to join her in that moment. Her eyes were so sad. “I can make time for you,” I said, and asked her when she was available. “It’s my planning time, I can meet now.” We walked to my office and met. She shared that she was struggling. The students were “stressing” her out, and she was responding to them in ways that she knew would not be helpful. She described the way that she was treating her students as not fitting with the situation or with her heart.
She disclosed to me that she found herself being verbally aggressive with the students, she was hurting the students and this was killing her. She disclosed that she felt out of control and couldn’t stop herself from acting this way. She said that the students were not connecting, or listening to her. She looked at me with searching eyes and asked, “Is this normal? What should I do?” I could see that she wanted to cry but we didn’t really know each other and she held it in.

I was really kind of caught off guard. I thought she was coming to ask me what our student had told me. I did not expect this emotional outpouring or level of disclosure. She wasn’t someone that I knew well, I really only knew her through the eyes of my students. Her disclosure humanized her for me and I responded by validating and normalizing her concerns. “This is normal,” I told her, “everyone feels this way from time to time, even I have.” I told her that teachers have more on their plates than anyone really understands, and they don’t get recognition for all that they do, especially for the work they put into the relationships with students. I talked to her about burnout and compassion fatigue and then I asked her why she came into this profession. “I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to help people, but…” she minimized this and quickly turned back to her distress. “What do I do about these feelings?”

I wasn’t sure what to tell her, but I felt like I had to give her something, some therapeutic task that she could do to help herself. I reminded her that she had just told me that she came to this field to help kids, to make a difference. I told her that she needed to re-connect with that part of her job. “How?” she asked.
“I don’t know a magic prescription for this,” I told her. I encouraged her to pick four or five students that she knew she was making a difference for, and keep a journal about her interactions with those students. I encouraged her to tell her peers when she saw them doing something good, compassionate, or altruistic with students. I encouraged her to shift her focus from the negatives to the opportunities for success, and to look for examples around her. I told her to stop yelling at children, to speak to them as she would her boss or pastor; it shows respect, and that has value to them. I encouraged her to imagine what they hear, the way they hear her. Would she want to be talked to in the way that she was talking to them?

I let her know that the boy that came in earlier to speak with me really thought she was going to ask him if his grandmother was okay, she was hospitalized and he spent the evening there with her. I told her that he thought his grandmother had called to let her know. Instead, she yelled at him. “I didn’t realize,” she replied. “We can never really know what are students are carrying with them,” I told her, and I asked her to take him aside and apologize to him and ask how his grandmother was doing.

I asked her to have a conversation with her class, to tell them that they have gotten off on the wrong foot, that she cares about them and wants them to know that she is invested in helping them to be successful, to tell them that she is going to try not to yell at them, and to ask them to join her in starting with a clean slate. I encouraged her to pair directions with messages of nurture.
As I gave these suggestions to her, her facial expression relaxed. When I finished, she thanked me and agreed to try them. I had nothing more than hope that these suggestions would be helpful, effective, or enough. My student later told me that they had worked things out. I never told him that I talked with her.

He shared that she apologized to him and asked after his grandmother.

This narrative demonstrates the toll of stress on teachers and their students from both the student’s perspective and the teacher’s. In this instance, the teacher made an effective effort to reach out to my student. I have not seen this kind of turnabout in student-teacher relationships very often. Her gesture helped my student to engage with her in the class, and he was able to raise his grade to a passing mark. While I am pleased with his improvement, the teacher continued with her difficulties, finished the year, and did not return.

**Organizing Around the Problem**

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

–Mother Theresa

Seeing compassion fatigue and burnout occur among colleagues and friends from my vantage as a social worker, a bonded member of their community, engaged my compassion. I know these teachers had love for children and passion for their field, and yet their emotional wellbeing had been eroded such that they could no longer act in service of these values. Each of them had chosen this career, at great expense had taxed themselves with years of schooling, and began their service with the nervous excitement of bottled up anticipation for doing good things to help kids. To lose this is a sad loss, heartbreaking in every instance. My compassion for friends’ and colleagues’ suffering
motivated me, and the impact of their condition on my students pushed me into action. I am employed to remove obstacles that distract or interfere with student success. The collateral damage that I have witnessed associated with these phenomena is an obstacle to learning; as a social worker I was provoked learn more about this, to find the means to help.

As it turns out, this was no simple matter to accomplish. The literature revealed very little about compassion fatigue among teachers and even less for special educators. There was plenty to read about burnout, many scholars have made contributions on that regard. The answers I found in the literature on burnout, however, did not adequately explain the interconnections of it with compassion fatigue. From my perspective, this was the most salient element in the erosion of emotional wellbeing for these teachers; it appeared entwined with the phenomena of burnout for them.

**Gathering Knowledge: Gleanings From the Literature**

A review of the literature revealed that compassion fatigue is discussed within two fields of study: traumatology and burnout. There is an extensive list of circumstances and conditions that contribute to compassion fatigue in both fields, along with an equally extensive taxonomy of symptoms. While there was significant overlap in circumstances and symptoms, they are predominantly presented in the literature as separate fields of study. The primary common causal denominator is a build up of stress that exceeds the individual’s agency to cope (Figley, 1998; Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Compassion fatigue has been described in both fields as an emotional tax on those who care for others (Figley, 1998, 1999/1995; Maslach, 2003).
**Contextual Positioning of Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

Stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are phenomena that are psychological in nature and involve processes that are “situated, never fully isolatable from their context” (Heft, 2001, p. 394). Heft (2001) asserts that these processes are interrelated and demand a method of exploration that considers the total or gestalt perspective. Given this, an ecological framework provides a means to view the context within which these psychological processes occur. It considers the interactions between the person and environment along with the influences that are ported back and forth between the two (Barker, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Lewin, 1951/1943). An ecological framework is, therefore, compatible with Heft’s (2001) view of psychological phenomena as inseparable from context, and it aligns with a molar view of behavior (thoughts, feelings, and actions), or the holistic or gestalt responses involved in psychological processes (Baum, 2002; Tolman, 1932). Stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout can therefore be viewed as situated within the context of person-environment interactions and explored by this study with sensitivity to that context.

**Stress and Coping With it**

**Stress.**

Stress is at the root of both compassion fatigue (Figley, 1998) and burnout (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Within the literature, it is described in terms of threats against the human being (Selye, 1974), needs and development (Maslow, 1954/1970, 2011), and physiological, emotional and cognitive processes (Carver, et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1993). Stress is most commonly described with reference to the
individual, but it can also be applied at the environmental or communal level (Lyons, et al., 1989).

Hans Selye (1974) was a pioneer in the study of stress on the body and he describes stress as the human being’s response to demands for adaptation to change. He notes that the nature of the stimulus demand for change as positive or negative is not as important as the strength of the demand. Stress, as defined by Selye (1974), is “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made on it” (p. 27). Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) expand the description of stress to include vantage from three perspectives: response-based, stimulus-based, and cognitive-transactional. Response-based refers to how the body responds to stress, stimulus-based refers to descriptions of stress that focus on the source, and cognitive-transactional refers to stress as an ongoing process that is dynamic, thoughtful, and responsive to changing demands and resources (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

Abraham Maslow (1954/1970, 2011) describes the response of mankind to stressors in terms of satisfying a hierarchy of needs that includes all three perspectives described by Schwarzer and Taubert (2002). Stressors in Maslow’s conceptualization are unmet physiological, emotional, and cognitive needs that are situated within the context of person-environment relationships and their interdependencies. The hierarchy of needs is ordered according to priorities asserting that basic survival needs are satisfied before higher level needs can be considered (Maslow, 1954/1970). Interdependency with the environment, including resources and relationships with others, plays a significant role in the individual’s progress, adaptation, or regression within the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 2011).
Coping with stress.

Generally speaking, coping serves to manage the emotional response to a stressor and/or to change the situation causing the stress (Admiraal, et al., 2000; Folkman, et. al, 1986). Coping with stress is described through a variety of means ranging in complexity from survival based regression strategies, as identified by Maslow (1954/1970, 2011), to approach-avoidance behaviors, or more sophisticated responses described in terms of cognitive and emotional processes. The coping process for cognitive and emotional stress involves similar mechanisms as the physiological processes described by Selye (1974). Namely, there is a process of perceptive appraisal of whether or not (and to what extent) the stimulus is threatening. This is complimented by an appraisal of resources to manage the emotional response and/or change the threatening situation. Next there is action consisting of behavioral or emotional response to the threat (Admiraal, et al., 2000; Folkman, et al., 1986; Lazarus, 1993; Salami, 2010). These processes can happen almost unconsciously, automatically, in less time than the movement of a clock’s second hand.

There are a myriad of strategies that human beings employ to defend themselves against physiological, emotional, or cognitive threats. Some these strategies demonstrate the unique and creative adaptability of human cognitive and emotional processes. Skinner, et al., (2003) conducted an analysis of 100 assessments of coping and comprehensively list 400 different ways of coping that were described in the literature. They assert through their analysis that there is not a unified consensus on a definitive construct of coping within the field (Skinner, et al., 2003). They categorize common coping strategies into families that include: Problem-solving, information seeking, helplessness, escape, self-reliance, support seeking, delegation, isolation,
accommodation, negotiation, submission, and opposition (Skinner, et al., 2003, p. 245). Lazarus (1993) cautions that assessing the utility of specific coping strategies relative to successful management of a stressor is a function of the person and the situation. In this line of thinking, the outcomes of coping strategies as adaptive or maladaptive are not universal.

**Burnout**

In a most simplified definition, Shaufeli, et al., (2009) suggest that burnout is “increasingly considered as an erosion of a positive psychological state” (p 204). That is, diminished interest and psychological exhaustion that develops over time and reflects feelings that one’s efforts do not make a difference (Stamm, et al., 2008; Morrissette, 2004). Schaufeli, et al., (2008) trace the origins of the concept of burnout to the 1970’s through concurrent explorations by Fruedenberger in New York, and Maslach in California. Fruedenberger was describing the gradual exhaustion of emotional resources and motivation among volunteer workers (Schaufeli, et al., 2008). Maslach was describing how human services workers “coped with their emotional arousal using cognitive strategies such as detached concern” (Schaufeli, et al., 2008, p. 205). The term “burnout” is a reference to the metaphor of a candle changing from burning brightly to suffocating or burning out (Schaufeli, et al., 2008).

Arriving at a single definitive understanding of burnout is challenged by conflicting descriptions of its scope. For example, some researchers limit burnout to exhaustion, or to systemic stressors such as workload, level of support, and student behavior, while others include empathic engagement (Stamm, et al., 2008; Robinson, 2006; Valent, 2002). Much of the research on burnout measured the phenomena with the
Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which according to Shufeli, et al., (2009), is considered the premier tool of measurement. This tool, however, measures one perspective of what constitutes burnout and does not afford room for other contexts or applications (Devilly, et al., 2009). More recently the field of burnout has expanded to include context specific perspectives such as client-centered, professional-related, and personal-related burnout (Shufeli, et al., 2009; Sprang, et al., 2007), which may afford room to narrow the scope to examine stress and burnout related to empathic engagement.

Shaufeli, et al., (2009) hold that the construct of burnout is conceptually linked to work, but they acknowledge that other researchers have broadened the scope. Kristensen, et al., (2005), for example, include contextual linkages such as work-related burnout, client-related burnout, and personal burnout. Van Der Linden, et al., (2005) note that burnout is a stress-related disorder brought on by prolonged repeated exposure to high levels of stress. Clausen and Petruka’s (2009) case studies support the Van Der Linden, et al., (2005) findings noting that symptoms of burnout among their participants emerged after prolonged exposure to either a single stressor or stressors from a combination of sources. Joinson (1992) described compassion fatigue as a unique form of burnout related to client interaction among nursing professionals.

**Compassion Fatigue**

The term compassion fatigue is employed within the scope of two fields of study, traumatology (Figley, 1999) and burnout (Maslach, 2003). Both of these fields address an individual’s empathy and empathic engagement in relationships that they have within the environment and with other people (Figley, 1999; Maslach; 2003). A basic definition of compassion fatigue is a gradual lessening of compassion over time typically reflective
of a shift from empathic engagement to disengagement with others that occurs with prolonged exposure and absorption of stress or trauma material from others in the environment (Figley, 1999/1995; Morrissette, 2004; Stamm, 1999/1995; Stamm, et al., 2008). Within the field of traumatology, compassion fatigue is sometimes referred to as compassion stress, vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and secondary traumatic stress disorder (Divilly, et al., 2009; Figley, 1999; Morrissette, 2004; Robinson, 2006; Valent, 2002). The terms compassion fatigue, secondary stress, secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and burnout can be found used interchangeably in the literature (Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Valent, 2002). Within the field of burnout, the term “compassion fatigue” is used in relation to a specific type of burnout termed client-related burnout (Maslach, 2003; Schufeli, et al., 2009).

Within the field of traumatology compassion stress was first described as an aspect of the relationship between the therapist and traumatized client (Figley, 1999). The therapist is affected secondarily by the distress of his client (Valent, 2002). Tepper and Palladino (2007) suggest that any profession that engages in helping others is at risk of compassion fatigue. Figley (1998) and Maslach (2003) also extend this concept to the strain within families that care for infirm relatives.

**Symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout.**

The symptoms of compassion fatigue as described in both fields, traumatology and burnout, appear similar. Hallmark symptoms include coping responses that serve to emotionally distance the individual from others perceived as contributing stress (Valent, 2002). The function of these distancing coping measures centers on protecting the individual from additional emotional harm. These distancing measures may emerge as
cynicism, statements that reflect a depersonalizing of others, lack of empathy, judgmental assessments, and emotional numbing; feelings of dissatisfaction, reduced personal accomplishment, and interpersonal problems (Kees & Lashwood, 1996; Lucas, 2007; Robinson, 2006; Sprang, et al., 2007; Valent, 2002).

Valent (2002) includes a sense of burden, depletion, self-concern, resentment, neglect, and rejection within the symptoms of compassion stress. He organizes symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout into the categories of cognitive (i.e., concentration, self esteem, preoccupation, thoughts of self/other harm, etc), emotional (powerlessness, anxiety, guilt, fear, rage, sadness, being overly sensitive, etc), behavioral (impatience, irritability, withdrawal, elevated startle response, sleeplessness, etc), spiritual (questioning God and beliefs, loss of faith, etc), personal relations (decreased interest in intimacy or sex, mistrust, isolation, intolerance, conflict, etc), somatic concerns (sweating, rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing, aches and pains, etc), and work performance (low morale/motivation, task avoidance, negativity, staff conflicts, absenteeism, withdrawal from colleagues, etc) (Valent, 2002, p.7).

Symptoms described within the field of burnout include the three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment (Figley, 1998, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Emotional exhaustion is described as a tired feeling that develops over time concurrent with the depletion of emotional resources (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Depersonalization is a sense of detachment and social distancing typically at the expense of personal and professional relationships (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Low levels of personal accomplishment refer to a feeling that a person’s efforts are meaningless and ineffectual (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Other associated
symptoms within the literature include: cognitive difficulties (Van Der Linden, et al., 2005), coping difficulties (Wilkerson, 2009), low levels of personal satisfaction (Wilkerson, 2009), poor job satisfaction (Hakanen, et al., 2006; Robinson, 2005; Yan & Jian-Xin, 2007), cynicism, health problems, and a lessening of wellbeing (Yan & Jian-Xin, 2007), insomnia, and intrusive thoughts of failure or worry (Schlichte, et al., 2005).

**Summary of the Study**

**Curriculum of Influence: Interactive Experiences With the Social World**

This study was developed using an ecological framework; a conceptual framework drawn liberally from ecological psychology, Kurt Lewin’s (1946/1951) calculus of life space, Uri Bronfenbrenner’s model of ecological development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), social constructivism, gestalt psychology, humanistic psychology, and symbolic interactionism. Lewin (1942/1951) conceptualizes the interdependent reciprocal and bi-directional interactions between human beings and their environment that influence behavior in a construct he termed “life space.” In this, behavior (thoughts, feelings or directed actions) is a function of both the person and environment mediated by time (Lewin, 1946/1951). Time interacts within the life space in a manner that includes simultaneous influence from past experiences, present demands or circumstances, and future wishes, goals and aspirations (Lewin, 1942, 1943/1951).

Within the context of ecological psychology, environment is the field within which the person interacts (Barker, 1968; Lewin, 1951/1942). The person and the environment are married in an interdependent relationship (Lewin, 1946/1951); in this arrangement, one cannot be easily studied without the other. For this research,
environment was further defined in alliance with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979/2005) systemic organizational scaffold reflecting intensity of influence through the distance of interactions: the micro, exo, meso, and macro system levels of environmental influence. The ecological framework that is constructed through works including Lewin’s (1939, 1942, 1943, 1946/1951) and Bronfenbrenner’s (1997, 2005), allows exploration of how teachers interact with and within their environment, what relationships exist between educators and their environment, and how these interactions coalesce to establish behavioral manifestations including symptoms of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

**Research Paradigm**

This study drew agency from an ecological conceptual framework and an exploratory phenomenological qualitative study design. The research sought to holistically explore lived experiences among educators that comprise the curriculum of influences that impact emotional wellbeing. Specifically, this study sought to explore environmental elements that cause stress along with elements or conditions that facilitate or mitigate compassion fatigue and burnout among educators. Sensitivity to the life space of participants, and the influences ported back and forth between person and environment was established through the research paradigm and conceptual framework.

**Sample**

A sample of 24 educators was drawn from four schools in a single large school district adjacent to a metropolitan area in the Southern United States. All participants worked either directly with special education students as teachers or para-professionals, or through roles, activities, and interactions inherent to their jobs. Participants
represented 10 different job types including: six self-contained special education teachers, two self-contained special education para-professionals, six special education co-teachers, one special education resource teacher, one general education co-teacher, one lead special education teacher, three school counselors, one assistant principal, two special education instructional change coaches, and one principal.

The sample was a convenience sample. I was working, or have previously worked, as a school social worker in each of the schools that participants were drawn from. Within qualitative research, the researcher’s relationships with participants are an important element in gaining access and establishing trust (Maxwell, 2005). Inclusion of schools within which I was familiar as a helper facilitated easier access to participants and the rapport building necessary for qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

**Data Collection**

Participants were engaged in the study through focus groups, individual semi-structured interviews, and prompted journal writings. The study queried what drew these educators to the field, experiences of stress, experiences of negative emotional wellbeing including symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout, elements and behaviors that mediate stress, and advice for new teachers entering the field. Focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribe into verbatim text.

**Data Analysis**

Transcripts from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews along with the journal writings were hermeneutically analyzed using inductive procedures to process the data from the general research questions that guide the study and, through a progressive
series of analysis, narrowed the aperture to specific phenomena, emergent themes, and focused conclusions. In order to facilitate data management and analysis, the computer software program Atlas TI was used. Within this electronic software environment are tools to assist with managing, storing, coding, organizing coded data by families, diagramming conceptual links among themes, annotating memos, and identifying the emergent themes (Creswell, 2007; and Wiesrma & Jurs, 2009).

The analysis of the data involved a progressive process of examining and re-examining the data through emersion within deeper and deeper levels of exploration. Analysis began with processing researcher epoch. This was followed by umbrella coding of key descriptors relative to the broad and guiding research questions, elements of the conceptual framework, and textural elements that stood out in the initial readings of the primary source documents. The next level of analysis included constructing of a list of significant statements within the quotes under each of the umbrella codes and examining them for the meanings they had to participants. The significant statements were then diagrammed and linked to one another to form logical conceptual groupings that were then coded within each umbrella code to reflect their salient meanings.

Hence, a funnel approach of analysis was applied to each of the initial umbrella codes to distill the content under each umbrella code down to the smallest salient themes. The codes for these salient themes within each of the umbrella codes were then analyzed across the umbrella codes to determine families of codes containing quotations of like, collaborating, or complimenting content. They were then examined and grouped for contextual alignment of content. This process resulted in the distilling of the data down
to seven groupings of like content that constitute the emergent themes for this research. They are as follows:

1. Draw to field.
2. Distant from decisions, the educator’s place within the world.
3. Sourness in relationships.
4. The whittling away of individualized education.
5. Erosion of educator resolve: stress compassion fatigue, and burnout.
6. Keeping stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout situated and molecular.
7. Advice for new teachers.

Discussion of Findings

I am the Voice of One Crying out in the Wilderness (John 1:23)

“We realize that what we are accomplishing is a drop in the ocean. But if this drop were not in the ocean, it would be missed.” –Mother Theresa

Within my approach to this research, I included intent to honor the participants for their contributions to my study; their insights to the complexities involved in experiencing and coping with stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. My plan was to do this through sensitivity in the writings drawn from their disclosures. In conducting the research, I learned that these teachers are stifled from sharing their own voices to advocate on behalf of their classroom, their pupils, their school, or even for themselves. This caused my intent and plan to take on a new direction. Simply stated, it is my goal to honor them by giving voice to their experiences as human beings, as teachers that love and educate children within a contemporary social world that is, according to Nieto (2005), often hostile toward them.
I am indebted to these remarkable teachers and in awe of the love, dedication, care, and regard that they give to their students in the midst of being assaulted by stressors over which they have little influence or control. With this in mind, I am the voice of one calling out for many. The weight of this was an importunate responsibility to speak well on their behalf, articulately and with integrity. I felt this as I engaged with the writing of this research, privately weeping salty tears, vicariously experiencing the joys and heartbreaks in their disclosures. In all phases of this work I was invested and driven to do it well. My feelings of responsibility heightened when I, as a researcher, formed relationships with these participants through this study. They were heightened again when, through our relationships, with me quieting and stilling my own thoughts, I was given the gift of entry into their worlds of experiences and the meanings that resonated for them. In this writing, I am merely an instrument and I pray that my work honors them.

**Draw to the Field**

Draw to the field tells the story of how these educators found their way to the field and what being an educator means to them. All of the participants described becoming and being an educator as a calling. Their routes to the field were not uniform: some experienced life-changing events, others began their journey in early childhood, and some traded successful corporate careers, or work in related fields to follow this calling. The common element for all of the participants centered on values related to nurturing, doing good for others, helping children to learn and grow, making a difference, and sharing blessings. Their work with children is interconnected to the values that drew
them to service. The nature, value, and meaning of their work are uniform, and form a part of the culture among them that bonds them together as a community of educators.

The connection to this calling among participants is strong and lasting. Take, for example, an assistant principal who was formerly an elementary school teacher and reading specialist. She describes wanting to be a teacher as a young child, “I’ve always wanted to do this, I studied all my teachers, I could probably tell you about every teacher I had.” Another participant, a special education self-contained teacher, tells of his early interests in being a teacher. He found his way to the field of education after a successful career in business, but his initial interest took root long before his entry to the field. Trading his corporate job to become a teacher meant a reduction in pay, but it was a career that is in line with what he imagined for himself as a child. He said, “I have always seen myself as a teacher, I’ve always thought about teaching, even in elementary, middle, and high school...” He went on to share that in high school he had an opportunity to be a teacher cadet. He had always wanted to be a teacher but tried pursuing other career options that had better pay and other trappings. The calling that he felt throughout his childhood continued to grow within him until the value he associated with it outweighed the rewards of his career in business. He shared that he is an educator because he is a part of something that helps children; he can help them in a way that others in their lives cannot, no matter what is going on for them outside of school.

An elementary school counselor in her 43rd year, who was a special education teacher for many years, describes a pivotal moment in her childhood that led her to the field. She describes herself as, “a child that would have been most likely to not succeed [emphasis original].” Her family moved a lot and she said, “you know, when you move
from school to school you’re really shy because if you make relationships, you
know you’re going to have to move again.” She shared that she really did not talk that
much when she was in elementary school, and not much attention was paid to her, but she
had an experience with a novice teacher that changed things for her:

I was real shy but I had this student teacher to come in and she really did take up
time with me and showed some interest. I was in third grade. I will never forget
it. So then I decided that I would like to do that for someone, you know,
especially someone that nobody else seemed to have paid any attention to. She
was an inspiration to me.

She goes on to say that this student teacher helped her to feel comfortable and connected
with her on a personal level. The teacher asked her about her life. “She would ask me
personal things about what was going on at home, how did I feel.” The positive
relationship that she had with this teacher in third grade has stuck with her for over 50
years. It serves as a memory of how, as a student, she was touched and inspired through
the power of her connection with this nurturing teacher. Her personal experience of
being cared for and drawn out of her shell by this gentle teacher inspired her to want to
do the same for others; it was a pivotal moment for her, it was her call to service.

Another participant shared that she had been a pastor serving small churches in
the rural south. She is a lesbian, private, and while she loved serving God within the
environments of church, her sexual orientation became a source of speculation for
members of the church community. The discomfort that resulted from this was painful
and ultimately led her to seek other ways to nurture people and serve God. It became, for
her, the pivotal moment that opened her to the field. Her journey led her to become a
special education self-contained teacher working with children who have severe emotional and behavioral problems. These are challenging students and she shares how her interactions with them align with her calling to serve God through her role as an educator:

What I’ve come to understand is that ministry is not talking about God; ministry is living the love of God. …I believe that God is love, and if I present love to these kids, that’s a way to present God.

A special education resource teacher describes having a successful career in the corporate world prior to starting a family. She left the corporate world to have a son. Her son, now in his 20’s, is disabled. When he was a child, educators and social workers guided her on what to do to help him. As she tells it, “So it’s like me giving back to the community and really giving God thanks for where my child is now. So me, you know doing that, coming to service, that’s the only way I can give back…” A lead teacher for special education shared a similar perspective of her work as a call to service. She disclosed that her son had a kidney transplant and she doesn’t feel she has to worry about him because, as she says, “… I’m doing God’s will… I don’t have to worry about my son because I’m doing what God wants me to, and He will always take care of my son.” The meaning of being an educator for her is woven tightly within the values of her faith.

My own call to service was not unlike the calling among participants. I left the family farm bound for college with a determination to prepare for a high paying career in corporate America. This represented an escape from the life of uncertainty and grueling monotony that I came to know with farm work. My family did not universally support my aspirations, but my mother gave me permission by saying, “just follow your heart and
“do your best.” My classes in advertising and business did not inspire me. In a moment of feeling lost, I decided to volunteer at a shelter for battered women and their children. During the orientation I was told that the children had been traumatized from seeing their mothers abused in unimaginable ways. If this was not enough, the same men that abused their mothers had also abused many of them. They told me that I would be working with the children and that my presence with them was important; the children did not have many connections with positive male role models.

At 20 I still felt like a lost child myself, but I went there, worked with those children; some of them still wearing the signs of physical abuse, and I was forever changed. There was something so rewarding to me to know that somehow I was important to those children’s growth and development. I was somehow a part of helping them to heal and move beyond their traumas. I had no training for this then, it was simply about being kind, caring, patient, and nurturing to those kids. It was about showing them love during our interactions, and when they responded through the artwork we did together or the games we played, that was all it took to transform me. Without asking for anything from them, they gave me a direction for my life. I traded the idea of being made financially rich through some corporate job for the feeling of being rich because of the human-to-human work that I could do as a social worker. When I shared this good news with my family, they were disappointed. My mother had hoped that I would “follow my heart” to become a doctor. She came to terms with my decision by rationalizing that I would be like a priest, doing God’s work, but poorer. My father pointed out that being spiritually rich does not pay the bills.
The participants and I are public servants, and by coming into the education community, we join the ranks of many others that came for similar reasons. The National Education Association (NEA), in their quinquennial research on the status of the American public school teacher, reveals that most teachers (71%) choose to careers in teaching because they want to work with young people (NEA, 2010, March). They are motivated to choose and remain in a teaching career by a personal sense of responsibility and compassion to work in service of helping others so that their pupils may live satisfying and productive lives of their choosing. The decision to become a teacher is described by Nieto (2005) as “a calling” (p. 3); and it is a passionate choice.

The art of teaching, for the participants of this study, means more than the mechanical delivery of academic content to students. All of them describe their membership in the field of education as a calling rooted in values associated with nurturing and caring for others. This description includes far more than the act of teaching curriculum. The fact of the matter is, participants of this study reveal that they teach in service of their broader values; teaching is the vehicle through which they nurture and care for children, it is the vehicle through which they make a difference in children’s lives. Student learning, as they describe, is interdependent with the nurture and care they provide, and teaching cannot occur without it.

Participants describe showing love to students by recognizing and meeting their needs. As Maslow (1954/1970) points out, there is a hierarchy to people’s needs. Academic learning is not the first level of need for children, and their other needs must be taken care of before their energies can fully be directed to learning. The teachers attend to these other needs by loving the children, caring for them, and making sure that they are
not hungry or thirsty; making sure that they feel physically and emotionally safe, establishing a community in which they feel a sense of belonging and can feel good about themselves. For the teacher, empathy and compassion are tools that serve their values, meet the children’s needs, and underpin the healthy engagement with students necessary for growth and learning to occur (Friere, 1993; Noddings, 2002; Seligman, 2006). For their students, they establish what Nel Noddings (2002) refers to as a community of care, and the meanings associated with this among participants define their perspective of teaching to include far more than just delivering lessons. While the children are with them, in their care, this means to them that they are in loco parentis (in place of parent). As one special education co-teacher says, “I truly do care about the kids, just like I care about my own children, and I do want to make a difference.”

**Membership within the helping professions.**

The participants describe that care and nurture are central to their roles, and the use of empathy and compassion within the practice of teaching are their tools to connect with students. Given this, they are, as Kees and Lashwood (1996) suggest, members of the helping professions. The nurture and care that they provide to meet children’s needs, regardless of the children’s circumstance, condition, or ability, honors their values and validates their membership within the bonds of the helping professions. This is important because the helping professions have traditionally been described to include social workers, mental health workers, medical professionals, and emergency first responders (Devilly et al., 2009; Morrissette, 2004; Robinson, 2006). These are the fields from which compassion fatigue and burnout arose to describe the emotional costs of caring (Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003; Schaufeli, et al., 2008). The work that educators do, as
described by participants of this study, asserts their membership within the bonds of helping professions. Their membership in the bonds of the helping professions also reveals their risk of experiencing the phenomena of compassion fatigue and burnout.

**Four Interrelated Themes of Stress**

Four interrelated themes of stress emerged in the results of this study. The first theme is distant from decisions, the educator’s place in the world. This theme explores the distance and isolation from the decision-making processes among participants. The second stress theme is sourness in relationships. This theme describes stress that occurs within relationships between educators and others within the environment. The third theme is the whittling away of individualized education. This theme reveals the implications and experience among educators related to policy mandates and consequent practices that dilute the effectiveness of special education to the chagrin of their calling. The fourth theme is erosion of educator resolve. This final theme of stress explores what happens in educators’ hearts over time as they are faced with ongoing stressful circumstances, and the behaviors they employ to cope. The discussion begins with the broad, holistic, or gestalt currents within participants’ experience of stress across these four themes and is followed by discussion of each theme individually including descriptive narratives from participants.

**Gestalt context: censorship, powerlessness, and learned helplessness.**

Participants reported a wide array of sources and implications of stress illuminated within the four interrelated themes of stress that are interesting in and of themselves. What is, perhaps more interesting is the meaning that different kinds of stress have to them and the circumstances they find themselves in while facing these
stresors. As they described the various elements that caused them stress, an underlying circumstance of powerlessness was revealed in their narratives, conditions within the educational community that facilitated a sense of collective learned helplessness. This sense of collective learned helplessness and powerlessness establishes a holistic contextual foundation for understanding of how the four interrelated themes of stress are heightened in intensity as they conflict with the callings that participants came to the field to serve.

The participants of this study are passionate people that came to this field to make a difference for children, but they describe that the field itself renders them ineffective through processes, procedures, rules, mandates, and structures that have been put in place by decision makers at distance from students and the actual practice of teaching. An environmental element that complicates their sense of powerlessness further is a policy within their district that prevents them from speaking out; they are censored.

The participants all reported that they experience stress from being constrained from, and powerless to, project their own voices to outsiders on matters regarding their roles as educators, the process of teaching and learning, or student needs. They cannot tell how the demographics of their classroom or needs among their students differ from other classrooms. They cannot tell how differences among students impacts the achievement scores that are used to judge their effectiveness. They cannot tell of how their children might need higher levels of resourcing to remediate academic skill deficits that don’t exist among students in other classrooms. They cannot illuminate how transience and instabilities in the home lives of their children influence the classroom and learning that occurs. They cannot tell that judging their performance as educators against
other educators based on children’s academic achievement is an unfair assessment. They cannot add context from these circumstances to the discourse that informs decisions governing practice and evaluation of their effectiveness.

Participants revealed that their voices are constrained on these matters because district policy prevents them from speaking out. They are not permitted to publicly say anything that might be perceived as representing the views of the district. To make matters worse, there is not a mechanism within their district for them to raise concerns, and they do not feel that they, or their children, have an effective advocate. There is a district spokesperson that is charged with speaking on district matters but, as one participant illuminates, “the question is whether or not they’re actually going to report it and convey it in the way you would convey it.” Another participant adds that the advocates for educators and for sound educational practice are quiet because they are, “trying to keep their jobs too.” There is no structure within the district to convey the voice of teachers, not even to the district spokesperson. There is no collective voice to represent the educators and special educators within this sample and, as a consequence, there is no voice to represent their unique individual students. The meaning that they take away from this is that they are not valued and the needs of their students are not a priority.

Participants reveal that they are at the mercy of media and governmental discourse. They describe the influence on education from direct and indirect interaction with the media as negative. They report being powerless to disrupt or counter media characterizations from their positions within the world of education. The media levies an influence that, as participants point out, frames a reference of how teachers are
characterized and assessed by outsiders that is one-sided and negative.

The limitations on educator voice also apply to governmental discourse and decisions. Participants identified government as a significant primary source of discourse and decision making for educational policy and practices. Participants reveal that their distance from these decisions, and the absence of their voice in discourse at this level, are significant sources of stress. They point out that often the decisions are forced upon them and they just have to make due and hope that something or someone will come along and make things better. The manner in which participants characterize the assaults by media and governmental discourse is reminiscent of McCarthyism. Making matters worse, they are prevented from responding in their own defense to the media’s assaults.

The meaning participants take from these conditions is that they have little control over their practice of teaching, even when what they are told to do is at odds with what they believe to be in the best interest of their students. They describe feeling that their insights as professional educators are not valued if they are contrary to mandates handed down from higher levels of authority. They describe a groupthink mentality that is disconnected from students and the practice of teaching among decision makers at the top that forces its influence on them through purse strings and mandates. They describe that the decisions made elsewhere subjugate them to the role of technicians employed to deliver a scripted and paced curriculum rather than teach to their individual children. They describe coming to the field to serve children, but being faced with the frustrating reality that they serve authority and decision makers within and outside the field to, what seems to them as, the detriment of students’ opportunities for success.
Distant from decisions, the educator’s place within the world

Participants describe themselves as being at an inaccessible distance from figures that make decisions and establish priorities for the field of education. They describe how discourse rendered in the media and within the chambers of government impose direct and indirect influence on the field that complicates their practice and causes stress. They describe decisions that result in stress from resource scarcity, training, teaching assignments, and workload; all of which originate from direct and indirect interaction with macro-level influences of media and government. They express a desire for meaningful interaction between the macro-level influences and the “boots on the ground,” the unheard voice of teachers. Participants described these macro-level influences within the context of the direct and indirect influences on their life spaces.

Media influence.

Nearly all participants reported the media’s portrayals of educators as negative and one-sided. The media is a macro-system level influence that, as participants point out, has influence on the perceived credibility of educators as well as on their interconnected relationships with stakeholders and decision makers. The following quote, for example, is how one participant described media coverage of education:

It’s generally very negative. It’s very disheartening. Of course the media thinks that they have to focus on the negative. That’s what they think, because that’s what gets …their sales and …people to watch. It’s unfortunate because it steers people away from education and it continues the horrible trend we have with educators not being respected.

She goes on to say that the media contributes to lessening of respect for teachers among
parents by negatively influencing their attitudes, which in turn, negatively influences the children’s attitudes toward teachers. This, she said, is a horrible cycle that plays out in the school. It is an example of how macro-level influences (discourse in the media) interact with micro-level elements (teacher-parent-student interactions) within the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005).

Another participant shared that “the way that the media portrays the school is really rough.” He goes on to say that the stories that make the news “are always the problems” and never the accomplishments made by students and teachers. He feels that this “puts a target on teachers” that is negative and influences how teachers are viewed and treated. He points out that contemporary ethos regarding the media have fostered and environment where parents feel welcome to come to a willing media to publish outcries about perceived problems before they even approach the schools to share their concerns. Teachers, he reminds, are not allowed to answer these portrayals and the effect of this, as he describes, is a slanderous misrepresentation of teachers and the field of education. He adds that, “when it’s portrayed on the news, it’s generalized, and that is the way outsiders look at it.” Another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher, shared that he and his wife regularly scan the media for positive stories about teachers but rarely find them.

Nearly all of the educators in this bounded group joined voices to call for an accurate representation of the complexities of contemporary education to be included in stories told within the discourse. They add, however, that they are prevented from contributing to this with their own voices from the field. They experience the conflict between wanting accurate representation and being censured as a source of stress, of
which they describe akin to learned helplessness; they are aware of what they could do or say to improve conditions, but the sting of potential consequences prevents them from action. They are, therefore, forced into compliance, forced into swallowing the pain associated with inimical attacks.

**Government influence: discourse and decision-making.**

Government, like the media, is another macro-system level influence on educators and the field of education. The decisions made at this level regarding what educators should do, trickles influence down to the State and then the local schools through standardizing mandates like, for example, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) or Race To The Top (RTTT). What trickles back up to these decision makers, according to participants, are the performance ratings on rubrics or scorecards with an absence of teacher voices; voices that might offer a context for making sound decisions. One participant points out that the information that trickles back up to decision makers gets molded and interpreted so that it presents to them a picture that demonstrates conformity and compliance with the rules and rubrics sent down from the top. He says that, “…things get sugar coated as they move up....”

With respect to the decision makers, participants described them as out of touch with the practice of teaching, disconnected from the needs of students, and as failing to prioritize the needs of special education students. Part of the problem, according to participants, is that decision makers create policies and mandates that are standardized, intended for all schools and all students regardless of the unique and varied educational needs among individual students and groups of students. A seasoned participant with more than 30 years experience working in special education stated that decision makers
“start moving at the speed of light and then forget about the people.” This is reflected by another participant who shared that their school’s mantra used to be that, “It’s all about the kids!” Now, she says, “its all about the standards that somebody tells us that we have to do.”

Decisions made for education that educators shall not speak of (in public).

…There is no other shelter hereabout: misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows. I will here shroud till the dregs of the storm be past. –William Shakespeare

The participants of this study describe themselves as public servants at the mercy of both good and bad influences from within and outside the schoolhouse that can support or hinder their work with children. In this, they are in a forced marriage with discordant bedfellows. They describe their inability to participate in decision-making governing their practice as a significant source of stress. The decisions made at a distance from them are handed down through layers of governing bodies as mandates that establish educational priorities, policy, and practices with little sensitivity to the needs of their students. When these mandates are ill fitting to the needs of their students, they are felt among participants as stressful elements that are heightened by conflict with their calling and love for children.

Some scholars point out that one-size fits all mandates governing education often have swift and severe consequences attached for teachers who fail to produce, and are frequently ill-fitted to the unique and specialized needs of individual children, neighborhoods, communities, or to the needs of business and industry for which education serves (Morse, 1979; Ravitch, 2010; Wagner, 2008). The educators that participated in this study validated these claims through narratives documenting their
own experiences with mandates that direct educational practice and priorities through purse strings and compliance measures.

Participants illuminate the stressful interaction between mandates, resource allocation, and their practice of educating children. They highlighted decisions regarding resource allocation that have influence over funds for teacher pay and benefits, classroom materials, funding for teaching and support positions, the student to teacher ratio, funding for educational programming targeting special education students’ vocational training needs, and funding for appropriate and specialized training tailored to working with special education students. The funding for education in the participants’ district comes from a blending of Federal, State, and Local dollars. Money from each of these sources comes with variety of strings and conditions that require the schools to align practices with the priorities of the funding sources. The district level priorities, according to participants, have swung to conform to Federal priorities and mandates endorsed by the State. The consequence of this alignment was a re-prioritizing of district efforts, expenditures, and resources to support satisfying the rubrics of educational success set at the Federal level and then, by virtue of alignment, the State mandates. This is a source of stress for participants and exemplifies how macro-level decisions can have indirect impact on teachers through the exo-system level of the environment by macro-level direct influences on primary settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Put another way, it is an example of the hand of government reaching through the world to touch the individual, the educator, the special educator, and by proxy, the children they serve. What the teachers take from this is that they have no control or input to the governance of their practice and they are forced to rely on hope that things will somehow improve.
Teacher compensation.

The distance of educators from decision-making authority regarding resource allocation was cited as a source of distress regarding pay. The participants reveal that the cost of living has steadily risen over the past six or seven years while educator salaries have declined. They point out that they were called to the field with noble intentions to serve children, but pay is still a factor because they have families and financial responsibilities of their own. One participant shares that, “teachers are not getting paid.” She adds that teachers are not in the field of education for the money, but it is an issue because teacher pay has been going down and the costs of living and for health benefits have been going up. Another participant candidly said, “I need more money.” She adds that the last time she saw in increase in her salary was over five years ago while the cost of living and the amount she is required to pay for health insurance has gone up every year, “Everything has gone up,” she remarks, except her salary. Another participant who describes himself as a head of household shared that he took a 50% salary cut to leave the military and become a special education teacher. As the economy declined and teacher salaries were lowered it was a “game changer.” He and his wife are both teachers and the impact on his family income was a “double hit.” He describes that his family lives a modest lifestyle but reductions in pay nearly caused him to leave the field so that he could support his family:

Nobody comes into this to get rich, but when I came in I looked at the pay scale and the charts and the years and… my moment came last spring when we were told that we weren’t getting a raise, we hadn’t got a raise, they weren’t paying into our retirement and we were going to take a pay cut.
I was like wow, now I gotta work two jobs… I had that moment; I was like man… I got my Federal time, I'll go into the department of V.A., …and I’ll just ride my Fed time out and be done with it.

He goes on to say that when he left the military he really wanted to have a career that he could pour his passion for helping others into. He did not want to have a job that would make him like a “corporate Joe,” working for a check. With his wife’s help, he came to terms with whether or not to stay or leave:

I told my wife, I said, baby if I get offered this job, I don’t know if I really want to take it because I’m really seeking this for the money. So she, you know, she just kinda reminded me, she was like, well if it is for the money, then it’s not what you should do.

While participants describe coming to the field in service of a calling, their compensation is a source of stress. They did not come to the field to get rich being educators, but they connect the pay they receive for their work to how they are valued as professionals. Traditionally the pay structure in the district that teachers were sampled from included modest annual step increases to adjust compensation for the increasing cost of living. As participants point out, this has not occurred for a period of several years. In addition, the district does not pay into social security and was putting the amount that they would have paid into social security into a retirement fund for teachers. The district stopped making these payments when the economy depressed, adding to the stress felt among participants, and uncertainty regarding their future retirements. The teachers and their families feel the impact of decisions regarding teacher pay as a very real source of stress over which they have little control. It is a source of stress that
reaches from the workplace into their homes and personal lives.

The decline in salaries experienced by teachers in this study is reflected elsewhere in the literature as well. The average salary for teachers in the last NEA quinquennial study was $49,482 (NEA, 2010, March), which, as Nieto (2005) points out, is relatively low when compared to other professions of similar training requirements. With respect to the education level of teachers, the NEA (2010, March) reports that 37% of teachers hold bachelor’s degrees, 56% of teachers have master’s degrees, 5% have specialists, and 1% of teachers have doctorates. Additionally, 56% of teachers had invested in ongoing college coursework within three years of the NEA survey and the percentage of teachers with master’s degrees has steadily increased since 1961, while the percentages of teachers with just the minimum educational level, a bachelor’s degree, has steadily decreased since 1966 (NEA, 2010, March).

Despite heavy personal investment in education on the teachers’ behalf, teacher salaries have declined in 11 states over the course of the last decade (NEA, 2010, December). The special educators in this study point out that they are paid at the same rate as general educators but are required to acquire training that is beyond what is required of general education teachers. They indicate that in order to teach special education, they must have a highly qualified certification in each subject matter taught. They teach many or all subjects to their students and therefore must be certified in each content area. This is not the case for general education teachers whom, as they point out, may get by with a highly qualified certification in one academic area.
Doing more with less is what participants say is being asked of them by decision makers. Participants explain that this is about more than just teacher salaries; it’s also about human and material resources for the classroom, teaching assignments, and workload. Nearly all participants shared that they use their own money to purchase supplies needed to do their jobs. The NEA (March, 2010) reports that nearly 97% of teachers spend their own money on supplies necessary to instruct their students and, for teachers in larger districts like the district participants were drawn from, the amount of money spent is greater than in smaller districts. Participants point out that the relative burden for using their money to buy classroom materials is higher for special educators than general educators because resource allocations are made to general education first, leaving special education with what is left over.

Participants reported that simple things like toner for printers and copy paper were in short supply –sometimes out for weeks at a time, not to mention the shortage of books and materials in the classroom. One special education teacher states, “we’re the step-brothers and sisters of the County, everything we have to do, we have to buy; we don’t get any help.” “I don’t even have books,” another special education teacher remarked. An elementary special education resource teacher shared that she works with students that are significantly below grade level in multiple academic areas yet she does not have books and materials to meet their needs. This is despite being evaluated based on the expectation that she teach the children grade level curriculum that is individuated down to each of their levels of understanding. In her words:
As a resource teacher, I think when it comes to materials; I’m to get my materials first. I do not. They issue to the general ed teachers first and then tell me there’s no more books.

A special education instructional change coach describes how decisions about resource allocation have resulted in fewer human resources available to her school. She draws it down to how it impacts her job as well as the students and teachers she works with. As she said it:

There’s not enough help. If there are three [students] hallucinating, and maybe suicidal, if there are three of them at the same time, it used to not all fall on my lap and it does now… Class sizes have increased significantly… we have lost positions in the last two years. Not every teacher that we’ve lost in the last couple of years has been replaced. The demands are harder… the part that is hard is [that] some kids that are very mentally ill, they need a therapeutic approach; they need a lot of… well-trained staff.

She adds that with the staffing resources that they have, it is extremely difficult to manage meeting the diversity of needs, the wide array of “dis”abilities among their students. The children’s emotional and other primary needs come first, and their staffing patterns make it difficult to meet those needs, which compromises academic learning.

**Programming for students: curriculum and delivery model interconnections.**

Participants describe that decisions about resources and priorities coalesce to influence the spectrum of special education service models offered throughout their district, and the focus of instruction. Their district embraced a co-teaching model that favors inclusion of special education students with general education students. This is, as
participants point out, an effort in line with the movement within the field of education toward mainstreaming. When inclusion was established as the district priority, they closed down a majority of the self-contained classrooms that served special education students in isolation of general education students. Isolation from general education students sounds negative, but what it means to these teachers is an emotionally warm cocoon-like classroom where special education students can be served free from stigma related to their challenges, free from the damage to their self-esteem that can occur when students that struggle are forced into face to face confrontations with the differences between their abilities and those of general education students. For these participants, the lore surrounding mainstreaming that is woven into rational for co-teaching models, the vicarious learning that supposedly occurs when general education peers get the answer first, and the idea that it is somehow a good idea to place a child in a classroom where everyone else is ahead, holds no more currency than a pasta strainer holds water. It may “help” some special education students, but not all, and certainly not a majority. As one participant states, capturing the collective voice of the group, “not all kids are right for the co-teaching model.”

In concert with changes to the spectrum of service delivery models was a shift in curriculum focus from a broad array of success paths for special education students to narrow focus on readying all students for college. The curricular focus on college readiness does not serve special education students well, as another participant, speaking the essence of their collective voice points out, “these kids are not going, they’re not going to college… and we’re not teaching them any skills… to transition from school to the workplace.” These two changes are environmental elements that cause participants
significant stress, particularly in light of their common interests to help children to learn, grow, and have access to the lives of their choosing. They are not decisions aligned with what participants feel will help their special education students to be successful, and yet they have no standing to challenge the direction and priorities that have been mapped out for them.

A general education co-teacher shares that, “there are some students that still need self-contained…” She suggests that children’s needs cannot be effectively met because the district does not offer an appropriate array of service delivery models. An elementary special education resource teacher points out that children who are pushed into a co-teaching model before they’re ready become frustrated; “it’s frustrating the teachers and frustrating the children.” Furthermore she adds that with the co-teaching model there fewer para-professional support teachers and the general education teacher and special education teacher don’t always see eye-to-eye.

Another participant points out that the special education teacher is required address the special education students’ IEP goals and objectives while also working with the general education students, many of whom he says, “could very well be classified as a special needs student because they’re struggling.” It is the collaboration with the general education teacher that he describes as stressful because the general education teacher is not taxed with the same level of responsibilities. The special educator, he points out, is required to weave in work on the IEP goals and objectives for the individual special education students, differentiate the instruction to their respective levels, remediate skill deficits, and collect data on each student’s performance on the individual goals and objectives; all while co-teaching the general education curriculum and helping with the
general education students.

A special education co-teacher adds that some of the general education teachers might not want to be in a co-teaching model and their difficulty accepting it influences their willingness to collaborate on behalf of the special education students. “People get territorial,” she says and then added that, “it’s not you’re kids and my kids! It does not work like that.” She suggests that the district re-visit how they staff inclusion classrooms and invite general educators to volunteer to work in co-teaching models. She adds that if general education teachers elect to teach in a co-teaching model, they might be more willing to “put more into it.” The teachers that are thrown into this model without choice, she says, resent it and complain that they do not know what to do with the special education students. As she says, they “resent it because they did not go to school to be a special education teacher. That’s what I’m seeing here a lot of resentment from the general education teachers!” A general education co-teacher shares that she had exposure to special education students during her student teaching but she did not go to school to teach special education students. Another special education co-teacher adds that the general education teachers have “a negative attitude toward special ed students and special education.” She goes on to suggest that, “maybe they just see us as co-teachers as coming into their room to take ownership of their room; like we’re taking over their class.” She adds that the general education teachers do not always value the special education co-teachers’ expertise or suggestions and may not collaborate with them to incorporate their ideas unless the ideas appear to be coming from the administrators.

Tracking all students to college is, as participants point out, the focus of curriculum within most all service delivery models in their district. There are two high
school programs that serve special education students with vocational training in the
district, but participants point out that the percentage of students that would benefit from
this curriculum focus far exceeds the capacity of these two programs. Participants
described the focus on college readiness as discordant with serving special education
students with individualized and relevant education aligned with the goal of helping them
to be functional adults. They suggest that special education students need a broader array
of curriculum options including vocational and functional adaptive curriculums. For
example, a special education instructional change coach shared that only around 20% of
their special education students are successful in college. The sad irony is, as he points
out, that the other 80% of their students are not being served by the focus on college
readiness that has become the district priority, and there is little else to offer them. Other
special educators in the same school estimate that the percentage of their students that go
on to college is even lower, between 1% and 10%.

Participant perspectives on service delivery models and curriculum foci are
enhanced by experience and mediated by time. They lament that before the decisions to
program around the NCLB Act, they had funding, training opportunities, and teaching
positions to support pre-vocational training, job skills, job readiness, and community
based vocational training. Participants shared that even though the NCLB Act is not in
effect anymore, the Race To The Top program parallels it in their district and continues
the same foci: college readiness for all pupils. One special education self-contained
teacher describes the impact of the district’s alignment with the NCLB Act on his
practice with special education students. He described how district priorities shifted from
meeting the children where they were by creatively engaging them through authentic
learning, to tracking all students toward college readiness with paced and uniform lessons. Of this, he said:

That was just the death nail because it became all about the academics. All of the things we used to do to hook the kids, the camping, the art, the shop, the basketball team, the cheerleaders, the student government, all of those things are gone. They’re gone!

A principal with over 30 years of experience working with special education students added that when the singular focus on academics within NCLB initiatives were prioritized within the district, there was less emphasis or resourcing for other aspects of helping students to develop and learn. In her words:

I think we became less masterful at managing behavior because the teachers were so worried that they would be judged if they left the class to deal with an issue… because they weren’t teaching [when they helped kids with issues]. They were always afraid that they would be in trouble.

As principal she was expected to support the district mandates. She had to, as she said, “play the cards” dealt by the State Department and her supervisors.

*Training opportunities.*

District resources for educator training, according to participants, have been subjugated to district priorities configured in support of State and Federal mandates regarding curriculum and student outcome indicators. The funding for training that is available now, according to participants, is allocated to professional learning that buttresses academic rigor in alignment with the district priority of readying all children for college.
There is not funding for training to equip them to meet the specialized needs of their students. For example, several participants described being sent to district sponsored trainings that do not help them with their special education students. As one participant pointed out, “we go to these workshops that we’re required to… and they send us to different areas, like go to a class or something, and maybe they’re [general education teachers] learning something, but we’re not getting anything that deals with our kids.” Another participant illuminated this further, “we have a [child with] traumatic brain injury [TBI]; we don’t know how to work with him. We get all this other stuff, but we don’t know how to work with TBI.” Yet another special education teacher echoed this further by saying that they’ve had plenty of trainings about assessments and curriculum delivery but, “it’s never about the kids and what their needs are… types of disabilities… how you can help a kid that is hyper and off meds to sit down? That’s never happened!” A lead teacher for special education shared that she thinks that teachers are frustrated and stressed out. She said that, “I think they feel like they don’t have the control that they should have. I think we lack the resources that we should have…” She clarified that they do not have the resources to help teachers to learn how to work with their kids’ behavior and exceptionalities.

**Audacity: the nutshell of distant from decisions.**

The educators in this study reveal that they do not have a voice in decisions regarding resources and priorities. They have little influence over the governance of their professional practice as educators. Their distance from decision-making authority on resource allocation, curriculum priorities, and special education delivery models yields their practice of serving individual students to the mercy of figures that plan for the forest
and not the tree. These are stressful realities to participants, and the meaning that they take from these circumstances is that their perspectives and input as professional educators is not of value to decision makers, and the needs among their special education students are not a priority. These conditions foster a sense of powerlessness and learned helplessness among participants. Nonetheless, they hold out hope for improvements that will benefit them as professional educators along with improvements that will strengthen the opportunities for their students. They are making due as best they can until decision makers realize that the children are slipping through the cracks. “It will get better, it has to. There has to be an advocate, it has to get better, at some point, some day, it’s gotta click somewhere, and not just this program it has to be everywhere else too.” They are making due until somebody with authority listens to the broader implications of current policy and practice trends, and makes positive changes informed by sound, holistic, and contextual information regarding student needs. They are waiting, holding out hope for a messiah to liberate them from their stricture and join with them to champion the values and beliefs espoused by their calling.

Participants all call upon those with decision making authority to incorporate the voice of special education teachers, their collective voice, in the decision making process. They want stability in the structuring of pay and benefits, and pay that reflects the complexities and training requirements of their jobs. They want decision makers to see, and be aware of, the realities in their classrooms by visiting and spending time in the schools that is uncorrupted by the filtering that occurs as information trickles back up through scorecards and performance rubrics. They want decision makers to be informed with holistic and contextually sensitive information that includes the voices of practicing
special educators. They want their special education students to have appropriate curriculum options that provide authentic education aimed at helping them to be successful adults. They want resources directed to success paths besides college readiness to enable their special education students to transition from school to the workplace and life. They want resources for training tailored to meeting the unique and specialized needs among their students. The care that they have for their students allows them hope, faith, and the splendid courage to want these things for themselves, for the field, and for their students. They hope for these things despite the stressful realities of powerlessness and learned helplessness that assaults them.

**Sourness in Relationships**

Sourness in relationships describes the strain in relationships that is activated by interactions. It involves micro-system level elements including roles, activities, and interpersonal relationships with others. The influence of stress felt at this level of environmental distance is most intense, and is ported through direct interactions between people, person-to-person. It includes collisions of stress from all participants involved (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Lewin, 1946/1951). This means that all of those influences that weigh in on a person through experience and interaction with the social world are ported through interpersonal interactions in relationships with others. This is, according to participants, particularly relevant to their teacher-student relationships. Teaching, as they point out, is dependent on effective interpersonal engagement, and interactions between teachers and students are the vehicle for this.

Consider, for example, the assertion by Paulo Friere (1993) that the process of learning is a function of the relationship between teacher and student, mediated by the
world. If the teacher is experiencing symptoms of stress and employing emotional distancing, depersonalization, or related coping mechanisms, the relationship between teacher and student is, as participants point out, obviously degraded. Likewise, the relationship between the teacher and other stakeholders are similarly compromised (Klassen, et al., 2009). For the teachers that participated in this study, in their hearts, the relationships with students are the most important element in the service of their callings. The theme of sourness in relationships explores strain in the teacher-student relationships, but it cannot explore this without consideration of the stress that both teachers and students bring to their interactions. The story of sourness in relationships between teachers and students is therefore comprised of two stories of stress that converge within interactions; one about the stress that students carry with them, and another about the stress that teachers bring into the exchange. Participants reveal that stress enters the interactions between teachers and students from both parties to compromise their relationships; it is bi-directional in nature, shared in a back and forth manner between them.

**Stress among students.**

Participants report that it is often hard to know what children might be dealing with in their lives. “They carry everything” with them when they come to school, “anything that’s had even a small impact on their lives.” The participants point out that in order to teach students, they have to be able to uncover and meet the student’s needs. When children come in to the learning milieu they, as participants point out, bring their stress with them, and it distracts them from academic activities. Participants shared that students show that they are stressed
through their behavior and actions. This is true for children at all grade levels; they carry stress with them and cope by communicating their needs with behavior. Participants shared that students’ behavior varies from verbal aggression to physical acting out and injurious behavior. They reveal that they are charged with detecting the behavior and figuring out what is causing the child’s distress before they can effectively teach the lessons for the day. What they uncover is often alarming and, as Lucas (2007) points out, can “tug at the souls” (p. 85) of teachers.

As a school social worker, I work to remove obstacles from children’s learning. The stress that they carry with them into the schoolhouse, that causes behavior and draws attention to them, is almost always the root of reasons why they are referred to me. Teachers engage with me in collaboration to help uncover the sources of children’s stress, to change the situation, to strengthen the children’s coping skills, and enlist external resources. Over the last 10 years I have maintained an annual average referral volume that represents between 15% and 20% of the total number of students enrolled in my four schools. My referral numbers are in line with the social work department as a whole. Together 38 of us annually serve between 15,000 and 20,000 of the 100,000 students that comprise the average annual enrollment of our district. I, like the other social workers in my department, am but one helper in the schools I serve. There are counselors, administrators, and a host of other professionals, including teachers that help children with their stressful circumstances. They are not all referred to me; my referral numbers are a humble underestimate of children in distress within my schools. The teachers are nearly always the first responders to students in distress and counselors come next.
The sources of children’s discomfort can bite hard into educators’ hearts, leaving long lasting scars, visceral emotional reminders that are hard to shake off.

In my tenure as a school social worker I have seen more human misery among children, my students, than I care to tell. Sometimes children become weepy in class and we learn that someone in their family has died. They may carry the embarrassment of wearing soiled clothing because their family does not have the financial means to have their water turned back on. They may not have clothing that fits their growing bodies; walking among classmates through the corridors with pants too short, that cannot be buttoned, shirts stretched, shoes tight and blistering. Children may have returned home from school the previous day to find their belongings scattered in the yard, scavenged by neighbors after an eviction warrant was served. They sit in school feeling the loss of home, place, belongings, and the uncertainty of where they will sleep that night. Sometimes children become argumentative and we learn that the police were at their homes the previous night for domestic violence.

A middle school boy was referred to me a few years ago for crying during class; it was uncharacteristic for him. “Mr. Mac,” he told me through tears, “He beat my mother. He was drinking and smoking and he beat her until she passed out; her face was bloody. Mr. Mac, I tried to stop him, but I couldn’t; he was too strong. I tried to keep my sister from seeing. I was afraid and called the police, but they took so long to get there [emphasis original]. I haven’t told anyone else about this; she asked me not to. Can you help me?”
Sometimes the children themselves have been abused, wearing gruesome marks in telltale shapes of the objects used to assault their little bodies; raised red marks from hangers, extension cords, shoes, sticks, or cigarette burns; bloody bald spots where hair was torn out in chunks. Sometimes their stress comes from hidden injuries, like the pain, embarrassment, and fear involved with sexual abuse. For example:

A little third grade boy was referred to me several years ago for bullying; he kept hitting his classmates. He could never say why. His mother didn’t know. His teacher could not figure it out. I could not figure it out. After months of trying to uncover the cause, months of working with him on anger management and strategies to get along, we learned the reason; not from him, from his sister’s friend who sought help for something else, something that disturbed her.

His older teenage brother, fresh out of jail, was prostituting his sister to his friends and other associates of his gang. He was trading her for favor, drugs, and money. She was in the fifth grade, just 10 years old.

Injured from her assaults, unable to hide her discomfort, and too afraid to seek help on her own, she shared what was happening to a friend. Her friend, frightened and disturbed by this, told their teacher. This little girl, victimized brutally for months, could not make eye contact; she looked so small and sad.
She had been quiet, polite, and blended in with the other students. No one imagined that this could have been happening to her. She was afraid to tell that she was being hurt. Her abuser, her older brother, threatened that if she told anyone, he would harm her little brother.

This was no simple case of bullying. This little boy knew what was happening to his sister; he had seen and heard it, but was afraid to tell. His brother had waved a gun at him and threatened to kill their mother and sister if he told. He shot the gun at a tree to show that it was real; the loud bang scaring the boy. He sat in class day after day while this ate him up inside, worried about his sister, fearful for his mother, angry at his brother. He held this in until it just became too much for him, then he hit whoever was nearby. He was telling us in the only way he could, through his behavior.

How could anyone imagine that this could be happening? We thought that something might be causing this boy distress, but not this. Their mother came to the school when this was discovered; the pain in her eyes and voice when she learned what had been happening was heartbreaking, unbearable.

Both children’s teachers were despondent. The boy’s teacher felt horrible for thinking he was a bully. The girl’s teacher was sickened, stung with the guilt of not having noticed any signs of distress in this child. She replayed their interactions over and over to think of what she might have missed. Both of these teachers were haunted by horrifying thoughts of the agony and pain these two children endured, I am haunted by this as well.
I wish that I could say that situations like these were isolated and rare, but the truth is that these were not the first, nor the last to come before us. These things that children grapple with, they stick with us. The stress and trauma they feel, it hurts our hearts because we care about them. The participants of this study are the front line of help for pupils in distress. They see and work with these kids every day while they suffer, endure, and heal from these stressors. Their calling confronts them to see beyond presenting behaviors, “to look beyond the veil,” as one participant stated, to the underlying causes of distress. Their love for students provokes them to put children’s needs first, above all else. Participants report that they must do this to meet the children’s needs, until this is satisfied, learning math or scoring well on a standardized test, in the context of the big picture, does not matter to kids and has little relevance to soothe teachers that are aware of their children’s distress.

A special education co-teacher in an elementary school, for example, shared that, “students these days are dealing with a lot of distractions.” He goes on to describe a former student that was struggling and points out how important it is to look beyond the surface behaviors to figure out what is really going on. “I can recall a student,” he said, “who displayed a lot of behavioral problems at school, wasn’t really interested in academics.” He shared that he realized, “after some time,” that the child was going home and taking care of his younger siblings. He was assuming an adult role that he was in no way ready for, should not have been expected to do, and for this boy, in the participant’s words, “Getting the homework done wasn’t important; he was trying to make sure that his brother and sister ate.”

A high school self-contained special educator shared, “the ones that are typically
having a hard time, they show up and you can tell because they’ll do whatever it takes.”

They call attention to their distress through their behavior. The students that don’t have food, for example, he described as, “almost like hoarders, ...if they have access to food, they’ll get as much of it that they can, even if they put it in their pockets or store away a little of it in their locker.” If they’re deprived of material things, “they’ll constantly ask other students for things, this is all day long; ‘can I have this, do you have any extra?’”

Their focus, as he points out, is on having their primary needs met, and because they are distracted by the pursuit of satisfying basic needs, academic learning becomes secondary.

Participants shared that students come to their classes carrying all sorts of stress. Collectively they report having direct encounters with students carrying the stress of being surrounded by drugs and alcohol; of being victimized by abuse and neglect; of not having food or adequate clothing; children whose families do not have the financial means to pay their bills, utilities turned off, foreclosures, evictions, homelessness; grief and loss issues, mental illness, infirm relatives, cancer, domestic violence, community violence, family dysfunction, and divorce. These stressors are in addition to the normal stressors among children; test anxiety, puberty, social acceptance, social conflicts, bullying, self-esteem issues, and the like. They are in addition to the extraordinary challenges among special education students who must contend with the stressors related their different abilities within a contemporary environment that, as participants reveal, is generally not tailored to their needs. Participants reveal that children carry these stressors into the schoolhouse and voice them through behavior within the interactions they have with the teacher, other students, and through disengagement with coursework. Often children’s behavior speaks louder than words to describe their distress.
Stress among teachers.

Participants in this study work with special education students, and it is primarily from this work that their descriptions of stress emerge. Participants acknowledged that they have their own stressors, from their worlds outside of the schoolhouse walls. All of them that described these stressors revealed that they do their best to ensure that their own personal issues do not enter into their relationships with students. One participant, in the midst of caring for an elderly infirm parent, said of his students, “they have no idea of my life outside of school.” He added that it is not fair to bring that into his relationships with kids, they have too much to deal with already.

Participants noted, as described earlier, that they came to the field to help children, and with this calling there are some stressors that they expected. Academic challenges, the troublesome and annoying surface behaviors that students employ, the particular challenges associated with special education students’ different abilities, or the heartbreaking underlying sources of stress among children are all elements that cause stress to these educators. These are the sources of stress that were largely expected, and engage compassion drawn from participants’ callings to be educators, their desires to help children have better lives. The children come first according to participants, and the worry and concern for students is their primary source of stress. These sources of stress, as participants describe, come through in the interactions from teachers to students as dedication, nurture, understanding, care, and love. “…I just do what I can do on a daily basis for the students. I do as much as I can for them,” said one participant who captured the sentiment of the bonded group.

The participants realize the responsibility of their work with children to mean, as
was pointed out earlier, that they are in loco parentis (in place of parent). For them, this means that children come first; children are their priority, and they understand their roles as teachers to include helping to meet children’s basic needs, those that supersede academics, before they or their students can turn attention and energies to instruction and learning. Teachers, however, are not fully in charge of the practices, policies, priorities, and expectations that are imposed on to them through mandates and administrative rule. These are the sources of secondary stressors for teachers that, as participants point out, can complicate, dilute, and undermine their work with children.

There is a wide array of secondary stressors that participants reveal, all of which can burden them as priorities or circumstances that compete with what they see as necessary to help their students. Collectively they describe: stress from a lack of parental support, parents that are disengaged, parents that are not doing enough to help their children, and parents that are aggressive toward the school and the teachers; stress from sourness in relationships with administrators related to leadership actions, methods, lack support, and instability; and stress from collegial interactions that, like administrative stress, is felt within the roles, activities and interactions that educators have with other educators. Interaction with these secondary sources of stress is described among participants as the convergence of competing and sometimes incompatible demands; all of which carry high stakes.

**Stress and sourness from interactions with parents.**

Participants describe feeling stress from their interactions with parents as relating to parents that do not provide adequate support to their children, and parents that are aggressive toward educators. Effective teaching, they point out, is dependent on
symbiotic relationships between home and school; support from parents in collaboration with classroom learning. When the support from parents is lacking, it causes a bind for educators and, in particular, special educators who are charged with (and evaluated for) delivering paced and scripted grade level curriculum to children who are not on grade level. They point out that special education students, due to differences in their abilities, are often below grade level and need both significant remediation, and significant differentiation; the burden for which is squarely on special educators. In addition, they reveal that the lock step pace of the lessons that they are required to keep up with, is often discordant with the pace that special education students can learn or accommodate lessons in meaningful ways. This is particularly so for special education students served in mainstreamed co-teaching classroom models, where their general education peers, with their average abilities, are able to keep pace with the curriculum and absorb the lessons in ways that make sense to them.

Hence, what participants describe are conditions forced upon them through district priorities and mandates that do not adequately accommodate students that are behind and, by virtue of the pace of lessons, leaves more children behind as they move through the years. These conditions heighten the importance and need for parental support, and when it is lacking, the stress felt among educators is heightened as well. Keeping in mind that these teachers came to the field to serve a calling to help children to learn, be successful, and unlock access to the lives of their choosing, the conditions they are faced with present an unmovable reality for them that decisions made elsewhere, over which they have little influence, are undermining their calling; this hurts their hearts. An elementary special education co-teacher, for example, shared how the implications of
these conditions play out in classrooms:

Each year we get kids and their initial skill set is lower. So the first struggle is that, as a teacher, I have these kids that have a lower skill set that are not coming on grade level, yet I’m held to the standard of teaching grade level material and maintaining a pacing chart that says you need to have this taught by a certain day, and you can’t do that if you have to go back with kids that don’t have that foundational knowledge. So, you have to remediate them. The consequences of that is, as a teacher, what happens in your classroom is, that you don’t end up reaching all of your students. …This… ties back to the parental support piece.

What a lot of teachers have tried to do, …is to tell the parents, “hey we’re going to go ahead and continue to teach them the grade level material, we will contact you and let you know what areas that they need to be remediated in and if you could go back and cover those previous skills and we’ll continue to teach the current ones, that will make up the gap.”

He goes on to share that this is not a failsafe approach because many parents are not equipped to do this. They may be, as he says, “working two jobs and they can’t put in that type of time, then that student never gets those gaps covered.” He adds that, “as a teacher, you only have so many hours in a day, and you have 30 plus kids in the classroom.”

When parents cannot or do not provide their children with adequate support, it is painfully frustrating for the teachers. The reality in which participants find themselves includes external controls forced on their practice that create conditions that serve to prevent them from helping their students; their students cannot keep up. This reality
among participants includes a torturous awareness that some of their students will fail, and without parental support, there is nothing else available to them to assuage this likelihood. An elementary general education co-teacher, for example, shared her frustration regarding lack of parental support:

Some parents, …they just send their child to school and that is it [emphasis original]. Whatever we do here at school, that’s it [emphasis original]. You can send letters and, you know, make phone calls or whatever, and you never get a response…

Parents do not “see the urgency in the situation,” says an elementary special education co-teacher.

If you have a student that needs remediation, as a parent you have to actually put more time into that student than the student who is on grade level. So, …let’s say that the normal third grade parent needs to spend about an hour with their child a night. [For] a student who needs remediation, as a parent you may have to be willing to put in two and a half hours a night.

He adds:

…At the end of the day, eventually that student is going to …step out into the world …and they need to be able to function. They need …those skills, and if they don’t [have them], …we suffer as a society.

“It’s not the child’s fault,” said an elementary special education resource teacher, “I’m frustrated with the parents!” The conditions that force teachers to rely on parents, and the frustration that teachers feel when parental support is not actualized, are agitated further by their collective sense of powerlessness and learned helplessness, as discussed earlier
in relation to decisions made at a distance from teachers and the children they serve. These stressful feelings are further agitated by engagement with aggressive parents.

Participants point out that as special educators they keep documentation, or data, on their students’ progress that is used to communicate how the children are doing to parents, and to establish an individualized education plan (IEP) with improvement goals. The IEP is developed in a meeting held annually for students in special education and can be re-visited for amendments at any time that the parent or teachers feel that it is necessary. The IEP is, according to participants, a legal document that outlines special education services to be provided to the child, it directs the supports that they are to give their students. It includes testing information that reveals the child’s present levels of academic functioning along with information that validates children’s eligibility for special education services, information about children’s differing abilities that interfere with learning at a normative pace. Changes to the IEP can only be made within the context of an IEP meeting and must have parental approval.

The IEP meetings, according to participants, are often a theater of distress within which parental aggression is directed at them. No matter how nicely information about a child’s different abilities and functioning level is packaged and presented to parents, it a presentation of the child’s deficits that can be hard for parents to hear, accept, or organize around. It is the meeting in which parents hear difficult information about their children, information about the longevity of challenges, information that highlights the differences between their child and others with “average” abilities. Special education teachers present this difficult information, and then explain what the school can or cannot do to help; they develop goals, sub-goals, and determine the least restrictive setting to serve the
child, the setting closest to mainstream that the child can handle. They present a reality of the child that, no matter how much delicacy or compassion is shown by the teacher, can be the source of significant emotional distress for the parent.

“Some parents are in denial,” said one participant, regarding children’s special needs, while others are frustrated with what the school has to offer their children. Sometimes other family stressors enter into the interactions between teachers and parents. A high school self-contained special educator, for example, shares that “it’s not just the idyllic mom and dad coming at you about their kid.” He describes parents airing their divorce issues in IEP meetings, making them a competitive venture between parents to prove who is the better parent. This is even more challenging when family services are involved. He illustrates how this works out in a meeting:

It’s dads over here coming at you this way, moms over here coming at you this way, the services people are coming at you from another direction about the same kid. Nobody wants to be left out, but nobody can make a decision…

Sometimes the teacher is caught off guard by parent hostility. A middle school special education teacher, for example, described working with particularly challenging student and his mom, with whom she thought she had a good relationship. The child’s needs exceeded the services available at the school and, because of this, he was often in trouble and his mom was frequently asked to help. The teacher established a close relationship with both the parent and the child, and helped them both through these difficult times. She even helped the parent with him in the community, outside of school. When it became clear that he had exhausted the supports available to him in the local school, she helped with the transition to a program that had more to offer him. The IEP
meeting was held at the receiving school. By the time of the meeting, everything had been discussed with the parent in advance and she appeared comfortable and in agreement. At the meeting to make the school placement change however, the boy’s mom turned her feelings of frustration aggressively on to the teacher:

The mother kind of wailed into me! It was like wow, she like called me all these curse words… When he got sick and went to the hospital, …I left school and said oh my God! …I went there to see him that night. I went there the next day to give her some relief. “You’ve been here all night, …take a break and I’ll stay here with him.” …And then …act like this; I wanted to strangle her!

This teacher really cared about this student and his mom. In her heart she knew that this young boy would thrive in the new school with the supports available to him there. When his mom attacked the teacher, cursing at her, it took her off guard, hurt her feelings, and caused her to become angry in return, but she maintained her composure during the meeting. She is a professional and even though she was being attacked, felt the urge to respond in kind; she recognized the parent’s pain and the importance for her to remain professional during the meeting. She had to swallow her feelings during this attack as best she could for the sake of the child.

The boy was present in the meeting, saw all that had happened and, even though the teacher remained professional and the placement change occurred, he refused to get on the bus to go to his new school for several days before actually trying it out. His mother’s response in the meeting gave him license for his initial refusal. Several months later I visited his new school and asked about him, he was doing well, had been voted student of the week; something that was not even a remote possibility for him in his
former school. Many more months later his mother came to his former school and apologized to the teacher, she shared that it was difficult for her to accept that her baby’s needs were so great. The teacher just hugged her and said that she was glad he was doing well.

Participants reveal that whether it is from difficulty accepting a child’s “dis”-ability, frustration with what the school can do for them, or parents’ own issues, many parents direct their feelings of frustration aggressively toward the teachers. Nearly all participants identified parent aggressiveness and low parental involvement as sources of their stress and frustration. They described the urgency and importance of parental involvement to student success, and by proxy to the teachers’ evaluations. Stress from parental interaction is interconnected with other sources of stress within the life space of participants. It combines with their feelings from other hostile attacks, their isolation from influence, and their sense of powerlessness and learned helplessness. It adds to their challenge of balancing their own stress as they interact with students.

**Stress and sourness from interactions with administrators.**

Each participant described experiencing stress from interactions with administrators. Collectively they described examples of stress from interactions with leadership related to leadership instability, actions toward teachers, methods of leading, and lack of support. The sourness from these interactions with administrators, according to participants, comes from being treated poorly, being micromanaged, “nit-picked,” controlled, targeted, chastised, manipulated, un-supported, and “thrown under the bus;” receiving conflicting mixed messages, being tasked with things that detract from their work with students, having to clean up after administrators, not receiving the nurture they
need from administrators, and being treated as less than professionals. Within these feelings of sourness from stress related to leadership interaction are shared thoughts and feelings that administrators really do not understand the complexities of special education or know how to work with special education students.

Several participants acknowledged that their administrators are treated the same way by members of the leadership that are higher up, that they may want to be helpful but they are constrained by district priorities and mandates in the same ways as the teachers. For example, high school self-contained special educator shares that administrators “all have strengths and weaknesses,” they may want to help but “…they are overloaded too.” She adds that:

I don’t think we get the support we need. I don’t think they can give us the support we need because they are under pressure too. Nobody works harder than [our principal], she’s here on weekends and stuff and yet I don’t feel that we get support from her in a lot of areas. Although, I think that she wishes she could.

Another participant drew this out further by sharing that her administrators agreed with her over a misguided policy but said that, “this is what we’re getting from the County, so this is what you have to do.”

The instability among leadership was, for me, an eye-opening source of stress among participants as they described the context of how this impacts them. In a period of six years the district has had four acting superintendents and a nearly complete change of all of the Board of Education members. The accrediting agency has been involved by raising questions about top-level administration, and even the State Governor has been taxed with looking at the conduct of district leaders. At the school level, one participant
pointed out that during the last six years there have been four different principals leading the building in his school. One of the principals, he added, replaced all of the assistant principals too. In addition, the lead teacher for special education has changed nearly every year. Only one of the four schools sampled had stable leadership at the principal and assistant principal level. That school, like the others had other instabilities including recent changes in the counseling staff and lead teacher for special education.

The frequency of change among leaders sets the stage for some of the challenges that teachers experience as they interact with administrators. For example, an elementary special education co-teacher said that with all this change, “basically, you just make due.” He goes on to describe how the shifting sands of leadership interact with teaching and educator’s roles. “Anytime a new administrator comes in,” he said, “they have their own way of doing things; it takes time to adapt.” He added that the differences in leadership styles, methods, or priorities among administrators cause instability and discontinuity within the building. He illuminated this further by saying:

The problem is with not having the continuity and it taking that time to adapt, you lose time and it hurts children; it hurts children academically. One administrator may cater more to the affective side whereas another one is strictly instructional, so you may lose a lot of instructional time, you may lose a lot of time in the way of doing things, and you don’t get to the well roundedness of the child. ..As far as teachers, it has a large effect because they have to learn each administrator and figure out what means the most to them, and of course you have different dynamics with each different personality and, as it so turns out, that our administrators, each one has been the opposite of the other.
A general education co-teacher shared that each time the administration changes, it harms morale among teachers, students, and other stakeholders. The instability also manifests as inconsistency in the rules, differences in how administrators respond to children, and disorganization in their approach to teachers. For example, an elementary special educator said:

I’ve encountered a lot of … inconsistency among the rules in the school; behavior problems, when you write children up, or when you try to send them through the process of SST [Student Support Team] for behavior concerns, somebody drops the ball in between.

She goes on to add that children slip through the cracks when there is leadership instability because, as she said:

… It is inconsistency between administrators; they don’t communicate with each other on certain things that they need to communicate. So one may tell you to go ahead and do one thing, whereas the other one may say, no you can’t do that, and then you’re going backwards and forward from administrator to administrator instead of them talking and coming as a united front when they’re making a decision.

She added that when administrators are novice and don’t really know the teachers, they are more apt to question the teachers and “second guess” them. She described this as being in sharp contrast to being treated respectfully as a professional. The stress from leadership instability is not just felt by the teachers. For example, another participant who is a principal shared that higher-level administration had failed to provide a clear mission and goals. She said, “I’ll be honest with you, I don’t know if we have vision or a
goal… I’m waiting for it to be stated… it’s a mystery to me and I should certainly know what it is.”

The instability of leadership is cited as a contributor to the level of support, or lack of it, felt by participants from administrators. In addition, participants pointed to the manner in which they are treated by administrators, and actions among administrators that cause problems for them, as other sources of stress from leadership. With respect to the manner in which they are treated by administrators, participants described being micromanaged and “nit picked.” For example, “I have a target on my back,” said one middle school special education teacher. She stated that she feels the principal has something against her. She gave an example of how she is required to write her three-part lesson on the board and have it displayed there all day so that the children know what they are learning, and if an administrator comes in the room they can easily see what she is doing. The challenge, as she explained, is that she changes rooms throughout the day. She was given administrative direction to use the Promethean board to display her three-part lesson plan since she changes rooms, but then later chastised in front of other teachers by the same administrator for not writing it on the board. She added, “to me that is a knit picky thing and that takes the focus away from what are we doing.”

An elementary school assistant principal described a different form of poor treatment. She described being valued by her principal so much so that the principal withheld recommendations and transfer requests, preventing her from moving ahead in her career. She described this manipulation as a leadership action or strategy that is forcing her to consider quitting. Of this, she said:
I’m not nervous like other people are nervous, …I have quit places before and it’s always been better the next place where I go… There’s some stress that just comes with it [the job], but additional stress I don’t need. So I have done that [quit] and said oh, this is, I can’t do this anymore.

Depending on the leader, I had to quit because you’re [the principal] not going to give me a good recommendation because you don’t want me to go. You’re not going to give me a good [recommendation], so I have to quit because that is the only way to get out. You’re not going to let me transfer, because transfers are polite, …your principal allows [emphasis original] you to go. They don’t have to release you, so I can’t transfer.

A high school self-contained special education teacher candidly shared a different point of view regarding what he thinks about administrator support and the lack of it:

I think I’ve come to a different place [nervous laugh]. I think that the support is just an illusion, that it’s just a bunch of bullshit. I don’t come here thinking or expecting that I’m going to get any support, or that they are going to meet my needs in any way whatsoever. I come here because I want to teach a class and I feel like that is what I was put here on earth to do. I know that sounds corny, so that is what I come to do.

I don’t expect anyone from the front office to give me a pat on the back or anything because that is just not going to happen [emphasis original]! …If you buy in to that, it’s been my experience that what you get is to a more fucked up place. …What you get is a more friendship relationship, and that is not what it is, it’s more of a dysfunctional work relationship.
If you have a lot of need for support, then you’re the person in their face asking for stuff, and the more you’re in their face asking for stuff, the more of a problem you are, then the more bad evaluations you get. So as I’ve come to detach, loving detachment, that’s what I do. So okay, I’m going to just lovingly detach from that and go over here and take care of what I need to do; I get better evaluations. I don’t need anything from them, so they like me better. So it’s better for me really because it’s not fake and maybe that’s just where they are, maybe they just don’t have anything to offer like that. I know that when I drop my granddaughter off, it seems like the support at her school is real. Maybe its because I’m on the outside looking in.

An elementary resource teacher took this a step further and described not being able to rely on administrators who tell her, “we’re here for you and if there is a problem, call us and we’re here for you.” She offered an example:

…Perfect example, one student I had that was a runner, would try to escape work, very argumentative, just wanted to sleep, and that child would leave out of the classroom; sometimes try to leave the building. …I remember one instance the child left my room, I was by myself because the help I had at the time was placed somewhere to cover another class. …After the child left, I think I had about 8 or 9 students in the room by myself; multi-level, basically cognitive level was, it varies… I can’t, I can’t just leave them when I run after this one student.
I called on the radio, three times, this is so and so, so and so has left my room and nobody answered and I, specifically after the fourth time, I called an individual name. That person never came back on the radio to say okay I got the message or whatever. It was about 45 minutes later, one of the assistant principals called me on my phone to ask me what I needed. …By this time I realized that the child had left the building and was across the street. Nobody came to me and said anything.

Then, …[they had] a conversation to say I allowed a child to leave the classroom and I did not call. So I had it documented how many times I called, so when I finally, when they finally came to me. I said, this is how many times I’ve called, showed them in the book, and nobody answered so I assumed that the child was confiscated at the door. Or somebody had the child because nobody came back and said okay Mrs. So and So, I have so and so.

In addition to not being able to rely on the administrators when she needed their support in a crisis situation, the manner in which they addressed this with her made her feel like she was being “thrown under the bus.” They addressed her in front of other staff in a meeting and then met privately to let her know she would be investigated. Here is what she said:

So when I found out that, I was told in a conversation that, …at the end of a meeting …the meeting was directed at me, …that we have to be careful what we do and if we need additional training, come and say something, and so I just didn’t say anything because I knew everything was gearing towards me but I knew everything that I did and I had my documentation and I had myself covered.
…Then the individual came to me and was talking to me and that’s when they were telling me about [the Directors of Special Education and Internal Affairs were] going to interrogate me and all this other stuff. But, because I had my notes and my documentation it didn’t bother me, that didn’t phase me at all.

Another participant, a high school special education teacher, described how the priorities that administrators embrace create a situation where they are concerned with things that are not necessarily the priorities of the teachers, especially during crisis situations, or when student stressors unravel the carefully planned lessons. This leaves teachers feeling misunderstood, undervalued, and unsupported. In his words:

A lot of your energies are going into corralling behaviors and getting people okay and knowing where people are at, and kind of sensing the room and all that stuff, and that’s kind of hard when somebody comes in and they’re only looking at the academic piece. When you’re dealing with all these behavior things and somebody wants to know why your standard isn’t written out or why you didn’t have it written in child language.

He pauses to giggle at the lunacy of this and then adds:

That’s when you just want to go, “what are you talking about? I was just trying to get through the last two hours of nightmare and I didn’t have time to write it up there [emphasis original],” but they don’t get all that.

In addition to stress and sourness from leadership approach and treatment of teachers, participants also describe actions by leaders toward students that cause additional stress for them. For example, one elementary special education co-teacher describes stress when administrators employ cut-and-dry rote responses to student
concerns or behavior without stopping to consider a more holistic approach that incorporates teacher insights and input regarding the child’s needs and life context to the decision making process:

I feel certain that each administrator that we’ve had …generally wanted to do things in the best interest of kids, but the process and the decision-making; looking at things from all angles and considering how everyone involved in the situation will be effected, I don’t think was always taken into consideration. Another participant, a special education resource teacher, draws this out further as it relates to the way administrators work with her special needs children and what it does to her heart, her stress. She, along with other participants, feels that administrators should embrace a wider array of responses to special education student behaviors. For example, she suggests that administrators help students to learn from mistakes by making them teachable moments instead of rote reliance on suspension or consequent oriented actions:

Personally, I feel that the majority of them does [sic] not want to be bothered and I’ve heard one or two of them say that [they have] worked in special ed before, but when it comes down to the nitty gritty, that’s what we call it, comes down to the bottom line, I don’t see where you’ve worked in special ed because there’s no empathy right there.

Many of them have said that they’ve worked in special ed and that’s telling me that they’ve been trained in that area and you’re not showing me that you know what to do with these children. It angers me; it really, really angers me. …I just do what I can do on a daily basis for the students. I do as much as I can for them but decision is not for me to make.
They make a decision and I just follow through and I just do as much as I can… There is just something that really bothers me to see how they treat them, and bothers me the things that they want them to do, but again, I’m me and I do what I can on a daily basis just to help those students. I try to handle …the problems [that] I have in my classroom so that I don’t have to engage them. Sometimes, it all depends on the individual, I can get support maybe from one or two, but the others; I think that they blow things out of proportion. They make too much out of a little thing.

She goes on to describe administrative “support” that ends up causing bigger problems in her relationships with students. She calls on them to help with student behavior through protocols within the school structure that are aligned with positional roles and responsibilities. As she said:

…When you send a referral for a student’s behavior, instead of them [administrators] coming back to you, …the kids are suspended for a day or two out of the building… I’m not a big person on having them suspended out of the building. They [the students] come back with a negative attitude because obviously the parents are home cussing us out, so the kids come back with a negative attitude towards us.

The lack, or “illusion” of administrative support, as one participant described, is a source of stress among participants. It causes sourness in their relationships with administrators that participants reveal, add to their overall feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and collective sense of learned helplessness. Some participants acknowledged limitations among administrators saying, for example:
They have to follow …some kind of rules from the top. So when the superintendent tells them to do something and the region tells them to do something, they have to follow those rules. I think some of them feel the way we feel but they can’t, they have to follow directions, … rules, and policies. That’s what you have to do if you’re in a leadership position… You can’t have personal feelings about how we should teach the kids and how we should do this or that, and they can’t change the rules unless they go through the County or the State.

The overall experience however, the gestalt meaning for these educators, is that they are on their own, they are unsupported, their contributions to student learning are not adequately appreciated by superiors, their leaders do not fully grasp all that is involved in teaching special education, they are not viewed or treated as professionals, and their leaders are not effective advocates for special educators, or special education students.

**Stress and sourness from collegial interactions.**

Participants, in addition to stress from interactions with students, parents, and administrators, also describe stress and sourness from interactions with peers. Collegial stress, like the stress from administrators, is felt within the roles, activities, and interactions educators have with other educators. Participants define collegial stress as negativity that comes directly from other educators through interactions, or indirectly as the by-product of the impact that negative peers have on students; seen through the eyes of their students. Participants describe the strain and stress that contribute to sourness in their relationships from peers as having to do with overt or covert prejudices among general educators against special education students, collaboration difficulties within the co-teaching model, discriminatory behavior directed at special education students, and
laziness among peers related to organizing around and meeting special education students’ needs. These stressors emerge in their interaction with other educators and, for these special educators, represent a school culture or climate that is abrasive to their dedication to help their special education student, abrasive to their efforts of establishing a community of care for their students, and offensive to what it means to them to be educators.

“How do you work with them [emphasis original]?” is a question that one participant, a special education resource teacher, describes as offensive to her coming from other teachers. It suggests to her that her students are somehow damaged, unworthy, or otherwise a bother. It suggests a negative prejudice or stereotype that lumps all of her students together, ignoring their individual unique strengths and abilities. It suggests favor for “normal” kids, and disfavor for “them,” her students. As she says:

When I look at some of the other teachers’ behavior, especially with the kids with special needs, and one statement that the majority of them make that I cannot stand is, “how do you work with them [emphasis original]?” Because they are human beings, and [just] because they have might have a learning deficit or be diagnosed with Autism, or Intellectual Disability, or Down’s syndrome, they’re all human beings. These kids, it’s not a sin, it’s a disability. …They can function to a certain level, but they just don’t function like other kids. They can learn just like anybody else, they may take a longer time to learn, a longer time to do something, but they’re all human beings and they need to be treated as humans.

This prejudice that she described, plays out in interactions with students. An elementary special education co-teacher, for example, added that her special education students have
had prejudices among general education co-teachers acted out on them. General educators, she noted, that were resentful of being placed in a co-teaching arrangement, treated the special education students in their class poorly, gave them, for example, a coloring sheet to work on during the lesson rather than differentiating the instruction. If you are a student in a co-taught class, another elementary co-teacher said, “you know who cares for you and who can help you and who’s like, *I don’t want to be bothered* [emphasis original].”

The poor treatment of students by general educators hurts the special educators’ hearts, and it is compounded by the way that general educators treat the special educators. Participants frequently cited conflicts with general education co-teachers as a source of stress. For example, one participant indicated that the special education teachers are not understood or respected by the general education teacher. She added that she has had to deal with situations in which there was stress from the way that general education co-teachers want to structure the classroom and share the co-teaching responsibilities. In her experience, the general education teacher “feels that all of the special education teachers should have to deal with the special education students.” In this circumstance, the general education teacher adopts a “hands-off” approach to the special education students and communicates a message that she is not their teacher. She added that this fosters an environment in which the special education children are caught in the middle, forced to choose who will help them, and, as she said, they disrespect the general education teacher by “only listen[ing] to the special education teacher.”

Other participants described the unwillingness to help special education students among colleagues as being attributed to laziness. For example, a lead teacher for special
education described the stress she feels from other educators that have negative attitudes and just don’t put the time into doing their job well:

I had another teacher who told me she had never had a child with Down’s syndrome and was waiting for me to give her some material. Now I don’t mind giving you materials, but again this is a doctor… this particular teacher has a title to her name, and I’m like okay, you’ve never had a child with Down’s syndrome [emphasis original]? [With] today’s technology, you don’t have to wait for somebody to give you training, you can get on the computer and go to any site.

She goes on to describe her frustration with the interaction with this highly educated teacher that, to her, is not putting in the effort that should be expected of someone with this level of education and credentialing:

She has a Doctorate [emphasis original] in education! That’s what gets discouraging because in my position, I have to rely on other people, and what I mean by that is, with my students, I have to rely on my teachers to do their best to teach the kids. I have to rely on that they will be creative enough to do a behavior intervention plan. I have to rely on you [the teacher] enough that you will do what you can for the students in your classroom. I have to trust that, and when I know that is not in place and then I have to be like this, checking every day, and it’s just; …it leaves me thin. I had to sit with that same doctor and I had to show her different behavior charts; there are behavior charts on line. I have “Googled” behavior charts and they come up done! I just have to put the child’s name in there, you know. But I did it, and we spoke about it and so forth. It discourages me sometimes.
Another elementary co-teacher shared that he thinks that some of the other teachers are negative because they have lost their compassion; “it’s the compassion, I’m convinced that many of our teachers have become like corporate America: it’s just a check, it’s just a job.”

To these participants, the behavior among their peers is offensive and causes stress. It deepens their feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and helplessness. It represents to them that not all educators are acting in the best interests of students, and for their students, their special education students, there is little love shown from the general educators. “Schools are supposed to be …[where] we take care of each other, and we care about each other,” said an assistant principal, but this is not what these participants feel from their general education colleagues.

**The collision of teacher and student stress that occurs during interactions.**

The stress that participants described associated with students, parents, administrators, and colleagues all influence teachers within the context of their life space; it is personal and exacts a toll on their hearts. More important, it comes into interactions with students through the bi-directional nature of the student-teacher relationship; it is stress felt as sourness in the relationships between teachers and students. All of the participants reported stress and sourness is an influence exchanged within the teacher-student relationship that interferes with learning.

The children’s behavior, rooted to their stressors, is what participants described as a source of strain in interactions. The sourness in their relationships comes when all of the stressors that teachers carry with them weigh in heavily along with the strain presented by student behavior. The behavior that students employ to cope, get their
needs met, mask their distress, distract themselves from their problems, or draw attention to their circumstances, occurs when they need it to; it does not wait for a recess in instruction, or for the halls to clear, it disrupts and demands immediate attention.

In concert with the petulant demands from student stress are the pressures on teachers to teach from bell to bell, and satisfy all of the expectations layered thickly onto them; expectations that are evaluated and inspected for compliance, documented in teacher evaluations, and may, as participants point out, impact their salary and contract renewals. To illustrate the conflicting priorities in action, a special education instructional change coach lamented that they used to be able to take the time to address student crisis and emotional needs without pressure to quickly get them back into the classroom for rigorous instruction. Her narrative describes how this works now, and the bind it puts educators in:

…Now if you talk to them too long, they’ll [the supervisors] be after you. You hold them out [of class] too long -It takes time [emphasis original], you remember how it used to take time? Not now, you get them in, you get them out! You’re pushing them back in here [the class] and therefore the behavior goes up, …and then its rubbed off on another student because you bring them back in here when they’re not ready to come back. But you’re trying to get them back in here so they get rigor. So you’re damned if you do, and damned if you don’t.

She described having to rush the process of helping children through their problems, but this causes more problems in the big picture. The co-mingling of student stress (crisis and needs) with teacher stress (the rush to serve district priorities) that is ported back and forth between the two is what causes sourness in the relationships felt by both parties. To
illustrate this further, a self-contained special education teacher described how student crisis play out in the class, and the problems it can create for the teacher. She said that when students decompensate into crisis,

…You have got to remove your class to a different classroom. You have to take them to the media center, so that lesson might be on Wednesday instead of Tuesday. …If a supervisor comes in to evaluate a teacher, she’s on a lesson on Wednesday that should have been on Tuesday… it’s a strike against the teacher because she’s supposed to be teaching the standards.

The stress and sourness in relationships between teachers and students is from the collision of competing priorities: the students’ as related to their needs, and the teachers’ as set by mandates, policies, practice expectations, and administrative directives. Decisions over which, as pointed out earlier by participants, were made at the macro level of the environment, by figures at a distance from the students and the practice of teaching.

Most of the behavior that children employ cannot be ignored. Participants describe the urgency of addressing the children’s distress as a safety concern. They reveal that pupils demonstrate anger and aggression, physical and verbal, which can disrupt the entire class. To this, high school self-contained special educator pointed out:

Every day they’re going to throw something else and there’s going to be a kink in the process that comes from their behavior, or whatever situation that they’re dealing with… You just don’t ever know what it’s going to be, and you don’t know how it is going to affect your classroom, your teaching, and just the entire dynamics of the class.
A middle school special education co-teacher shared her struggle with children that are so often angry. She paused to wonder out loud what the sources of their anger might be:

We were talking about this today at lunch, …how angry some of them are at 8:15 in the morning. *What are you so angry about, this early in the morning? What have you come in contact with that’s making you this angry, or what are you missing that’s making you this angry* [emphasis original]?

She struggled with this and added, “Maybe it’s the trust, …the closeness or the trust in the relationship; they don’t trust me… It doesn’t feel like I’m reaching as many of the kids that I feel like I need to reach.” A principal shared how students let their stress be known and how this factors in to the teacher-student relationship. She said, “You know they present in very aggressive and disruptive, and,” her voice trails off and she tears up, “*you’re going to make me cry* [emphasis original]...” She paused and then continues:

They come from very troubled and very challenging situations, and they come here and they show that behaviorally. So, they’re going to be a mess everywhere they go, they’re going to act out, attack verbally, physically lash out, withdraw, try to hurt themselves, that whole realm of inappropriate emotional and behavioral responses... Poor peer relationships; they’re just going to want to take out all the anger and hurt inside on everybody around them, especially if you try to care about of them because they don’t trust that it’s real, and they don’t trust that you really are who you are...

Along similar lines, another participant shared that, “there could be verbal [aggression], but it could be like when you lay a book on a student’s desk and they knock it off, that’s aggressive.” “They jump up on the furniture, they throw the furniture; they throw things.
They talk while you’re talking. The cursing, I’ve gotten to where I tune it out,” shared another special educator. Participants reveal that student behavior can also escalate to physical aggression. For example, a novice high school special educator said:

I’ve had fights in here. I just had a fight the other day… it was terrible. …I’m like right away, “I don’t want to see it; you’re not going to do that in here if I can help it. I was like man, why are you fighting?” And [then] I’m in the middle of it, I jammed my thumb man and its still sore, you know, and then the one kid, …his medicine is up really high so he’s not able to really defend himself… sometimes you feel like you make it worse; you’re holding a kid and another kid is punching the kid …really kind of, a brutal kind of thing.

The participants point out that they are not evaluated on how well they manage the crisis that erupt when students act out their stress behaviorally. The meaning that they take from this circumstance is that the work that goes into taking care of the children’s emotional needs, the work to foster a positive, nurturing community of care holds no currency among the authorities governing the field. A high school self-contained special educator laughed nervously as he described how student aggression plays out during the course of instruction:

Your trying to calm them down, but you’re also trying to get them to do some work. [Laughs] So, I know you’re mad but you have to read this story [emphasis original]. I think people would be surprised about the level of aggression.

With respect to student behavior, some of it does not impose an immediate safety threat and participants have some discretion over how they address it. This is where stress from the administrators can influence their approach. For example, a middle
school special education co-teacher shared that in her building it is common for teachers to send situations to the office, to their micromanaging boss. She provided the following context:

I know a lot of people are just stressing out because… right now it’s just because a lot of people have been written up for being late to work. If you are only one or two minutes, give me a break! …Nit pick me with that, but you want me to stay until the buses leave, or you want me to stay and do these little faculty meetings, or you want me …to help you look good, but you’re not going to give me a break.

Using a fictional name of “little Johnny,” she described how the teachers return their stress to the principal: “To deal with little Johnny, …I really can control little Johnny, but you’re on me and so I’m just going to send little Johnny to the office.”

From my perspective as a member of their community that works somewhere in between teachers and administrators, I see the utility of this as having several values. It is, on one hand, passive aggressive in that it is an indirect way to address a problem within the behavior of the administrator; give her a taste of her own medicine, let her feel some of the stress that she is dishing out, give her something to do that will keep her busy so she has less time to “nit pick” teachers with whatever might be her issue of the day. It serves as a coping mechanism on two counts: it removes an immediate stressor from the room, little Johnny’s behavior, and it affords them a means to address their stress with the administrators action in the absence of other strategies. It is, unfortunately, a strategy that puts the student in the middle and, multiply little Johnny by the 100 teachers in the building through the course of 5 to 7 class periods in a day, it becomes a cyclical mess. It is my observation that, while this may soothe the teacher in the short run, it can, and
does, effectively overwhelm the principal and other administrators to the point that their needs for control effectively increase their efforts to micromanage teachers and make rash and ill-considered decisions that addresses the students. For example, one of my principals (who did not participate this study) has told me on more than one occasion during the course of our work together, “this building is out of control, I’m suspending anyone that is sent to my office for 5 days because I can’t get anything done.”

Thankfully as a social worker, I am supervised through my department, which affords me the luxury of permission to advocate for fair treatment of students, and I point out to her that making blanket decisions to suspend kids like this is inappropriate; my influence, however, is limited.

The confluence of teacher and student stress is, according to these participants, an ongoing challenge that is made difficult by additional stressors imposed on these teachers through interactions with others in the environment through roles or activities related to their work with children. For these participants, their students are their priority and the stress that they feel as educators is secondary to meeting the needs of children. They believe that students’ behavior communicates stress, unmet needs, the presence of unpleasant circumstances or traumas, and that it is their job to listen and realize the context of what students tell them through their behavior so that they can be helpful, so that they can be teachers that care for students during the school day in the place of parents. They do not feel that others understand or value this aspect of their beliefs. This, to them, is confirmed as they are assaulted with demands, negative attitudes, and incompatible mandates that threaten to undermine their work with children. They feel unsupported, isolated, and unappreciated from others in their field and, as they point out,
by some parents who are aggressive or detached. They do not feel that they have adequate understanding regarding the complexities of their jobs or appropriate advocacy for their students. They do not feel that there is a functional partnership between special educators and other members of the educational community to help them achieve the goals inherent to their calling.

The stress they feel is larger than what they feel for themselves, it is stress that weaves its way into interactions with children and causes sourness; it influences the relationships children have with the field, with the content of curriculum, with teachers, and with the school itself. It is stress that distracts children from learning, rushes teachers through the process of meeting children’s primary needs to get them back into “rigorous instruction.” It is stress from prejudice and poor treatment of students. It is stress from directives that dilute teacher capacity to dedicate adequate time to their students, to what they believe is important for their students. All participants describe the stress that educators feel as something that distracts from teaching and learning. They all reveal that stress among teachers enters into the teacher-student relationship and harms the student. They also reveal that they have little control or influence over these sources of stress. All of these things contribute to the sourness felt within relationships, sourness that can be fertilizer for seeds that grow into compassion fatigue and burnout.

**The Whittling Away of Individualized Education, a Fertile Garden of Discontent**

This theme describes what is perhaps the most troublesome source of stress to these educators. It describes what, according to participants, amounts to as structural discrimination against their special education students. Structural because it is discrimination that is woven within the district policies, practices, priorities, and
mandates with which these educators are forced to comply. It is most troublesome because it describes stress that is at direct odds with their calling to service, their desires to help children to learn and be successful, to access and have good lives, the lives of students’ choosing. Participants’ beliefs about what is helpful for growth, learning, and development among their special education students are established from a combination of experience, training, and awareness of laws.

They described how the IEP is supposed to be a document that serves children based on their unique and individual needs. The foundations of the IEP are outlined, according to participants, in law and the IEP is, as they describe, a legal document. These laws include wording to ensure that children with “dis”-abilities are provided free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment suitable to serve their individual needs. To this end, it is the understanding among participants that it is the obligation of the local educational agency, the local school district, to accommodate children’s needs with appropriate services, and to create those services where they do not exist; this, as they point out, is compromised by the district’s adopted priority of serving all students with a curriculum that aims for college readiness; this, as they point out, is compromised by the district’s failure to provide an adequate continuum of service delivery models for special education students; this, as they describe, is compromised by the district’s failure to provide a broad spectrum of curriculum offerings that opens more than one path to success, more than college readiness. The district, as they point out, is not acting with fidelity to meet what these participants believe to be in the best interests of their special education students.

Taken together, the reality that these participants find themselves in, is serving
within a district that has woven within its policies, practices, priorities, and mandates, structures that discriminate against special education students’ rights as outlined in law. This, as they reveal, is structural discrimination that, by virtue of censorship, mandates, and administrative rule, they are forced to accept and take part in through their roles as educators. From their experience, they know and believe this to be a disservice to special education students, one that binds these participants in conflict between what their hearts demand as being true to their calling, and the priorities for practice handed down to them through mandates and administrative rule. The district priorities that govern their practice, that allocate resources, that sanction curriculum, that define service delivery models, that standardize student and teacher evaluations, are, as they say, things that they have little voice or influence to challenge. These are elements that coalesce to function as structures that discriminate against their students. These are elements they do not feel an effective advocate is standing up against on behalf of special education students, or special educators. The circumstances these participants find themselves in with respect to structures that discriminate against their students are, perhaps, the greatest source of sourness in their hearts. They are, perhaps, the largest helping of fertilizer that nourishes the seeds of discontent for these participants, seeds of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. They are additional elements within the ecology of their district that combine with stricture from censorship to rub them with the reality of their isolation, powerlessness, and helplessness.

Participants were not uniform in their descriptions or understandings of the etiology of decisions handed down through layers of leadership that foster the conditions that discriminate against their students. They describe these decisions as having been
made at a distance from them. They trace some decisions back to the macro level of environment, to Federal acts such as the Race To The Top (RTTT) or No Child Left Behind (NCLB). They describe how purse strings entice the State to adopt priorities that are pressed in to the local districts. Some of them suggested that the mandates get interpreted corruptly at different points in their lineage, and that the problems that they see for their students result from the execution of priorities set elsewhere. While nearly all of these special educators expressed some degree of uncertainty regarding the etiology of these decisions, they were unanimous in voicing their stress associated with them.

**Structures that subordinate the IEP: district curriculum and mainstreaming.**

Participants reveal that a majority of special education students would benefit from vocational and/or functional adaptive curricula. Within their district, however, these curricula have been replaced with curriculum designed and executed with the goal of readying all pupils for college. The curriculum that participants described is known as the common core curriculum. This, as they point out, was set as a priority by the State Board of Education, and then executed within their district. The manner that this has been executed in their district, as they point out, corrupts the fidelity of IEPs. It is, as they describe, woven into directions and expectations regarding how they are to develop IEPs for their special education students.

The IEP, as they remind, is a legal document that outlines how a student is supposed to be served through special education. The legal premise, as participants point out, is that students are to be served with free and appropriate education tailored to their individual needs and abilities, and delivered within the least restrictive environment conducive to meeting their educational needs. Historically, according to participants, the
goals within the IEP are written to reflect the child’s present levels of academic functioning.

The content of the goals is meant to provide a starting point, where the child is presently functioning, and a target, where they hope the child will function after a specific amount of time given the supports that are outlined and provided. The content of goals is also, according to participants, supposed to reflect work towards realistic outcomes of which the IEP committee (including parents) agrees are aligned with what will be helpful to the child for transitioning into life upon graduation from public school. To this end, a transition plan has historically been included within the IEP, initiated at a certain grade threshold, to scaffold the efforts to move the child toward successful transition after graduation by aligning goals and supports.

Hence, for students with severe intellectual disabilities, for example, it is generally agreed, by parents and teachers alike, that they will be well served with goals that ready them with functional adaptive skills, vocational skills, or prevocational skills so that they can transition from school to the workplace and become productive independent citizens as best they can. In instances when the student’s needs are not aligned with what is available in the local education agency, it is understood that the local educational agency is obligated to reasonably accommodate the child’s needs by obtaining or creating appropriate educational opportunities and related supports. This is not how participants say it works within their district, which for them is a reality that is unchallengeable, troublesome, and stressful.

Participants shared that development of IEPs in their district has been re-interpreted and modified so that the IEP reflects the curriculum and what can be taught
within the spectrum of delivery models offered by the district. Participants point out that, for example, the goals on the IEP are written to the grade level common core curriculum standard, not to the child’s present levels of functioning. Two participants offered alternative approaches to the practice of writing IEP goals to the grade level common core curriculum standard. One participant, a lead teacher for special education, shared that the grade level common core curriculum is written as the goal, but objectives can be written following the goal that address the child’s present levels of functioning. Another participant, an elementary special education co-teacher, shared that he continues to write the IEP goals to the child’s present levels of functioning despite the movement to write them to the grade level standard of the common core curriculum. As a school social worker I am a child advocate and I admire and appreciate that he is unapologetically resolute as he describes his beliefs and rational for this:

    I’m writing it for the present level of function. The IEP is an individual plan for that student, so that’s my justification for writing it as such. It does our students no good to be in the fifth grade and to be reading on the first grade level and they cannot formulate sentences and not to have a goal to formulate sentences, basic sentences. I make that as the goal. In my opinion it has to be the goal because that is the present level of functioning, period! And I mean that is just the bottom line of it. I’m telling you for a fact that other people, many people aren’t doing it that way because as the kids transfer from fourth to fifth grade and I get the IEP and it’s written on a fourth grade level but this child is still on a first grade and all the data says this, but that IEP is written for a fourth grade curriculum.

Writing the goal to the grade level curriculum, he says, may appeal to the parents because
it masks the gap between where the child is functioning and where he should be functioning; it is easier for them to hear, they hear the grade level, not the gap. He sees this as a disservice to parents and their students and adds, “…I don’t delusion the parents,” and goes on to say that it is better to, “… talk about the truth” of where students are at and what they need to accomplish to be at the same level as other, non-special education, students.

Participants point out that it is not simply a matter of how to write the goals in the IEP, it is also about the relevance of the curriculum that is written into the goals; relevance regarding what will be helpful to special education students as their lives move forward. In one school, for example, several participants said that a majority of their special education students are not served by the current curriculum. They estimate that 20% or fewer actually benefit from a singular curriculum focus aimed at readying them for college. A novice teacher in his second year as a special education self-contained teacher, for example, shared that there is dissonance between the content of his courses and student needs, circumstances, and what will be helpful to them in the future. He works with special education students that are challenged by behavior and emotional problems. His narrative illuminates the disconnection between district curriculum priority and student needs:

I’ve got a British lit class and we’re reading Beowulf, and I’m teaching them Chaucer, and I’m teaching them Pardoner’s Tale, and Wife of Bath’s Tale, and these tales are interesting, but then when that question comes up …from a student who is homeless, you know, and he’s asking me like okay, “well why are we doing this?”
He restated this for emphasis and then continues:

You know then the question becomes okay, “why are we doing this [emphasis original]?” …I ask myself… “WHY ARE WE DOING THIS [emphasis original]?” You [to the student] need something more fundamental than this, don’t you? That’s a hard question; …you take it to people, I mean… I’ve run it past people. The response is, “I know, we gotta do something different for him.”

The sad reality is, as he and other participants point out, there is little else to offer children beyond the college preparatory curriculum in their district. Hence, that child, along with many others like him, is stuck there, asked to sit through something that has tenuous relevance to what he needs educationally for life success. This is very hard for educators because they can see the students’ needs, they have been able to meet them in the past through more diverse curricula, but there is nothing that they can do to help these children within the confines of their current circumstances. Another participant, a middle school special education teacher in a self-contained model, candidly adds:

The point is to do the same curriculum. They’re [decision makers] not worried about the kids and living after they get out of sixth period, or living when they get out at 18. …They don’t want to look beyond the “so called” no child left behind. She goes on to say that, “they [the administrators] want to make sure that everybody is on the same pacing chart,” so that they are in line with the notion that “everybody is going to college,” to which she despondently adds, “but everybody is not going to college.”

Another participant spelled out the utility of curriculum goals in the context what they really serve, and how teachers are asked to incorporate goals and student needs within the confines of the service delivery models offered:
I think it’s more focused on the academic achievement, which is… [pauses], which is good, as long as the students are learning. But not for trying to meet some standard you know, to make your school look good; and I think it’s more that now... I think it boils down to money… because everything has a price tag.

...At one time there used to be a bank of accommodations. But right now, accommodations are pretty standard. …They’ve used them so long, [that] I think …if you took some IEPs …and compared them, they would be very similar. One student may have less [sic] accommodations than another student, it depends on who’s writing the IEP, …but …the accommodations are pretty standard.

…That’s the way it is.

…You have to look at what can you actually do in the classroom. So if I have this [goal] on there [the IEP], can I actually do that in the classroom? Can I actually do that? Do I actually have the time to do that? …Look at the situation we have with co-teaching. …They have given us a, sort of like, a model. …There are different models, …but the county wants us to do parallel teaching and stations. …How can you do something one-on-one when you’re doing those sorts of things, …when you have to break off in groups? …There’s no one-on-one, you can’t just pull the student off to the side and forget about all the others, even though you want to do it sometimes.

His narrative illuminates that the focus of special education is more academic, less on student’s present levels of functioning. This, he points out, is in line with the district’s priority to ready pupils for college. He shared that this is good if students are learning, but he adds that it is his experience that special education student learning is not why the
focus has shifted, he shared his perspective that the focus is for the benefit of the school, not the special education students; this captures the overall sentiment of the bonded group. He goes on to illuminate how the service delivery model dictates goals for the student’s IEP; “You have to look at, can you actually do that in the classroom?”

This is not in keeping with the spirit of developing IEPs that was discussed earlier, the scaffold as defined by law to protect student rights and, by proxy, the good works within teachers’ callings. It is, however, the reality he faces because within his co-teaching model, there are inherent limitations to working individually with students, “even though,” as he says, “you might want to;” even though students might need that level of support. An elementary special education co-teacher drews this out further, indicating that in practice you cannot, for example, differentiate the fifth grade curriculum standard down to a first grade-kindergarten level without exposing the child’s deficits to others in the class. In her words:

If they’re working on fractions and you come up with a pizza and that signals out the child because that child is supposed to be sitting in a co-teaching setting. Because how is he doing pizza when everybody else is doing fractions and they’re like, well I want to do the pizza, but that’s the only way you can get him to do the fractions because you have had to whittle it down so much for his level and he still can’t comprehend that. Then you’ve got a whole bunch of other students off task because he’s doing something that looks fun.

In high school this becomes a significant self-esteem issue for students, as a self-contained special education teacher points out. He said that he can provide work that is at a child’s present levels of functioning, but when students are in mixed ability
groupings, it would expose the child’s deficits to the other students, causing the child to shut down and disengage completely. To this he added, there are not resources to provide staff or materials to pull children out for individual, or small homogeneous group learning opportunities. Opportunities that he suggests might help to close the gaps through remediation in a more emotionally safe situation for the child, a situation in which the stigma of being behind is lessened or eliminated. Instead, the IEP is written so that services are delivered within the classrooms and delivery models that already exist.

**August accounting follies and the State alternative assessment program.**

Participants reveal that within structures that discriminate against their special education students are the methods of counting graduation rates, and the State’s Alternative Assessment program (SAA). The State, participants point out, uses a formula for counting graduation rates that recognizes students that earn special education diplomas, or transitional diplomas, as dropouts. This is offensive to the special educators that participated in this study and serves as yet another example to them of how their special education students, and the work they do with them, is not valued or appreciated by decision makers. It is another example to participants of practices that they describe as discriminatory against their special education students. This is not the whole of it for participants though, there is more to the State’s way of counting graduation rates tied to the State Alternative Assessment (SAA) program that adds even more discomfort among special educators. Participants reveal that the State offers an alternative assessment (SAA) program as a means to accommodate students that function at the lowest 1% of cognitive ability with different methods to calculate their progress than the standardized testing that is required for this purpose among all other students. Students that are
eligible for the SAA are, as one participant points out, so cognitively impaired that reading is beyond the grasp of most of them, and for many, if standardized tests were administered, they would be unaware that they were being tested. In his words:

The student has to be so low that, basically in a nutshell, you have to be so low that you don’t understand that you’re taking a test, because, …[the guidelines say] that if you are able to sit for a standardized test, and say that you don’t know an answer, then you’re high enough for a standardized test.

These students, he pointed out, the students that are served by the SAA, count among the children that earn college preparatory diplomas, while students that might “spend 6 years learning all sorts of wonderful things” pursuant to a special education diploma count as dropouts. The SAA program is also a very time consuming process for the teacher. An elementary resource teacher explained that “for every 5 minutes of instructional time, there’s about an hour of paperwork.” Another participant drew this out further as he describes how strict district adherence to mandates regarding teaching the grade level common core curriculum standards played out in middle school with a severely intellectually disabled child served by the SAA:

This one kid is literally, …I mean the teacher is literally taking a student’s hand and picking up a seed and putting it in the dirt and writing about how they are learning the life cycle of plants; instead of teaching them to recognize a human coming in the room, …that’s what get’s teachers frustrated.

The teacher does all the writing about how the child is learning the life cycle of the plant in order to satisfy the accommodations provided to the child. The child is a mere puppet in the exercise. The curriculum focus for the child aims to provide access to the
opportunity to go to college. This, as participants point out, is folly that hurts the child by denying access to a relevant and appropriate curriculum, a curriculum that could help the child to become as independent as he can in preparation for life. By “child” written in the singular here, it is implied to mean children served by the college-bound, common core curriculum that has been prioritized by the State and adopted within the district as the sole curriculum of importance.

A special education instructional change coach pointed to how the value affixed to graduation rates within the State’s formula can lend a corruptive hand to IEP development. He provided the context that in the past his school provided comprehensive educational programming for special education students that included vocational curriculum but, when the No Child Left Behind Act shifted the district’s focus to college readiness, the vocational offerings were cut in favor of programming aligned with NCLB and college readiness. Most recently he had a student who was served through the SAA that was being considered for a change in placement to a school that provides vocational training. He describes being cautioned from encouraging such a change because of how it might conflict with how the child was counted for graduation rates through SAA, as he tells it:

We had a kid that we were trying to send to [the technical school] and a person who is higher up [in the district] said, well be careful about that because if we send them to [the technical school] they will not be eligible for a [State Alternative Assessment] diploma. The LTSE [Lead Teacher for Special Education] said rightly that, “I have a real problem that we’re saying we shouldn’t do what’s best for our students so a school can get a diploma [credit].”
Caveat emptor: good intentions pave paths with cobbles of bad ideas.

The structures that participants describe as discriminating against their special education students are systemic problems with practices built around them that, as they point out, benefit the State and district without appropriate consideration to the impact they have on children. A special education instructional change coach, for example, said of State and local decision makers, “I think there were some good intentioned people but the ignorance is, well …there’s no real awareness of who special education students are and what their needs are and what this is doing to them.” These misalignments, these examples of structural discrimination against special education students, are elements that interact with the teacher in the life space during the congress of teaching and learning. They cause stress through conflict with the teachers’ values of doing what is right for children. Participants report being aware of what children need, but being prevented or otherwise unable to meet the children’s needs because of the interaction with district practices and State mandates.

The curriculum itself, according to participants, is difficult for special education students. As has been discussed, nearly all participants call for a wider array of curriculum options for special education students; options like an expansion of vocational training and functional adaptive curriculum that would open additional success paths for students that are not college bound. Participants report that the college preparatory curriculum is presently considered as the “gold standard” within the district, but it is paced at a rate that is too fast for special education students to grasp and master, and it does not engage them to synthesize and apply their learning to the real world, their lives outside of school. A lead teacher for special education shared that the curriculum is out
of date. In her words, “I think it is what we think the kids need in the world, but it is
based on years ago ideas.” She added that:

Our kids are lacking creativity because everything in the school is structured for
them. You know when I was a kid, you used to go out there and create a game
and use your imagination and make up a game. There are some things that you
can’t learn in school. There are some things that you just have to make up; you
just use those skills that you just have, just innate skills that no one has to teach
us, and we stifle it.

Look at a typical kid three, four, or five [years old] and they can tell you
what they want to be when they grow up. By the time they get to fifth grade and
eighth grade, they don’t know what they want to be; we stifle it. We zap that
creativity away from them because we start telling them what they’re supposed to
do and how they’re supposed to do it, you know, we don’t’ allow them to solve
their problems anymore, we try to solve them for them.

Another participant, a middle school special education teacher, drew this out further by
sharing that before the curriculum became so structured, scripted, and paced, she had the
flexibility to engage the children, to present lessons that were hands on and creative. She
added that, “I think kids felt better about themselves doing those things.” She lamented
that she actually enjoyed her job much more when she had the professional autonomy to
create lessons that worked with her students. Another participant added that the delivery
of curriculum with strict adherence to performance standards and pacing doesn’t take into
consideration the impact on students that struggle academically. In his words:
They don’t think about the emotional toll that it takes on the student that goes in that class and can’t do what the other students are doing for that semester. Then if they find out that it’s not working, no harm -no fowl, we’ll just switch them to a special ed diploma. They would rather that you throw them in for college prep and then after a semester or a year you have to switch. They allow you to do that, but my point is that then you have a traumatized kid that has built up a year of unsuccessful high school; more likely to drop out, more likely to not try, and most of the teachers that worked with him could have told you that he couldn’t do it.

He goes on to add:

If there’s a gray area, I’m always for giving a gray area kid a chance, but if all the teachers are saying this is not going to work out, it used to be we could say that, but we’re in a system right now that is saying push toward regular ed diploma.

A high school special educator described how district curriculum mandates interact within her life space during the congress of teaching students that need more than what she can provide within the confines of the paced common core grade level curriculum standards:

These kids are being left out, sitting in the classroom. [The] stress that I experience is kids that are like 16 and 17 and can’t read. They came through from elementary school, to middle school, and they still can’t read. They can read their names, because they know their name, but anything other than that… So it’s frustrating and stressful to see a kid go through that. …[I may] want to try to teach them to read and teach them how to do things and its like, you can try to go back, … but …they need more help with daily living things, …how to survive.
Policies that the government makes for education, especially for special education, it’s [sic] not logical a lot of times. He’s 19 and I can’t necessarily slow down to teach him how to read, I’m supposed to be teaching him the standards, and he needs to be learning vocational [skills]. …[They] need to learn a skill and not sit in a classroom all day, and … that’s what they’re not getting.

A middle school special educator in a co-teaching model said that the curriculum is “preparing them to take the test; just to take the test and pass.” This is a source of stress for him and he goes on to say that children in special education will need the basic skills that education can offer, plus they will need to be able to get along with one another, they will need drive, determination, motivation, creativity, and greed to be successful in America. He added that neither the curriculum nor the tests are aligned with what these children will need to be successful in the world of work.

An elementary special education co-teacher added that he does not have authority to exercise the professional autonomy and judgment to meet the needs of students even if he can see them. He said, for example, “we have a new reading program that basically has a script and it limits your creativity to be able to teach to things that you know that those children need to be successful.” Another participant, a special education instructional change coach, candidly shared:

I feel it’s almost abusive to put a child in the curriculum and in coursework that they are so far behind. I equate it to as if I moved you to France right now and put you in a public school and… tell [you] to function at this level. …It’s just not fair to expect them to perform at that level and it’s also not fair to tell the teacher that you have to teach them the curriculum at this level.
She goes on to describe what this looks like in practice and the irony of how transparent this is to students:

…You put them in an algebra class where they’re doing polynomial equations and all these equations, and the kid has never been taught fractions. Well, why are you thinking he’s going to do a fraction with algebraic equations on the top and on the bottom when he can’t even grasp $\frac{1}{2}$ plus $\frac{1}{4}$?

This placement then becomes problematic for the child in the classroom as she points out:

…When you walk in class it’s full of variables on the top and on the bottom and we have a kid in there that I don’t even think could do $\frac{1}{4}$ plus $\frac{1}{2}$ and he says, he told us this today, he said this to me, “do you realize that I had two weapons charges in elementary school and they moved me from school to school, do you know how many math lessons I missed? And one of the weapons charges was for scissors, they just exaggerated, one was for a knife, I really did bring a knife to school.” Because for me, he’s acting up every day in math; really it’s funny to me because I’m not the teacher, but I forget what he said today but it was a phrase from a movie that he said out loud repetitively, like a parrot like, and yesterday [his teacher] said yeah, and yesterday it was a profane word, because he can’t do the work he disrupts the class. He wants to go back to learn last year.

I had a kid [say to me], “could you just, why don’t you go back and teach me, like seventh and eighth grade? And then I’ll do high school, even if I have to graduate later” [emphasis original].”

She shared that these kids want to learn. They’ve missed some opportunities because of challenges in their past, but they want to learn. She struggled with this for a moment and
then asked:

Why is it if a kid is not learning reading at the third grade level, because that’s when they’re supposed to be reading by, If they’re not reading at that level, why aren’t they being taught reading in the fourth, and fifth, and sixth, and seventh until they get it?

The answer to her question is painfully simple, teaching reading in the fourth, and fifth and sixth and seventh grades is not on the common core curriculum for those grades, and there is not flexibility or resources (human or material) to actually accomplish this.

Another special education instructional change coach described this with respect to the pressures on teachers to stay in line with expectations forced upon them:

I fear that teachers today deal with ongoing stress to always run their class according to a detailed, standardized formula that an observer can walk in and check off; to stay on the curriculum’s pace even when students aren’t ready.

The structural discrimination against special education students that these teachers describe to be woven within curriculum, service delivery model, and IEP development are not the end of it. They point out that it is also integrated into the standardized assessments that are used to evaluate special education student progress. On this regard, it is transformed from structural discrimination, say participants, to systematic abuse.

**Systematic abuse: the standardized assessment of special education students.**

Participants described the IEP as a legal document. They described how the intent of the document is corrupted. They described the purpose of goals to include the student’s present levels of functioning as a starting point complimented by a target performance after a period of time being provided with support and services. The IEP
meeting is, at a minimum, an annual meeting and from the second of these onward it includes a review of the student’s progress on each of the goals. The review of goals and in the IEP is personal, unique to the student, and reflective of the data kept all year long by the teacher that demonstrates the child’s personal movement toward mastery. If this is done well, with fidelity and integrity drawn from the deeply seeded values inherent within teacher callings and subsequent training, it provides an astoundingly specific description of individual student progress. This is, however, not the only measure of student progress for students. Participants pointed out that there is utility in looking beyond the individual to compare the child’s progress against that among other children. To accommodate this, students are evaluated with standardized assessments. These assessments can be, and often are painful for special education students, as participants point out, and the question becomes, at what point is enough, enough?

**District priorities leading to student evaluation.**

Participants reveal that keeping up with the pacing chart for the grade level standard on the common core curriculum has become more important than meeting the students’ needs. Three participants in a focus group all laughed when asked if the intensified focus on academic curriculum has resulted in improved student achievement scores among special education students. They said that achievement has not increased, but behavior problems have; there is “more acting out, because the kids can’t do it [the grade level work], so they act out.”

Another participant, a high school special education instructional change coach added that she did not believe that the increased focus on academic instruction yielded achievement gains among pupils. She said, “our instruction got better, the academic part
got better, got significantly better, although some of those teachers have left.” In response to being asked about whether or not the improved academic instruction resulted in increased student achievement, she said, “I don’t think so.” She reflected that the focus of the curriculum is not really aligned with what they need and the pace of delivery exceeds students’ ability to learn it. She added that it is hard to tell if their students improved academically because, “there was no measure to really measure the academic progress of the kids in the high school, at least among those that we’re interested in measuring that for.” She explained that many of their students are transient and the measurements of academic achievement only consider students that attain a status known as “FAY,” or full academic year. They have to be in attendance long enough to be counted. She said:

Our high mobility knocked a lot of kids out because they weren’t here for the amount of time that they needed to be here for the measures to count. …In high school, the real measure was …[the] end of course test, [and] the high school graduation test, which is in the 11th grade. We don’t usually keep that many 11th and 12th graders, especially those on a college prep diploma, and the transition kids [special education diploma kids] don’t count.

An elementary general education co-teacher summed it up by saying that there are gaps between the curriculum and what the children are needing, along with gaps in service models available within the district, all of which leave special education kids behind. Another elementary special education co-teacher explains that some of gaps occur because there is a lack of vertical alignment of the curriculum. He describes challenges with vertical alignment of the curriculum in his school:
We’ve had some discussions but I think that the thing is that it doesn’t happen often enough. Last year we started to get into vertical alignment where third grade teachers are talking to second grade teachers so those teachers know that these are the prerequisite skills that the kids need to come to us with, …so that they know the skill set that the students need to come to the next grade with.

He goes on to say that the students that come to him without the pre-requisite skills. They are starting the year out behind and he is expected to remediate them. The challenge, as he points out, is that in order to keep up with the pacing charts, he cannot take time out to remediate them, and his evaluation as a teacher is tied to how well his students do on the testing for the grade level common core curriculum standards. Hence, he is teaching students that are behind and do not have the skills to succeed on the grade level common core curriculum standards. He is required to teach the grade level standards in pace with a district mandated pacing chart, and he does not have time or resources to remediate the children so that they will have an adequate opportunity to learn the material. The children are evaluated through standardized assessments on their mastery of the grade level common core curriculum standards, and his evaluation as a teacher is tied to how well his students do on these tests, tests that he knows they are not academically ready to take.

**Standardized testing and the abuse of special education students.**

With respect to giving standardized tests to special education students, several participants point out that this is stressful for all involved, and imposes a large tax on instructional time and emotional energy. Nearly the entire month of October (around 15 out of 20 instructional days) was spent testing, according to participants, and in addition
students take benchmark tests every three weeks. “Children take the COGAT, the ITBS, the CRCT, the end of course tests, the high school graduation tests, and all those benchmark tests.” With respect to the benchmark tests, one participant pointed out that they are not aligned to the students IEP goals and objectives. Another participant, a general education co-teacher, pointed out that the benchmark assessments do not reflect student mastery of concepts, and the scores do not reflect the strength of student academic skills. She added that, “surprisingly, those that are the beta club students, the safety patrols, supposed to be the cream of the crop, …[they] didn’t achieve anything higher than those that are just getting by.” Another participant considered what it must be like for a special education student that is below grade level and forced to sit through district mandated benchmark tests. He was the testing coordinator for his school:

It’s a lot of work that is doing something that is not a value to our program or our students. We don’t get good results from testing and, in fact, the County’s policy now about doing benchmarks is making sure [of this]; you take a student that’s two-three grade levels behind and you give them a standardized test that’s over their grade level every three weeks. Well, you’re going to assure that they’re not going to try; they really don’t want to. We get some kids that probably do try, but … [for] half of our student population …we know they don’t try on the CRCT or the ITBS. The kids on regular diploma probably really do try on the end of course test, but …it’s frustrating. What bothered me was taking special ed students, special ed diploma students, and taking them and sitting them in and giving them the [State] high school graduation test, which is not going to keep them from graduating but they have to sit for it.
You know, or the most abusive is really the writing test because year after year you have students that cannot understand the prompt. So they can’t follow. At least on the other test you can bubble along, but it’s very embarrassing for most students to come in and we give them something and they [just] look at it…

…I remember a student raised his hand and said, “I don’t understand, I don’t know how to begin,” and I said, “well, I can’t help you.” Literally, “just remember the things you learned in class, like, well, take your time, try to do an outline, that’s what this page is for;” and he’s like, “you don’t understand; I have no idea what they’re asking.” I hope they get over it but you know that our system, in a way, abused that student that day.

He goes on to describe how another special education class comprised of students with low average intelligence scores that were preparing for the writing test. He said that the teachers really worked with them and made the classroom experience positive for them. They all showed progress on average of two or three grade levels of improvement before the test, but they were still significantly below their grade level. He adds that they worked hard and:

They had good grades, and they talked about how they were making better paragraphs and introductions and stuff, and they all walked in the writing test and they all tried real hard and they all felt really good about it and a month later they all got their results and they all failed. And they all said, *I WHAT* [emphasis original]? Because they’re not on grade level, and it’s really not realistic to expect them to be there and it’s really sad that part of the testing thing for our students is kind of unfair and it does hit hard.
He said that the students were shocked and hurt when they found out their scores. “They worked hard,” he said, and “they had seen improvement, they were feeling good about the progress they made, and they got slammed.”

Another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher explained that testing kids above their present levels of functioning, at their grade level, is setting them up to fail and causes stress for both the child and the educator. In her words:

I think when you say that a child can read or perform on a grade level that is so below where they are, but then you give them a test on the grade level, that produces stress for me. Because your seeing this child can’t, you have a legal document saying that this child can only perform on this level, and you are giving them something on THIS LEVEL [emphasis original], it seems like you are setting them up to fail, for failure.

She adds that tests, the State tests and the district benchmarks are too frequent and it is causing kids to have “test fatigue.” The children tell her, “We don’t want to take any more tests. We’re tired.” She adds, “and when we are testing these kids like that, are we really getting good data?” The testing, she says, is very stressful to the children because it disrupts the normal routines of the school, they can’t change classes and they are essentially held in one room all day. As she says it:

Because like even now with them not being able to move, …you try to give them something to work on, and they freak out: “Is this a test?” “No it’s not a test, this is just your daily work that you need to be doing.” And they are …freaking out, like I am tired of being tested. …Some kids …were just marking, and I don’t know if the kid really read that or they just want to be done.
Convergence: rejoice not in the iniquities of teacher evaluations.

All of the participants described testing students as a source of stress, but not just because of the stress it causes to children, it also causes stress to the educators. They pointed out that student test scores are used to evaluate teachers. This is a significant source of anxiety for them. They described wide variation in children’s’ abilities and circumstances that make this type of evaluation unfair. In addition, there is discourse regarding linking teacher pay to student achievement scores. One participant, a special education self-contained teacher that works with children who are below grade level and have severe emotional and behavioral problems shared that, “Every year there are more things that we have to take care of and have in place to prove to people that we’re doing our jobs.” She goes on to articulate her concerns about how the evaluation process and possibility of pay for performance will impact the field of education:

The goal of all this is to improve test scores and they’re going to pay us on student achievement eventually, that’s what they say. I don’t see that ever happening, but if they do, who is going to teach at an inner city school? If your pay and ability to do well in your profession is based on that standardized test, who’s going to voluntarily teach in places like this except us poor dupes? I know there are schools where the parents are involved, the kids are well fed, and they do better than an inner city setting where there’s one parent, if there is a parent [emphasis original], [or] where the parent has to work all the time. How can you say that the norm here is the same as the norm there?

She referenced that the manner in which student test scores are used to evaluate teacher effectiveness involves a comparison of student gains in one teachers class against student
gains made in other teachers’ classrooms. She made salient that this disadvantages teachers that work with needy students because it does not account for uncontrolled variables that influence student abilities or distract from their learning. She recalled a meeting that she was in with district leadership where this topic came up:

I remember one meeting and they were talking about the last curriculum standards when they were new, and they talked about how everybody would be tested on this, and I said well, “when you get a kid that reads on a second grade level, how can you…?” And she said, “well you have to catch him up dear.” Okay so it’s taken him eight years to get to the second grade reading level and in one year I’m supposed to catch him up the other six? That’s crazy talk!

An elementary special education co-teacher took this a step further and described that with the way the evaluation system is set up, teachers may have to focus energies on the children that will make the greatest gains. In his words:

For your heart, it is very disparaging. …Going forward to this pay for performance model is really going to put pressure on teachers to focus on the students that …make the greatest gains; the students that they think that they are actually going to be able to move forward. …If they [district leaders] don’t see the gains, then … [the teacher’s] pay suffers.

He is described a circumstance forced upon teachers that, for their own survival, they may be positioned to select which students enhance the likelihood of a contract renewal or step increases to pay. This is a structure that, if executed, will leave some students behind. I do not know a single teacher that does the work for charity, but if the pay for performance model is put into play, the teachers who elect to work with very needy
children will be doing just that. He added, “you know, no one really gets into this field because of the pay, but we all have to maintain our way of living… [These are] definitely some difficult decisions.” Another participant simply stated, “I don’t think it’s fair; I don’t think it’s fair to use the child to evaluate me.” She goes on to say that the child’s performance depends on many elements that are out of her control, such as the value placed on education in the home, or whether or not the child is interested in what she is teaching:

You can give a child something education wise, but if they don’t want to accept it or if they don’t try to get it… Why is that a reflection of me? What’s happening at home to reinforce what I’m giving to them?

In addition to using student test scores to evaluate teachers, there are other elements of the evaluation process that also cause stress to the teachers. For example, what administrators look for when they observe and the priorities regarding what they expect of teachers is often disconnected with the complexities of special education teaching practice. A middle school special education teacher, for example, pointed out that administrators in her building look at the how the teacher is keeping up with the pacing chart, and they look at:

…Lesson plans, and make sure whatever you are doing is at least shown on that week, that what your doing is on your lesson plan, and it relates to your instruction, and that you can find the ways to do assessments, that’s all they’re concerned about.

Another participant pointed out that the administrators require them to spend time engaging in practices that have little or no value to the students or the practice of
education, as she describes it:

I was observed on the third day of school. I didn’t even know what I was teaching yet, the subjects. They gave a list of things that we were supposed to teach, no subjects were taught, just the rules and regulations. You see I have my standards on the board, my three-part lesson plan. I have to have it up or I’ll get written up. The kids don’t give a care about it. I understand it gives me direction about what I need to be teaching them, but the fact that a kid knows?

“The kids can’t even read the board with the standards, but then you have to have your three part lesson plan [on the board],” said another teacher. She goes on to say:

The first thing they look at is the teacher, they don’t look at the kid and their problems and this kid isn’t on medication, his mom is in jail, they don’t look at those factors, they say they do, they’ll look at, okay this kid is this, this kid is that, but they always come right back at the teacher or the para professional in the room and say, “you’re doing this, and you’re doing that wrong, you need to do this or you need to do that.” But all they’re saying is that you need to give them more work, more structure, because structure isn’t everything [emphasis original].

When you have a kid that didn’t take their medicine, structure means nothing to them. …That kid might work after they realize okay, she really understands, she cares about my feelings. It’s not the structure; it’s the relationship [emphasis original]! A kid will work for you if you have a good relationship with them.

Another teacher added that the administrators tell her she’s got to make her lessons engaging. To this, she replies, “you can make it the most engaging thing, you can stand
on your head and do a cartwheel across the room but if they’re not on their meds, it
doesn’t matter.” A special education instructional change coach shared that the
instrument used to evaluate teachers uses a standardized formula to check that teachers
are performing on a set of rigid criteria. He references a scene from the movie Dead
Poets Society where a teacher has the students walking outside behind him while he’s
ripping up a book and throwing the pages into the wind. The students in the movie are
thoroughly captivated with what the teacher is saying and doing, “their minds are on
fire,” he said, and yet he pointed out:

The sad thing is, in our current system, that would be a failing PDP [Professional
Development Plan] sort of teacher; doesn’t matter that the kids are engaged and
thinking. People could tear him apart because he doesn’t have a word wall, he
doesn’t have the standard on the wall, and he didn’t do an introduction.

A middle school self-contained special educator shared that:

They would come in to observe, and I would be observed while I was teaching
and being pelted with stuff. …They would come in and make sure that I had my
standards on the board. And that didn’t stop them [students] from doing it, so I’m
being observed while I’m being pelted with stuff while I said, Oh look, this is the
standard, this is the essential question, this is the work we’re going to work on,
this is my word wall, this is my student work up on the wall, so that I can meet all
those things that they are watching me for and all the time, chaos is raining.

Another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher, added that the
administrators are quick to mark a teacher down for not meeting some “nit picky” item
on their checklist, but they rarely recognize the teachers’ efforts to stay late and help with
extra things for the school. A high school special education teacher in a self-contained model explained that he experiences a lot of stress from doing all the paperwork and other stuff to make the administrators’ job of evaluating him easier. He said:

There’s that stress of just doing classroom management stuff, and then there’s the stress of the paperwork and all the stuff you have to do to, you know, to cover yourself, and have all your stuff organized so that if people walk in they can see at a glance what you’re doing.

That’s hard [laughs] because you may be doing something that’s way off but you have to, if someone comes in, …be covered so that at a glance they can get a good assessment of what’s going on. You have to have your three-part lesson plan on the board so that when somebody walks in they …know …your intention, and if somebody is asleep, you have to be able to say that we tried to wake so and so. …You have to be able to cover yourself. That can be stressful because you may have gone through two or three hours of rough classes and you’re already kind of tired and somebody walks in for an observation and you gotta, [snaps his fingers] …make it look good. …Not that your not doing what you’re supposed to be doing, it’s just that you have to make sure that it is easily identifiable when somebody walks in.

An elementary special education co-teacher stated that administrators use the teacher evaluation process to “throw you under the bus.” An elementary special education resource teacher took this a step further and shared that administrators use the evaluation process to punish or consequent teachers rather than as a tool to nurture growth and improvement. As she described:
It’s like okay, you [the administrator] see a teacher that needs help, …or needs to improve in something. …Instead of saying okay, “I understand, probably you might need help in classroom management. Let me assign you a mentor or another teacher to help you with classroom management and you guys can sit down and work on some strategies how you can do it,” it’s like it’s an “I got you!” …To me, it’s like they’re always looking for weaknesses in people to say, “I got you!”

A big part of the problem, according to participants, is that the stakes involved with teacher evaluations are high, and what the administrators are checking on their forms, or what the State has mandated, may not align with what the teacher sees as important for his or her students to grow and be successful in the world. The IEPs might not be properly aligned with students’ present levels of functioning or needs. The curriculum might not be addressing students’ needs. The students may not be performing at their best on student assessments. The student assessments might not be capturing individual student growth on academic or IEP goals.

All of these factors, these elements in the environment that participants illuminated, have been decided upon, put into practice, and have whittled away at the concept and practice of individualized instruction for their special education students. Within the life-space of participants, the interaction with these elements produces stress, anxiety, and frustration. It emerges as a conflict that exists in the interaction between what they know their students’ need, and what they are allowed to, or mandated to, provide. One participant pointed out that if the teacher or the students don’t perform well
on what administration sees as important, the teacher may lose his or her job, “if you don’t have …a satisfactory, …you may or may not get a renewal of contract, which means you could lose your job. This is stressing me out just talking about it.” The sad reality for these teachers is that the tools used to measure them are unfair because they really do not measure the teacher’s effectiveness. The tools used to measure them are operated as tools to punish and consequent them, rather than to identify needs among students and teachers that should provoke greater resourcing and support. They are tools that fashion utility to blame the teacher for all other elements and decisions that weigh in on student success.

**Erudite of bipolar demand, binds, and abuse: the agony of teaching.**

“The evil that is in the world almost always comes from ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding.” –Albert Camus

The participants of this study describe being asked to do the impossible: asked to comply with policies and practices that they feel harm children; asked to violate the moral underpinnings of their oath and callings; asked to remain silent while they bear witness to the discrimination and abuse of their students at the hands of their leaders; and then told that they are bad because they didn’t measure up on their evaluations, their students didn’t magically overcome the oppressive forces imposed on them to score well on standardized tests; is this not abuse of these professionals? The cards that these teachers are forced to play are, in my view, from a deck that is stacked against them. They have erudite helplessness gained through chronic and repeated exposure to the repellant messages within demands made by the field combined with censorship and consequence.
The policies and practices that govern education were, as participants generously suggest, quite possibly born of good intentions, but they are no different than an orchard that bears no fruit; snags of barren wood that litter the landscape and waste nutrients from the soil. I have seen the decaying pocks of this on the farm in my youth, in the halls of my schools, and it is what participants describe as the decisions that are made at a distance to establish policies and practices without consideration of the students; policies and practices that once executed, assault participants’ students with structural discrimination; policies and practices that stifle creativity and circumvent authentic learning; policies and practices that misguide teachers and harm students. These are elements that participant site as sources of stress related to the programming for students. They are elements at odds with what participants view as the point of special education; individualized education structured and delivered to help children with their specific challenges. These elements, as participants described them, whittle away at individualized education, they dilute it, devalue it, and systematically undermine its intent through repellant mandates and administrative rule. They are ill-conceived elements that are engaged within the local schoolhouse to define what is taught and the circumstances of how it is taught, and then students are evaluated on what they learned within these conditions, which, among other things, is then used to evaluate how effective the teacher was at teaching it.

This infertile garden of well intentioned bad ideas promulgate policies that are the burial yard for special education students’ life success, and their teachers’ careers. These well-intentioned bad ideas form the foundation from which student learning is assessed and teachers are evaluated; it is a foundation of sand along the ocean’s edge. The
participants reveal feelings of being at the mercy of demagogue decision makers who, invested in promoting their own “well intentioned” ideas, have no idea of the realities that they inflict on others. Again, as participants pointed out, they have no voice or advocate for challenging these grim reapers. The messiah to chaperone participants’ callings on this regard, has not yet arrived; Don Quixote is still resting beside the windmill. They are reminded from these circumstances of their aloneness, isolation, helplessness, and powerlessness. This is not, however, as much about them as it is about their students. The stress they feel regarding these policies and practices that structurally discriminate against their students is felt strongest related to the ugly impact it has on the students. The students, after all, are these participants’ first priority.

**Erosion of Educator Resolve: Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

The sources of educator stress that were identified by participants were discussed in the preceding three themes. They explored the stories of stress from repeated exposure to circumstances and conditions that participants felt did not help their students, along with censorship, powerlessness, and situational helplessness. They explored stressful interaction with systemic policies or practices that some deemed abusive and others said systematically discriminated against special education students.

Erosion of educator resolve: stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout is the last of the 4 emergent themes related to educator stress. This explores the story of how the sources of stress, the environmental elements, influence the educator within the life space over time, and result in response behaviors to cope with their experience of stress. Response behaviors consist of thoughts, feelings, or directed actions to accommodate the demands of the stress. Some response behaviors are positive and support a healthy
emotional accommodation of the demands, while others are negative and align with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. The response behaviors that align with compassion fatigue and burnout are what are described within this theme.

**Sowing Seeds of Stress, Growing Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout.**

In human terms relevant to my participants, compassion fatigue and burnout are the processes involved when educators’ resolve to help students is worn down and their hearts are broken. A good example rests within a conversation during a focus group between two high school self-contained special educators, a male and a female. They describe the burden of having so many competing demands that they are forced to make uncomfortable decisions that “bargain” with their sense of efficacy and calling. The weight of these decisions is tremendous because they have to decide which students they can actually help and which they cannot. The nature of having to make this kind of decision is dissonant with why they became educators, that calling to help young people to have good lives, and it erodes their sense of resolve to help each child. The conversation is as follows:

She gasps for air in response to a question of what it does to her heart when she has to make these decisions, and then tearfully she said, “We’ve let that child down… That’s probably the biggest stress; knowing that I personally am letting these children down.” She described one of her students, “he is a really bright kid; anything he hears or sees, he remembers. He can’t read. There’s something going on up here [points to her head].” He added, “he’s not retarded, he’s very intelligent. But the thing about it is, …it makes you sad and angry…” She interrupted him to emphasize, “angry.” He continued and added:
Because you get a student and you think that, well, *it’s all up to me* [emphasis original]! [Nervously Laughs] Well I know that seems unreasonable, but like during your language arts class …you think that it’s up to me. …They need to make some progress, not just because you’re going to be evaluated, but it’s kind of like I need to move them in some kind of direction somehow.

She responded, “and some times the things that you feel like you need to do to help them will hurt you on your evaluation.” He agrees and continued, adding:

Right you can’t do that and so you feel stymied by that in some ways. But then after a while, after a couple of years, you think, *well I can’t save everybody* [emphasis original]. Well I can’t save everybody, throwing my hands up [gestures with his hands]. So you get to the point that you think, well I can’t focus all of my energy into that one student that can’t read because I’ve got seven more people that need just as much, so maybe I can do something for them.

He interjected, “it’s almost like you have to make these bargains with yourself. Like, okay, he’s just going to have to sit over there and do stuff. …I know he can’t read.”

Slowing her cadence, she responded in a quiet emotion-filled voice, “We have to decide who is dispensable. …[She pauses]… I hate think of these kids as dispensable; I’m sorry.” To this he responded:

Right, but that’s the bureaucracy of it. That’s the bureaucracy, and so we’ll go [to administrators], like we both have and said, well we’ve got him over here and …he doesn’t know his ABC’s, what am I going to do? And …they handed me a little book that looks like a Dick and Jane novel. I thought: …I can’t give that to him. That would be a violation of his trust. That would be horrible.
So you have him in there and you know that he can’t read and so you have to try, the only thing you can do, is try to preserve his self-esteem and preserve his place in the group while your trying to get someone else moving, and you know you’re not going to give him what he needs but you’ve got seven others that need stuff too, …and you still feel guilty. It makes you feel guilty, like you should be able to teach this kid how to read. I’ve never been taught how to teach kids how to read. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know why they don’t have an adult literacy program. What do we do?

She interjected that this student, “he has been with us since seventh grade, I am a reading specialist, I said let’s do something,” and then goes on to point out the resistance and challenges she faced with trying to help this child:

Well, to schedule something …we can’t use this, we can’t do that. Then we get these special reading programs, like Read 180, it’s a really great program but you have to be on second grade level.

She interjected, “guess what, we have lots of children that are not that far along,” and then continued:

So they’ve given… him the reading lab for a while. They move us around where we can’t build it. Now I have basic reading and that child is in my class and what I need to do is set up the lab and guess what, the main disk is gone… It’s $250 and we can’t afford to replace it. So it’s just, do what you want. Don’t have the materials that I need. Can’t afford the materials that I need. Told to do what I want, and they haven’t given me enough time to go in there and set things up. I’m coming in on weekends and I’m still not having enough time.
She said, “adult literacy is different and that is what we need.” He agreed and added:

That’s what we need, and you kind of have to bargain like that, and that is hard!

You have to carry that guilt. When I see [that student] in the hallway, I can’t help but feel like I’ve let him down, that I’m a part of the school that has let him down.

They described caring about this child, wanting to help him, but not being able to, and this agitates their emotions with feelings of guilt. They described circumstances in the school that rendered their desires to help this child mute. They described bargaining with themselves to cope with their inability to help this child, cognitive bargains that do not resolve their emotional guilt. They described empathy and regard for the child that induces them to want to help, but it is in conflict with competing environmental demands, available resources, and time.

Throughout their description of the interaction with this child and the circumstances that impact all of them, their empathy and compassion for the child remains solvent but the conditions, as they described, erode their resolve and efficacy to help him. They describe situational helplessness related to this child over a period of years for which they cope by bargaining that maybe they can at least help the other students. When they see this child’s face in the hallway, however, they’re reminded that they have been a part of something that has failed him. The dissonance and guilt that this produces does not go away; it is, as several participants shared regarding similar situations, “heartbreaking.” Their conversation captures the essence of how all participants described the conflicts with elements in the environment that hurt their hearts, sow the seeds of stress.
The Garden of Worn Resolve.

“When health is absent, wisdom cannot reveal itself, art cannot manifest, strength cannot fight, wealth becomes useless, and intelligence cannot be applied.” --Herophilus

The tremendous stressors felt among all participants are what wear on their resolve, their emotional resources, and empathy to help each child. Among the participants, several described interactions with stressful elements within the environment situated within the congress of teaching that resulted in coping behaviors aligned with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. They described cognitive symptoms such as having difficulty turning their thoughts away from stressors related students and work once at home. They described emotional exhaustion and somatic problems. They described how stress entered into personal relationships, and relationships with students to cause distancing and negativity. They also described how stress interacted with work performance. Some of their observations were of other colleagues and others were of themselves. All of the participants that described seeing or engaging in coping behaviors consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue or burnout; they described them in response to situated stressors that interacted within the roles of educating.

With respect to specific response behaviors that align with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout, participants revealed that collectively they have experienced: insomnia, waking up at night worried about the children, physiological problems like high blood pressure or diabetes, feeling overwhelmed, headaches, fatigue, and physical illness from the stress. One teacher reported that she became mentally and emotionally withdrawn. Other teachers reported that they have observed their colleagues taking their stress out on the children, becoming detached, losing their empathy for the
kids, and losing their passion for the field.

A principal reflected that, “educator stress causes burnout.” To this she added that when her teachers are stressed or burned out, they are not at their best and, “you can’t have student achievement when that’s the case, …it’s a cycle.” A middle school special education co-teacher shared that, “once an educator shuts down, I don’t think that the child is getting what they could be getting.” A counselor observed that teachers sometimes become so frustrated that, “their stress controls them, and then they cannot connect effectively with students.” A middle school special education co-teacher shared that when teachers get stressed, “they stop coming to work, they take their sick days, you know, they take FMLA [Family Medical Leave Act]… and then the kids are losing out.”

An instructional change coach shared that emotionally unhealthy teachers are not able to balance their stress:

The emotionally unhealthy teacher is not able to maintain this balance. She either overworks and eventually burns out, or does just enough to get by. She either can’t let go of her concerns for students when she needs to, or avoids any emotional connections.

An elementary special education resource teacher shared that she has personally experienced the impact of stress from paperwork demands on the work done with children. She said, “if you are asking me for all this paperwork on a daily basis, how much time is left for me to teach? I can’t! So sometimes you find yourself not giving the kids your all.” Another participant described her experience with compassion fatigue and burnout while teaching in an alternative education setting:
The students ranged in ages from 12 to 19, and most had no intent to gain a valuable education. They were there because the judicial system said they had to be. Parents were frustrated, staff was extremely stressed, and students were not involved. Each day was focused on discipline and making sure students remained at school for the required hours for funding; and not to teach children. I felt overwhelmed each and every day, and often had severe headaches, fatigue, and lack of interest in my own personal life. As a result of the stress, I became…mentally and emotionally withdrawn, …[and] physically sick. I had no desire to continue educating children and resigned from my position.

The feelings that she described of being overwhelmed, the headaches, the fatigue, the lack of interest in relationships, the mental and emotional withdrawal, and the physical illness from stress, are all consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. The stressors involved in this job ultimately eroded her resolve to teach the children, to the point that she resigned.

A special education teacher in a self-contained model shared that she has compassion fatigue. She drew this out by sharing how her stress interacts within her, and in her relationships with students:

I wake up at night with it. I find myself being short with kids. I’m being judged for [their] bad behavior. Because I have to fight so hard, I find I have less patience. I also think about what its doing to my health and its no longer balanced. I’m desperate to get out of it but there is a part of me that says gosh I really hate the idea of leaving it. I also have a fear of what’s out there when I leave.
Another participant, a high school self-contained special education teacher, stated that he has never questioned his decision to become a teacher, but the stress and impact on his health is causing him to be uncertain if he will last:

I have never questioned it. I have questioned my viability, because I’m fading now. I haven’t been well. Man when I started in October I had to actually leave, man my blood pressure was like, 159 over something. The doctor had to give me medicine. Man I was taking medicine for a little while; I was stressed out! I had to slow down, because… I’m up in the morning, you know, I’m typing and I’m thinking, and I’m looking up videos to go with, you know… to coincide with the… the content.

Stress, as Seyle (1974) points out in his pioneering research spanning over 40 years, can have physiological impacts on the health of individuals. In line with Seyle’s research, Morrissette (2004) lists somatic problems associated with stress, such as those that this participant describes, as symptoms of compassion fatigue.

A special education co-teacher talked about how difficult it is to turn his concerns for students and teaching off when he goes home:

Finding a balance [laughs] is a balancing act. Whether you want to or not you take it home and your mind replays the events of the day. It takes a while, for many of us it may take a couple of hours, to finally come down when your home, to come down mentally. You’ll find yourself even waking up from your sleep with ideas for instruction or ways that you can help that problem student out, or trying to figure out what were they going through, what were they dealing with at home right now.
In the literature regarding compassion fatigue, Morrissette (2004) identifies insomnia, waking at night with worry, intrusive thoughts, and cognitive preoccupation with distressing client-related material as symptoms.

Another teacher described the toll that stress has on him mentally, emotionally, and physically in response to a question about the impact of stress on him:

Fatigue, I mean just fatigue. By the end of the day I’m just so tired that I just don’t have a lot to give. I mean I do enjoy the time in my car that I can just listen to the radio, that’s good. But it’s like when I’m here and somebody tells me something that I have to do... my first thought might be curse words. That can be kind of stressful. It’s just the fatigue and the low lack of energy, not having a lot of energy to give to people at home because you’re tired. You know we talk all day. You know all day I’m running my mouth to these kids and trying to be reasonable and fair and when you get home, I might not want to be reasonable and fair. I might like it my way. Sometimes I just don’t want to talk when I get home.

He reflects back to when he was a novice teacher and described how his coping has evolved over time:

When I first worked here and I would go home and I would tell these people all these stories from here. You know, it was fun to see their reaction, because it would make you feel so powerful because you could handle it and it would make you feel so great. Then after a while I realized that I don’t want to tell all these stories, I just want to leave it there. So now I rarely tell any stories about work. I leave it here. I just drive off and leave it here. It will still be here. I’ve found that
if I carry it with me on any level, it would just mess me up.

He added that these ways of coping evolved over time for him as he became more accustomed to the seasons of the school year, the annual process of making it from day one to the end. Of this, he said:

I have to just compartmentalize that way. You know, leave it here and then I would go out and do other stuff … because you’re trying to make it to the end of the year, not just to the end of the day.

This teacher identified negative thoughts, emotional distancing, and fatigue as the toll from the intensity of stress in his work with students. All of these response behaviors are consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue.

An elementary resource teacher described health problems that she is dealing with that she attributed to her stress:

I can’t sleep because of stress. Stress has caused me to have diabetes. I have high blood pressure! *High blood pressure* [emphasis original]! I have to take medication every day. Sometimes the workload is so much, it’s like, what else do I need to do? But at the end of the day, I can’t throw my hands up because I have a responsibility… I have to do this to educate these children.

She added that she takes her responsibilities very seriously, they are, as she pointed out, a part of her oath to the State Professional Standards Commission, “This is something that I have to do, because it’s my job and I take it seriously. So I can’t, I can’t throw my hands up and say I don’t know what else to do.”

A high school special education teacher in a self-contained model described seeing one of her friends, a colleague, become emotionally distressed. She described a
mismatch between what the teacher needed from her interactions with students and what the students could actually give back to her. In this description, the teacher’s response is severe and demonstrates a pervasive impact to stress related to her compassion, her warmth and love, for the kids:

We had a co-worker that I’ve become friends with... She would go home and get on the couch and she would just cry and she would go into depression because she needed the kids to give her something, respond to her in some way, and we know that we can’t count on it. …She was very giving to our kids and she expected warmth and loving back. …Our kids can’t do that and so it just ate her completely up and she would go home and get on the couch and cry and get in depressions and she wouldn’t come to work.

Accommodating the stress that is related to the education profession can, as these participants pointed out, be very challenging. It draws out bargains between values and beliefs central to callings, and the realities in the field that are painful. These teachers demonstrate through their narratives that balancing stress is important for their longevity in the field. While they describe using coping behaviors that align with symptoms of compassion fatigue outlined in the literature, this does not mean that they are burned out or compassion fatigued. The balance of stress is key to whether or not the roots of compassion fatigue and burnout find soil from which to grow, become molar, come to represent the gestalt of what it means to be a teacher. In addition to this, the utility or outcomes of coping strategies as adaptive or maladaptive are not universal; they are a function of the person and situation (Lazarus, 1993). For these participants, the stress and related coping strategies are part of a bigger picture.
Germinating Prickly Thorns, the Sour Blossoms of Stress.

All of the participants in this study describe empathic engagement with their students. The care and regard that they have for students is allied to their calling to become educators, to help children to have better lives. Each of the educators in this study described ongoing chronic exposure to situated environmental stressors over which they have little control. As Robinson (2006) points out, the fact that these teachers care so deeply for their students while being presented with such difficult and stressful circumstances puts them at risk of emotional injury. Some teachers are able to accommodate this within the calculus of their life space. Others find that the compounding of stress over time causes them to consider leaving the field.

A principal, for example, who during the previous year had a heart attack, described the extreme intensity of demands on her, and how the cumulative build up of stress from these demands are causing her to consider leaving:

Maybe it’s because of my position, but I don’t think I ever disengage. The stress of the job, and the impact it’s had on my health and my family, has caused me to question what my priorities should be at this point in my life. Because I have sacrificed so much, and I feel like now I’m at a point where there is not a lot that keeps me here. That’s why I have to retire. I’m serious.

I drive home… eat a quick dinner; I work more until I go to bed. I do that every night and I do it on Sundays. It’s very hard to disengage because I get nothing done during the school day that relates to my job as a principal. You know, today I haven’t checked my email, today [she points at the mess of papers on her desk] this is my desk, it looks good today; junk everywhere.
I have to sort and sift, and I can’t even get to the computer. I have to hire, I have three positions; I haven’t even started looking. I can’t even get home at a decent hour and even spend a little bit of time with my family… My position its continual triage and you’re always hit with more than one thing at a time so, it’s multitasking of a huge type, truly. …I’ll be talking with somebody and I’ll respond [she points to the two-way radio] and they’ll say, you heard that? And I’ll say yeah.

She describes how she might look to an outsider as having pathology but within the context of her roles and responsibilities, it is adaptive for her:

[The director] used to say that I was ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disordered], but I think it’s by necessity because there is so much that I have to focus on… Part of it too is that the kids do a lot and I want to support the staff, and that, to me, means …I really have to …be on top of my game at every moment.

She said, for example, “if I hear somebody calling five times and nobody responds, or even twice and nobody responds, then I’m responding because the staff need to know that they have that support too.” She attends to the building with a cat-like readiness to jump in and help with whatever her students or teachers might need; her work and personal cell phones, two-way radio always nearby and intermittently beeping, buzzing, and blatting out calls for help.

An assistant principal also shared that she considered leaving her role because of the stress. She said that, “the stressors compound with the years. The first year of course was very stressful just because I did a lot [emphasis original]… as the new A.P.” She
was at a school that did not make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and it was under the leadership of a new principal that was a novice leader. She said, “I did the testing, I did the scheduling, I did the grade levels, I did…discipline… and I’m thinking, oh my God I’m going to freak out!” She added that they were, “pulling me and pulling me and pulling me, that was very, very stressful.” She had to confront the rest of the administrative team and tell them that she could not take on all of those responsibilities by herself; the load would have to be balanced with the other two assistant principals. She shared, “so I expressed that and I said if we cannot divide it up, you need to tell me now because I will not sign the contract, and I will go on.”

Another participant shared that she loves the kids and her work with them but the cumulative stress from so many changes, and so many problems, in the processes of educating children have eroded her resolve. She has an awareness of the problems but because of the intensity of demands placed on her, she does not have the time to talk about or address them. She said:

I do think this was the year for me to retire, like I should have been retiring now. This was the time to retire because there’ve been so many changes; I don’t like them. I see problems and I don’t have the time to talk about them.

Another participant shared that during the last year of their former principal, he was overloaded and spread so thin that he thought he could not take it anymore; he started to look for a way out. This was not an easy decision to come to for him because he has spent nearly his entire career working with this school. In that amount of time, 20 years or more, the staff become like a surrogate family and the attachments with children
run deep. The children he works with in that school have severe emotional and behavioral challenges and he has played pivotal, integral roles in their learning, growth, development, healing, and transition into life. The intensity of needs among the children at his school heightens the sweetness, reward, and satisfaction of seeing them succeed, of being a part of something that is helpful. He came to this calling, became an educator, after studying theology in seminary and his values of service are woven deeply within his dedication and the regard he has for children and his work. He said:

I was actually going to leave here. I mean I’m still stretched but there was one year, I mean the last year of [our former principal], and that was the year… I went on and took my [test] to be certified to be an inclusion teacher and I …was looking for that role.

He said that he went so far as to put his application in at another school but the school he applied to was in transition from one principal to another and there was a delay in responding to his application. In the meantime, the principal that he was having difficulty with was demoted and moved to another school. He added:

By the time they responded, I withdrew my application because our new principal came in, but if I would have had a response back earlier, and had gotten it, I would have gone.

He added that the incoming principal was someone whom he knew well and had worked with, and it was because of her personality that he stayed. More than just her personality, he knew where she stood with respect to her values and beliefs about children. He knew that her values produced within her a drive to do good things, to nurture staff so that they could nurture students. For him, the stress was from the leadership, he said, “the kids’
stressors in and of themselves don’t hardly every push me over the edge.”

Another participant, a special education self-contained teacher, shared that her previous class was so aggressive and so challenging that she felt herself becoming burnt out over the course of the last year. She said, “last year I was done. …I was done because…they… self-contained me with these sixth graders. They were a very aggressive group, verbally and physically.” She said that she was going to leave because she could not take the intensity of stress with that group, but her principal offered her a chance to work with older students. She stayed and described the current cohort of older students as, “a wonderful blessing.” A middle school special education co-teacher joked that if a bus came by their school to pick up all the teachers that were stressed and wanted out, “there would be a line.”

**Perspective Hidden Amidst Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout.**

The waves that God keeps sending, lapping against the shore, they change us, the can erode our resolve, but never without reminders of the beauty in the meeting of ocean and horizon. The sea of needs and stressors also swims with joy. “Every year,” said another participant, every year she thinks about leaving, “yes every year! Every year, and then I think about kids and I’m like dog, they need me; I gotta come back.” She goes on to say that even, “the kids keep asking, why do you keep coming back here each year? You know it’s not the money; it’s about them. I just feel like if everybody left, who would be here for them?” A para professional that has been physically injured so many times by students that her back is in constant pain and she walks with a stiff oddity to her gait, shared the same sentiment, “it’s the kids, they’re the reason I come back each year.”

A middle school special education co-teacher shared that the reason he stays is,
“definitely not the money. It’s the love that I have for trying to teach the students, you know, but I will say that I’m quickly losing it. I always say the point that I retire is when students do not respond.” He continued and described how teaching has changed, and how this is making it harder to connect with the students. He said that there is, “a certain mindset about teaching kids with challenges” that is endorsed by leaders and is at odds with his training and beliefs. He added:

It’s starting to shape my attitude in a different way. It comes from the responsibilities of teaching now. I cannot go out the box as much as I used to. They really don’t allow us to go out the boxes much now; my creativeness would have to come within the parameters of the curriculum, you know what I mean? It hampers it sometimes. The one thing that keeps it going is that the kids still want to come in and be around me. No matter what I say to them, no matter how I push them away, and I’ve had kids that say you’re, you’re just different… It’s like you care more. I care more? I kind of remind them what we did yesterday and what I said to them. But evidently what I’m saying to them, I guess it’s not phasing them the way I think it is, you know, it’s not “I hate you” or something like that. At times kids will say that and then the next day they’ll come back and they’re right up under me; they really don’t hate me.

The results here reveal the presence of behaviors among participants that are consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. Collectively, they report a wide array of the characteristics of these phenomena. The participants reveal these behaviors within the context of a broader picture, a bigger story. All of the participants of this study described situated stressors that interact with their roles and activities as
professional educators. The response behaviors they describe align with compassion fatigue and burnout, but their utility is for coping. Several even identified as being or having been burnt out and/or compassion fatigued. Many described approaching the point of leaving the field because of the toll stress took on their emotional and physical health.

The results here also show that nearly all participants shared within their narratives that there were other elements; other situated elements within the congress of teaching and learning that operated within the life space to draw them back. The results reveal that their resolve and sense of efficacy may erode, but something occurs in the life space through the interaction of time and other elements to mediate the phenomena of compassion fatigue and burnout from claiming a molar stake to the educators’ emotional wellbeing. Those other elements have to do with their students and the love they have for them.

**Keeping Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout Situated and Molecular**

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity. –Pema Chodron

The previous themes explored the reasons participants became educators, stressors that they experience within the field, and how those stressors impact their wellbeing and the process of teaching. The results presented in these previous themes identify the presence of response behaviors consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. With few exceptions, the presence of these symptoms did not exact
a molar stake on the educators’ wellbeing. Within the narratives that educators shared to
describe their stress, the emotional toll of their stress, and the impact it had on
relationships and the teaching and learning process, there was an underlying story that ran
concurrently with these themes. It is a story of connected elements that mediate stressors.
This concurrent story is key to understanding what prevents the phenomena of stress,
compassion fatigue, and burnout from decimating educator resolve and engagement.

The theme of keeping stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout situated and
molecular explores these mediating elements within the context of relationships. This
theme explores how the power of the call to service, as described by participants, can
reach forward through time to mediate stress in present circumstances. This theme
explores how love, regard, care, concern, empathy, and engagement with students all
coalesce with faith, hope, and beliefs that things will get better. It is a theme that
explores how these hopeful positive elements from the past and future engage with the
present inside the life space of educators to mediate current stressful circumstances with
emotional strength grown from the deep roots of humanizing values; roots deeper and
stronger than those of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. It is a theme that explores
the self-sacrifice that is possible when a broader sense of purpose, a broader context, can
be erected that grants leave to the strength of influence among stress, compassion fatigue,
and burnout by making them small, or molecular in contrast. It is a theme that explores
behaviors that support wellbeing.

Belonging to Humanity, Love.

Participants all indicated that they were called to the field for the children, to
teach the children, to help the children unlock access to better lives. It is the children that
they love and the children are the reason that they, like Don Quixote, battle on despite the challenges. Their work with children is firmly planted within those deeply rooted human values of caring for others. The relationships they have with children are characterized by bi-directional influences; the teachers influence the children’s growth and learning and, in return, the response of the children reinforces the teachers. For example, an elementary special education resource teacher stated that she remains in the field of education because, in her words, “I’m doing a civic duty.” She added that her decision to stay is rewarded and reinforced when:

…I see a child is able to grasp something it makes me feel good and that’s why I still, that’s why I do it. Because I know they can learn. …We just have to have the patience and the tolerance to persevere.

Similarly, an elementary special education co-teacher shared that she keeps coming back year after year because, as she says it, “I truly do care about the kids, just like I care about my own children, and I do want to make a difference.”

An elementary lead teacher for special education shared what she does when she becomes discouraged:

What I try to do is, although I have a title of supervisor within a school setting, I try to stay connected to the kids. I try to …bring them in and still make that connection, to help them academically. I will do that or I’ll go in the classroom and just try to stay and help the ones I know are struggling so that they do not become discouraged and give them a little bit extra if I am able to and just a word of encouragement or a word of I understand that you’re having some difficulty with organization, I do to and that’s why I have an agenda, so don’t feel bad.
She nurtures students, tries to normalize their challenges so that they don’t feel alone. It is what she does when the stress, isolation, powerlessness, and helplessness connected to her job set in. When she gets discouraged from the stress and strain in her role as a lead teacher for special education, she returns to her calling, her work with children. She reconnects with that nurture, love, and care that is involved in helping a child. She returns to the relationship she has with children, it is what sustains her amidst her stress; it is what helps her to feel less alone by connecting to her purpose. The relationship with children mediates her stress and provides the context, the perspective, and the bigger picture of what she is doing and why it is important. A general education co-teacher added to this story by describing the raw experience of seeing a little boy that she was working with improve and how it made her feel:

> Oh, [she gasps and tears form in her eyes] it was wonderful. It was wonderful. It made you cry [she catches her breath], and I think he felt good about himself, you know, the more and more he made that transformation.

A middle school co-teacher contributed to the story by sharing how her work with children is rewarded:

> Most of us work with what we have. We can only work with what parents send us. There’s not a magic pill. We will do what we can do with what we have. You know what really, really has me smiling and my husband thinks, “you are just so weird.” If a child that I’ve had a long time ago, …they see me in a store and they remember me. I think wow they remember me! …I am here because I love my job, not because of the salary. Because I love my kids, I love my job.

She talked about meaningful work she did with kids that lived in a rough public housing
project area near her school, “the kids, it seemed they wanted something from me; education, they wanted it! I don’t know if it was because they didn’t have anything. They wanted it. They wanted to do well. Those parents were up here and involved!” She added that, “two of my kids last year, came back, one was going to …college and the other one was going to Job Corp. …They came back, to tell me.” This, she describes, as among the greatest gifts that her children, her students, have given her.

A high school special education self-contained teacher said that he works with the “neediest” of kids, knowing that he is not going to measure up well against other teachers based on his students’ academic progress, knowing that they will present him with greater challenges. In his words, the reason he works with this group of particularly challenging students is:

Because there is always a kid that changes despite everything else that is happening around them when they’re not here in the building, that it gets better for them, that mentally they feel better about themselves.

He added that he does this work for the kids, and his work with the kids is what motivates him to keep his focus off the stress. “They’re here and they deserve a lot of attention, …all of my attention when they’re here.” Another participant, a high school special education self-contained para professional, drew this out further, she said:

I just feel like, when I’m not around, I just feel lost. …When I first started I felt like if I could just, I wanted to come in and save all these kids, that was my goal. Just to come in and try to help these kids, I wanted to save everybody. …Through the years I’ve learned that if I could just help one child, …then I’ve made an accomplishment in a lot of things.
She added that now she takes each day as an opportunity to try to help one child; “…listening, just really sitting down and listening to them and …not interrupting. Listening to their side of the story and trying to help them.” She shared a particular interaction with a student that she’s worked with for a couple of years. School, for this young man, is like a home because he doesn’t really have stable and close connections with people outside of school. He appreciates the teachers and she said, “he does articulate it a lot,” which reinforces the their motivation to help him, to do extra things for him to make his chances for success better. In her words she described a recent interaction with him:

We stayed late up here on Friday. He had an incident with …a girlfriend of his, I guess you want to call it; …she tore up his probation papers, …tore them into like a million pieces and just threw them in his face. Staff came together and, sitting there, …we put his papers back together like a puzzle and was [sic] able to get his papers back together and make a copy of it because he had to see his P.O. [Probation Officer] on Friday.

…We forgot about the things that we had to do to sit there and try to help this child because he was about to lose it, and we was [sic] able to get these papers back together, put them up, piece them back together, little pieces like a puzzle, and to make a copy. …He was so proud of that, it was amazing. He said, you all spending your time on Friday here to help me? And we said yea. So he was very proud.

Another participant reflected on work that she did with several young ladies that had been rescued from bad situations; their parents had prostituted each of them. She said:
I made a big difference in their lives. I had two or three young ladies that went to college and they’re making more money than I am right now. I keep in touch with them on yahoo and talk to them through emails.

She added that the most important tool to help these kids is, “relationships and not judging them, not judging the things that they already did, or the things that happened before they got here, and taking it day by day.”

The children weave their way into the hearts of these educators. Another participant illuminated this as she described one of her students:

He doesn’t have anybody else, so I think he kind of you know, I think he, you know [she struggles], I have got … a little special place for him in my heart; more than anybody else, more than anybody else really through the years because I’ve known him since seventh grade. He’s not really a bad kid but he has a lot going on at home and I think he really appreciates what we do because he doesn’t have anybody else.

Along the same lines, a middle school special education teacher shared how special it is to her when she thinks of her work and her relationship with a young lady that came to her in rough shape and on the wrong path. In her words:

There’re always kids that I connect with… We had a young woman who came in as an eighth grader and she was a pistol. I mean the boys were all afraid of her. They knew that she would whoop the… [laughs] … and she tried a few times.

You know, we had some tough times that year, …We all started referring to it as that bad time [emphasis original] [Laughs], but she got her act together and …did great. We kept in touch through the years.
Her facial expression softened as she continued:

…She’s in college now, she graduated and she called me and, you know I haven’t talked to her since she started, but just every once in a while she’d call me. She didn’t have a good home life; her mother wanted her to be crazy because she got the SSI [Supplemental Security Income]. So, she had a lot to overcome. …She worked her way out of [Special Education]. She got into regular classes, she made honor roll. She just did all the right things. Well, not all the right things, but you know, she’s in college.

I don’t know how she managed it because of her home life. Her mother, her mother kept her grandkids that lived with them and she had a lot of responsibilities… but, you know, I did things. I bought her an outfit for graduation and just helped out if they needed a ride. You know, I just did the extra things. I always did that. If a kid needed help, I bought whatever they needed; their clothes for eighth grade graduation. It’s really special to think about her.

A principal, a Caucasian woman, described some of the challenges she faced at one point in her career when she changed from working with autistic students that were primarily non-verbal to students that were verbal and had challenges with their emotions and behavior. In particular, she talked about a young lady, and African American girl, who was filled with anger and quite often acted on her anger through verbal or physical aggression. Underneath the anger, however, this principal described this child as quite bright and creative. She described the relationship with this child as significant to her. In her words:
My first year here I had this middle school class that was, [she pauses]…they were …emotionally disturbed kids and they talked back and I was shocked because I worked with non-verbal autistic kids, and these kids would cuss me out and I didn’t really know how to respond and now, not only were they responding, but they were cussing at me and I was like, “holy crap [emphasis original]!”

One of the things that I always remember, …there was this girl in the middle school who was really awful, she really was, and I was the department chair overseeing the program. One day she came to school and she was so proud of herself, …she had made this necklace… So she had this necklace that she had made; she took two saltine crackers that she smooshed together on a string and she attached something to it that said white cracker Mrs. [the participant’s name], and she came up to me and she was just so proud of herself and she looked at me and I said, Oh my God! You are so creative! I can’t believe how creative you are! And it floored her that I responded that way. She expected me to be mad, to get her in trouble, how dare you… I don’t know what she expected but it was not what I gave her. Many years later she came back and apologized to me. She came back to the school.

The principal points out that this young lady worked through all of her difficulties and turned her life around. She came back to the school to apologize, but more than that, she acknowledged the love and care she received from the educators that found ways to help her let go of her anger, to reframe and redirect her unpleasant behaviors so that she might find a way to access her potential, her brightness, her creativity. She came back to let them know that their efforts made a difference and mattered to her. The principal adds
that the significance of this to her, “was something else.” After transcribing this principal’s narrative, I sent it to her, it was so beautiful that I wanted her to have it; she let me know that it brought tears to her eyes, it was just that meaningful.

An elementary counselor who has worked for over 40 years in a number of jobs within education including special education shares, “I keep in touch with a lot of students because they are the reason I worked this long.” She goes on to say, “Oh, my God, I don’t care if they remember me or not but just to see them blossom.” She then describes her history with child that encountered during the early part of her career, a child that had a significant impact on her whom she carries in her heart:

The counselor from another school called and said, “I just want to prepare you that there’s a student that will be coming to your school and she’s burned very badly. I just didn’t want to send her over there the first day without talking to you about her.” She was in the kindergarten, and ah, she, she… she… [She struggles and slows her cadence], …I tried to …pray and prepare myself and …get myself ready and just imagine …what I would say, or what I would do… I practiced some things you know, because I wanted to be ready when she came…

When she came, … [her voice weakens and her cadence slows more] she was burned severely [emphasis original]. [Sighs heavily] Her hands were folded, her hands couldn’t open, and her ear was burned, her face was burned. She was burned on every part of her body except for the bottom of her feet and her some parts of her head where her hair was thick. I [pauses] …I truly loved her. I still have her picture [she points to her bulletin board].

She goes on to describe the child’s family and circumstances:
...She had two other siblings and they all slept in the same room because they stayed with some other family members. ...The mom needed help... she was developmentally delayed. So I took her to ...the clinic, to all of her [parenting] classes, and we got her on some SSI [Supplemental Security Income] because she needed support. ...I was driving them around and sometimes I would have her [the student] by myself, she could take a story book ... she couldn’t read, she was in kindergarten, but she could make a story up by just looking at the pictures, so I knew then that there was some intelligence about her, spark about her... The teachers, ...they just didn’t seem to have that closeness with her, because... she was different.

She smiled and said that the child had settled in and was doing very well but things at home started to unravel and the family was forced to move. She became very attached to this child and when they moved, she lost touch with them for a while.

Her sister moved out of the apartment, ...they were sharing the rent. ...When her sister moved, they had to move. I tried to keep up with them and it just so happened that they came to the principal’s church one time and he said, I saw your family and ...I touched base with them again. Then, after that, I lost touch with them again.

She kept the child’s picture on the bulletin board in her office and, after many years, one of the itinerant staff that worked in her building and in other buildings saw the picture and said, “I found your child. She’s a senior now. Do you want to call so we can go visit?”  “Yes,” she replied. The child’s mother had died and she and her two autistic brothers were living with their aunt. She describes the visit:
I went to visit her. She didn’t remember me, but that didn’t bother my heart because I remembered her. I saw her, she was a young lady, finishing school, and I was satisfied. I felt so good inside because she was a senior and had gone to the prom and she was doing better.

This counselor has kept track of many of her former students, students that she taught and students that she worked with as a school counselor. She shared with pride that she has students that are teachers, media specialists, nurses, and doctors. Seeing these young people blossom is what keeps her grounded, it gives her perspective and allows her to see that the stress of the moment is nothing compared to the joy that comes from helping a child to grow and learn. It is, as she describes, “the relationship with the children that matters.”

An assistant principal shared that during her career, her favorite job was when she was a reading specialist. She said that what appealed so about this job was the intensity of her relationships with the kids, “I mean my focus could be completely them.” The children were referred to her because they had failed a standardized test and, in her words:

You got to see them through their maturity level and get better with reading, …then the next year when …I told them, …you passed, it was kind of like, “I passed? So …you’re not coming to get me, what do you mean?” …I liked that. She added that the relationship was as important as the work she did with them, and then described an experience that took her by surprise:
I was at the salon and [this woman], she asks me, “did you used to be a teacher? I mean were you were a teacher?” Yes. “Are you [she says her name]?” Yes. And then she told me who she was and …I could, I remembered her. …She said, “well I’m married now and I’m trying to work and I really want you to mentor me.” …I thought, oh my goodness, because she remembered me from when I was her teacher.

She shared that she had this student some 13 or 14 years earlier and described her as a quiet girl that didn’t really say anything. She added that for this former student to approach her, “that was huge [emphasis original] to me.” It has been two years since they have re-connected and she said, “that made it really full circle for me, because I, every now and then, see some students out or whatever and we will talk, but that one, when she asked me, ‘I want you to mentor me,’ it meant a lot.”

An elementary special education co-teacher smiled as he said that there have been many students that have touched his heart. He recalled a student that he worked with when he was teaching in a high school. He said:

Her mother never graduated and she was determined. This young lady was actually pregnant, …she had been struggling to graduate, pass graduation test, and she struggled with comprehension and reading, but we worked. We worked hours on end after school, on the weekends. Many of times in education we come across a lot of students that just take it for granted, so when dealing with students that struggle cognitively, for her to put forth that effort and to get it, …the icing on the cake was her passing the graduation test, that was just awesome.

He continued and said that the student expressed her appreciation to him, and how her
success impacted him:

She wrote a letter to me and just thanked me for all the time and the effort… I told her, I said, it was you; it’s you that I need to be thanking because you really did my heart some good to see that there are still students that still want to better themselves.

He described another student that he worked with in the high school. A 10th grade boy that played football, but felt like school was a “prison.” He shared that the boy had a 1.8 grade point average in the 10th grade. “He was dyslexic and didn’t know it.” The boy was not his student, but he began working with the boy because, as he put it:

He would get picked at, picked on, laughed at. This was a nice sized kid, played football, …so as I’m looking like some thing is not right, like he almost has this word, you can hear him break it down and chunk it and pronounce it and couldn’t just pull it out.

…We ended up getting speech involved and also the social worker. Come to find out, his mom actually took him to get tested on her own dime because she said that our process is a little slow, and she was just like, I don’t want to lose my baby because he was getting in fights on the regular. So we found out what it was and we got him help and he went from a 1.8 GPA [Grade Point Average] as a 10th grader to when he graduated he had like a 2.6 and he had a full ride [scholarship] to the University of South Carolina.

In both of these examples he drew satisfaction and reward from his work with these kids. He described them as two of many kids that he is proud of, rewarded by he did with them. He added that the key to being successful as an educator is having compassion:
Don’t come into education if you don’t have the compassion. You won’t get rich, but you have to have the compassion …to have the sustainability to keep …going over the years.

An instructional change coach shares how meaningful a relationship that she has with a former student is to her. She described this as her “most career shaking” experience:

There was a young lady, …I had her and her boyfriend for many years, and she was …a very involved child… and she left the program and then, after a while, would get herself in a mess and call me from time to time. For many years I worked with a para professional while she [the student] was still in the program. I was friends with the para professional I worked with for many years and she would call both of us and you know, “Oh I moved, this happened to me, that happened to me” [emphasis original].” Sometimes she got in messes but she got her life kinda back together, you know sort of, and she gets married and invites me and the para to the wedding. The wedding is on the border of Georgia and Alabama, Bowden Georgia. I wasn’t really planning to go, I feel bad about that now.

The para professional talked her into going, “come on let’s go, let’s both of us go. So we went to the wedding.” She describes being humbled by what she experienced once she got to the wedding. It highlighted to her how significant she was in this person’s life. In her words:
Okay, trailer park wedding, very pretty trailers, very well manicured and taken care of, but it was a trailer park and I had never been to a trailer park and in the middle of nowhere. This is the impact of this job: …people came out of a lot of places to that wedding, out of different trailers. People that were there, and they said to me, and the para, “oh, you’re Mrs. [she says her name], oh we’ve heard so much about you. …Oh you’re Mrs. [she says the para professional’s name],” and when I heard that, I just couldn’t believe it. They were people with no teeth, there were all kinds of people there telling me that they’ve heard so much about me.

She had talked to these people like I was her mother. She went on, and we would lose contact and she would call me from time to time. She had my home number. She called me to tell me she was getting married, she had three children, she called me as she was having each child, and so I heard from her. She never abused having my phone number, she would just call me for her life events and then her husband died in an accident at work many years, many, many years later. Oh, we had a big reunion and she came from almost Alabama [emphasis original] with her husband and her three kids to the reunion, and then a few years after that, her husband died in an accident at work; some machinery or something killed her husband.

Now talking about having these mental health issues, everything she had put together, after that death, kind of fell apart. So she headed to some hard times. She didn’t call me right away, when she thought she was doing better she called me. She called me about the death right away, …but then, …hard times.

She described how this former student struggled and then re-connected:
She couldn’t manage the kids …she needed some help for herself. You know the husband dying really unglued her. She called me to admit that she had fallen apart and was trying to get it back together. She hasn’t called me in quite a while but she’s tried to Facebook me quite a few times. She taught me more than anything of the impact that you have on lives, working through this program. I taught her in the 80’s and my last contact with her, my last contact with her was early this year.

She added that the impact that this had on her personally and in her heart for all of these years is tremendous and has deepened her resolve. Of this, she said:

Oh my gosh! I mean everybody in my family knows the story of this girl. Like there are people out there that, that [emphasis original] is all they have, and what it does as a person is make you appreciate everything you have. Like I can’t, just can’t even imagine, what these kids go through.

Every participant described experiences with students like these that reminded them in the midst of their stress why what they do is so important. Every participant described being reinforced and rewarded from relationships with their students. Their relationships with children through their work hold the molar stake when it comes to the gestalt experience of their roles as educators. Participants described that their relationships with students are the primary mediator that make small the influence of stress. These relationships help to balance the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout by keeping them situated within the broader context and molecular by comparison. Participants describe these past experiences as having resonance that reaches into the present and engages them within the life space to help add balance and
Threading Hope for the Future in to the Life Space now.

“Hope is some extraordinary spiritual grace that God gives us to control our fears, not to oust them.” –Fr. Vincent McNabb

“Faith is a living, daring confidence on God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times.” –Martin Luther, 1552

Participants described their relationships with students, their love of students, and the rewards they experience as students respond to them through learning and growth as a primary mediator for stress. The results here reveal that the love that they have for students is reflected through their narratives detailing histories of experiences that extend back to their calling to serve. The results demonstrate that this love comes forward through time into the present and engages with them in the life space to strengthen them as they cope with stress. Second to this for participants is hope.

Hope encompasses those wishes and beliefs for the future that, without having yet happened, reach back to the present and interact with the educator within the life space to strengthen their courage and resolve. Participants pointed out that it is for the students that they hope and wish for things to improve. It is love for the students with the promise of hope that they continue the self-sacrifice of immersing themselves in stressful circumstances to live out their callings. These values from experiences and beliefs grounded in hope add to the thoughts, feelings, and directed actions that comprise their behavior; behavior that establishes balance and perspective to support the emotional wellbeing required among educators to teach. The meaning of hope to these educators is that of faith. Hope, their act of hoping, is a behavioral act of faith; a faith that the grace
of humanity, or God, will make things better.

Each of the participants shared ideas of what they hoped would change to make education better. Each participant held out hope that things would get better. One participant said simply that what is needed, what he hopes for, is more “concern,” and then he added, “from everyone.” His hope is that there is more concern about teachers and education from the world that education sits within and serves. He said, “I think we’re regarded with the same … care as the person… who changes my trash, you know, empty’s my trashcan. …That’s the issue.” He continued on to say that there is too little compassion and regard shown to educators and the field of education; the connection to people with the power and influence to make things better is tenuous and distant. He added that if there were more concern, more compassion and regard:

I think people would feel better about what they did… and if people feel better about what they did, then, man that’s magical. If you think about a building like this, this forgotten building, you know what I mean, then you got people here that are really good, I mean everybody in this building is really good you know, but I think through …how negative this place can be sometimes, I just think because you get lost in it and you don’t feel the concern, …and then you begin ...to think what you do is insignificant, so you don’t get people operating at their full potential. At the end of the day, they come back for a reason, it’s not the money, it’s not any of those crazy kinds of things, it’s because somewhere they genuinely have care and concern for the children.

A high school special education self-contained teacher said that “it will get better, it has to. There has to be an advocate, it has to get better, at some point, some day, it’s
gotta click somewhere, and not just this program it has to be everywhere else too.” While participants pointed out their voices are censored from speaking out on behalf of their children or schools, they all shared a hope that decision makers would gain awareness of their plight and advocate for change. Many hoped that decision makers would reach out to solicit their voice, to visit their classrooms and learn first hand what the current circumstances are. For example, a participant talked about what she hopes decision makers become aware of with regard to teachers:

I think what they need to know is, really how hard teachers do work, how limited it is what they work with as far as resources, how much they have to …spend their own money to bring some creativity into their classroom; to buy rewards for the kids. I think they need to know how much they’re not appreciated.

She added that what she hopes will change for the children in contemporary education. In her words:

We need to have better resources, smaller class sizes. We need to have different programs within our school settings, whether it is technology or vocational opportunities for our kids while they are here. We cannot do the same things for our kids of this generation because this is a generation that is truly different. This is a generation of technology. It has to be different. It cannot be just pencil and paper anymore. …It’s a different generation and if we don’t put that technology in place very young for them and for very early for them, we’re going to lose them because paper and pencil is not what they are used to. That is our generation, not theirs. …They need to know how to be creative, and we need to bring that into the school somehow.
A general education teacher described that what would help her to do her job more effectively, what would help the children in her class, is if she were to have more support. She says, “I want to be supported, not only through my administrative team, but parents and the community; everyone needs to be involved. We always have moms but I want to see more dads, more dads involved.”

A special education instructional change coach passionately explained his wishes for how things should change and be better for his students:

We still just give lip service to vocational exploration. It doesn’t have enough time and we really should be …spending a lot more time on career exploration, helping kids discover what they like doing, what they’re good at, get past the core of what everybody in our society knows and then have all that rest of their time to study what they’re planning to go into…They can change their mind but they need a lot more flexibility to do that.

His hope is that time and flexibility can be afforded for authentic education for his students, education that connects with their interests and readies them for life after school.

A school counselor said that she hopes decision makers become aware of the pressure on teachers and their need to feel accomplished. She added that, “teachers hardly get recognized for the time they put into what they do.” She also said, decision makers need to be more aware about how funding and resource allocation decisions impact the teachers:
They should be aware of the lack of support the local school system provides. They should also be aware that the furlough days and pay reduction has impacted our career and home lives. There should be an accountability piece to how systems allocate the money.

She concluded with a wish for the school systems to attend to teacher stress, to provide stress management resources designed to improve health and emotional wellbeing among educators. An elementary special education co-teacher summed it up by stating her belief that, “someday somebody will come to their senses, something will happen.” Something will happen to make it better for the teachers and the children they serve.

Within all of these statements of hope there is a collective cry for the voices of teachers to be heard. Within their voice there is guidance for new directions to be taken that can improve the experience of students and, in particular, special education students while they are in school, and in their lives once they graduate. Participants reveal in these results a deep desire for the future to be better. A desire for decision makers to understand how current systemic problems cause stress and undermine children’s opportunities to learn through misguided priorities and compromised implementation. They reveal a desire for decision makers to have a closer connection and greater understanding of contemporary education with regard to student needs, complexities of meeting those needs, and fair resource allocation. The hopes, desires, wants, and wishes, about the future, a future that is better, coalesce with the teachers’ love of children. They coalesce together as values and beliefs within the life space to strengthen teachers’ resolve and help make molar the joys of teaching and learning. In so doing, they help to
provide a balance to outweigh the phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, help to designate them as situated and molecular by comparison.

**The Ripple of Helping Hands and Loving Hearts.**

“What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.” –Saint Augustine

The participants of this study are helpers by choice, public servants, and public service is by its very nature a collective, self-sacrificing, and altruistic effort. In this, they are members of a bonded group. They execute their roles and activities to educate the children as a collective of individuals united by a common culture and common calling. By virtue of being members of a bounded group, they are interconnected. They all revealed as mediators to their stress and difficult circumstances, the love they have for children and hope that things will get better. In addition to these primary and secondary mediators is a third, which has to do with the help that they give to, and receive from one another along with what they do to help themselves. Help includes directed actions that educators perform within their interconnected group; directed actions that are enlightened by their values and beliefs and executed in response to their circumstances and stressors. Help, when complimented by values and beliefs, produces mediation to stress for these participants and thereby foils the seed of compassion fatigue and burnout from finding earth and growing roots.

All participants described the importance of collegial support. An elementary special education co-teacher, for example, talked about how important support is to her from colleagues. She came to the field to help children after having worked in a related
field. At great sacrifice she put her life on hold while she took classes and became certified so that she could follow this calling; her family accompanying her on this journey. As a new special education teacher she was assigned to the most challenging students in her school. The stress was so overwhelming that the calling and the love for children were not enough. She said that, “if it was not for [she names two teachers], I would have said forget this, maybe some other words [laughs], and left.” These two teachers provided her support when she began and they continue to help one another as they move through the years. She added that in her first year, “I saw my principal twice.”

She goes on to say:

Although she said, “oh, let me know if you need me, [emphasis original]…I saw her twice, and those two times, she was bringing a student into my room and said, “how are you doing” [she says her name] and walked out. She didn’t even wait for the “I’m fine,” or “I’m alright;” nothing.

Another elementary special education co-teacher described how having support from others at her previous school during stressful circumstances impacted her:

I mean it made you feel like you had some sense of worth. You’re just a teacher, but we’re all in this together. …I mean when I was there it was everybody from the janitors to the cafeteria, everybody was in on it, it wasn’t just one person; everybody supported everybody.

A counselor shared that, “teachers are human too and sometimes they have bad days, and sometimes we have things going on in our personal lives.” She added that in her role she, as she said, “can kinda tell when the person just needs some relief.” If there is something that is causing stress or a child that is acting up, “…if you can just
sometimes give them … a little breathing room, …just take the child out of the
environment,” it can make a world of difference. She also said that sometimes it is even
“more helpful for the child than it is for the teacher, to take the child out of the
environment for a little while.”

A special education self-contained teacher shared that it is important to pay
attention to one another when they are working with students, and offer help and
feedback to each other. Students, he pointed out, respond to how they believe the teacher
feels about them. Sometimes the teacher is so caught up in the moment that they are not
aware of how they are coming across to students. He described how important it is to
have the courage to let a fellow colleague know when their way of approaching a student
is causing stress or conflict to continue or worsen. He shared an example from his own
experience when he helped a teacher understand why a student kept having conflicts with
other students. The teacher had become frustrated with a male student because of the
constant discord with other students, and was showing his frustration through tone of
voice, agitation, and attributing blame to this particular student whenever conflict arose.
He tried to offer the other teacher context to engage the other teacher’s professionalism
and empathy. In his words:

I told him I said, hey man, … I know he’s got issues, … but he can feel how you
feel about him. If you could just keep your calm around him, he’s here … because
he’s got … some coordination issues and sometimes he’s got some hygiene things
that are pretty bad, and so he’s just an easy target for students.

The help that this teacher offered to his colleague is what was needed to humanize the
child to the other teacher, and help that teacher to disengage from his stress related
response behaviors that were making the situation worse for all involved. By helping this other teacher, the participant was also lightening his own load because this child was in his homeroom and when things fell apart for him in other classes, he would return to his homeroom teacher in a state of emotional crisis. Hence, this teacher was interconnected with his colleague and his directed action to offer guidance helped them both; all of which was for the benefit of the child, their first priority.

All participants identified help through collegial support as an important source of strength and mediation to their stress. Collegial support included primarily support from fellow teachers but there were examples of support from administrators and family members of their students. The support from administrators and family members of students, however, did not triangulate across all data sources or a wide array of participant types and therefore narratives describing it are not included here.

In addition to the help that participants received from, and gave to peers, participants also described behaviors that they practiced to help themselves with stress. Behaviors, as defined within the calculus of life space, include thoughts, feelings, and directed actions (Lewin, 1946/1951). For these participants, behaviors that they described to help themselves cope with the stress include habits, beliefs, and directed actions. Some of these are woven in to their prevailing tendencies, their dispositions. Faith, for example, is among those behaviors that contribute to many of these educators’ dispositions. “I am doing God’s will,” one participant said. “God has put me here and will always provide for me so I work like there is no tomorrow and take care of what I need to take care of today,” said another. “If I present love to these kids, that is a way to present God,” said another. “…It’s like me giving back to the community and really
giving God thanks for where my child is now,” added yet another participant. It’s not just faith in God; participants shared within their narratives that it is also faith that in the future things will get better; it is faith in humanity. They weave these powerful messages into their dispositions as beliefs, informed by hope and values that shape their approach to stress and working with children. By engaging these hopes and beliefs, participants help themselves with reassurance that their work is aligned with a bigger power or part of a greater cause. As one participant put it, “…my balance is through my faith.”

In addition to faith, participants also reported specific activities and directed actions that they engage in to help themselves. Included among these are taking care of their physical health, exercising, avoiding negativity, treating others the way they want to be treated, taking time out for themselves, being emotionally and cognitively present and engaged within their own families, and talking out their stress with supportive members of their kinship networks. Nearly all of the participants described how important it is to disengage from work. They described this as difficult at times, but important.

The Balance of Stress: Molar and Molecular.

In 1993 when I first began my career as a school social worker, a school that had the most unwittingly clever principal that I have ever encountered hired me. The school had independent control over their budget and hired me to serve only their children. I did not interact with other school social workers in the district, and I was the only school social worker on staff at this school; there were other clinicians, but I was the only social worker. The work was among the most intense that I have ever experienced. The children all had mental health issues that dotted the diagnostic spectrum, and with their emotional challenges came heart-wrenching histories and violent behavior. This school
served children who otherwise would have been institutionalized in mental health facilities. The principal had created this program after first working as a visiting teacher with children living in a local State Hospital. At the time of its creation, few other programs existed like this in the Country, and no other program existed like this in the local public schools. She started it with a single classroom of six or so students, and when I found my way to this place, it had grown to a complete school, a comprehensive school serving middle and high school students with both academic and vocational programming. Students’ abilities differed greatly and represented both a wide array of emotional and behavioral challenges, as well as a wide range of intellectual abilities; from pervasively intellectually “dis”abled, to gifted students.

I was in love with this place from the first day. While waiting for my interview, a student who was angry and upset got in to a van that a county repairman had parked in front of the building. The keys were in the ignition, and off this child drove. Around 10 miles from the school he called the front office on the citizens band radio, commonly referred to as the “CB radio” back then. The school had noticed the van leaving but did not realize who had taken it; the repairman was still busy with his work. An anxious cat and mouse game occurred on the CB radio between the front office and the unknown driver of the van. From the voice of the driver, they knew it had to be a student, “who is this,” they asked, “I’m sorry, I can’t tell you that,” said the driver through laughter. Eventually the police apprehended him; he had stopped to put a little gas in the van, but did not have money to pay. This driver was a boy, not old enough to drive, who had impulsively taken the van to soothe his anxieties and his need to distract himself from his emotional distress. Every member of the school that was not already engaged in taking
care of, or teaching, students mobilized around this crisis. Their worry and concern for this child communicated to me that I had found the right place to begin my career. The other applicant waiting beside me for her interview, looked mortified; she did not get the job.

There was not a single day that went by between 1993 and 2000 when I worked in that building that was free from intense crisis related to students in distress. In the early days, if a student’s behavior became dangerous to himself or others, we would restrain the child with therapeutic holding techniques until they calmed down and were in control. It was not uncommon to walk down the halls through an obstacle course of children being held on the floor by groups of four or more worried and concerned adults.

This work was very stressful and at the same time, very rewarding. These children had failed everywhere else, and we were determined for them to succeed with us. They might leave our building to go to the hospital, as several did for suicidal or homicidal ideation, but we would never kick them out of our program; it was an unconditional love practiced from our shared beliefs, mission, goals and values. Everything about that school was structured around finding the best ways to help those children experience success at something.

The principal employed a model of shared governance through distributed leadership. Each one of us had influence and voice on how to shape the program for the optimal success of children. We were not perfect, we did not always agree, but everyone was passionate, engaged, and had a stake of ownership in the process. This was clever, on the principal’s part, but was not the most resourceful thing that she guided us to institute. She also encouraged development of a scaffold of beliefs that guided every
aspect of our practice. One of those beliefs was that the relationship between teachers and students is primary to learning; I still believe this. In support of the scaffolding beliefs, we practiced regular reflection on our relationships with students, musing about the magic moments that occurred when students did well. The premise of these twice-weekly structured reflections was to learn from each other how to work with individual kids. A secondary outcome occurred from these reflections as well; we were continually engaged in a dialogue about our good works with children, and this served to reinforce our commitment and dedication, it served to mediate our stress by putting us face-to-face with how our love for kids and desires to make a difference were actualized. I have never seen this done so well in any other school that I have worked in. I have no idea if she did this intentionally, or if it was by accident, but it was an effective way to keep us balanced.

Every year we did this through the bell shape curve of the cycle of stress that is the school year; low at first when everyone is settling in, high around the winter holidays, and low again in anticipation of summer. Every year, this clever process was revisited in a summative annual slide show set to music; captured images of teachers and students engaged in those magic moments. If you had been thinking of leaving before the slide show, you were committed to another year by the end; committed within a bonded group of adopted family, the teachers and students that you work with. No one that I knew outside of this group could understand what we went through together. The relationship with students was primary to their learning, and it was the foundation of why we kept coming back to them despite all of the stress. I had thought this unique to that school, and it wasn’t until this research that I realized that the power of relationships with students, and all the beliefs and values that are woven into them, hold a similar utility that
is wide-spread among educators; universal among my participants.

Every participant described coming to this field for callings similar to my own. Every participant of this study described wonderful and lasting experiences with children. Every participant described stressors inherent to the job of educating and tied to contemporary circumstances. Every participant described behaviors that they, or others they work with, engage in to cope with stress that are consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. Every participant described elements within, or connected to their relationships with children that mediate their stress; love, hope, and help.

The most significant conclusion from these findings is that the gestalt meaning of being an educator, based on what these 24 educators described, resides in the balance of the molar or molecular experience of stress versus the molar or molecular experience of joys related to working children. The participants of this study described coping mechanisms that remain adaptive for them within the context of their life space because the balance remains such that the molar stake of what being a teacher represents to them is about the love they have for children and the relationships they have with them. Their stress is outweighed by this and held down as a molecular facet of their experience. Molecular is being used here to refer to small or less significant, whereas molar is the overall or gestalt experience.

The balance that participants describe is not something that I found in the literature regarding stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue among educators. It does not provide all of the answers, but certainly this, along with other elements in this study, might provide the beginnings of conversations, and incentives for further study, to erect
structural elements that support a healthier balance for educators. It does not help the teachers that I have already seen lose their love for children and passion for the field, those sad losses that provoked me to do this study. The insights here may, however, be useful to stem the annual migration from the field of the 40% to 50% of new teachers that, as Ingersol (2003) estimates, exit within five years of beginning service. To this end, the participants of this study offer advice to new teachers entering the field, advice that mirrors some of their own positive coping strategies.

**Generative Guidance From Those in the Know for Teachers new to the Field**

The final theme includes the advice that participants offer to new teachers. Each participant gave suggestions that they hoped would make a new teacher’s experience better. The advice given is reflective of participants’ generative and nurturing ways, and it is also a mirror to the behaviors that they try to practice themselves in support of a healthy emotional wellbeing. There were a few participants that half-jokingly said that the advice that they would give new teachers is to find another calling, but this was from the context of the stress that they were feeling in that present moment, and this advice did not triangulate across data sources or participant types. By and large the advice for new teachers included guidance for relationships with students, learning from peers, and self-care. While the advice was directed at teachers in general, it was arrived at through participants’ work with special education students.

With respect to students, a middle school special education co-teacher said to “remain calm” when you are working with students. A high school special education self-contained teacher suggested that new teachers should, “celebrate the small gains, … [and] don’t feel bad if all your kids don’t pass the standardized test, or if everybody
doesn’t pass your class.” He also said:

Don’t take ownership if everybody fails. I think you have to look at how far did you move these kids. Did you help them grow in whatever way from where they came in to you to the time that they left?

Along the same lines, a special education instructional change coach added:

Balance between working hard to do a good job, and not overworking; caring for students, but also setting enough emotional boundaries to not be overwhelmed. The “serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

A special education para professional shared that it is important to “get to know the kids.” She offered that it is equally important to avoid taking their behavior personally. Along the same lines, a special education self-contained teacher said that it is crucial to know your students, and see each of them as individuals. In her words, “don’t go in there blind, you might get hit, and it’s not going to be the kids’ fault because they have a disability.” She also said:

Don’t try to reach a kid like you reach your own kids, because every child is different. …You might remind them of their mom, their mom might have molested them. You don’t want to be a trigger to a kid; the way you talk to them, the voice, the way your voice carries, it might be a trigger. …You got to watch what you are doing, you got to read the IEP.

An elementary special education co-teacher suggested that new teachers should, “start each day anew, and give each student a new slate.” He added that it is important to do this “because we actually ask them to do that for us. …We are human and we do
make mistakes, … so we want the same thing… it’s almost, treat others the way you want them to treat you.” A counselor adds that new teachers should “really love children and have a passion for what you are doing.”

Advice that participants offered for new teachers regarding learning from peers centered on finding a support network of veteran teachers that could mentor them and help them as they acclimate into the routines of teaching. All participants reported the value and importance of having a collegial network to learn, and draw support from. They suggested avoiding teachers that are negative, or that do not treat children in a way that seems right. A middle school special education co-teacher stated that new teachers should absorb knowledge from seasoned teachers. He suggested that they, “listen, watch, [and] observe,” other teachers and, “in the right forum, if you have questions, ask questions. Get guidance when you get off track;” it will help the new teacher to persevere. Similarly, an elementary special education teacher suggested to, “act like a sponge.” He continued and said:

Gather as much information as you can in your first year. There is no way to get it all, some things you are going to have to learn the hard way, but find you a veteran teacher who you have watched, that seems to do things the right way, that has high integrity and …ask the person questions and …see how much information you can glean from them. The knowledge piece is so important. Keep your integrity, stay honest, keep your confidentiality, and realize how good things, you know, such as testing are harassment. Those things are huge. …Know the policies and understand how they work, how to deal with parents.
The advice that participants offered for new teachers regarding self-care addressed how they approach the school setting and included taking care of themselves emotionally and physically. For example, a special education instructional change coach suggested that new teachers learn to, “balance honest self-criticism in order to improve with self-acceptance.” He also offered that it is important to, “learn to do the crappy stuff enough that it doesn’t get you in trouble, but never let yourself be fooled into what’s valid and what’s not.” A lead teacher for special education added, “go with your heart, and do what’s best for kids. …Be an advocate for kids, …think outside the box, … stay on for what you know and feel to be right.” Another participant shared that keeping a unit journal to reflect on your practice and experiences while teaching can give much better information than the test scores:

- After you give the test, …reflect on what you think worked well and what didn’t.
- It would give …much better information and would help the teacher much more because it would be a much more valid reflection experience.

A middle school special education co-teacher offered that it is important to, “keep an open mind; …don’t be quick to judge and to criticize.” Similarly, another participant suggested that, “chaos is not always a bad thing,” if the children are engaged and learning. He added, “just do your best,” and provide yourself with “forgiveness when you don’t accomplish what you started out to do when you began the day.”

Another participant, a middle school special education co-teacher, suggested, “You’ve got to take care of yourself because if you don’t take care of yourself, you can’t care for anybody else.” He added that it is important to reflect on what you are doing and keep focus on the value of your work. “Every night before you go to bed,” he said, “you
ask yourself, ‘is this is what I really want to do?”’ A counselor suggested that:

You have to be organized. You have to be punctual. You have to get to work before the children get there, because you have to be prepared. You have to be willing to give of yourself, your time. You have to be…willing to go that extra mile.

She continued by adding:

You cannot get into education thinking you’re going to be rich; you’ll be disappointed! “What is rich?” …I say that to people, …having money does not make you rich. I would rather be rich in spirit, heart, mind, soul, and body than to be rich in money, because if you live as long as I plan to live, you will not know if you have any money or not, somebody else will be managing it.

A special education self-contained teacher suggested that if your stress becomes too much and it is interfering with how you work with peers and students, take a mental health day to regroup. “Call in to say, I’m sick, I can’t, my throat hurts, I might need a mental day.” “Just stay away,” she said, for a day to take care of your self. A para professional offered the following advice that captures the sentiment of the group: “know that you cannot save the world. Come in here, to try to do the best you can, and try to see if you could help one child.” She added that if you are able to do that, “you’ve done good.”

**Summary of Findings**

This study was a qualitative phenomenological exploration of the curriculum of experiences that influence educators. The primary interest included exploration of the environmental elements that interact with educators to facilitate or mitigate the
phenomena of stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. These phenomena are psychological in nature and, as Heft (2001) points out, they are situated within context. The context in which educators experience stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout was therefore an important feature of exploration within the present study to gain holistic understandings of the meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences, their molar or gestalt experiences (Baum, 2002; Tolman, 1932). The findings summarized herein were drawn from the interactions between educators and their environments that inform their behavior, including thoughts, feelings, and actions. Findings identify educators as members of the helping professions, describe their common draw to the field, identify four interrelated themes of stress including their relationships to the phenomena of compassion fatigue and burnout, identify joyful elements that mediate stress, and offer guidance mirroring participant’s positive coping strategies for new teachers entering the field.

**Educators and Special Educators are Members of the Helping Professions**

The first significant finding was the positioning of educators and special educators within the bonds of the helping profession. Compassion fatigue has previously been described through the fields of traumatology, and burnout with regard to members of the helping professions including social workers, medical professionals, and emergency first responders (Devilley et al., 2009; Morrissette, 2004; Robinson, 2006). Participants of this study revealed that the nature and demands of their job are similar to other helping professions, and as such, educators and special educators can be considered among the bonds of the helping professions. This finding is important because it identifies educators as at risk of compassion fatigue and burnout similarly as other
members of this bonded group. Little available research has heretofore addressed members of the teaching profession, especially special educators, in this manner. Keys and Lashwood suggested their membership among the helping professions in 1996, as did Robinson in 2006.

**Educators Join and Remain in the Field in Service of a Calling**

In addition to allegiance with the helping professions, another significant finding includes a universal call to service among these educators. All of the participants described the decision to become an educator, and what being an educator means, as a calling. This is consistent with Nieto’s (2005) assertion that the decision to become a teacher is a “calling.” For these participants, it is a calling that arose from, and is maintained by, deeply held values and beliefs centered on doing good things for others, for children, helping children to learn and grow, to actualize their greatest potential for successful and productive lives. The findings indicate that values associated with their calling interact with, and influence them throughout their career, sometimes reaching forward through time to strengthen their resolve as they are challenged by stress. Each of the participants also described examples of positive interactions with students that reinforced their sense of calling and rewarded their service.

**Four Interconnected Themes Relating to the Experience of Stress**

With respect to findings related to stress, four themes emerged related to participants’ experience of stress. The first theme is distant from decisions, the educator’s place in the world. This theme explores the distance and isolation from the decision-making processes among participants. The second stress theme is sourness in relationships. This theme describes stress that occurs within relationships between
educators and others within the environment. The third theme is the whittling away of individualized education, a fertile garden of discontent. This theme reveals the implications and experience among educators related to policy mandates and consequent practices that dilute the effectiveness of special education to the chagrin of their calling. The fourth theme is erosion of educator resolve. This final theme of stress explores what happens in educators’ hearts over time as they are faced with ongoing stressful circumstances, and the behaviors they employ to cope. The findings are informed from participants work with special education students and are presented through their collective voice.

Gestalt Meanings to Participants Regarding the Experience of Stressors.

Each of the four stress themes are independently interesting, but the commonality of shared experience and meaning among participants has equal significance, and establishes a context for understanding the intensity of impact from the sources of stress. Findings reveal that these participants are under the stricture of censorship that prevents them from calling out the problems in their field, and from defending themselves against hostile attacks. They are not allowed to say anything publically that might be considered to represent the views of their district. There is no mechanism within their district to voice concerns. Concerns that are contrary to the mandates handed down from upper levels of leadership, or those with decision-making authority, are dismissed.

This condition contributes to collective feelings of isolation, powerlessness, learned helplessness, and a reality among participants that they have little influence over their practice. In addition, the meanings that they take from this circumstance include a feeling that they are not valued as professionals; there is not an effective advocate for
their students or for teachers, especially not for special educators; and they are forced into submission to decisions governing their practice that are made at a distance by figures that are, in their view, disconnected from the congress of teaching. Authority and voice are stripped from them and, as a consequence, they are unable to challenge policies or practices that they view as structures that discriminate or abuse their special education students. The can see what needs to change, they know what needs to be said, but they are prevented from doing so by oppressive district rules, priorities, and mandates. It is, for participants, a reality that is dissonant with their calling to service. They came to the field to serve the interests of children, but find that they are serving figures that make decisions at a distance from them that are, as they describe, hurting children; this they are required to do without recourse and under threat of consequence for non-compliance.

**Distant From Decisions, the Educator’s Place in the World**

Findings within “distance from decisions, the educator’s place in the world” reveal that these participants experience hostility from the media and government decision makers, to which they are prevented from defending themselves. They reveal that the media paints a one-sided caustic picture of them that negatively influences the societal, familial, and children’s perspectives of them. They are censored from defending themselves by district rules. Within the circumstance of their vocal stricture, they are subjugated to the mercy of decisions governing their practice that are made at a distance from them, and without important contextual awareness of students’ needs, without voice from educators that could provide a basis for sound decisions. They are forced into compliance with decisions governing their practice through mandates, administrative rule, and threats of consequence.
The findings in this theme highlight that many decisions that govern their practice are at odds with the values of their calling, and what they believe to be in the best interests of their special education students. This causes, for these participants, an emotional and cognitive conflict, a bind between their beliefs, what they are forced to do, and their inability to talk openly about problems. These findings highlight decisions regarding curriculum priorities suggested at the Federal level, adopted by the State, and imposed on the district in which they serve through purse strings and mandates. The findings reveal that the curriculum priority within the district is focused on readying all children for college to the exclusion of resourcing for other success paths. They reveal that this adopted focus is not suitable to meet the needs of the majority of their special education students. Furthermore, resourcing decisions have eliminated other suitable opportunities for success for their special education students such as functional adaptive and vocational curricula.

Decisions regarding resourcing, they reveal, have had a negative impact on teacher pay, material and human supports for the classroom, the breadth of the continuum of special education service models, and specialized educator training to meet the unique individual needs among students with a wide array of disabilities. Findings reveal that resourcing within their district favors elements that are aligned with the common core curriculum and priority of readying children for college. These conditions foster feelings among participants that they are not valued, their students are not a priority, and there is not an effective advocate to speak on their behalf.

**Sourness in Relationships**

Sourness in relationships describes the strain in relationships that is activated by
interactions. It involves micro-system level elements including roles, activities, and interpersonal relationships with others. Findings in this theme support the assertion made by Paulo Frier (1993) that the process of learning is a function of the relationship between teacher and student, mediated by the world. Within this theme there are findings regarding stress among students, among teachers, and the impact of stress within the interaction of teachers and students.

Findings within this theme reveal that students experience a myriad of stressors that influence how they interact and engage within the school. Participants assert that students are their main priority and that while students are at school, in their care, they view themselves as in loco parentis (in place of parent). Findings in this theme reveal that student stress interferes negatively with learning. Findings in this theme reveal that special education students carry stressors related to their handicapping condition in addition to the normal stressors and circumstances experienced by other students. Furthermore, findings in this theme reveal that educators view student stressors to represent primary needs that must be met prior to effective engagement within academic learning. This is consistent with Maslow’s (1954/1970, 2011) hierarchy of needs. Furthermore, they view meeting these primary needs as a responsibility inherent to their roles as special educators. They also reveal conflicts between their beliefs about, and efforts to meet children’s primary needs, and the priorities of the district and subsequent pressures imposed on them.

Findings regarding teacher stress reveal that they too experience a wide array of stressors from environmental elements. Findings reveal that primary stressors among participants are the conditions, needs, traumas, and stressful circumstances among their
students. Participants purport that they have personal stressors from their lives outside of school, but they effort to buffer their students’ awareness of these. Findings reveal that participants identify secondary stressors that impact them in the congress of teaching. Secondary stressors include priorities or circumstances imposed on them through their roles as educators that compete with what they see as necessary to help their students. Collectively they reveal stress from a lack of parental support, parents that are disengaged, parents that are not doing enough to help their children, and parents that are aggressive toward the school, and teachers; stress from sourness in relationships with administrators related to leadership actions, methods, lack of support, and instability; and stress from collegial interactions related to prejudices, negativity, and lack of understanding of special education student needs, or value ascribed to special educators’ expertise.

Findings reveal that stress carried by teachers and students collide during interaction through a bi-directional exchange. This, participants point out, interferes with student learning and is complicated by structural elements within the school. Students, for example, express their stress through petulant behaviors that cannot be ignored. Teachers, under pressure to comply with scripted paced lessons in service of the district curriculum priority, are judged poorly for falling behind on the pacing charts if they stop rigorously instructing their children to attend to student needs or crisis. This is a collision of stress from competing demands. The stress felt by both parties, teacher and student, enters into their interaction to cause conflict that distracts from learning.

The Whittling Away of Individualized Education, a Fertile Garden of Discontent

Findings in this theme reveal the most troubling source of stress to participants.
Findings in this theme reveal structural discrimination of their special education students through subversion of the IEP, curriculum priorities that poorly serve special education students, State graduation accounting formulas that count students who earn special education diplomas (or transitional diplomas) as dropouts, and peculiarities within the State Alternative Assessment program that allow students in the lowest 1% of cognitive functioning to earn diplomas that are counted among the college preparatory diplomas. SAA students earn college preparatory diplomas while higher functioning special education students that graduate with transitional diplomas are counted as dropouts. In addition, findings in this theme reveal systemic abuse of special education students by standardized testing.

Participants reveal that district policy places a premium on the common core college preparatory curriculum and has resulted in a practice of writing IEP goals and objectives to the grade level common core curriculum standard, rather than the student’s present levels of functioning. Additionally, the IEP is written to reflect what can be offered in the continuum of special education delivery service models provided in the district, rather than as a reflection of accommodations needed to serve the child’s needs. Complicating this further is a shrinking of the continuum of services by eliminating self-contained classrooms in favor of co-teaching models that support the movement toward mainstreaming. Concurrent with this is an elimination of vocational and functional adaptive curricula options that participants feel would better serve their special education students.

Participants reveal significant dissonance between what the college preparatory curriculum that they are required to use, and the educational needs among their students.
In addition, the pace of the curriculum is set at a rate that is too fast for special education students to grasp, and the content itself has tenuous value to them resulting in disengagement, frustration, and a widening achievement gap that leaves special education students further behind. Students that function well below grade level are served this curriculum, and then forced to painfully sit through standardized test after standardized test, each described as a failure experience. Furthermore students that need more intensive supports than co-teaching models can provide are denied access due to a lack of adequate self-contained classrooms, and a lack of resourcing for individual or small group instruction that could occur within other models. Participants assert that there are students being served in co-taught classroom who need to be in a self-contained model in order to be adequately served. These classrooms are no longer readily available.

The policies that govern these educators’ practice create circumstances that break their hearts. They are sources of extreme stress because they position educators to violate the values that drew them to the field by requiring them to participate in practices that they believe to harm their students. Furthermore, they have no influence or authority to challenge these matters, and they are prevented from doing so through district censorship, and threats of consequence. They are told to do the impossible: they are directed to comply with policies and practices that they believe harm children; asked to violate the moral underpinnings of their oath, calling, and laws that chaperone student rights; they are required to remain silent while they bear witness to structural discrimination and abuse of their students at the hands of their leaders; and then told that they are bad because their students did not magically overcome the oppressive forces imposed on them to score well on a standardized test, a score that is then used to judge the teacher as
ineffective. These findings reveal that these teachers are abused by misguided decisions made at a distance from their practice of education without context or understanding of the complexities involved in serving their special education students.

**Erosion of Educator Resolve: Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

This is the final theme related to participants’ experience of stress. Findings in this theme reveal how the sources of stress, the environmental elements, influence the educator within the life space over time and result in response behaviors to cope. Coping response behaviors include thoughts, feelings and directed actions to accommodate the demands of stress. Findings in this theme focus on response behaviors that align with the symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. Findings reveal that participants employed, or saw other educators employ coping responses consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout.

Findings reveal that in response to stress, participants collectively have experienced: insomnia, waking up at night worried about the children, physiological problems like high blood pressure or diabetes, feeling overwhelmed, headaches, fatigue, and physical illness from the stress. One teacher reported that she became mentally and emotionally withdrawn. Other teachers reported that they have observed their colleagues taking their stress out on the children, becoming detached, losing their empathy for the kids, and losing their passion for the field. All of these behaviors are described within the literature as behaviors consistent with symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout (see Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003; Morrissette, 2004; and Valent, 2002).

These findings are not meant to be a diagnostic assessment of participants, but rather an illumination of their experience of stress and respondent coping strategies.
Compassion fatigue is described in the literature as an exhaustion of an individual’s compassion for others generally arrived at through exposure to stressful circumstances within the environment, or stress having to do with another person or people with whom the individual interacts (Figley, 1999; Maslach, 2003). In every instance, participants’ empathy, regard, and compassion for their pupils remained solvent despite the presence symptoms associated with compassion fatigue, and despite prolonged immersion in extraordinarily binding and stressful circumstances. The findings in these four interrelated themes of stress reveal conditions that affirm risk of compassion fatigue, the presence of symptoms, but an absence of the central outcome, that of reduced compassion. This suggests the presence of mediating elements within the environment.

**Keeping Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout Situated and Molecular**

Findings within this theme identify the elements within the environment that mediate stress among participants. Findings reveal that mediation of stress does not eliminate or remove it, but establishes a balance between what is negative and what is positive that enables the educators to function. This is the most significant finding from this research to help me to understand the processes involved in helping my friends and colleagues who struggle with maintaining their love of children and passion for the field. Central to the findings within this theme is that the gestalt meaning of being an educator, based on what these 24 educators described, resides in the balance of the molar or molecular experience of stress versus the molar or molecular experience of joys related to working children. Molar, as used here, refers to the overall or gestalt experience, the biggest or most intense part of the experience, whereas molecular is being used to refer to the opposite, a smaller, less intense part of the experience. Findings within this them
reveal that coping mechanisms remain adaptive for participants within the context of their life space because the balance between stress and joy remains such that the molar stake of what being a teacher represents to them is about the love they have for children and the relationships they have with them. Their stress is outweighed by this and thereby held down as a molecular facet of their experience.

Findings reveal the elements that mediate educator stress, and serve to prevent compassion fatigue and burnout from claiming a molar stake include participants’ love of children, hope for a better future, and the help that they give and receive one another in support of their callings. Influences from their callings reach forward through time into the present to strengthen participants’ resolve within the life space. Hope for the prospect of a better future for their students, a future that has not happened yet, reaches back in time to the present to strengthen educators’ dedication within the life space. Love of students is reinforced through the relationships that participants have with students, past and present, and rewards participants for their efforts by bringing them face-to-face with the value of their work. These three elements are found to mediate participant’s experience of situated stress from becoming molar, gestalt representations of what it means to be educators and, in so doing, they mediate compassion fatigue and burnout from finding soil and growing roots. The findings assert that it is the relationship with students that matters to both student learning and healthy educator emotional wellbeing.

Generative Guidance From Those in the Know for Teachers new to the Field

The findings in this study affirm that teaching is a stressful job. To this, participants offered advice to new teachers entering the field that reflects their own efforts to cope with stress and preserve their emotional wellbeing. Participants included
advice for teachers in general, but it was largely drawn from their work with special
education students. Findings include advice that guides new teachers related to
establishing positive relationships with students, learning from colleagues, and self-care.

With respect to students, participants suggest to practice the golden rule: “treat
others as you want to be treated.” In addition, they point out that it is important to refrain
from judging students, to approach them with an open mind, remain calm during
interactions, do not take their behavior personally, celebrate small gains, and establish
relationships with them as individuals. They stress the value of understanding the context
of individual children’s lives, knowing them personally and holistically through personal
interaction and the history contained in their records. They also advise to refrain from
treating, or trying to reach students through ways or manners new teachers might employ
with their own children. Children come to school with histories of their own and it is
important to refrain from conduct that might remind them of trauma or difficulties they
have encountered in their lives, or trigger their related coping responses. Participants
advise new teachers to attend to how students respond to them, be mindful of whether or
not their approach is impacting students negatively, and make adjustments as needed.
They also suggest refraining from being fooled by proclamations that assert absolutes,
and remain true to what they believe to be valid in the best interests of their students.

With respect to learning from colleagues, participants advise new teachers to form
relationship with veteran teachers from whom they can learn, observe, and seek guidance.
They suggest avoiding teachers who treat children poorly, or who are otherwise negative.
They reveal that new teachers cannot know all that they need to when they enter the field.
They will make mistakes, and it is important to ask questions.
With respect to taking self-care, participants stress the importance of taking care of their physical and emotional health, finding a balance between working hard and self-acceptance. It is important, they said, for new teachers to be able to forgive themselves if they get off track or do not accomplish all that they hoped to in a day. They recommend that new teachers do their best, and regularly reflect on the difference that they make in the lives of students. They added that if stress becomes too challenging, it is important to take time to re-group. Finally, they recommend becoming comfortable with the reality that you cannot save the world, but you can come to do your best and if you help even one child, “you’ve done good.”

**Conclusion**

Participants came to the field of education with noble intentions to help children that reflect common altruistic values and beliefs. Once within the bonds of the community of educators, they became aware of an insulting reality of powerlessness and subversion sourced to hostile attacks and offensive directives from people who, or institutions that, judge and lead them. Forced in to compliance by the stricture of censorship and threat of consequence, they are held in helpless servitude to mandates from disconnected and unaware leaders that structurally discriminate against their special education students, and systematically abuse them through policy and practice mandates that form impossible access to success for special education students. Participants are further abused by being blamed through fundamental attribution error for their children’s lack of progress. These negative elements assail my participants with binding stress and heartbreak.
Despite virulent circumstances, participants establish and maintain a molar view of their work with children, and what it means to be an educator, that counterbalances and outweighs their stress. The values of their calling reach forward through time to infuse with their love of children along with their courageous hope that things will get better for them, and for their students. This interaction is reinforced through the collective bonds with colleagues as they give and receive help from one another. It is anchored, reinforced, and rewarded by the relationships with their students that bring them face-to-face with the value of their work.

Participants’ students are their first priority. The relationships they have with students are the primary tool for teaching and learning, and the faith that is drawn from calling, love, hope, help, and their relationships with students, sustains them to endure the self-sacrifice of submitting to the painful realities forced upon them so that they can continue to be educators. Within their contributions to this study exists a call upon advocates and decision makers to repair the fissure that exists and isolates them from sharing in their governance, to learn from them, to liberate them from the stricture of their censorship and include their voice and insights in discourse and decisions, to represent them fairly, and to effectively join them in the humble service of helping children to grow, learn, and actualize their greatest potential. It is my view, based on this research, that the key to keeping compassion fatigue and burnout from robbing teachers of their love for students and passion for the field, is to engage measures that strengthen their relationships
with students, recognize and value their good works, and join with them in the service of their calling.

Validity

Building a Foundation of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, validity refers to the believability or trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Within the scope of this study, there were deeply set personal motivations to establish validity. Among them included a desire to understand educator experience of these phenomena with a goal of finding ways to mediate or lessen the negative ripple of their influence. While this was and remains a personal interest, it was also hoped that the results here would aid other helpers, healers or educational leaders as they draw from this work to engage with potential beneficiaries of these understanding and findings in their own circles.

With respect to establishing validity, there is no shopping list of methodological strategies that will ensure the absolute validity of qualitative research findings (Maxwell, 2005). My goal, then, was to establish a foundation within the description of all aspects of the study that affords a level of credible trust for the understandings that arose from the research. Within this study, this was conceptualized as the strength of a curriculum of coalesced influences that inform understandings of the relationships existing between educators, their environments, and dispositions of emotional wellbeing including the negative states associated with stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. The influences described are reflexive in that they interact with the external reader of this research; therefore, establishing validity requires consideration of whether or not the findings will
be logical and believable to someone outside the worlds of the researcher and participants.

**Positionality and Epoch.**

Within the present work, several methods or strategies were woven in to the fabric of the study to aid in establishing validity. Maxwell (2005) describes researcher bias as a threat to validity. One measure to address this bias was to inform the audience of my positionality as a researcher. This allows the reader insight to the philosophical assumptions that interacted with my lens as a researcher (Creswell, 2007). Transparency of positionality to the reader is not the end of efforts to address researcher bias. In addition to this measure, this study also includes what Van Manen (1990) refers to as exploring the researcher’s pedagogy of a theme. This involved reflexive reflection of the essence of a phenomena and my experience of it in relation to the meaning assigned to it by participants. Specific activities within the present study that support the ongoing reflective analysis of my pedagogy, or bias, include writing researcher reflections, memos, and starting the analysis by processing epoch. That is, writing of personal experiences of the phenomena in order to set aside these experiences and establish what Husserl (1973/1948) refers to as the processing of epoche, or suspension of personal judgments or beliefs about phenomena in order to see it as others see it.

**Triangulation.**

Within the construction of the study there were also measures to establish validity through triangulation of data. Wolcott (2009) describes triangulating data as a process of including data from multiple sources. Triangulation was accomplished in this study by including data from focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and prompted journal
writings. Including data from multiple sources strengthens the data by lessening the likelihood of incidental themes serving as informant to overall emergent themes within the findings (Van Manen, 1990).

There were three sources of data in this study and the clearest triangulation occurs when the code is present across all data sources: Focus Groups, Individual Interviews, and Journal Prompts. When this study was developed, it was targeted toward special education teachers as being the primary participant pool. As data collection began, it was clear that other participant types wanted to contribute and have their stories included and, given that this is where the data was leading, additional participant types were added. Hence the sample was expanded to accommodate a fuller and more robust collective story. The added participants provide a second means through which to view triangulation. That is, triangulation across participant types. In all there were 10 participant types that contributed date to this research. This includes educators from a wide array of positions ranging from para-professional teacher to principal. This second means of triangulation was applied for codes that did not meet the threshold of triangulation across all three data sources but had two of the sources and also had five or more of the 10 participant types represented.

These two methods of triangulation offer an additional benefit of strength of triangulation. The strongest triangulation included codes that exist across all data sources and all participant types. The next strongest level of triangulation included codes that exist across all data sources and a wide array (five or more) of participant types. The next strongest level of triangulation included codes that exist over two data sources and a wide array of participant types.
Member Checking and Peer Review.

Two additional strategies that were employed that have not been discussed thus far are member checking and peer review. Member checking is also referred to as respondent validation and it is a process by which input is sought from participants regarding whether or not the emergent themes accurately represented the meanings that they intended (Merriam, 2009). This allowed for checking to make sure that the participant’s contributions were understood accurately and not misinterpreted in the findings (Creswell, 2007).

Within the present study, participants were asked for feedback to make sure that their contributions were accurately represented in the research on more than one occasion in various phases of analysis. During the interviews and focus group sessions a questioning style was used that mirrored back what participants said from time to time to gain clarity. In addition, member checking was conducted at various points during the data analysis. During the early stage of data analysis, when the emergent logical groupings within the umbrella codes were established, seven participants were queried to gain their input on whether or not the quotations within the emergent logical groupings accurately reflected their statements during data collection (Merriam, 2009). All seven of the participants found the emergent logical groupings consistent with their contributions. Member checking was conducted again at the emergence of the overall themes from the data analysis. In this instance, eight participants were engaged in discussion of their contributions and the emergent themes. All eight participants indicated that the seven emergent themes were consistent with their contributions.
Peer review is a process that involves having an individual knowledgeable about the topic, but not involved in the present study, to serve as an outside reviewer. The peer reviewer examines the data and methodology to assess whether or not the findings are reasonable and credible (Merriam, 2009). For this study the research has been conducted within the context of a doctoral dissertation and, as such, peer review has been sought from doctoral committee members who are experts in the field of education, educational research, and narrative writing of qualitative research.

**Limitations of the Study**

Qualitative research is not designed for broad generalizability and, as such, this study has limitations. Bryant (2004) describes limitations as, “those restrictions created by your methodology” (p. 58). This study has data drawn from focus groups, interviews, and journal writings. These are all brief encounters with the participants that are highly vulnerable to acute environmental influences that might be mediated were the study to be conducted over a longer period of time (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the study drew the data through interactive engagement with the researcher and others within the focus groups, with the researcher in the semi-structured interview, and through independent reflective activity for the journal writings. The interactive and reflective nature of these activities elicit contributions from participants that may differ from those that might be obtained by observing them in their classrooms or other environments where their actions are less likely to be mediated by memory and other social or cognitive processes. Most noteworthy, this study is limited by the sampling procedures. The sample is drawn from a single school district and as such the data is vulnerable to environmental conditions and systemic idiosyncrasies unique to the district.
Delimitations

Delimitations, according to Bryant (2004), “are the factors that prevent you from claiming that your findings are true for all people in all times and places” (p. 57). Bryant (2004) is referring to the factors of the study that impact the generalizability of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Within the present study, the participants are drawn from a single large school district within a large urban metropolitan city in the Southern United States.

Challenges within the district include a declining tax digest due to reduced property values relative to an economic recession. This has producing reductions in pay and resources, downsizing of teaching and support staff, increased class sizes, furlough days, instability within district leadership including the superintendent and board of education, and other processes, structures and practices unique to the district. All of these environmental attributes unique to the district present delimitating factors. Additionally, at the time that the study data was collected, the State in which the district is situated adopted a standardized curriculum, which resulted in a change to the curriculum and curriculum delivery within the district. This presents as a delimitating factor as other districts might not be in the midst of similar changes. Additionally, the politics and ways of being within Southern culture that interact with, and influence, the participants of this study may not be consistent with other regions and, as such, may be a delimiting factor for this study. Likewise, the school district from which these participants are drawn from may differ by size, resources, student population, leadership, and a by host of other environmental influences that may be unique to the district and thereby be a delimiting feature. The participants themselves may not be a representative
sample of all educators, which also presents as a delimiting factor. Finally, social conditions of the present day such as the political climate, recent economic downturn and elevated unemployment, may produce influences on participants that may not be factors in the future and are therefore delimiting characteristics of the present study.

Theoretical Implications

Participants in this study reveal the nature and demands inherent to their roles as educators to be consistent with other helping professions. This is important given that the phenomena of compassion fatigue originated within the fields of traumatology and burnout to describe the emotional costs of caring among members of this bonded group. The traditional definition of the helping professions does not include educators; it included social workers, medical professionals, and emergency first responders (Devilly et al., 2009; Morrissette, 2004; Robinson, 2006). Adding teachers to inquiry and scholarship among researchers who study compassion fatigue, may offer helpful insights going forward.

Additionally, the findings in this research make several assertions regarding the nature of teachers’ work with students. First, participants identify student behavior as a purposeful mechanism that communicates their stress related to unmet basic or primary needs. Participants identify the importance of meeting these needs as pre-requisite to effective instruction of academic subjects. This is consistent with Maslow’s (1954/1970, 2011) hierarchy of needs. Second, teachers define their roles as educators to include meeting children’s primary needs as a critical function of effective instruction. Third, participants assert that teacher and student stress detracts from learning and undermines achievement among pupils. Fourth, participants view their responsibility toward the
children in their care as akin to being in the place of the children’s parents (in loco parentis). Fifth, consistent with assertions by Nieto (2005) participants in this study describe their decision to join the field, and what it means to them to be an educator, as a calling. Furthermore they reveal that the beliefs and values inherent to their calling remain with them as an influence on their practice throughout their careers. Finally, participants reveal the relationships between teachers and students are the primary influence for both the congress of teaching and learning, and teacher resilience. These assertions inform the orientation of these teachers as they interact with their students, along with their experiences of stressors that facilitate or mitigate stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. In this research, these elements established a foundation of which stressful elements conflicted, causing emotional and cognitive binds that negatively influenced participants’ emotional wellbeing.

**Practical Implications**

There are several practical implications from this research. First, participants identify stricture from censorship as a source of stress. Beyond being a source of stress, it also excludes their voice in decisions that govern their practice. They identify decisions imposed on them that structurally discriminate against special education students by subverting the IEP, the manner in which their State Board of Education counts special education students’ diplomas (i.e. transitional diplomas) for graduation, their State’s Alternative Assessment (SAA) program, and a lack of both adequate curricula and special education service delivery models. These are problems identified as existing within their district or State that are in need of immediate attention. The law protects special education students’ rights, and these same laws chaperone the values and
underpinnings of the calling among special educators.

It is to the advantage of their district to lift the stricture of censorship exacted on these teachers voice in order to learn directly from them how the policies and practices adopted by the district are causing distress and conflict with what these educators believe to be in the best interests of their students. In addition, participants reveal that they can offer decision makers holistic contextual information for making sound decisions for the field and for special education in particular. Lifting the stricture of censorship, and including educator input on the governance of their practice may enhance the quality of decisions going forward, and reduce the likelihood of continuing to add to the gap between special education students’ and general education students’ success rates.

In addition to consideration of programming for students via curriculum and classroom format, it is also worthwhile to attend to the frequency, necessity, and manner that standardized tests are administered to special education students. Participants identify the current practices as repeated rehearsals of failure among special education students. They indicate that may special education students, by virtue of their handicapping conditions, are often significantly below grade level. The standardized tests, including benchmark assessments given every three weeks in this district, are assessments measuring performance on grade level common core curriculum standards. This repeated assessment process is, according to participants, a set up for failure for their special education students. Participants revealed that 15 out of 20 instructional days in one month of the academic calendar were spent testing students with various standardized tests. Additionally, students are given benchmark assessments of their mastery of grade level common core curriculum standards every three weeks. This, they reveal, is
excessive and results in testing fatigue among students. They reveal that students present both anxiety and apathy toward testing and often just bubble in answers to finish so that they can put their heads down and wait until it is over. The quality of information gained by these tests is questionable and the proposed utility to measure teacher effectiveness from these measurements of student achievement is compromised, questionable, and unfair resulting in tremendous stress to educators.

Finally, in all matters it is wise for leaders to consider how their actions impact those they follow. The participants in this study reveal clearly that both teacher and student stress distracts and undermines the congress of teaching and learning. To this end, it may be practical for leaders to attend well to this as they are charged with helping students to achieve at their most optimal level. It may wise for leaders in education to incorporate structures within the ecology of schools, and the field of education that support healthy emotional wellbeing among teachers and, in particular, among special educators.

Special educators who participated in this study revealed that complexities, responsibilities, and stressors of their jobs, relative to general educators, are higher and more intense. Furthermore they reveal a general lack of understanding from administrators and decision makers regarding their students’ needs and what they must do to meet them. It is to the benefit of the field, to special educators, and to the special education students served, for leaders to establish stronger awareness, stronger relationships, and stronger support of special education.

**Implications for Future Research**

It is my sincere hope that the stressors that these participants described are
isolated elements unique to their district. Given, however, that the scope of this inquiry only included participants drawn from a single school district, consideration of expanding the study to include a wider sample of participants from multiple districts is merited to rule out the existence of similar stressors on a wider scale. Along this line, it may also be helpful to include participants from a sampling who represent a regional, State, or a National pool. This may be particularly helpful given that participants in this study trace the origins of many of their stressors through a lineage that starts with Federal Acts (e.g., NCLB and RTTT) that were adopted by their State and then subsequently imposed on local districts, their schools, and their individual practices as educators.

**Summary**

Teaching is a very stressful occupation, particularly for special educators. Participants revealed that many of the sources of their stress are outside of their control, and are elements within the ecology of the field and their schools that are imposed on to them through mandates and administrative rule. They reveal that they are censored from speaking out about what they see as the problems within contemporary education, or on behalf of themselves or their students. Additionally, they reveal that many of the decisions governing their practice are at odds with what they see as in the best interests of their special education students. This causes emotional and cognitive distress among participants to which they have little recourse. They assert that student and teacher stress interferes with learning. They also assert feelings and beliefs that special education students and their teachers are not well understood, valued, or given priority in discourse and decisions by figures with authority that govern the field and their practice. Within their practice, they believe it is their obligation to meet student primary needs that
supersede academic learning. They describe this as a critical function of effective
teaching. They reveal that priorities within their district compete with, and devalue, their
efforts to care for students in this way.

They reveal that despite the extraordinarily stressful circumstances they find
themselves in, they remain loyal to their callings and are resilient because of their love
for children, hopes for a better future, and the help that they give to, and receive from
each other. Among their hopes for the future, they wish for greater voice in matters
related to the governance of their practice. They hope for adequate and appropriate
resourcing for meeting special education students’ needs, along with viable curriculum
and service delivery options. In all that they do, they reveal it is the relationship between
teacher and student that is the primary influence on learning, and on teacher resilience.
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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Date__________

Dear Teacher,

I am currently enrolled as a doctoral student in Inclusive Education and Educational Leadership for Learning at Kennesaw State University. As a requirement for my degree I will be conducting a research project entitled “Curriculum of Influences on Emotional Wellbeing: Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout among Educators.” The purpose of this research is to help the education community better understand and support the needs of teachers contending with work and student related stress. I am requesting your permission to include you in this project.

This project will begin on August 1, 2012 and end on or before March 1, 2013. The project will involve a focus group, a semi-structured interview with the primary researcher, and a series of 5 journal reflections to writing prompts. Possible benefits for the participants of this project include the following: The present study will contribute insights to the literature on compassion fatigue and teacher burnout that may serve to inform change agents within the education field regarding how to identify and mitigate teacher stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Additionally, this study will include special education teachers within the inquiry of compassion fatigue among educators heretofore not represented in the literature. The potential significance of insights gained by this study may establish new foundations for educational change agents to support teachers and thereby facilitate enhanced teacher emotional wellbeing, improved job satisfaction, improved school climate, improved teacher-student relationships, and enhanced student achievement.

The interview and focus group will be audio taped and will include questions about teacher perspectives on aspects of their engagement with students, student related stress, work related stress, job satisfaction, school climate, influence of stress on teaching and student achievement, sources of stress, coping, and potential mitigation strategies. There are no foreseeable risks for participants. Your name and all other personally identifiable information will be kept confidential. The names of your school and school district will not be included in the final report.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You will not be penalized or lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to if you decide that you will not participate in this research project. If you decide to participate in this project, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You have the right to inspect any instrument or materials related to the proposal. Your
request will be honored within a reasonable period after the request is received. All participants will be at least 18 years old.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research project, please contact me at:

404-345-7065 (home) or 678-676-9430 (work)
scottmcmans40@yahoo.com
SDM0216@fc.dekalb.k12.ga.us
Scott D. McManus, A.B.D.
2961 Kimmeridge Drive
East Point, Georgia 30344

You may also contact my University advisor, Dr. R. Ugena Whitlock at 770-423-6314.

Thank you for your participation in this important study.

Best regards,

____________________________
Scott D. McManus, A.B.D.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign and date the form in the space provided below.

_________________________________
Signature

_________________________________
Printed name

_________________________________
Date
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP SCRIPTED QUESTIONS

1. Describe the most significant sources of stress that you have encountered in your role as a teacher.

2. Describe how the stress influenced your thoughts, feelings, or actions?

3. Describe strategies that worked or did not work to take care of your stress.

4. How does stress interact within the learning environment?

5. How does stress and interact with the practice of teaching?

6. How does stress influence the teacher-student relationship?

7. Can you describe a time that the stress caused emotional, physical, or cognitive exhaustion?

8. Can you describe a time that your stress was so strong that you avoided certain people or situations?

9. How does stress influence your physiological health?

10. What supports are available to you to ease your stress?

11. Describe elements that keep you emotionally strong?

12. What elements keep you emotionally strong in the presence of stress?
APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What drew you to the field of education?

2. Can you share an experience that you have had with a student or family that is particularly meaningful to you or that makes you proud of your work?

3. Tell me about your students this year.
   a. How would you describe the relationships that your students have with you?
   b. How have they adjusted to the school year so far?
   c. Tell me about the model of teaching that you have these students in (e.g., general education, co-teaching, resource, self-contained) and how it works.

4. If you feel comfortable, please tell me about any stress that you are experiencing.
   a. Can you describe the influence that this stress has on your relationships with your students?
   b. Can you describe the influence of stress on your teaching and or student achievement?
   c. How does your stress influence the interactions that you have with other educators? Administrators? Parents?
   d. Is your stress influencing you outside of school as well?
e. Have you ever experienced physical health symptoms related to stress?

f. Have you ever felt like your compassion was just exhausted? Can you describe this?

g. Have you ever felt burned out? Can you describe this?

5. Has there ever been a time that your stress or experience with the job has caused you to question your decision to be a teacher or consider leaving the field?

6. How does the media coverage regarding education influence you?
   a. What influence does the media or other external sources have on the stress that teachers feel?

7. What keeps you coming back despite the stress?

8. What strategies do you find helpful to manage your stress?
   a. Can you describe the climate of your school?
      i. Are there supports available to teachers that help to relieve stress?

9. If you had the power to change the world, what supports would you want to help teachers?
   a. At the classroom level?
   b. At the school level?
   c. At the district level?
   d. At the community level?
   e. At the Federal level?
10. If you were mentoring a new teacher, what advice would you provide about managing stress?

11. Are there any other aspects of stress or stress management that you think should be included in this study?
APPENDIX D

PROMPTS FOR JOURNAL ENTRIES

1. From your perspective as an educator, describe an emotionally healthy teacher.

2. From your perspective as an educator, describe how the interactions between teacher and student, and/or teacher and teaching, are influenced by stress.

3. From your perspective as an educator, describe a personal experience with stress and how it influenced your performance as a teacher. Include how it influenced you emotionally, cognitively, and physiologically.

4. From your perspective as a teacher, identify supports and/or changes that would be helpful for teacher stress.

5. If you were an advocate for all teachers, what would you want decision makers (near and far) to be aware of regarding support to teacher wellbeing?