Mental Health and the High-Performing Student: A Study of Stressors and Effective Supports for High-Achieving High School Students

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Mental Health and the High-Performing Student: A Study of Stressors and Effective Supports for High-Achieving High School Students

A Dissertation by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Mental Health and the High-Performing Student: A Study of Stressors and Effective Supports for High-Achieving High School Students

by Jodi Boyle

Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses. An additional purpose of this study was to identify the academic and social stressors experienced by students and the coping strategies used to overcome them.

Methodology: This study used a phenomenological research design to describe the lived experiences, academic and social stressors, and coping strategies of high-achieving students. For this study, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the academic and social experiences of students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses. This data provided insight into the perspectives and thoughts experienced by students and helped to identify coping strategies to support academic and social stressors. The combination of purposeful and convenience sampling was used to identify a small group of students in IB, AP, or Honors courses.

Findings: Analysis of the data revealed that students identified IB, AP, and Honors course expectations, participation in extracurricular activities, and time preparing for courses as causing stress. Academic stressors for participants were related to workload, test anxiety, consistency in expectations, and stress related to course and personal success criteria. Social interactions, peer relationships, social media involvement, and extracurricular activities caused increased stress. Additionally, participants identified
time and curricula management, support resources, and activities for addressing stress as methods for coping with academic and social stressors affecting high-achieving students.

**Conclusions:** To support students, four conclusions were identified. First, the structure of courses combined with the competitive nature of students creates a stressful situation. Second, although family, friends, and teachers provide support for student achievement, they also contribute to stressful situations encountered by students. Third, the demands from participation in IB, AP, and Honors courses limit time with peers and social activities for students. Finally, high-achieving students require support in managing time, prioritizing, and coping to reduce stress.

**Recommendations:** Based on the findings from this study, eight recommendations were put forth for further research to advance the understanding of how to address student stress.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The effects of prolonged and excessive stress on the brain can negatively impact a student’s ability to behave and learn (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014). As further detailed in the study by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005/2014), stress becomes toxic when the body’s stress management system is activated for long periods of time. With effective coping strategies, those in stressful situations are able to identify physical or mental actions to effectively react to stress (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001).

Lazarus (1999) found that stress can be a response to illness, academics, family, and/or social interactions for children and adolescents. According to a report released by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2017), students worldwide experience stress in relation to academic and social experiences, especially as academic expectations rise. In a study by Feld and Shusterman (2015), high school students participating in college preparatory classes experience symptoms of stress, such as lack of concentration, work initiation, and irritability at least once a week. For students living in high stress and economically disadvantaged areas, life events often prevent them from meeting academic and behavioral expectations in school; however, when educators provide positive opportunities for students to engage with their peers, community, and school, learners feel connected to their environment and motivation increases (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Learning can be stressful for students in secondary education, especially for those transitioning from middle to high school. With increased academic and social
obligations, social and emotional supports provide students with strategies for decreasing stress and anxiety (Merrell, Juskelis, Tran, & Buchanan, 2008). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, n.d.), academic programs that promote social and emotional learning (SEL) encourage positive peer interactions, decreased stress and depression, and increased academic performance in students. As increased supports for students struggling with SEL needs are provided (K. Tan, Sinha, Shin, & Wang, 2018) and a focus on creating goals for college and career readiness in middle and high school are addressed (Davis, Solberg, de Baca, & Gore, 2014), secondary students develop strategies for academic success.

**Background**

Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory described the fact that the human brain can form thoughts and actions based upon the anticipated outcomes of a situation and adjust responses according to the positive or negative results of one’s actions. Within the educational setting, students at all ages experience forms of social and academic stress. According to Fields and Prinz (1997), stress in preschool and elementary-age students is associated with getting along with others and solving academic problems. In a study on stress conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), teens report that during the school year, they experience stress at levels that cause them to feel overwhelmed, depressed, and tired (Bethune, 2014). By recognizing student stress, educators are able to provide specific supports to improve student academic performance and mitigate behavioral and emotional struggles (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017).
Experts agree that to provide effective academic instruction, students need strategies that support their ability to understand their emotions, regulate their behaviors, communicate appropriately, and make reasonable decisions in diverse settings (CASEL, n.d.). Students who are challenged by emotions struggle with classroom engagement and academic success (Durlak et al., 2011); however, educators and families can work together to develop self-efficacy, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making skills in students (CASEL, n.d.). Bradberry and Greaves (2009) further supported this claim with the description that emotional intelligence enables individuals to control the rational and emotional functions of the brain through the ability to maintain awareness of relationships and behaviors. According to Rodríguez-Ledo, Orejudo, Cardoso, Balaguer, and Zarza-Alzugaray (2018), educational supports that provide students with the ability to be emotionally intelligent and mindful encourage a developing awareness of emotions and competence in personal and social issues.

**Social and Academic Stress in Secondary Schools**

Across the United States, secondary students experience stress caused by academic expectations, economic or interpersonal relationships within their family, and/or social relationships with peers (de Anda et al., 2000), and academic stress associated with pressure from peers, curricular expectations, and social engagements have been linked to increased student burnout. Merrell et al. (2008) believed that not addressing the academic and social stress experienced by adolescents with early interventions could create lasting negative effects for students. As reported by a study conducted by the APA, the stress experienced by teens during the school year is greater than what students feel should be healthy for their age group (Bethune, 2014).
Patterns of stress and anxiety from increased academic and social stress affects students worldwide; according to OECD (2017), academically related anxiety is prevalent among 15-year-old students in all nations, with 59% feeling anxious during testing and 60% feeling tense while studying. In a study of burnout experienced by secondary students in Portuguese schools, Cadime et al. (2016) determined that students with a high level of connectedness to their academics and self-awareness were less likely to experience academic burnout. However, according to Giota and Gustafsson (2017), girls in Swedish middle schools reported having greater stress and anxiety from academic expectations than boys. In a study by Liu and Lu (2012), students in Chinese high schools reported high levels of academic stress and depressive symptoms, which were found to be consistent between genders. Around the world, student needs vary according to OECD (2017), and with the support of teachers and families, academic stress and anxiety in students can be reduced.

Coping Strategies and Social-Emotional Supports

Secondary students have specific needs related to learning that support their mental health. According to CASEL (n.d.), academic programs that promote SEL encourage positive peer interactions, decreased stress and depression, and increased academic performance in students. Weissberg and O’Brien (2004) detailed that effective SEL programs should include systematic instruction and opportunities for student activities that engage students in all settings as well as parent and community involvement throughout development. Additionally, Durlak et al. (2011) noted that students benefit from SEL programs through improved attitudes toward self, others, and school; reduced negative behaviors; and improved academic performance.
CASEL (n.d.) observed that teachers are able to provide daily support to the SEL needs of students through specific instruction on how to develop relationships with peers by increased engagement and modeling of appropriate behaviors. Additionally, with an increased understanding of the background and needs of the students they serve and knowledge of how to support their social and emotional needs, teachers report having greater commitment to their students and an improved ability to provide instruction and student support (Poulou, 2017). As detailed by Hamedani, Zheng, and Darling-Hammond (2015), when all adults within an educational setting develop strategies for supporting the social and emotional health of all students, educators take on the critical work of educating the academic, social, emotional, and psychological needs of students to ensure they are successful within their schools and communities. With balanced supports for academics and SEL, all students receive a high-quality education (Hamedani et al., 2015).

**Theory of Stress and Emotion**

Lazarus and Folkman (1987) defined stress as “negative person-environment relationships, cognitive appraisals, and emotional response states such as fear, anger, guilt, and shame” (p. 142). To further support this definition, Lazarus (1999) asserted that the process by which individuals appraise their body’s reaction to a negative experience and the coping strategies used to mitigate the body’s response as the theory for stress and emotion.

According to Seiffge-Krenke (1995), adolescents need specific strategies to determine the appropriate response for dealing with stress; adaptive and maladaptive responses to stress are based upon an individuals’ ability to access their internal and
social resources and relationships. These coping strategies, as defined by Compas et al. (2001), are purposeful actions to respond to stressors. As students navigate stress, they need specific supports that are conducive to the emotional response to the stress that they are experiencing (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995).

**Stress and Social and Emotional Learning Supports for Students of Poverty**

Students from high-poverty schools experience events that can prevent them from meeting academic and behavioral expectations. SEL strategies designed to support students will allow them the opportunity to regulate stress in their personal lives, lower anxiety, and focus on their learning (Hamedani et al., 2015). With specific supports for helping students of poverty manage stress and anxiety, students find greater opportunities to connect to their school and peers while developing skills for future success (Durlak et al., 2011). Camangian (2015) pointed out that by offering opportunities for students to recognize, reflect, and connect their experiences outside of school to their education, students are able to develop leadership qualities that extend beyond the academic setting.

Research on SEL supports claims that students of poverty find academic success when provided strategies to manage stress and anxiety that carry over from school to their personal lives (Hamedani et al., 2015). Additionally, Hamedani et al. (2015) stated that schools must recognize the psychological needs of the whole child to identify resources and strategies that prepare children to be successful members within their community. Research by K. Tan et al. (2018) stated that educators need to create specific SEL programs to develop social skills in high school freshman struggling behaviorally and academically. When educators provide positive opportunities for students to engage, learners feel connected to their environment and motivation increases (Durlak et al.,...
2011). With instruction that supports the social and emotional needs of students, learners from urban settings can focus on the curricular and peer interactions presented to them.

CASEL (n.d.) detailed that when students use skills and strategies that are explicitly taught regarding self-management, self and social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, they succeed academically and behaviorally. As children from poverty navigate social and academic expectations, educators can offer consistent interventions and supports through structured SEL programs offered from elementary through high school (Greenberg et al., 2017) that focus on the five competencies outlined by CASEL. Furthermore, as students learn to manage their stress and anxiety through school-based SEL instruction, they carry over skills practiced into their home and community relationships (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004). Learners from urban and high poverty areas benefit from SEL strategies that support their mental health and academic competencies.

**Academic and Social Stress and the High-Achieving Student**

Students participating in academically rigorous courses like International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) courses strive for academic success; however, as described by Suldo, Shaunessy, and Hardesty (2008), these same students often experience increased pressures to succeed. Additionally, some educators assume that students achieving academic success have limited social-emotional needs (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015); in actuality, depression in high achieving students (Baker, 2004) highlights a need for increased social and emotional supports for students in these programs. Students in accelerated programs often suffer from increased levels of perceived stress associated with their performance.
(Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010) as well as a decrease in physical and mental health (Conner & Pope, 2013). Baker (2004) reinforced the concept that high-achieving students benefit from school-based supports to help manage the effects of academic and emotional stress. By understanding the mental health needs of their students, educators can develop strategies for lessening the stress and anxiety in students while providing the academic rigor necessary for the course.

However, further research concerning the relationship between perceived stress and the impact of social stressors on students participating in rigorous academic courses remains to be explored (Suldo et al., 2008). By employing SEL supports in the academic setting, educators provide students with specific strategies to strengthen their emotional regulators while creating a positive academic and social-learning environment (CASEL, n.d.). For students participating in accelerated coursework, SEL supports within the academic setting support processes for decreasing stress and anxiety.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

In a survey of over 10,000 adolescents aged 13 to 18 years, nearly 32% of the participants met the criteria for anxiety (Merikangas et al., 2010) according to the National Comorbidity Survey. Stress, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), is an emotional response to a negative experience and can be directly related to anxiety and emotional distress (Lazarus, 1999). For adolescents, the stress related to pressure from peers, increased social expectations, and academic demands (Hurley, 2018; Walburg, 2014) can negatively affect self-esteem (C. Tan & Tan, 2014), resulting in depression and anxiety (Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2017).
For students from poverty, research supports the importance of educators providing psychological, social, emotional, and academic supports to the students they serve (Hamedani et al., 2015). When students understand their emotions and learn specific coping strategies for regulating their reactions, they can navigate academic expectations. Additionally, educators need structures for supporting the social and emotional deficiencies of students (Phillippo, 2010) and strategies for helping students understand their feelings and stressors (Kregel, 2015).

For high-achieving high school students, the stress associated with academic expectations and social interactions can negatively impact an individual’s mental health. As described in Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory, the human brain adjusts its responses according to anticipated outcomes of a situation. For high school students participating in courses with rigorous academic expectations, managing perceived stress can be challenging (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010). However, the strategies used by students to manage stress caused by academia are lacking in school (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010).

According to CASEL (n.d.), with supports that help individuals understand their emotions and behaviors, improve communication, and make decisions, students find academic success. Poulou (2017) explained that when teachers understand and recognize the SEL needs of students, their commitment to instructional and behavioral supports improve. By providing balanced academic, social, and emotional-learning supports, educators are able to develop the mental health of all students, which improves the potential for academic and social success (Hamedani et al., 2015).

Although strategies for supporting the SEL needs of students in academic settings has been outlined by CASEL (n.d.), additional research is needed in determining sources
of stress and effective coping strategies for high-achieving high school students (Suldo et al., 2008). Shaunessy and Suldo (2010) detailed strategies used by gifted students to cope with stress experienced in a high school IB program with aggression and frustration. Additionally, Feld and Shusterman (2015) pointed to a need to address the effects of stress, such as lack of sleep, academic anxiety, and psychosocial factors, on students participating in college preparatory classes. Although studies have shown the effectiveness of SEL supports in urban areas with academic and social challenges (Camangian, 2015; Hamedani et al., 2015), there is currently no research that explores the lived experiences and effects of stress on high-achieving high school students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses. An additional purpose of this study was to identify the stressors (academic and social) experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students and coping strategies used to overcome them.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?
2. What are the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?
3. What are the social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?
4. What coping strategies do high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses use to manage stress?

**Significance of the Problem**

This study investigated the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses and adds to the body of research to understand the academic and social stressors affecting high-achieving students and the coping strategies used to mitigate stress. This study is significant in providing stakeholders insight into the experiences of high-achieving high school students and helping to identify appropriate social and emotional supports for managing stress and anxiety.

Shaunessy and Suldo (2010) stated that high-achieving high school students need specific strategies for coping with and managing stress. Additionally, Compas et al. (2001) detailed that specific coping strategies are needed to address stressful events and to create positive thoughts in adolescents. This study may provide insight in the resources needed by district and school administrators for counselors, social workers, and mental health therapists to support student stress and anxiety from academic and social expectations. For teachers of IB, AP, and Honors courses, an awareness of the academic and social stressors affecting their students may enable them to provide more effective supports, which could develop positive teacher and student relationships. As described by Jennings and Greenberg (2009), teachers who are aware of the social and emotional needs of their students and have strategies for helping them cope with stress find that they are more connected to their students.
CASEL (n.d.) points out that families need a strong understanding of skills, behaviors, and attitudes to support their children at home and in school. As advocates for their child’s academic and social success, this study may highlight for parents the benefits of understanding the experiences of their high-achieving students and the coping strategies needed to address the stress affecting their children. With increased instruction on self-efficacy and awareness (Rodríguez-Ledo et al., 2018), high-performing students become equipped with strategies to manage stress and anxiety. According to Rodríguez-Ledo et al. (2018), students who are aware of their emotions and have the ability to regulate their reactions to stress and anxiety are more empathetic and socially competent. This study presents examples for students to develop their emotional intelligence and to help them recognize stress and potential coping strategies.

Previous research has highlighted the need for school-based social and emotional interventions to support academic and behavioral challenges in students (Greenberg et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2003). Additionally, Hamedani et al. (2015) identified the importance of including teachers and administrators in explicit social-emotional instruction for students. This study adds to the body of literature by describing the lived experiences of high-performing students and how they cope with academic and social stress, and this may guide administrators, teachers, and parents in supporting improved mental health and well-being for students.

Definitions

The following definitions were used in this study:

**Academic stress.** Feelings of anxiety and mental distress associated with the fear or idea of academic failure (Lal, 2014).
Advanced Placement (AP). College level courses taken within high school.

Anxiety. An emotion associated with feelings of tension and worry.

Burnout. Exhaustion linked to chronic fatigue and strain (Walburg, 2014).

Coping strategies. Efforts by individuals to control the demands of their environment and the associated emotions (Lazarus, 2006).

Honors. High school courses considered to be academically rigorous in comparison to general education courses.

International Baccalaureate (IB). Educational programs focused on critical thinking and student independence for students aged 3 to 19 (International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO], n.d.).

Social and emotional learning (SEL). The process for understanding and managing emotions, goals, and empathy through responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.).

Social stress. Situations that threaten an individual’s relationships, self-esteem, or feelings of belonging (Juth & Dickerson, 2013).

Stress. An emotional response to a negative experience that can be directly related to anxiety and emotional distress (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Delimitations

This study was delimited to high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in AP, IB, and/or Honors courses at high schools in California.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this study is organized into four additional chapters, the list of references, and the appendices. Chapter II provides a review of the literature regarding
social and academic stress in secondary schools, coping strategies and social emotional supports, the theory of stress and emotion, SEL supports for students of poverty, and academic and social stress affecting high-achieving students. Chapter III describes the methodology of the study, including the research design, sample, data collection protocols, data analysis procedures, and limitations of the study. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study in a report of collected data and the results of data analysis. Chapter V presents a summary of the study and provides major findings and conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter II is a review of the literature related to stress experienced by students in secondary education. The intent of this chapter is to highlight the need for additional research to identify and describe academic and social stressors experienced by high-achieving high school students and to define coping strategies to address the stress they experience. When students understand their emotions and learn specific coping strategies for regulating their reactions, they can navigate academic expectations.

For high-achieving high school students, the stress associated with academic expectations and social interactions can negatively impact an individual’s mental health. As described in Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory, the human brain can form thoughts and actions based upon the anticipated outcomes of a situation and adjust responses according to the positive or negative results of one’s actions. For high school students participating in courses with rigorous academic expectations, managing perceived stress can be challenging (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010). However, the strategies used by students to manage perceived stress caused by academia are lacking in schools (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010). According to CASEL (n.d.), social and emotional learning (SEL) supports are most effective when strategic approaches are systematically addressed by schools, families, and community members.

This review of the literature is arranged in six sections and utilized books written by experts in the field of stress and emotion, dissertations, empirical studies, and scholarly journal articles to define academic and social stress in high-achieving high school students. Section I provides an overview of social and academic stress in secondary schools, which includes an understanding of social, emotional, and academic
learning. Section II describes social and academic stress experienced by students in secondary schools within the United States and internationally. Section III describes coping strategies and social-emotional supports for middle and high school students and includes the effectiveness of increased SEL in classrooms. Section IV describes the theoretical foundations of Lazarus’s (1999) theory of stress and emotion while defining adolescent stress and coping strategies and Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory. Section V describes stress and SEL supports for students of poverty, including supports for increasing engagement and academic performance in urban schools. Section VI presents academic and social stress for high-achieving students; describes the experiences of students in International Baccalaureate (IB), Gifted and Talented (GATE), and Advanced Placement (AP) courses; identifies key findings of the research; and identifies gaps in the research.

**Social and Academic Stress in Secondary Schools**

CASEL (n.d.) identified five components of a comprehensive social and emotional program to support the academic and social success of students. Through five core competencies focused on self-efficacy, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, students develop skills in self-efficacy that promote successful social and academic success (CASEL, n.d.). As further described by Hamedani et al. (2015), providing resources to students based in social and emotional supports provides a critical base of knowledge for students that increases social and academic success.

Academic expectations, family and social relationships, or economic concerns cause increased stress and anxiety for students in secondary schools (de Anda et al.,
Without early intervention designed to support the academic and social stress experienced by secondary students, students may struggle with mental health and learning difficulties (Merrell et al., 2008). Burnout has been linked to academic and social stress caused by peer pressure, curriculum demands, and increased social engagement (Walburg, 2014). Increased stress and anxiety associated with the demands from social, personal, and academic expectations leaves many high school students feeling overwhelmed.

Effective SEL programs, as defined by Durlak and Weissberg (2011), support students in developing skills to identify and manage emotions, set achievable goals, understand the opinions of others, develop positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and develop interpersonal skills. As students navigate increased learning and social expectations in secondary schools, specific instruction based in SEL provides support for students to encourage positive academic and peer development (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). Additionally, instruction designed to increase self-awareness, confidence, and self-efficacy in students increases motivation while improving behavior and performance (Greenberg et al., 2003).

**Social and Emotional Learning Needs in Education**

Students in secondary education experience a variety of stressors beyond those associated with their academic needs, with many students having specific needs related to learning that support their mental health. According to CASEL (n.d.), academic programs that promote SEL encourage positive peer interactions, decrease stress and depression, and increase performance in students. As stated in research by K. Tan et al. (2018), secondary schools need programs designed to support the academic, social, and
emotional needs of students. Hamedani et al. (2015) further supported this need in stating that lessons designed to meet the SEL needs of students provide psychological resources to students that build social and academic competencies.

According to a 2017 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Youth Risk Behaviors Survey, 31.5% of U.S. high school students surveyed claimed to have experienced feelings of sadness or hopelessness that occurred daily for 2 or more weeks. CDC researchers detailed that adolescents with poor mental health have a greater chance of engaging in high-risk behaviors such as sexual activity, substance abuse, or increased negative interactions in school (Kann et al., 2018). Durlak et al. (2011) detailed that SEL needs manifest in the urban, suburban, and rural classrooms as aggression, emotional distress, depression, and anxiety. To effectively eliminate maladaptive coping strategies, Greenberg et al. (2003) determined that students need consistent and ongoing instruction on how to combat stress related to academic and social relationships and to ensure better scholastic performance, behavior, and peer interactions. Furthermore, when left unsupported, the social and emotional needs of students can impact the learning of others, particularly when disruptive behaviors interrupt the classroom environment (Merrell et al., 2008).

**Emotional Intelligence in Education**

Experts agree that to provide effective academic instruction, students need strategies that support their ability to understand their emotions, regulate their behaviors, communicate appropriately, and make reasonable decisions in diverse settings (CASEL, n.d.). Bradberry and Greaves (2009) further supported this definition with the description of emotional intelligence (EI), which enables individuals to control the rational and
emotional functions of the brain through the ability to maintain awareness of relationships and behaviors. When SEL is supported through the development of EI, students develop skills in self-monitoring, increased awareness of feelings, empathy, recognition of nonverbal communication, and anger management (Salovey, Mayer, Caruso, & Yoo, 2002).

As students transition from middle to high school, stress and anxiety increases along with academic and social demands; for students with high EI there is an increased chance of engaging in effective coping strategies to manage the expectations of high school (Qualter, Whiteley, Hutchinson, & Pope, 2007). As described by Rodríguez-Ledo et al. (2018), EI is the idea of how individuals effectively understand, manage, and express emotions. Through the development of effective EI supports, students acquire strategies to regulate reactions to increased stress and anxiety. According to Parker, Saklofske, Wood, and Collin (2009), the development of effective EI strategies while young will ensure that students have skills to develop and maintain friendships throughout their education.

**Self-Efficacy**

Bandura (2006) defined self-efficacy as individuals’ perception of their ability to achieve goals based on personal experience. Students with high levels of self-efficacy, according to Zimmerman (2000), are able to effectively manage their learning while maintaining motivation. Additionally, increased self-efficacy supports students in academic achievement through confidence and in the quality of work presented (Pajares, 1996). For learners, true efficacy is exhibited by those who are able to self-regulate their emotions and control their behavior; as described by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons
as students progress from elementary through high school, their ability to self-regulate increases.

Levels of self-efficacy are often lower in students with increased stress and anxiety; in a study by Muris (2001), students with lower levels of academic and emotional self-efficacy were found to have increased levels of depression. This study is supported by Bandura’s (1993) claim that individuals with low levels of self-efficacy have difficulty visualizing success scenarios and tend to focus on their own failures. When individuals struggle with self-efficacy, they often have difficulty committing to goals, maintaining motivation and resiliency, and persevering through adversity, which can lead to stress and depression (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). For secondary students, this lack of self-efficacy can lead to task avoidance and a lack of confidence in attempting new assignments (Pajares, 1996). With specific SEL supports that develop self-efficacy, high school students can successfully navigate personal and academic expectations.

**Social and Academic Stress in U.S. and International Schools**

Stress caused by academic demands, economic and interpersonal hardship with the family, and/or peer relationships are experienced by secondary students across the United States (de Anda et al., 2000; Morazes, 2016). As students experience increased pressure from peers, curricular expectations, and social engagements, students are at a greater risk for burnout (Walburg, 2014). According to a study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), teen stress during the school year is greater than what is considered healthy for the age group (Bethune, 2014). By not addressing the academic and social stress experienced by adolescents, Merrell et al. (2008) asserted that
teens are at greater risk for experiencing lasting negative effects that could be avoided through early intervention.

Increased academic and social stress affects secondary students worldwide. According to the OECD (2017), anxiety related to academic expectations is prevalent in 15-year-old students worldwide, with 59% of students feeling anxious during testing and 60% while studying. In a study of Chinese high school students by Liu and Lu (2012), high levels of academic stress and depressive symptoms were experienced by male and female students. In Swedish middle schools, female students shared that academic expectations caused greater stress and anxiety than their male peers (Giota & Gustafsson, 2017). However, in a study of secondary students in Portuguese schools, Cadime et al. (2016) found that when students felt a high level of connectedness to their academics and were self-aware, they were less likely to experience academic burnout.

**Secondary Schools in the United States**

For secondary students in the United States, academic demands associated with time expectations and curricular success are related to increased stress and anxiety (de Anda et al., 2000). As identified by Walburg (2014), pressure from peers and academic expectations, such as social and curricular tracks, increases a student’s risk for stress; additionally, as student anxiety increases, there is a greater risk of burnout and school dropout. Knowing that extensive exposure to stress may have negative effects on the adolescent brain, secondary students with lasting periods of elevated stress risk damaging the structure and function of their developing brain (Romeo, 2013), identifying a need to mitigate the stress experienced by students.
Schools are often considered to be the source of stress and anxiety for adolescents (Bethune, 2014; Kiselica, Baker, Thomas, & Reedy, 1994), which can have adverse effects on academic achievement, peer relationships, and self-awareness (Kiselica et al., 1994). In a 2013 APA survey of stress in America, teens reported that their stress was at its highest during the school year and that the stress brought on feelings of depression or sadness (Bethune, 2014). In a study by Feld and Shusterman (2015) in which 333 high school students participating in college preparatory courses were surveyed about their levels of stress and anxiety experienced, more than 20% described feeling fatigued and having difficulty maintaining focus because of stress. Additionally, almost half of the students were irritable, restless, and unable to sleep at least once a week (Feld & Shusterman, 2015).

Many students attending urban and suburban schools are socially and economically disadvantaged. For students living in urban areas, the lack of response to the social and environmental stressors facing adolescents has led to increased academic struggles (Camangian, 2015). These same students are often failing to meet academic standards in the traditional classroom setting. This failure is not that of the students but of the schools, teachers, and classrooms that are struggling to meet their needs (Jensen, 2013). According to Duncan-Andrade (2007), not all teachers teaching in urban schools are highly effective educators focused on meeting the needs of their students. For some students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, stressors associated with familial struggles can cause heightened stress and anxiety and lower academic success (Morazes, 2016).
In addition, the growing amount of stress affecting the lives of secondary students in U.S. schools is associated with their interactions with peers. As described by Bethune (2014), teens who report having a high level of stress also spend more than 3 hours a day online and average 7 hours of sleep a night, which is over an hour less than what is recommended by the National Sleep Foundation. Online activity can include actions involving social media, such as YouTube, and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter (Greenhow, 2011), and youth involvement in social networking sites has presented concerns by educators and parents regarding negative or dangerous experiences linked to the online activity (Ahn, 2011). Interactions in an online forum can add to the stress and anxiety experienced by adolescents.

In addition to online interactions, negative peer relationships in social situations can increase stress and anxiety in secondary students. As described by Seiffge-Krenke (1995), positive peer relationships encourage increased self-esteem and support an adolescent’s perception of self, but poor peer relationships negatively affect communication, increase feelings of being ignored, and increased disagreements. Knowing how to handle negative peer interactions can be difficult for teens and can cause reactions associated with amplified emotions and behaviors (Sontag & Graber, 2010), and these interactions can unintentionally stifle a student’s academic and social progress.

**Secondary Schools Internationally**

For students attending secondary schools internationally, depression, anxiety, and stress are associated with academic and adverse childhood experiences (Bhasin, Sharma, & Saini, 2010). According to a World Health Organization (2020) report, anxiety was the eighth leading cause of illness and disabilities in adolescents and can detrimentally
affect a teen’s ability to perform major life functions such as attending school and developing relationships. Student stress and anxiety are associated with academic demands, specifically concerning time management, test anxiety, and academic ability (Lal, 2014; Putwain, 2007). As academic demands increase, secondary students worldwide need strategies and supports to negotiate expectations.

According to studies conducted in India, secondary students from affluent families struggle with high levels of academic stress (Bhasin et al., 2010) and often show signs of stress, which can include aggression, withdrawal, increased emotions, and lack of interest in social activities (Hussain, Kumar, & Husain, 2008). As students transition into college, similar stressors are experienced causing an increased need for long-term supports to help students cope with stress (Lal, 2014). For students in Malaysia, similar stress caused by academic and social demands causes anxiety for students. In a study conducted by Hau Jett and Yusoff (2013), adolescent students in Malaysia struggle with meeting the expectations of teachers, family members, and themselves, causing pressures to succeed that result in an abundance of stress and anxiety.

Similar patterns of academic stress are seen in students in other nations. For students in the United Kingdom, academic stress has been linked to illness and social and parental conflicts (Putwain, 2007). According to Cadime et al. (2016), attitudes toward academic achievement and the emotional, social, and psychological well-being of students directly affect the academic success of secondary students in Portugal. Those students with a disconnected attitude toward school often struggle with burnout, stress, and engagement. Swedish students begin showing increased signs of stress and anxiety associated with academic demands in Grade 6 with elevated levels by Grade 9 (Giota &
Gustafsson, 2017). In China, a study by Liu and Lu (2012) linked academic stress to depressive symptoms in high school students, which was greater for those students with lower academic achievement. Academic expectations cause increased stress and anxiety for secondary students worldwide, identifying a need for coping strategies to support symptoms experienced by students.

**Coping Strategies and Social-Emotional Supports**

Beyond academic needs, secondary students have specific needs related to learning that support their mental health. According to CASEL (n.d.), SEL programs encouraged in the academic environment decrease stress and anxiety in students, encourage peer relationships, and improve academic performance in students. SEL programs are most effective when they include systematic instruction, student engagement opportunities, and parent and community involvement (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004). Furthermore, Durlak et al. (2011) detailed that students exhibit improved academic performance and reduced negative behaviors and display a positive attitude toward self, peers, and their environment when presented with effective SEL instruction.

Through specific instruction on how to develop relationships with peers, increased engagement, and modeling of appropriate behaviors, teachers are able to provide daily support to the SEL needs of students (CASEL, n.d.). Through an increased understanding of the background and needs of the students they serve and knowledge of how to support their social and emotional needs, teachers report having a greater commitment to their students and an improved ability to provide instruction and student support (Poulou, 2017). As detailed by Hamedani et al. (2015), when educators support
the academic, social, emotional, and psychological needs of their students, the focus on balanced supports ensures that all students are successful within their schools and communities.

The stress experienced by children is often exacerbated or mitigated by their family and environment (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Coping, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), is a cognitive and behavioral response to a feeling of threat, harm, or challenge to manage the internal and/or external demands on a person. Lazarus and Folkman further explained that the two main functions of coping are to change the relationship between the person affected and his or her environment and to regulate one’s emotional distress. In a meta-analysis conducted by Compas et al. (2017), coping and emotional regulation strategies most commonly used by children and adolescents were “emotional expression, emotional suppression, problem solving, cognitive reappraisal, distraction, acceptance, avoidance, wishful thinking, denial, emotional modulation, unregulated release of emotions, and humor” (p. 947). Students in middle and high school need strategies for coping with the increased academic and social demands that they are encountering.

**Middle School Students**

For students in sixth through eighth grade, increased expectations by parents, peers, and academic expectations can cause increased stress and anxiety. In order to manage the effects that these demands have on students, specific instruction is necessary to address their SEL needs. According to CASEL (n.d.), students at the middle school level have varying developmental needs and benefit from resources to help them develop personally and academically. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, n.d.)
explained that students between the age of 10 and 15 years benefit from an education that is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. A key component of this type of learning environment is one rich in SEL supports that specifically focuses on the development of self-efficacy, decision-making, problem-solving, and management of health and stress in students (Davis et al., 2014).

As students transition from the elementary to middle school setting, there is a need for programs that specifically support their academic and SEL. Merrell et al. (2008) described educators, administrators, and support staff members who are needed in schools to provide specific mental health supports in addition to a comprehensive learning program. Durlak et al. (2011) explained that schools play an integral role in developing the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the students they educate; however, evidence-based resources and time are needed in order to effectively address the needs of all students. Providing a learning environment that is rich in SEL supports will foster a sense of safety and security in students (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004).

With a lack of strategies for coping with the increased academic and social challenges, increased emotions can hinder an adolescent student’s engagement, work performance, and academic success (Durlak et al., 2011). According to a study by Domitrovich, Syvertsen, and Calin (2017), adolescent students need specific supports in school that will help them in developing their sense of purpose, self, relationships, and awareness of their own thought processes. Additionally, as students transition from middle to high school, there are fewer opportunities for interactions with teachers, an increase in student population, and greater lack of support for those struggling with social
skills (K. Tan et al., 2018). Middle school students need specific supports in their transition to high school through SEL strategies designed to give them coping strategies to support academic and social demands.

**High School Students**

Stress is an emotional response to a negative experience and can be directly related to anxiety and emotional distress (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). For high school students, stress can be caused by internal and/or external sources that affect their experiences. Zarei, Hashemi, Sadipoor, Delavar, and Khoshnevisan (2016) explained that when students experience ongoing stress and anxiety, they can suffer from psychological and physical illnesses. Additionally, this type of persistent stress can cause an increase in behavioral referrals and have a negative effect on a student’s academic performance (K. Tan et al., 2018). To support students in addressing the symptoms of their stress and ensure that they have effective coping mechanisms for managing their feelings, high schools need SEL programs that focus on developing cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies as outlined by CASEL (n.d.).

As part of the California Department of Education’s (CDE, n.d.-b) mission and vision, every school must support the social, emotional, and academic learning needs of every child; to accomplish this task, components of SEL skills must be addressed by all teachers in all classrooms. As students enter high school, there is a need for increased supports that addresses their self-awareness and management, social awareness and relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as detailed in Figure 1 (CASEL, 2017). For teachers to be effective in developing SEL skills in students, they need programs that focus on developing specific personal and relational skills, are integrated
into the curriculum, provide opportunities for practice, are evident school-wide, and involve communities and families in development and evaluation of supports (Domitrovich et al., 2017).

Coping, according to Lazarus (1999), is a method for managing stress in an individual’s life; additionally, effective coping strategies can effectively lower stress, while ineffective coping can lead to increased levels of stress. Levels of stress and anxiety are at increased levels for high school students due to academic and personal pressures and can lead to the use of ineffective coping strategies such as withdrawal, drug, and/or alcohol use (Zarei et al., 2016). Knowing that effective coping strategies helps to lessen the levels of stress in an individual’s life, and providing specific supports in social and emotional development will help prepare students beyond the academic environment (CDE, n.d.-b).

Figure 1. Core competencies wheel. From “SEL: What are the Core Competence Areas and Where are they Promoted?” by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017. Retrieved from https://casel.org/what-is-sel/
According to Hamedani et al. (2015), high schools that provide instruction and supports in social and emotional development and teach strategies for perseverance develop individuals who are “mindful, conscientious, and empowered; and who develop a sense of social responsibility about making positive contributions to their school community and the wider community beyond” (p. 3). For schools to effectively address the SEL needs of students, a collaborative effort of school and district personnel, along with family and community support, is needed to ensure that strategies are comprehensively addressed throughout the academic day (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004). To provide targeted SEL supports that address and benefit the individual needs of students, educators need an understanding of the coping strategies and resources held by each student in order to use those assets to lessen stress in their students (Hamedani et al., 2015). When educators work with families to support the academic and social needs of all learners, students are able to develop self- and social-awareness skills that will continue to benefit them as they become citizens in their own communities (Hamedani et al., 2015; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

**Theoretical Framework**

Stress is defined as a negative response to relationships; cognitive judgements; and emotions through fear, guilt, anger, and shame (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) and is often associated with disappointing situations that individuals strive to change (Lazarus, 1999). During adolescence, individuals experience changes in their physical, social, and emotional beings and need specific coping strategies to mitigate their response to stress (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). By understanding the sources of stress and the related effects of
those stressors, adolescents are able to identify coping strategies to successfully respond to each stressor.

**Lazarus’s Theory of Stress and Emotion**

According to Lazarus (1999), the way people adjust and cope with their stress is related to their internal and external resources and relationships while stress and emotions are managed cognitively, motivationally, and relationally (Lazarus, 2006). Lazarus (2006) also recognized that “emotion is always an interaction between an individual with a distinctive personality and a particular social situation” (p. 34), and coping is the method used for managing the demands of change and the emotions that those changes create. As adolescents face increased academic and social stress, effective coping strategies are needed to address the emotions experienced. The coping strategies used by adolescents to address stressors are directly related to their self-awareness and relationships with peers and parents (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995).

For teens, stress can be a result of interactions with family members, peers, environment, or academic expectations. The long-term effects of stress on the structure and function of the adolescent brain is undetermined (Romeo, 2013); however, exposure to toxic stress, which is described as strong, frequent, and chronic without adult support, can negatively affect the architecture of the brain (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014). An adolescent response to stress is directly related to the adolescent’s belief in how to handle the level of stress experienced (Lee, Jamieson, Miu, Josephs, & Yeager, 2018). As detailed in Figure 2, Seiffge-Krenke (1995) highlighted that as adolescents mature, they develop strategies for aligning their social supports for
coping with stress to their needs and the options available to them during their time of elevated stress.

According to Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, and Saltzman (2000), coping strategies are often voluntary or involuntary in response. Voluntary coping indicates awareness of the stressors and is regulated by one’s cognitive, behavioral, emotional, or physiological response; involuntary responses may occur outside of one’s conscious awareness and be reactionary to the stress (Connor-Smith et
As described by Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, and Gruen (1985), the elimination of stress in the life of individuals would be unreasonable because stress is a biproduct of the relationship between people and the environment. For adolescents, effective stress management comes from identifying coping strategies to lessen the effects of the identified stressors.

**Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory**

Academic supports that focus on SEL in the instructional setting allow for students to develop self- and social-awareness skills that are necessary in mitigating academic and social stress (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). According to Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory, the human mind is responsive to outside influences and proactive in response. Bandura further detailed that as learning occurs, individuals recognize the effects of their actions and begin to anticipate reactions to their behaviors. The theory describes how individuals use their observations and relationships with others to serve as a model for their social behaviors while maintaining awareness of their own cognitive behaviors (Woolfolk, 2014). Effective communication through the understanding of social cues and norms is a key component of SEL and supported by Bandura’s (2018) description of social modeling in which behaviors can be influenced by peers or through social media and information readily available online. However, through self-efficacy, Bandura (2006) discovered that each individual’s behaviors and reactions are affected by their perceived capabilities. Effective SEL supports provide individuals with strategies for managing their social and self-awareness and lessening the effects of stress in students.
Through the development of self-efficacy, adolescents gain skills in resiliency that helps them to set goals for addressing successes and failures, increase motivation, increase problem-solving strategies, and lessen depressive symptoms (Bandura et al., 1996). With the development of self-efficacy, individuals are able to see themselves positively (Bandura, 1993); SEL programs that focus on building self-efficacy skills in children focus on providing strategies for managing academic and social stress. Bandura (2006) observed that the level of an individual’s efficacy determines whether they are strategic and optimistic or erratic and pessimistic; those with a high level of self-efficacy are able to persevere through adversity and are able to manage the stress and emotion associated with their life experiences. For students, high levels of self-efficacy are associated with increased work productivity, persistence, and problem-solving, which often lead to greater academic achievement (Zimmerman, 2000).

**Stress and Social and Emotional Learning Supports for Students of Poverty**

Adverse situations experienced by students from high-poverty schools can have a direct effect on their academic and behavioral success. However, when students in high-poverty schools receive SEL instruction that focuses on strategies to regulate stress, lower anxiety, and focus on learning, students acquire skills for academic and social success (Hamedani et al., 2015). According to Durlak et al. (2011), skills that help manage stress and anxiety allow for students to develop stronger connections to their school and peers. By offering opportunities for students to recognize, reflect, and connect their experiences outside of school to their education, students are able to develop leadership qualities that extend beyond the academic setting (Camangian, 2015).
When students of poverty receive specific SEL instruction in the academic setting on strategies for managing stress and anxiety, the benefits of the instruction are exhibited in the academic and personal lives of students (Hamedani et al., 2015). Hamedani et al. (2015) added that by recognizing the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of the whole child to providing resources, skills, and strategies ensures students become successful members of their community. The research by K. Tan et al. (2018) highlighted that high school freshman struggling behaviorally and academically are in need of SEL programs to develop their social skills. According to Durlak et al. (2011), students connect to their environment, and motivation increases when educators provide positive opportunities to engage with their peers, community, and school. When students from high-poverty schools are provided instruction that supports their social and emotional needs, they can successfully focus on the academic, social, and environmental situations.

For students experiencing stress from their environment, maladaptive coping strategies such as substance abuse, withdrawal, and negative behaviors are often reported (de Anda et al., 2000) and can detrimentally affect academic performance. Knowing that students from poverty need increased academic and SEL skills to maintain engagement, educators can support their students by focusing on building honest and respectful relationships, increasing movement activities, building vocabulary, teaching with a focus on developing a growth mindset in students, and building core academic skills (Jensen, 2013). By developing skills for self-efficacy, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in students, low-income students
have greater opportunities to find success academically and behaviorally (CASEL, n.d.; Greenberg et al., 2003).

CASEL (n.d.) details five competencies that support the development of self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in students. According to Greenberg et al. (2017), when children from poverty receive instruction specific to these competencies and through consistent interventions provided in all academic settings, they are able to successfully navigate their social and academic expectations. Weissberg and O’Brien (2004) further stated that as students receive specific SEL instruction to manage their stress and anxiety at school, they are able to practice these skills in their home and community relationships. When SEL instruction focused on self-efficacy, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making strategies are taught in urban and high-poverty schools, the mental health and academic competencies of students improves.

**Social and Academic Stress and the High-Achieving Student**

Academic success is often the focus for students participating in secondary education programs such as IB, AP, and Honors courses; however, Suldo et al. (2008) believed that pressures to succeed can be overwhelming for these students. When assumptions are made that academically advanced students have limited social-emotional needs (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015), these students can be left without resources to develop effective coping strategies. Research by Baker (2004) indicated that depression in high-achieving students highlights a need for increased social and emotional supports for students in academically rigorous programs. As described by Shaunessy and Suldo (2010), students in accelerated programs often suffer from increased levels of perceived
stress associated with their performance in addition to social stress caused by situations that threaten an individual’s relationships, self-esteem, or sense of belonging (Juth & Dickerson, 2013). This increased stress can result in a decrease in physical and mental health for the high-achieving student (Conner & Pope, 2013).

Stress and anxiety can leave many students participating in academically rigorous programs unsure of how to manage the overwhelming feelings associated with their experiences. As a result, researchers have identified an increase in suicide ideation, burnout, and depression (Baker, 2004; Cadime et al., 2016). For teens struggling with maladaptive coping strategies to manage their stress and anxiety, there are increasing concerns that the lack of understanding for how to address stressors appropriately can have devastating effects on the health of teens (de Anda et al., 2000). Cadime et al. (2016) pointed out that in high-stress academic environments, there can be an increase in the level of burnout, which is associated with low academic achievement and decreased engagement in curricular and social situations. Academically gifted students had previously been regarded as less affected by stress and anxiety; however, according to Baker (2004), high-achieving students show similar levels of elevated depression, which had been routinely associated with typically performing peers.

The stress associated with academic expectations, familial responsibilities, and social interactions can have negative effects on high-achieving high school students. As described in Bandura’s (1999) social cognitive theory, the human brain can form thoughts and actions based upon the anticipated outcomes of an individual’s current situation, and the mind adjusts responses according to the positive or negative results of their actions. For high school students participating in courses with rigorous academic
expectations, managing perceived stress can be challenging. Specific strategies for managing the stress associated with the curricular expectations in high-performing courses include immediately addressing stressors, taking part in activities that create a temporary diversion from stress, and using specific relaxation methods (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010). However, the strategies used by students to manage perceived stress caused by academia are lacking in schools (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010). According to CASEL (n.d.), SEL supports are most effective when strategic approaches are systematically addressed by schools, families, and community members. Baker (2004) reinforced the idea that high-achieving students would benefit from school-based supports to help manage the effects of academic and emotional stress. By understanding the mental health needs of their students, educators can develop strategies for lessening the stress and anxiety for students while providing the academic rigor necessary for the course.

To effectively deliver academic instruction, students need strategies that support their ability to understand their emotions, regulate their behaviors, communicate appropriately, and make reasonable decisions in diverse settings (CASEL, n.d.). Bradberry and Greaves (2009) further supported this claim with the description of how EI enables individuals to control the rational and emotional functions of the brain through the ability to maintain awareness of relationships and behaviors. Suldo et al. (2008) detailed that further research is needed to identify the relationship between perceived stress and the impact of social stressors on students participating in rigorous academic courses. When SEL supports are delivered in the academic setting, students learn specific strategies to strengthen their emotional regulators while creating a positive
academic and social learning environment (CASEL, n.d.). For students participating in accelerated coursework, SEL supports within the academic setting will support processes for decreasing stress and anxiety.

**International Baccalaureate Courses**

IB programs are designed to teach students critical and independent learning skills that focus on logic and to develop an awareness of personal assumptions and perspective within six subjects (IBO, n.d.). Students participating in IB courses are often identified as intellectually gifted and, in a study by Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, and Shaffer (2006), showed higher levels of social and behavioral satisfaction than students participating in general education courses. However, according to Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, Michalowski, and Shaffer (2009), secondary students participating in IB courses identified academic expectations as their primary source of stress and were associated with mental health concerns.

**Advanced Placement Courses**

AP classes are identified as college-level courses taken within high schools. According to the College Board (n.d.), AP students develop academically rigorous college-level skills through courses taken in the high school setting with opportunities to receive college credit through participation in AP exams. With the enticement of receiving college credit and a perceived advantage in college acceptance, students describe participation based on opportunities rather than interest (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). Additional concerns associated with AP courses center around the level of preparedness by high school teachers to guarantee students are academically and social
challenged at the college level (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Schmitt & Goebel, 2015).

**Honors Courses**

Honors courses are described as high school courses considered to be academically rigorous in comparison to general education courses. Honors courses are taught at an academically rigorous level that is designed for high-achieving students (College Board, n.d.). These courses offer challenges to students beyond what is typically covered in general education classes and provide greater experiences and depth of knowledge in each subject area.

**Research Gap**

Although strategies for supporting the SEL needs of students in academic settings have been outlined (CASEL, n.d.), the review of the literature highlighted that there is an area of additional research needed in identifying the lived experiences of students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses, their sources of stress, and effective coping strategies used to address stressors. Although studies have shown the effectiveness of SEL supports in urban areas with academic and social challenges (Camangian, 2015; Hamedani et al., 2015), there is a need for further knowledge regarding the effectiveness of SEL supports for high-performing students (Suldo et al., 2008). As stated by K. Tan et al. (2018), secondary educators need to implement programs that appropriately support the specific academic, social, and emotional needs of all students. By focusing on specific programs to support the stressors of students participating in high-achieving academic programs, this research addressed strategies for increasing mental health awareness and decreasing stress and anxiety in students.
Additional research is needed to determine the sources of stress and effective coping strategies and support for high-achieving high school students. As outlined in the research by Suldo et al. (2008), although stress and anxiety associated with increased curricular expectations do not affect the academic performance of students, there is a need for research to determine the impact and sources of stress on students in accelerated programs. Shaunessy and Suldo (2010) supported the idea that an understanding of how stress and coping strategies affect and influence the mental health of high-achieving high school students is needed in order to effectively address their SEL needs. By developing an understanding of the lived experiences of students combined with the identification of effective coping strategies used to mitigate stress and anxiety, there will be a greater understanding of the social, academic, and emotional needs of high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses.

Summary

When addressing the needs of high school students from poverty, Hamedani et al. (2015) explained that SEL programs that focus on the understanding of the lived experiences of high school students can focus on developing strategies in students that support their academic and social needs. In a study by de Anda et al. (2000) in which the experiences of adolescents were analyzed to determine the frequency and effectiveness of coping strategies used to address stress, the findings indicated that the students with the highest levels of stress were more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies and were in need of support programs to change behaviors. Educators need specific strategies to support students in developing coping methods that heighten their academic, social,
political, and economic skills by providing culturally competent SEL supports in schools (Camangian, 2015).

High-achieving high school students have specific needs related to their mental health that extend beyond their academic performance level. CASEL (n.d.) researchers defined the need for SEL programs that encourage positive peer interactions, decrease stress and depression, and increase academic performance. Although students in IB, AP, and Honors programs often exhibit academic success, Shaunessy and Suldo (2010) explained that those participating in accelerated courses often suffer from increased levels of perceived stress associated with their academic performance. Additionally, research by Feld and Shusterman (2015) suggested that high-achieving students identify feeling symptoms of depression associated with school-related stress and pointed to a need for future research to address the specific effects of stress, which include lack of sleep, academic anxiety, and psychosocial factors. In a study completed by Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008), students enrolled in AP and IB courses shared their perception of their education in these programs and evaluated their learning experiences. Although the majority of students claimed to be satisfied with their learning experiences in AP and IB courses, those who exited the programs described the curriculum as failing to meet their individual learning needs because of rigid curriculum and instruction. Conner and Pope (2013) pointed out that high-achieving students struggle with engagement that is linked to decreased physical and mental health. Students in academically accelerated programs need school-based supports to help manage the effects of their academic and emotional stress (Baker, 2004) and access to programs that appropriately support their academic, social, and emotional needs (K. Tan et al., 2018).
Secondary students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses need specific supports dedicated to understanding the stressors experienced and the effective coping strategies that address the stress and anxiety experienced in social and academic settings.

**Synthesis Matrix**

The synthesis matrix was developed to organize the subject matter to more easily identify sources relating to each section of the Chapter II literature review. The main areas covered were SEL to understand emotion, behaviors, and relationships; stress and anxiety due to academic and social expectations; mental health and high-performing students; self-efficacy, student stress and coping strategies; and emotional intelligence and mindfulness in adolescents (see Appendix A).
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter describes the methodology used for the study. The research purpose statement and research questions are presented to establish the basis for the study. This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses in addition to identifying the academic and social stressors experienced by these students and the coping strategies used to overcome them. Data were collected through the analysis of interviews. The population and sample are defined and identified. The data collection and analysis protocols are explained, and the limitations of the research design are acknowledged.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses. An additional purpose of this study was to identify the stressors (academic and social) experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students and coping strategies used to overcome them.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?
2. What are the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

3. What are the social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

4. What coping strategies do high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses use to manage stress?

**Research Design**

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), qualitative research gathers data from experiences and societal and cultural systems in order to describe phenomena. As a qualitative phenomenological study, the purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses. An additional purpose of this study was to identify the stressors (academic and social) experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high students and the coping strategies used to overcome them.

Qualitative research methods, including grounded theory, ethnographic, and phenomenological, are compatible in describing the phenomena associated with the lived experiences of high-achieving high school students. Through grounded theory, a phenomena are analyzed from various perspectives (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) with comparative methods being used to analyze the data collected (Patton, 2015b). Ethnographic studies detail how cultures are affected by individual and group behaviors and dynamics (Patton, 2015b), specifically “learned patterns of action, language, beliefs, rituals, and ways of life” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 23). A phenomenological study, according to Patton (2015b), analyzes how humans experience the world in which
they live; specifically, it describes a phenomenon and the ways that it is described and interpreted.

For this study, a phenomenological research design was used to describe the lived experiences, academic and social stressors, and coping strategies of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students. Patton (2015b) stated that phenomenological studies “focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (p. 115). For this study, interviews were conducted to understand the day-to-day academic and social experiences of 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses. These data provided insight into the perspectives and thoughts experienced by high-achieving students in order to identify coping strategies to support academic and social stressors.

**Population**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined a population as “a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research” (p. 129). The population of this study included high school students in Sacramento County in which, in 2018-2019, there were 37,646 11th- and 12th-grade students according to CDE (n.d.-a).

**Target Population**

According to Creswell (2014), the target population is the “actual list of sampling units from which the sample is selected” (p. 393). A target population for a study is the entire set of individuals chosen from the overall population for which the study data are to be used to make inferences. The target population defines the population to which the findings are meant to be generalized. It is important that target populations are clearly
identified for the purposes of research study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). It is typically not feasible, because of time or cost constraints, to study large groups; therefore, the researcher chose population samples from within a larger group.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) further explained that the target population provides specific generalizations for the research. The target population for this study was specific to 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses within Sacramento County in California, which are served within eight school districts within Sacramento County. For students participating in AP and IB courses in art, computer education, drama/theater, English language arts, foreign languages, history/social science, mathematics, music, physical education, and science, 14,448 students were enrolled in Sacramento County during 2017-2018 (CDE, n.d.-a) with 70.5% of enrolled students participating in history/social science courses and 51.6% in English language arts. This study focused on students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses in English language arts, history/social science, and/or mathematics.

**Sample**

The sample is a group of participants in a study selected from the population from which the researcher intends to generalize. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), sampling is selecting a “group of individuals from whom data are collected” (p. 129). Similarly, Patton (2015a) and Creswell (2003) defined a sample as a subset of the target population representing the whole population.

**Sample Size**

Qualitative analyses typically require a smaller sample size than quantitative analyses. Qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to obtain feedback for most or
all perceptions. Obtaining most or all of the perceptions leads to the attainment of saturation. Saturation occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives or information. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommended the concept of saturation for achieving an appropriate sample size in qualitative studies. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) recommended five to 25, and Morse (1994) suggested at least six. There are no specific rules when determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research. Qualitative sample size may best be determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives (Patton, 1990).

The students for this study were chosen using purposeful and convenience sampling. Through purposeful sampling, the researcher was able to compile a small group that was manageable and credible to represent an entire sample group (Patton, 2015b). Convenience sampling allowed the researcher to interview and gather data from participants who were easily available (Patton, 2015b). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), purposeful sampling allows for a small number of selections to be made from the larger population. The combination of purposeful and convenience sampling was used to identify a small group of 15 students from the 14,448 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses within high schools in Sacramento County in California. This study focused on students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses in English language arts, history/social science, and/or mathematics.

**Sample Selection Process**

Patton (2015b) described qualitative methods as focusing on small samples of study for a specific purpose. By selecting a small sample of 11th- and 12th-grade high
school students of the 14,448 participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses within Sacramento County in California, this research used in-depth interviews to collect narrative information to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving students. The following process was used to select participants:

1. A list of high schools within Sacramento County that offer IB, AP, and Honors courses was obtained from the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE). These high schools included Bella Vista High, Center High, Cordova High, Cosumnes Oaks High, Del Campo High, Delta High, Elk Grove High, Encina Preparatory High, Florin High, Folsom High, Foothill High, Franklin High, Galt High, Grant Union High, Highlands High, Hiram W. Johnson High, Inderkum High, John F. Kennedy High, Kit Carson, Laguna Creek High, Liberty Ranch High, Luther Burbank High, C. K. McClatchy High, Mesa Verde High, Mira Loma High, Monterey Trail High, Natomas High, Rio Americano High, Rio Linda High, Rio Vista High, Rosemont High, San Juan High, Sheldon High, Valley High, and Vista del Lago High.

2. The researcher contacted district secondary education administrators by phone to request permission to contact site administration regarding potential participation. The researcher focused on the first three district administrators to provide support.

3. Administrators from approved high schools were contacted by phone to obtain permission to contact and interview potential participants.

4. Students from IB, AP, and Honors classes were contacted by site administration to seek volunteers for the study.

5. A list of 15 potential participants was compiled from the responses.
6. The parents or guardians of potential participants selected were contacted by phone and e-mail by the researcher to describe the selection criteria, procedures, and risks involved in participation. These statements were made over the phone and included in the invitation e-mail to the parents or guardians of potential participants.

Institutional consent, informed consent, child assent, and Participant Bill of Rights forms were completed for district, site, parent, and student participation. The principal provided a student advocate who sat in on all student interviews.

Instrumentation

According to Patton (2015b), the data collector in a qualitative study acts as the instrumentation and controls the environment of the study. For this qualitative phenomenological study, student interviews were conducted. The interview style for this study used a standardized, open-ended interview, which ensured that “the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions are worded in a completely open-ended format” (Patton, 2015b, p. 437). The questions asked by the researcher were based on the research questions, variables of the study, and a comprehensive review of literature and aligned to describe the lived experiences, academic and social stressors, and coping strategies of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students. A copy of the Interview Protocol is contained in Appendix B. Using this format with a phenomenological study allows the researcher to collect comparable feedback of lived experiences based on the consistent questions asked of each participant. Using a standardized, open-ended interview format, interviewees were provided with institutional
and informed consent and child assent forms with the addition of the Participants’ Bill of Rights.

**Reliability**

Reliability is achieved when an instrument continues to produce similar results when used in different circumstances (Roberts, 2010). There are different strategies to ensure reliability of instruments whether they are used for quantitative or qualitative methods (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This is imperative in research design because it indicates the rigor and trustworthiness of the research findings.

In qualitative studies, reliability is based on the trustworthiness of the data collected (Golafshani, 2003); additionally, Patton (2015b) described that using standard and consistent processes for interviewing ensures reliability. For this study, the interviewer conducted all interviews using the same protocol for the introduction of the interview and questioning and maintained reflexivity (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) to ensure continual self-monitoring in order to be neutral and objective throughout interviews. A field log and journal were maintained throughout the data collection process to document interactions, observations, and details of each interview.

All data collected from one-on-one interviews were coded and sorted into themes based on research and interview questions. Patton (2015b) described the process for analyzing notes and transcripts as necessary to code, categorize, classify, and label the patterns found within the data. To ensure accuracy in coding, intercoder reliability was used to verify the accuracy of the coded data (Lavrakas, 2008) and to establish consistency in the determination of the frequency for each theme.
Pilot Test

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described the importance of pilot testing to identify necessary changes or inconsistencies in the interview questioning. Pilot testing allows for revisions of limitations within structure or outline of the interview and its questions (Turner, 2010); additionally, a pilot test is conducted using participants similar to those outlined within the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Turner, 2010). To increase reliability, a pilot test was conducted using recently graduated students whose participation in IB, AP, or Honors aligned them with participants of the study. Pilot test participants were asked to review the interview schedule and questions and to provide feedback on the introduction of the interview, the clarity of the wording of each question, the opportunity to provide responses to describe the lived experiences of students, the length of the questions, and the recording process.

Validity

Validity ensures that the study “measures or tests what is actually intended” (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). Validity also assures that the findings from the instruments are true (Roberts, 2010) and aligned directly to the research questions (Patton, 2015b). Various strategies were employed to ensure that both the quantitative and qualitative data collected were valid.

Validity is described as the agreement by the researcher and the participant on the description of the phenomenon defined by what is seen and heard during a study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). To ensure validity during this study, the researcher used participant language, mechanically recorded data, and participant review to ensure accuracy of the data collected. By mechanically recording data, the participants’ exact
language was collected and reviewed by participants through the analysis of transcripts and observation data collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

**Interview Question Development Matrix**

As a validity measure, the researcher used an Interview Question Development Matrix (IQDM) designed to directly align the interview questions with the research questions and variables of the study. The specific sources from the literature review that were used to create the questions were Bandura (1993), Lazarus (1999), and Suldo et al. (2008). The IQDM can be found in Appendix C. The use of the IQDM assures validity in that the data gathered directly address the research questions and variables of the study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection, according to Patton (2015b), ensures that each interview and observation is treated as individual experiences used to describe “history, interconnections, and system relationships” (p. 67). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explain the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses and to identify the stressors (academic and social) and coping strategies used to overcome them. To describe the lived experiences of students, interviews, observations, and artifacts were used to support the triangulation of the data collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

**Human Subject Considerations**

Prior to data collection, the research design and interview protocols were approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB). Through voluntary participation, informed consent, and commitment to privacy and
confidentiality, the researcher ensured that each participant completed a child assent form and that the research study met the criteria for human subject research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The parents or guardians of potential student participants were contacted by phone and e-mail before formal invitations were sent via e-mail and included the purpose and protocols for the study. As participants accepted their part in the study, they received via e-mail a copy of the Brandman University Research Participant’s Bill of Rights, institutional consent, informed consent, and child assent forms. The forms included the title of the research study, the purpose of the study, a description of procedures, the risks and benefits of participation, assurance of confidentiality, permission to use an audio recorder, the option to review one’s transcription of the interview, a request for student work samples, and the contact information for the researcher. All consent forms were collected by the researcher and kept in a lock-protected safe. To further protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants in the study, only the researcher had access to the names of participants as all participants and school information were provided alias names (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

**Interview Procedures**

As described by Patton (2015b), data collection through interviews allows researchers to collect information and details about what cannot be observed. For each interview, participants were provided with a review of the Participant’s Bill of Rights and informed consent, an introduction to the study, which included the purpose and the research questions, an outline of the interview questions, and a verification of confidentiality of the information collected during the interview. Before questioning
began, participants were reminded that they controlled the interview environment and could stop the questioning at any time during the process. Throughout the interview process, the researcher documented observations and follow-up questions that developed through the course of the standardized, open-ended interview. As the interview concluded, the researcher thanked the participants and asked whether there was any additional information that they would like to share in regard to their experiences as a high-achieving student.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis and interpretation, according to Patton (2015b), “involve making sense of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said” (p. 471). The data collected through interviews, artifacts, and observations were used to identify themes that appeared in the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

**Data Coding**

Upon the completion of data collection, the researcher transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts to code the data and identify patterns and structures to describe the phenomena of the participants in the study (Basit, 2003). In the initial reading of the data, the researcher identified data segments before establishing a set of tentative codes and categories that could be used to describe the data (Basit, 2003; Patton, 2015b). To determine the frequency for each theme, the coded data were loaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software produced by QSR International, to sort the data by the identified code. The coding process was reviewed and refined to ensure that an accurate representation of the phenomenon was explained through the data (Basit, 2003). The
coding process was further analyzed through the support of two colleagues who studied the coded data as a measure of intercoder reliability.

**Categorizing and Identifying Themes**

Patton (2015b) described the need to repeatedly analyze data to find recurring patterns that can be categorized for connectedness and differences. As patterns in the data emerged, themes were identified between codes found within the interviews and observations to determine whether the themes identified were recurring throughout the data sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

**Intercoder Reliability**

To maintain reliability throughout the analysis of data, the researcher called upon colleagues to verify and identify consistency in coding as well as reflexivity to avoid bias. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified that researchers avoid bias and maintain subjectivity and reflexivity through self-awareness, cognizance of the participant, and accuracy in data collection. By documenting all interactions, dates, places, activities, and decisions in a field log and journal, the researcher kept a continual record of all decisions and rationale associated with data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

**Depiction of the Findings**

In describing the lived experience of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses, a naturalistic description of what each student experienced and how coping strategies were used to address academic and social stress was described in a narrative format with descriptions of each participant’s experiences (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). These experiences were then used to
describe the phenomenon experienced by the group of participants through a synthesis of shared experiences (Patton, 2015b).

**Limitations**

This study was limited by the research design, which used the researcher as the main instrument of the study, the small sample size, and the use of the participants as the primary source for collecting data. According to Patton (2015b), observations and interviews may be affected by anxiety, anger, personal bias, or by the inability of the researcher to only observe the external state of the participant. Additionally, the study was limited by the participants’ selection and presentation of artifacts for study, which were limited by quality and accuracy.

**Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology used for this phenomenological study. The research purpose statement and questions provided a basis for the study and were used to outline the research design, which included the population, sample, instrumentation, and process for data collection and analysis. The next chapter in this study presents the data and findings from the study.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

Through a review of the literature, research has indicated a need for high-achieving high school students to receive specific supports dedicated to understanding the stressors experienced and the effective coping strategies that address the stress and anxiety experienced in social and academic settings (Baker, 2004; Conner & Pope, 2013; Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010; K. Tan et al., 2018). As a result, this study focused on exploring the lived experiences of high-achieving high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses. To address this topic, the researcher interviewed 15 high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students in Sacramento County in California. This chapter presents the findings of the research. The chapter begins by stating the purpose statement and research questions followed by a description of the methodology, population, and sample. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses. An additional purpose of this study was to identify the stressors (academic and social) experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students and coping strategies used to overcome them.
Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

2. What are the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

3. What are the social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

4. What coping strategies do high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses use to manage stress?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

For this study, a qualitative phenomenological research design was used to describe the lived experiences, academic and social stressors, and coping strategies of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students. By focusing on how participants process and rationalize their lived experiences, the data collected through in-depth, semistructured interviews provided details to answer the research questions of the study (Patton, 2015b). The researcher conducted 15 interviews through Zoom video conferencing with 11th- and 12th-grade high school students currently enrolled in schools throughout Sacramento County in California: one from Sacramento City Unified School District and 14 from Elk Grove Unified School District.

Participants selected the date and time of their interview and received a Zoom invitation to conduct the interview. All interviews were conducted between March and June 2020, with all participants receiving an advance electronic copy of the interview
protocol, informed consent form, child assent and parent informed consent forms when necessary, and the research Participant Bill of Rights. Interviews were recorded through two electronic devices, Zoom and Otter, and then transcribed using the transcription service provided through Otter. All participants were provided an electronic copy of their verbatim transcript for review and edit as necessary. The NVivo coding software was used to code, analyze, and categorize all data into themes, which were then correlated to the research questions to identify findings of the study. To ensure intercoder reliability, a colleague familiar with the study conducted an independent review of the codes and themes developed from the data.

**Population**

A population is a group that “conforms to specific criteria” to which research results can be generalized (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 129). The population of this study included 37,646 11th- and 12th-grade high school students in Sacramento County according to CDE (n.d.-a).

**Target Population**

According to Creswell (2014), the target population is the “actual list of sampling units from which the sample is selected” (p. 393). A target population for a study is the entire set of individuals chosen from the overall population for which the study data are to be used to make inferences. The target population defines the population to which the findings are meant to be generalized. It is important that target populations are clearly identified for the purposes of research study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). It is typically not feasible, because of time or cost constraints, to study large groups; therefore, the researcher chose population samples from within a larger group. The target
population for this study was specific to 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses, which are serviced within eight school districts in Sacramento County. During the 2017-2018 school year, there were 14,448 students participating in AP and IB courses within Sacramento County (CDE, n.d.-a). This study focused on students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses in English language arts, history/social science, and/or mathematics.

Sample

The sample is a group of participants in a study selected from the population from which the researcher intends to generalize. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), sampling is selecting a “group of individuals from whom data are collected” (p. 129). Similarly, Patton (2015a) and Creswell (2003) defined a sample as a subset of the target population representing the whole population.

Sample Size

Qualitative analyses typically require a smaller sample size than quantitative analyses. Qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to obtain feedback for most or all perceptions. Obtaining most or all of the perceptions leads to the attainment of saturation. Saturation occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives or information. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommended the concept of saturation for achieving an appropriate sample size in qualitative studies. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) recommended five to 25, and Morse (1994) suggested at least six. There are no specific rules when determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research. Qualitative sample size may best be determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives (Patton, 1990).
This research used a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling to identify the participants for this study. The study’s sample consisted of 15 high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses in English language arts, history/social sciences, and/or mathematics. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity for all participants, the names and all signifying information were absent from the presentation of data and the findings. The 15 participants, nine female and six male 11th- and 12th-grade high-achieving students, were identified with numeric representation (e.g., Participant 1 [P1], Participant 2 [P2], Participant 3 [P3], etc.).

Presentation and Analysis of Data

To answer the research questions for this study, the researcher coded emergent themes from the data by participant. The data from the 15 participants were organized to respond to the four research questions in a table to identify the themes with the most frequency counts and the number of participants who noted these themes as related to the study’s purpose. The data are presented by each research question followed by a synthesized summary of the findings.

Research Question 1

The first question sought to answer, “What are the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?” As identified by Walburg (2014), students experience stress related to their academic and social experiences, which can be derived from curricular and peer pressure and engagement expectations. Of the 15 participants, 14 attended six courses a day, and one attended seven courses. The range of IB, AP, or Honors courses taken by the 15
participants over the course of a school year were from one to six, with the average number of courses taken at 4.8. To understand the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students, three themes appeared from the 15 participants interviewed with frequency counts ranging from 45 to 66. Table 1 illustrates the lived experiences of high-achieving high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors course.

Table 1

The Lived Experiences of High-Achieving 11th- and 12th-Grade High School Students Participating in International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, or Honors Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total frequency count</th>
<th>Total no. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course expectations</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in extracurricular activities</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time preparing for courses</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Course expectations.** Interviewees identified course expectations most frequently when asked to describe a typical academic day and the expectations of their IB, AP, or Honors courses. Of the 66 frequently described expectations, participants described the need for attentiveness in class, effort, and a passing score on the AP exam as the greatest of expectations. P2 noted that most of the AP classes had a high workload, and there was an expectation that all readings, notes, and problems were completed independently outside of class time. P1’s statement highlighted the point made by P2:

So, the expectations for the AP courses would be to come to class prepared on time. Make sure you’ve done the reading if it was assigned, the notes that were assigned, the vocab. You should be able to basically, like, kind of, if you need
extra outside help, you should be able to use your resources of like computers and stuff and be able to look it up. But the teachers are also there to help if they need that. And they expect you to ask questions if you don’t understand.

P15 described the expectations as “complete your work and to, you know, be active in class and trying to do well, I would say. But I think that most teachers don’t really expect like a high grade necessarily but just a lot of effort.” P3’s response concurred with P15: “They want our undivided attention . . . they expect us to always be there, they don’t want us to miss school . . . they expect us to work or try our best, no matter what.” For P4, P9, P12, and P14, obtaining a passing score on the AP exam was an expectation; P14 added that obtaining college credit in math was a personal expectation.

**Participation in extracurricular activities.** Participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports and volunteerism, were identified with a frequency rate of 61 when 15 interviewees described their lived experiences. The range of participation included one to seven activities with an average response of two and half club, volunteer, or sports activities per participant. P5 indicated that
during school, I’m running around doing things. I’m helping teachers. . . . I’m doing flight training. . . . I also do a lot in my film class which is also the Academy. . . . I do volunteer work, before the quarantine, every Sunday I would go to the retirement home.

Similar to P5’s volunteer work, P3, P6, P7, P8, and P12 participated in volunteer activities, including mentoring and tutoring underclassman and supporting community activities.
According to P1, “I'm in three bands. So, that’s a lot of concerts over time. I play lacrosse as well, and hockey.” P4 plays soccer, volunteers with community groups, and participates in on-campus clubs and games. When describing seven extracurricular activities, P8 stated,

I participate in a lot of sports, so for this year I did football and then I was doing volleyball but then COVID happened so volleyball was canceled. And then like during my junior year I did, football, and then I did soccer during the winter, I did the winter and then I did volleyball in the spring. I was part of two like academic clubs, NHS National Honor Society, and CSF the California Scholarship Federation. And I was also part of like this Writing Center which basically was like a, like a tutor group basically where people would come to us with like their essays and be like, “Hey, can you help like peer review my essay or give me ideas on what I need to work on?” and stuff. And I was also part of the Key Club that they have here [in the community].

For 11 of the 15 participants, sports were included in the extracurricular activities.

**Time preparing for courses.** Time preparing for courses appeared at a frequency rate of 45 for the 15 study participants. P2 described the increase in the time spent preparing for the AP exams:

I’d say if you’re doing it the right way and you’re studying the right way that around, probably eight to 10 hours of studying a week is about average but when the AP test comes around, I mean, I study at least probably, I want to say between 24 to 48 hours per week. Because, as it gets closer and closer it gets more and more stressful.
P15 concurred with P2 by stating that “I spend a lot of time doing homework and a lot of times studying for tests, so on like a day-to-day basis probably 2 to 3 hours.” For P14, “I’d say probably on a daily basis 2 to 3 hours. And that’s like, not just doing homework that’s like additional prep from prep books online courses studying with friends for the AP test itself.” P12 summarized the time spent preparing for courses:

I think it varies class to class, but I would say the class that requires the most time is probably math. I probably spend about an hour a day preparing and doing homework outside of class, and for other classes, probably 30 minutes a day. So, overall, a lot of time, maybe 10 hours a week.

Research Question 2

The second question sought to answer, “What are the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?” Academic stress is described as the distress experienced by students and is associated with academic demands such as time management, assessments, teacher expectations, and/or subject proficiency (Lal, 2014). For the 15 participants, stress related to success criteria, consistency in expectation, test anxiety, and stress related to academic workload appeared at a frequency range from 33 to 69 when analyzing the responses to the academic stress experienced by the interviewees. Table 2 illustrates the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses.
Table 2

The Academic Stressors Experienced by High-Achieving 11th- and 12th-Grade High School Students Participating in International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, or Honors Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total frequency count</th>
<th>Total no. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress related to academic workload</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test anxiety</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency in expectations</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress related to success criteria</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stress related to academic workload.** The pressure for academic success can be overwhelming for students (Suldo et al., 2008), and stress related to academic workload appeared at a frequency of 69 for the 15 participants who specifically focused on homework, note taking, memorization, and studying. P11 described days that were both mentally and physically exhausting:

At the end of the day after I complete football practice, by the time I’ve finally eaten and showered, it was about 9 p.m., and it sucks to be in my workload at 9 p.m. When it carried me into like 2 a.m., that was just like really, really hard, and annoying. I work so hard physically during the day, and I’m mentally drained from an actual school day like where I try like but that doesn’t matter. Like, my school time didn’t matter. What matters is me doing homework on my own. So that was a big stretch for me, like, the physical exhaustion paired with the mental exhaustion. And especially when it’s just like, just reading, like if I was working through math problems that was always easier than just having like 20 pages of textbook to read. Oh my gosh, it’s terrible. And, but it was good, because that taught me a skill or whatever, you can look at that as a stressor like late night, having to do after school all day.
The response from P8 described the stress associated with workload expectations:

“Whenever I had football right after school, I wouldn’t feel the stress until I got home at like seven o’clock. And then it was on.” This response was mirrored by P1 who explained that

getting home late, doing homework late . . . overall not getting enough sleep . . .

the overall knowledge that you have to be able to like retain and be able to use on a daily basis. I would say those are all pretty big stressors.

The stress associated with reading, learning, and memorizing concepts independently was described by P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, and P12 with details of multiple pages of problems, readings, and notes to prepare for daily lessons.

**Test anxiety.** Test anxiety, according to Putwain (2007), is the reaction of students to varying forms of tests and assessments. Test anxiety was described 62 times by the 15 participants in relation to academic stressors. For nine of the 15 participants, anticipating and perseverating on the test caused an increase in stress. P8 described feeling bad before and after a test:

I could feel it in my gut like, even though I had studied beforehand. . . . I couldn’t eat before or after. . . . I’d mostly be really sad after a test . . . even if I did okay. . . . I still would like feel bad.

P14 detailed, “I remember on my AP World test. . . . I was shaking, I was super nervous about it because I wasn’t super strong in the class.” P15 stated that anxiety increased when feeling underprepared:

Um, I would say that over the years, I’ve gotten better at knowing myself and how to prepare for tests, I think you just learn how to study and that lessens the
anxiety I have for it. But when there’s a big test that I know can really affect my grades, and I don’t feel super prepared for, it can keep me up at night and I won’t sleep. I’ll just have like dreams about failing this test which is definitely not helpful.

For P1 and P2, their anxiety increased when seeing the test for the first time made them each feel like they had forgotten the information studied. P1 stated, “You get the test right in front of you, and then just everything flies out the window.” P2 explained that “while you’re taking the test, you kind of blank out and then you get so stressed that you can’t remember the information even though you know it.”

Frequently looking at the clock or knowing that there is a time limit increased test anxiety for P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, P11, and P13. When asked about test anxiety, P7 described,

Sometimes I get test anxiety just because when you’re taking AP tests, or tests in AP classes, there’s definitely like time limits and like, I’m always watching the clock and that kind of stresses me out. But they kind of help you cope with that by teaching you like time management and how to, like, go about that, but it definitely is stressful.

P13 described that knowing “you only get 40 minutes to do it” when explaining that there is a limit to the time that is given to complete a test can be stressful especially when there are multiple tests in the same day.

**Consistency in expectations.** Expectations for student success, as described by Shaunessy and Suldo (2010), can increase perceived stress in high school students participating in rigorous academic courses. For the 15 participants interviewed,
consistency in academic expectations was described at a frequency of 42. P14 described the consistency in self expectations as compared to the expectations for success in the AP class as,

You know I’d say that the expectations I put on myself, you know doing well on the classes, striving to achieve my best, really goes pretty much hand in hand with the course expectations; because of course expectations, they want every student to succeed and they want the students to do well. And they basically say give your best effort, and with your best effort being given you will do well. And a lot of, a lot of students will probably argue otherwise, but I think that the root of the counterargument to that is just laziness. Not wanting to put in the amount of effort that students that do well put in. And because of that, I feel like that’s a big reason why students are angry and they, you know, argue with the course and put out anger towards the course if they’re not succeeding.

The response from P3 explained that students are aware of the time commitment and the success criteria at the beginning of each course; the struggle, however, occurs when teachers “don’t really realize that we have other AP classes, and not even just AP classes, regular classes give a ton of work, too . . . which is hard.” P5 agreed when explaining that the expectations for success can seem overwhelming in the beginning of the course, but “once you get to know the teacher, and you understand how they are, and how they teach, and how they manage their class. . . . I don’t think it changes, it is just how the teacher does it.” P7 and P8 both agreed with the assertion by describing that AP teachers expect increased studying and homework, which can be overwhelming to manage.
The expectation to pass the AP test with a three or better is another expectation that amplified stress for P1 because of the need for increased time management, tutoring, and studying. P2 agreed stating that “if you don’t get that three, it’s obviously very stressful on your end because you also feel like you’re not up to par with the AP.” For P4, the knowledge that all of the curricula taught is “fair game” on the AP test increases stress; as stated, “I don’t know what to study, and it’s kind of hard because the topics are so broad . . . it’s hard to understand.” For P8, P9, P10, P13, and P15, there is increased stress concerning the need to maintain an academic grade above a C. For P9, the pressure concerning “little tests” that drastically change grades are frustrating because those exams do not affect knowledge toward the AP test. P10 agreed stating that “you have to cram everything in before the AP test,” which results in additional stress.

**Stress related to success criteria.** When describing stress in high-achieving high school students, Suldo et al. (2008) stated that “students in academically challenging curricula likely face additional normative stressors related to school (e.g., increased workload and more high-stakes tests) and daily hassles related to pressures to achieve” (p. 275). Stress related to success criteria appeared at a frequency of 33 for the 15 study participants with grade expectations being a focus for 13 participants. According to P3,

I have pretty high expectations for myself, especially like my family doesn’t question me, but like my family is also pretty smart, like especially my sister. So, I also, I like hold myself to those high expectations. So, I like expect myself to get As, and I mean, I’m not like extremely like disappointed when I get a B, but I do try my best to keep my grades to an A. And for the AP tests, I do expect myself to get a five or four. And I know three is passing but it still doesn’t look
as good, especially like for colleges especially junior year. I was really expected to like push myself to get fives on all my AP tests. And I do stress myself out, I get myself like anxious and stuff about having to get those fives because, like, it’s always like oh I need to do it for college or, oh, like, I don’t want to like disappoint my family like not getting like As or like the highest grades or the highest scores.

For P4, the lowest acceptable grade would be a low B to maintain a GPA that would be sufficient for entrance into college. P6 pointed out that “I see success as my grade in the class overall.” P7 agreed with the statement made by P6: “I know that it’s harder, but I still want to get like an A in the class. . . . I know that like I could get a B . . . but I still pressure myself to do good.” While 13 participants explicitly stated academic grades as a success criterion, P1 and P2 described the desire to receive college credit as a primary criterion for success.

Research Question 3

The third research question sought to answer, “What are the social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors course?” According to Walburg (2014), pressure from peers, in addition to social expectations, can increase a student’s risk for stress. In this study, four themes appeared most frequently, which included effects on social interactions, peer relationships, social media involvement, and stress associated with extracurricular activities. Each theme appeared at a frequency range from 23 to 53 for the 15 participants. Table 3 illustrates the identified social stressors experienced by high-
achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses.

Table 3

The Social Stressors Experienced by High-Achieving 11th- and 12th-Grade High School Students Participating in International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, or Honors Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total frequency</th>
<th>Total no. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effects on social interactions</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relationships</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media involvement</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress associated with extracurricular activities</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Effects on social interactions.** The 15 participants in this study described their participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses as having an effect on social interactions at a frequency of 53. Lazarus (1999) explained that adolescent stress can be a response to social interactions, illness, academics, and family. For participants in this study, social interactions are described as related to their comparison and/or competition with others, fear of missing out, and having little time with friends; however, developing friends through the participation in these classes appeared at a frequency of 13. As described by P7,

I think you feel a lot more bonded to the people that are in your class. Like when I’ve had AP classes and my friends are in them . . . you’re kind of going through the same like stress together.

P8 detailed that participation in AP classes prevented time with friends while also providing an opportunity to meet new people:

Okay, well, it’s kind of like a double-edged sword, because for the most part AP classes take a lot of time and effort. So, like often, like my friend is like, “Oh!
Hey, you want to hang out or something?” or “Hey, we’re playing video games for an hour, we’re going to go to the park,” and I said, well I can’t, because I have to finish this project or to finish this essay or do this homework. But then again, I also made some of my best friends in my AP classes because a lot of times, kind of like you know we’re suffering together. I guess, so like if you’re able to bond over and would like call each other and do homework together. So it’s like, sometimes it would take away from my experience, but it also allowed me to make new friends who had like similar interests as me as well.

According to P14, “I wanted for myself [to be] with people with the same mindset,” when describing how the first year of being in AP classes changed the dynamic of friend groups.

Comparison with or competition with peers appeared at a frequency of 13 and was described by P2, P5, P9, P11, P13, and P12 who stated,

AP classes foster kind of a competitive nature between students, because like this year it was a big deal, the top 10, and in my AP Econ class we had five out of 10 of the top 10 students. It just felt really competitive all the time. So, I think that it kind of feels competitive but since I wasn’t in the top 10 it was a little better.

P2 stated that the comparisons were strongest when AP test scores are posted in June and July, and students share their scores on social media:

And if you for example don’t get that score, and you’re not willing to show that to everyone, it’s of course going to stress you out because you’re gonna feel either less than other people, or you’re gonna just, you’ll feel a lot different compared to
someone who’s someone who they felt they succeeded, and while you may feel that you failed.

For P1, the amount of homework assigned in AP classes has affected social interactions and prevented time with friends: “It’s kind of like the fear of missing out, FOMO, just the fact that you can see people going and doing stuff that you can’t do. Just kind of makes you feel a little bit worse about it.” P10 described the “lack of time to hang out with my friends after school or like after practice” if there was an upcoming AP test. P15 stated that there is not much time to spend with friends because of the amount of work associated with AP classes:

It takes up most of my time, and because I’m busy pretty much every day of the week and at least 1 day on the weekend doing homework. I don’t spend a lot of time with my friends, and I have to miss out on a lot of the things they plan because I, I just can’t make the time to go hang out.

Peer relationships. Lazarus (2006) described emotions as being affected by the continually changing relationship between others and the environment. For 15 participants in this study, peer relationships were described at a frequency of 37.

According to P1, P2, P3, P10, P12, P14, and P15, participation in IB, AP, and Honors courses prevented time with friends; P15 stated that “my friendships aren’t as strong as they were. . . . I don’t get to catch up with them and do like the normal bonding friendship activities that most friend groups do.” P3 stated that peers expect you to “do whatever everyone else is doing . . . but then, if you go, you’re risking getting that A on that test or having that extra time to study.”
Comparisons between self and peers appeared at a frequency of nine and was described by five participants. According to P5, who had five AP courses, peers compare their performance with one another, and even though they don’t resent one another, “It definitely can create some separation, the others kind of make you feel like you . . . must be really smart.” For P6, even though the majority of peers are in AP classes, the lack of AP classes is compared to ability:

Okay, well I have friends, and we’re all in AP classes. So, we all kind of understand, if we need to have, if we have a lot of homework. We’re usually all in like the same way because, like most of my friend group is in AP Gov. So, we all know, oh we have a lot of notes tonight, we’re not doing anything, or oh we have a test on Monday, we’re not hanging out on Sunday. So that’s kind of a good thing, but I know me and [a friend] are only in one AP class, whereas the rest of my friends are in two or more, which is kind of hard because it kind of makes us feel like we’re like, in a way like stupider than that because we’re not as, like, in those stressful, like high education classes.

P9 explained that peers in the International Studies program “think that they are smarter than the average person because they are in this specific program. And so, I think that affects the relationship and the participation in the class” which increases peer competitiveness.

For P6, P7, P8, P11, and P12, their peer relationships are based in their IB, AP, or Honors courses. As described by P12,

I think that a lot of my friends are also in AP classes so it’s good to like study with them and have that extra support. Where you can go to them for help if you
need to, so it’s nice and other than that just it takes more time, so I don’t always have as much time with friends.

P7 agreed with P12 and added that “I have a lot of friends in there and since everyone wants to be there is a lot nicer because everyone’s willing to work together in groups.”

Social media involvement. Social media involvement, and the information found online, can influence the relationship of peers as detailed by Bandura (2018) in his description of social modeling. For the 15 participants in the study, social media involvement appeared at a frequency of 33 with 10 participants identifying frequent participation in specific social media sites. According to P12,

I’m present on social media. I use Instagram and Snapchat mostly. And I think the stress it caused me is it really affects my time management, because it kind of like sucks time. Once you get on there, it’s hard to get off. So that’s difficult. And then, other than that, just like, I think it’s a lot of comparing that goes on between like teenagers and stuff so that can cause stress, too.

P1, P3, P5, and P15 agreed with P12 in describing social media as a distraction that can cause a loss of time, which can result in an increase in stress.

Social media for P10 caused stress when “you’re worried about like other people getting offended. People not liking my stuff on Instagram and Snapchat.” P7 stated that those who post on social media sites often share the best parts of their lives: “They think that’s all their life but they’re not seeing the other side of it.” According to P6 who described being on all social media platforms,

I don’t use Twitter, or anything like that, because Twitter is kind of a negative space and people kind of talk like bad about other people and bad about
themselves on the app. I usually start off with, I’ve never like tweeted, or anything like that. Instagram is only hard like following big influencers, like models and stuff, because it makes you look down upon yourself. And you know, you think like, why can’t I have a life like that? I can look like that, so I don’t really follow any big influencers because it’s just kind of makes me like not as happy. But I follow like friends and usually Instagram is more positive than any other social media.

Issues experienced while in middle school has kept P2 off of social media for 5 years; P2 further stated that

while social media is a great tool to kind of share things with people . . . it can a lot of times be a situation where you’re anonymous, and people kind of take that idea, and they use it the wrong way.

For P1, P11, P13, and P15, social media is used as a way to connect with friends and family; however, as P1 described, “That time can be used much, much more wisely, rather than going on social media.”

**Stress associated with extracurricular activities.** Stress associated with extracurricular activities appeared with a frequency count of 23 from the 15 participants in this study who each identified participation in one to seven extracurricular activities. Stress is defined as an emotional response to a negative experience and can be directly related to anxiety and emotional distress (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). P1 described getting home late and a lack of sleep as a stress related to extracurricular activities:
The stressors there would come from not getting enough sleep, definitely. Um, last year in junior year, I took three AP classes at the same time as playing during winter percussion, which was 3-hour practices after school. And so, they start at 6 so they go from 6 to 9. So, I would get home at around 9:30 and then have to start all my homework, and it would just end up me going to bed at like 1 in the morning every night and just being tired. That would just be like a consistent schedule, so the fact that extracurriculars tend to take a lot of time up out of your day where you could be doing homework right after school. It would be just a lot of extra time that you have to be like doing homework or worrying about extracurricular activities where you should be able to just relax. Then you have zero period, you’re up again at 5 o’clock, leaving the house at the crack of dawn.

P6 described the need to balance an extracurricular activity with the expectations of an AP course:

I did team manager for basketball and it kind of took away all my time. Like it was every day after school from 3 to 5, so I wouldn’t get home till like 5:35, which left me not as much time to do my homework, which probably wasn’t a good idea. So, doing that I would have to finish my AP Gov notes, because I spent 2 extra hours at school doing basketball.

P7 stated, “I think I just kind of learned to manage my time. Like you have to be willing to stay up and put in the work, like wake up early and do it.” For P14, time management is a strength but stated,
Time management probably is one of my strong suits, but it really is a lot of work because wrestling demands a lot and it’s only a 2-hour practice after school, like right after school so I’m getting home around 5 or 6 o’clockish. But it’s really draining physically and mentally and you’re tired and then I have a massive workload for my AP courses. And I got a balance, you know, grooming like showering, eating, things like that, with the courses after I get home and I’m tired and I want to sleep. But you know, I gotta stay up and do it. So I think that that’s a big thing from the extracurriculars because I noticed after wrestling ended, like after I got injured, it was a lot easier, I had a lot more time on my hands.

For P5, the balance is in enjoying extracurricular activities and the expectations of AP courses:

You see for me, a lot of the extracurricular stuff that I do, I like to do, and you kind of get this weird situation where you’re working hard, but you’re also enjoying it. But they’re annoyed by how much you’re working with it, which is kind of weird. You know, it’s basically where it’s like for me, I enjoy flying and doing all that. So, when I’m doing it, it’s a lot of work, and I’m always like why is this so much work, oh my gosh. But, you know, at the same time I’m also like really enjoying it, so it’s kind of that weird balance of work and having fun with it. And, you know, I would say that even though I have fun doing it, what stresses me out the most is the amount of more work that creates because I don’t have as much time in other classes. So, you know, it’s really weird because in most people who do extracurricular, do them because they enjoy it. And so, you get that weird balance of, you know, it’s a lot of work and I’m annoyed with the
amount of work, but I’m at the same time enjoying it. Yeah, I would say that it does create stress, but it really does it in the other classes where you now have less time to do work or prepare for a test.

P2 described enjoying extracurricular activities but feeling like there had to be a choice between AP courses and the extracurricular event:

Yeah, I mean, I played football and I played lacrosse and I mean both of those kind of just have me doing extracurriculars year round. So, a lot of it is very difficult when you are trying to do something that you’re passionate towards and that gives you a lot of joy. But at the same time, you have to take those classes, and then play that sport, and it’s kind of hard to make a decision between the two sometimes because you can either do something you enjoy or do something that you chose to do, whether you enjoy it or not. And of course, it’s gonna create stress if you’re able to balance those two all the time.

**Research Question 4**

The fourth research question sought to answer, “What coping strategies do high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses use to manage stress?” As defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), coping is a cognitive and behavioral response to a feeling of threat, harm, or challenge to manage the internal and/or external demands that an individual experiences. To regulate emotional distress, coping strategies allow individuals to change the relationship between themselves and their environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The 15 students interviewed identified three themes with a frequency count ranging from 29 to 35 with coping strategies appearing with a frequency of 55. Table 4 illustrates the identified
coping strategies used by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total frequency count</th>
<th>Total no. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management of time and curricula</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons or things accessed for support</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process for addressing stress</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Management of time and curricula. Student stress is associated with academic demands such as time management, test anxiety, and academic ability (Lal, 2014; Putwain, 2007). For the 15 participants interviewed, coping strategies identified in managing time and curricula included using open time blocks to complete work, prioritizing assignments and tasks, and planning time to work, with each appearing at a frequency range between eight to nine. P2 described balancing homework with sports:

I would always admit, I’m not always the greatest at it, I would always try to balance my homework during school, and then do my sport. That way I have less to do at night, or if I’m unable to do it at night, I would show up to school early the next morning because I realized that sleep is something that students need. So, I try to work on it in the morning too but it got very stressful, I wasn’t able to crunch in enough homework during that time and it would be very difficult. If I had to do a ton at night or way more than 2 in the morning.
P1 described avoiding procrastination through the use of time management:

I definitely work on not procrastinating. I’ve made it important to myself that immediately after school when I get home, I start on homework and before I do anything, I get at least part of my homework done. Before an easy thing to do would be to come home and get on your phone and start looking at your phone and then like you lose an hour or two and then you start on your homework. It’s just, it’s much easier if you get it started, and then take a break. So, I think that would probably be one coping strategy is making sure my time management is very good.

P3 reiterated the strategy to start homework immediately after getting home and not waste time. P15 stated that the schedule for managing time and curricular remained the same during the school year: “I really just go to school, eat, do homework . . . that scheduled basically every day.” For P7, P8, P12, and P13, creating a schedule or planner was used to manage the time and curricular demands of their courses. P7 stated, “AP sends up a schedule, like way early in advance, so I just kind of plan my personal schedule with that schedule.” P8 extended P7’s strategy by scheduling time for projects and extended homework assignments: “I would make sure that I would do a lot of my projects over the weekends, I would make sure if I don’t do it during the week . . . then I’ll do the project over the weekend.”

P6 described completing AP work before other assignments:

Usually I tend to do my AP homework first, because I know I can get that out of the way, so I can focus on that more if I do it first thing. Then if I do my math homework first and then I do my AP homework, it’s just easier to focus on it. In
the beginning, I do my other homework in the morning, but I never do AP homework in the morning because I know it’s just gonna stress me out.
P5 stated that managing time and curricular expectations required taking breaks: You know, being able to come home and just kind of relax for a good half hour really helps and then I also try to plan what I’m doing. So, you know I sit down on my computer and I go okay what needs to be done tonight. And then I more or less try to stick to that based on this will only take half an hour and it takes 4 hours, so it really all depends.
P8 described using a combination of writing down all assignments and using open blocks to complete assignments while P9 detailed using time at school and home to “power manage” the time and curricular needs:
I usually will get everything done in one night, but if I don’t I just kind of like, sit back and power manage it. I kind of, well, I have a planner, so I know what I have to do that night. And if something isn’t due the next day, then I’m not going to stress about that as much as I am going to just stress about like something that is due the next day. I’ll do those first and if I have time, I’ll do some others. I usually do things that I know that I need to do, so I’ll do my math homework because I know if I don’t do it then I’m going to get behind on that class. Even though it’s not necessarily due, but I don’t necessarily have to, you know, do something for my history class because I know I can do it the next day and still be fine in that class. So, I’ve kind of just managed what I know I need to do my myself in order to succeed in the classes.
P10 agreed with strategies used by P9 and stated, “If I don’t get my homework done at nighttime, like I would do it during other classes or like at lunch.”

**Persons or things accessed for support.** Identifying individuals or places to go for support appeared at a frequency of 31 for the 15 participants interviewed. According to CASEL (n.d.), academic programs that promote social and emotional learning (SEL) encourage positive peer interactions, decreased stress and depression, and increased academic performance in students. The 15 students interviewed identified family, mindfulness or meditation, and friends at a frequency that ranged from 13 to 17. P3 described the family and friends resourced for support:

> I usually go to my sister probably first because I relate to her, and she also has taken all of these rigorous courses. So, she like knows what I’m going through and knows what it’s like. I also like going to my boyfriend because he’s, like, supportive of me and always tries to encourage me to do my best. I go to my parents, sometimes, but like I don’t want to like, like let them down. Like I know they care about me, so I go for them for like schoolwork help, like if I have any questions that I’m just like feeling overwhelmed about. They are able to explain it to me because they’re pretty good at all like the math and sciences.

P1 concurred with P3 in the going to family first:

> I’d say the very first person I would go to is probably my sister, because she already finished high school. She took AP classes as well, so she knows how I’m feeling. And then after that probably my parents because they’re very understanding of how stressful it can be, um, after those after like close family members, I would say probably go to my AP peers, simply because like they’re in
the same class as me. They know it’s like exactly how I feel about something like, if I’m stressed about homework, they know exactly what I’m feeling because they have the same homework, too.

P15 elaborated on P1’s statement about peers understanding the course expectations:

I mean, go to my friends who have pretty much the same pressures and just kind of rants about how annoying school can be and how much work we have, but there’s like a few people who have the same workload as me and we all scream and cry the same.

P8 described using mindfulness strategies to cope with social stress:

When it came to like social stress, like I said I would talk to my friends because they would also be struggling with the AP classes, and more recently this year, like I said, sometimes I would just go on Instagram for like 5 to 10 minutes during a homework assignment just to like get my mind off the topic just to like, relax my mind. So, I’m not constantly just like going crazy with all these, like, anxieties and stresses. Can I do this? I’m like okay, I’m just gonna take a quick second just to breathe and relax and then analyze it and so I’m not like freaking out, and stuff. I also talk to my parents to be like, you know, I just need to relax for a little bit. You want to watch like a TV show for half an hour and then I’ll just do my homework so that way I can just not be too stressed.

**Process for addressing stress.** Academic stress, as defined by Lal (2014), is the feeling of anxiety and mental distress associated with the fear or idea of academic failure. Social stress is defined as situations that threaten an individual’s relationships, self-esteem, or feelings of belonging (Juth & Dickerson, 2013). Processes for addressing
academic and/or social stress appeared at a frequency rate of 29 for the 15 participants of this study. According to P1,

So, even though I do a lot of band and like play music a lot. I tend to play music, besides journaling, which has become bigger. I tend to go play either my bass or my drums, because I feel like that’s just an individual activity where I can get my mind off. I can use music as a way to kind of express myself in a way I wouldn’t be willing to like tell others.

P13 also turned to music and used strategies to develop a positive mindset:

I think listening to music is always pretty good, whenever you need to calm some stress you have. I know it’s kind of hard to do that at school, if you get stressed there. But you can at home, or before school, and listen to music so it’s pretty nice. Um, and just trying to tell yourself to make sure you’re not in the negative mindset, which I know can be difficult for some people. But you can’t think that I’m going to fail this test, I always think I’m definitely overly positive, and some people do not like that about me, but it’s just something that I try to do. You got to think, I will most likely pass, hopefully. Don’t think, I’m never gonna pass this test, I did terrible. Think, I’ve definitely been studying that and stuff. I always try to, you have to get in a little bit of a better mindset, before you do something to help relieve stress.

P2 described meditating, watching TV, and hanging out with friends to get away from stress. P14 explained,

I like taking showers, I feel like that’s a good way for me, swimming, just exercising doing that kind of stuff that really kind of takes my mind off of it,
putting into something that I’m in complete control over. And really helps me kind of take a break for a little while. From the intensity that’s at hand.

Exercise is a strategy used to address stress for P6: “I go for runs, because it helps me like process everything.” P10 stated, “I like running. Just going out for a run” when asked to describe strategies used to calm academic or social stress.

P7 described using mindfulness techniques and sleep to calm stress:

During a test, I’ll just try to like take deep breaths and like remind myself like what I’m actually doing and what got me to focus. But other than that, like I just try to get a lot of sleep, and just relax on the weekends. That way I can be ready for the next week.

P9 used similar strategies as P7:

I don’t know if there’s anything like, physically, I really do. But I know that like, I just think to myself, it’s not the end of the world. If I don’t pass it, I’ll try as hard as I can. And I know that at the end of the day, I’ve done everything I can to try to succeed in this certain class. And also, I keep doing what I enjoy, like I keep playing soccer. And I know that is fun for me right now. If I’m not struggling academically, I’m not going to let it affect everything else in my life. And I’m just going to keep moving forward past it because I can’t really change the past and you can’t, you know, it’s not at the end of the day, it’s not the end of the world and you’ll be fine.

**Summary**

Chapter IV presented the data and findings of this qualitative study, which sought to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving high school students participating in
IB, AP, and Honors courses in Sacramento County in California while also identifying academic and social stressors and coping strategies used to overcome them. The study’s population included 11th- and 12th-grade high school students in Sacramento County according to CDE (n.d.-a). The target population for this study was specific to 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses that are served within eight school districts in Sacramento County in California. This study focused on students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses in English language arts, history/social science, and/or mathematics. A total of 15 high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses participated in this study.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

2. What are the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

3. What are the social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

4. What coping strategies do high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses use to manage stress?

An interview protocol was established with one background question and 16 primary interview questions that addressed each of the four research questions of the study. The 15 participant interviews were held in a one-on-one format via Zoom. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and the Otter application. Interviews were transcribed using the Otter transcription application; all participants were provided with a
digital copy of their transcription. The data obtained through the interview transcriptions were coded, analyzed, and categorized into themes using the NVivo coding software and then correlated to the study’s research questions, which resulted in the findings of this study. An independent review of the data was conducted by a colleague familiar with, but not involved in, the study to ensure intercoder reliability.

Findings from this study related to the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses that yielded the most frequencies included the following:

- Course expectations
- Participation in extracurricular activities
- Time preparing for courses

The most frequently identified academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses included the following:

- Stress related to academic workload
- Test anxiety
- Consistency in expectations
- Stress related to success criteria

The most frequently identified social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses included the following:

- Effects on social interactions
- Peer relationships
• Social media involvement

• Stress associated with extracurricular activities

The most frequently identified coping strategies used by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses to manage stress included the following:

• Management of time and curricula

• Persons or things accessed for support

• Process for addressing stress

Chapter V of this study presents conclusions based on these findings. Chapter V also offers implications for future action and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter V provides a recitation of the purpose of this study, the research questions, the methodology, and the population and sample. The chapter then presents a summary of the major findings and includes an account of the unexpected findings. The researcher then provides conclusions based on the research findings. The chapter concludes with implications for action and recommendations for further research based on the findings of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses. An additional purpose of this study was to identify the stressors (academic and social) experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students and coping strategies used to overcome them.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

2. What are the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

3. What are the social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?
4. What coping strategies do high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses use to manage stress?

**Research Methods**

A qualitative phenomenological research design was selected to describe the lived experiences, academic and social stressors, and coping strategies of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students. This study focused on using in-depth, semistructured interviews to describe how participants process and rationalize their lived experiences (Patton, 2015b). The detailed interviews of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses provided essential detailed data used to describe and understand the lived experiences of participants in this qualitative study.

**Population and Sample**

The population for this study consisted of 37,646 11th- and 12th-grade students in Sacramento County according to CDE (n.d.-a). The target population for this study was specific to 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses, which are serviced within eight school districts in Sacramento County. According to 2017-2018 school year data provided by CDE, 14,448 students participated in IB, AP, or Honors courses; this study focused on students participating in courses specific to English language arts, history/social science, and/or mathematics. From this target population, a sample size of nine female and six male 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, or Honors classes were identified as the 15 participants for this study.
Major Findings

The major findings of this qualitative study are organized and presented by each research question.

Research Question 1

*What are the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?*

The major findings produced three lived experiences of the 15 high-achieving high school students interviewed. Course expectations, participation in extracurricular activities, and time preparing for courses appeared at a frequency count between 45 and 66.

The most frequently identified lived experience described by participants was course expectations with a frequency count of 66, which focused on attentiveness in class, effort, and a passing score on the AP exam. Participants identified that the expectation they placed on themselves, as well as from teachers, was to perform at the highest level. This level of success included passing the AP exam with a minimum score of three or higher, putting forth best effort, attentiveness, and participation. For the 15 participants, the time spent preparing for IB, AP, or Honors courses appeared at a frequency rate of 45, with 2 to 3 hours a day spent planning, studying, and completing nightly homework for each course. The time demands of academic courses combined with extracurricular activities took up the majority of hours in a day. The 15 participants averaged just over two extracurricular activities each, which included sports, clubs, and volunteer activities. As identified in the review of the literature, academic demands
associated with management of time, test anxiety, and academic ability are associated with student stress and anxiety (Lal, 2014; Putwain, 2007).

Research Question 2

What are the academic stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

The major findings included stress related to academic workload, test anxiety, consistency in expectations, and stress related to success criteria, which appeared at a frequency rate of 33 to 69. As described in the review of the literature, students participating in academically accelerated programs often experience higher stress because of increased performance expectations (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010).

Participants described the stress associated with academic expectations as overwhelming and exhausting, with participants stating that their success was based on their final grade in the course. The review of the literature highlighted that the pressure to succeed is exacerbated by the increased workload, testing expectations, and additional stress associated with academically rigorous curriculum (Suldo et al., 2008). Participants compared the consistency of course expectations from teachers to those placed on themselves, with additional stress coming at the beginning of each course as participants aligned the expectations of their teachers with those placed on themselves. The success criteria identified by participants created an additional stress associated with test anxiety. Putwain (2007) defined test anxiety as a reaction to varying forms of tests and assessments; participants in this study described increased anxiety as the time to test neared, and a fear of failure was associated with forgetting information and concepts.
Research Question 3

What are the social stressors experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses?

The major findings included effects on social interactions, peer relationships, social media involvement, and stress associated with extracurricular activities, which appeared at a frequency count between 23 and 53. These findings are supported in the review of the literature and as described by Walburg (2014) as pressure from peers and social expectations that cause an increase of stress in students. These findings are further supported by the definition of stress as an emotional response to a negative experience that can be directly related to anxiety and emotional distress (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

According to the participants in this study, social interactions are affected by self-described lack of time, competition and comparison of self to peers, and a fear of missing out. Additionally, while participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses helped to create friendships with individuals with similar personalities and goals, peer relationships were difficult because of lack of time. Although some participants described social media as a distraction and drain on time, others described it as an avenue for staying connected with friends and family. For participants in this study, lacking sleep, getting home late, balancing course expectations with extracurricular activity expectations, and needing to manage time commitments caused increased stress.

Research Question 4

What coping strategies do high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses use to manage stress?
The major findings of coping strategies used by participants to manage stress included management of time and curricula, persons or things accessed for support, and processes for addressing stress, which appeared at a frequency count between 29 and 35. As supported in the review of the literature, coping strategies allow individuals to change the relationship between themselves and their environment to manage the demands that an individual experiences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

The participants in this study described prioritizing assignments and tasks, planning time to work, avoiding procrastination, and using open time blocks to complete work as a coping strategy for managing time and curricula. An additional coping strategy was to utilize family, mindfulness and/or mediation, and friends who understand their experiences as resources for support. Participants described exercising, listening to or playing music, mediation, and maintaining a positive mindset as effective methods for addressing the academic and social stress they experience.

**Unexpected Findings**

An unexpected finding emerged from the data collection in this study. As cited in the review of the literature, a 2017 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Youth Risk Behaviors Survey stated that 31.5% of high school students in the United States claimed to have experienced feelings of sadness or hopelessness. These feelings led to high-risk behaviors such as sexual activity, substance abuse, or increased negative interactions in school (Kann et al., 2018). However, in this study, all participants described feelings of stress that led them to turn to family, friends, or other external resources to offset stress and cope with their feelings. This finding indicated a possible
future qualitative comparative study to determine the identified academic and social stressors and coping strategies from students participating in varied academic programs.

**Conclusions**

In evaluating the findings of the data collected and the review of literature, this researcher used the unique perspective garnered through the experiences of parenting two high-achieving children along with the understanding of the research to identify several conclusions. The review of the literature supported this study in identifying the effectiveness of social and emotional learning (SEL) supports for students with academic and social challenges living in urban areas (Camangian, 2015; Hamedani et al., 2015). In order to support students, the review of the literature stated that secondary educators need to implement programs that appropriately support the academic, social, and emotional needs of students (K. Tan et al., 2018). As detailed in the review of the literature, increased curricular expectations are not associated with a decrease in academic performance for high-performing students; however, there is a need for research to determine the impact and sources of stress on students in accelerated programs (Suldo et al., 2008). The review of the literature further identified a need for understanding how stress and coping strategies affect and influence the mental health of high-performing high school students (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010). Furthermore, the review of the literature and this study concluded that by understanding the lived experiences of students combined with the identification of effective coping strategies used to mitigate stress and anxiety, there will be a greater understanding of the social, academic, and emotional needs of high-achieving students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses. Four conclusions were derived from the major findings based on the lived experiences of high-
achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses. These conclusions were further supported by the review of the literature in Chapter II.

Conclusion 1

High-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses are overcommitted and overworked academically and socially, which allows for little personal time. These students are self-driven and continue to thrive despite the overwhelming workload and extracurricular commitments; however, they experience stress related to their self-induced pressures to achieve. Based on these findings, it is concluded that the structure of IB, AP, and Honors courses combined with the competitive, achievement-oriented nature of the students creates a difficult if not unhealthy personal situation for students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses.

The data collected from the individual interviews revealed that the daily experiences of participants included an academic workload that averaged four IB, AP, or Honors courses, two and a half extracurricular activities, and a minimum of 2 hours a day required for studying and preparing for academic courses. Participants described the stress associated with their personal criteria for success, which coincides with the requirements for each course; however, interview data highlighted additional expectations to exceed the standards on the final IB, AP, and Honors exams as well as to obtain a B or better on the final course grade. As detailed in the research, teachers of IB, AP, and Honors courses develop success criteria based on increased levels of studying and homework, which participants described as overwhelming to manage. According to the literature, students in accelerated programs often suffer from increased levels of
perceived stress associated with their performance (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010); these students are also at a greater risk of burnout associated with increased peer, social, and curricular expectations (Walburg, 2014). The expectations for academic success associated with studying, homework, and the memorization of concepts for unnecessary tests caused preventable stress that affected the sleep, peer and family interactions, and social experiences for participants in this study.

**Conclusion 2**

*Family members, friends, and teachers provide a source of strength and compassion for participants while also setting high expectations for success that are a source of motivation for students. Based upon this finding, family members, friends, and teachers provide support for achievement but also contribute to the difficult and stressful personal situations encountered by IB, AP, and Honors students.*

Students described the expectations of teachers and families as being rigorous but further explained that their drive to succeed was self-motivated. The data also indicated that students emulate the success criteria modeled by family members and teachers. Participants described the lowest acceptable grade as a B to maintain a college acceptable GPA and becoming anxious and stressed about obtaining a five on the AP exam to avoid disappointing their family. The expectations for receiving high grades, obtaining college credit from their participation in IB and AP courses, and comparing themselves to those in their family and their peers caused stress and anxiety for students. Interview data also revealed that family members, friends, and teachers were a source of strength as students navigated academic and social stress. Participants stated that academic stress lessened once they realized the expectations of their teachers, developed relationships with peers
in their courses, and discussed their experiences with their family members. However, these stressors could be eliminated or avoided, as identified in the literature, through specific instruction on developing relationships, engaging with others, and modeling appropriate behaviors, through SEL skills that support student development (CASEL, n.d.). Furthermore, when educators and families work together to support the academic and social needs of students, self- and social-awareness skills are developed that will benefit them as they become active members of their communities (Hamedani et al., 2015; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

**Conclusion 3**

*Although the demands from participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses limit time with peers, students identify that they build friendships within their classes that are based on similar interests and similar personalities. Based on this finding, students in IB, AP, or Honors courses miss out on social opportunities and experiences because of the stress associated with academic and extracurricular commitments.*

Students indicated that their participation in high-achieving courses limited their time with peers and left them feeling like they were missing out on social opportunities with friends. Students felt that even though there was competition and comparisons with peers in their courses, friendships were developed based on the time spent together and their shared interests. Through the participation in IB, AP, and Honors courses, students were able to meet other students who had a strong drive to succeed and who understood the pressure associated with the advanced curriculum. However, the time demands associated with homework, study, and extracurricular commitments prevented participants from socializing with friends. The literature states that social stress can
threaten relationships, self-esteem, and feelings of belonging (Juth & Dickerson, 2013); however, students shared that by having friends who were struggling with the same academic and social experiences, they were able to rely on one another as a source of support. As students mature, the literature supports that adolescents develop strategies for aligning their social supports for coping with stress with the options available to them during times of elevated stress (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995).

Conclusion 4

Self-efficacy is apparent in students through their recognition of emotions and the need to manage time to decompress, meditate, and recover from academic and social stress. Based on this finding, students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses require support in time management, prioritization of expectations, and coping strategies that reduce stress.

The literature supports that individuals with a high level of self-efficacy are able to persevere through adversity and are able to manage the stress and emotion associated with their life experiences (Bandura, 2006). Interview data indicated that students rely on practices for managing time and curricula using prioritization of assignments, planning time to complete tasks, and avoiding procrastination. Furthermore, students identified coping strategies such as playing and listening to music, mindfulness practices, meditation, and exercise to mitigate the academic and social stressors they experience. As defined in the literature, coping is a cognitive and behavioral response to a threat, harm, or challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), and coping strategies used by adolescents are directly related to individuals’ self-awareness and relationships with others (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). These strategies are supported through the interviews
with students and the data collected that details how students manage the stress associated with their academic and social interactions.

**Implications for Action**

The exploration of the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses and an extensive review of the literature revealed major findings for the identification of academic and social stressors. Additionally, these important findings identified coping strategies used to mitigate stress in high-achieving high school students. Based on this inquiry, four implications for action are directly correlated with the conclusions drawn from the major findings and are as follows:

1. Through the shared stories of the high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses, it was determined that students are overcommitted and overworked academically and socially, which allows for little personal time. These students are self-driven and continue to thrive despite the overwhelming workload and extracurricular commitments; however, they experience stress related to their self-induced pressures to achieve. Because families, school district leadership, site administration, teachers, and support staff are responsible for preparing students to be college, career, and life ready, the following are calls to action:

   a. District adoption and training of SEL programs that support the development of self-efficacy, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.) need to be explicitly taught and supported in IB, AP, and Honors classrooms using language that is universal across
sites to create a sustainable program that builds upon core competencies of SEL development.

b. Full-time mental health and social-emotional supports need to be provided by licensed mental health therapists, social workers, and counselors to support the ongoing social-emotional and behavioral needs of students participating in IB, AP, or Honors courses. These supports should include ongoing site-centered individual and group counseling and supports focused on the academic and social stressors experienced by high-achieving students.

c. Professional development and ongoing district and site training in Emotional Intelligence (EI) need to be provided for staff working with IB, AP, and Honors students to support the understanding of the rational and emotional functions of the brain to maintain awareness of relationships and behaviors specific to IB, AP, and Honors students (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). The understanding and practices of EI need to be modeled by district and site leaders, teachers, and support staff to support the ongoing SEL development in IB, AP, and Honors students.

d. Districts and sites need to provide family leadership trainings on the development of social-emotional, behavioral, academic, and mental health supports in the home for families of IB, AP, and Honors students. These trainings should focus on the developmental needs of students and will support the SEL lessons being taught in classrooms.

e. District leaders, site administrators, and teachers need to work together to review the structures of the academic programs associated with IB, AP, and Honors courses to refine the expectations for student performance and proficiency
achievement for each course. Student success criteria must be based on quality of standards comprehension versus the quantity of time spent memorizing and reiterating facts and information. “Busy work”, as the students in this study named it, must be kept to a minimum with higher level understanding and performance the basis for evaluation, not volume of work.

2. A major finding in this study revealed that family members, friends, and teachers provide a source of strength and compassion for students while also setting high expectations for success that is a source of motivation for students. To further support high-achieving students participating in IB, AP, and Honors courses and ensure that they are supported socially, emotionally, and academically, the following actions need to occur:

a. Teachers need to provide specific SEL lessons that support the development of self-efficacy, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and effective decision-making skills for IB, AP, and Honors students.

b. Professional development is needed for IB, AP, and Honors teachers on mindfulness practices to be integrated into the classroom with specific supports in the classroom provided by mental health therapists, social workers, and counselors.

c. IB, AP, and Honors teachers need to build time within their lessons to develop personal relationships with students to develop an understanding of their social and emotional needs while building trust beyond academic expectations.

d. Online resources need to be available to IB, AP, and Honors families and students through district and school websites to support families and students outside of the instructional day.
3. A major finding of this study showed that while the demands from participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses limit time with peers, students build friendships within their classes with other students who share similar interests and have similar personalities. To provide students with more opportunities to interact and collaborate with peers the following actions need to occur:

a. Site administration, teachers, and support staff for IB, AP, and Honors students need to model self-awareness and self-management skills to support students in developing efficient practices to manage course expectations, which include the incorporation of homework, studying, and assessments based on the quality versus quantity of course proficiency.

b. Teachers for IB, AP, and Honors students need to provide specific time for collaborative activities that build upon course content but highlight the individual interests and learning strengths of students.

c. Resources and activities need to be available for IB, AP, and Honors students at all sites to encourage student participation and interaction with a focus on community building, empathy, and social awareness.

4. A major finding in this study showed that self-efficacy is apparent in IB, AP, and Honors students through their recognition of emotions and the need to manage time to decompress, meditate, and recover from academic and social stress. To further develop self-efficacy in students, the following actions need to occur:

a. Professional development needs to be provided for district and site personnel in the training of EI to support the development of self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management for IB, AP, and Honors students.
b. Site administration and teachers need to model EI practices for students with specific supports for building and maintaining self-efficacy for IB, AP, and Honors students.

c. Site-centered individual and group counseling and supports need to be provided by full-time mental health therapists, social workers, and/or counselors focused on the needs of students in building self-efficacy skills for IB, AP, or Honors students.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The following recommendations derived from the findings and conclusions of this study are made for further research:

- Explore the lived experiences of recent graduates on the familial expectations and the effect on academic and social stress.
- Explore a qualitative comparative study to determine the identified academic and social stressors and coping strategies as described by students participating in varied academic programs.
- Explore a qualitative study on the development of EI in high school students and how it affects their college academic and social experiences.
- Explore a qualitative comparative study on the development of SEL skills in high school students from the perspective of students and teachers.
- Explore a qualitative comparative study between teachers and students on the development of IB, AP, and Honors courses, course expectations for students, and how each group would alter the courses.
- Explore the lived experiences of elementary and secondary teachers on improving student learning through the development of SEL core competencies.
• Explore a qualitative phenomenological study of the lived experiences of teachers on the development of EI within themselves and their students.

• Explore a mixed methods study of the effectiveness of elementary and secondary principals in developing a sustainable SEL program within their school sites.

• Explore a study that identifies and describe the benefits of participation in IB, AP, and Honors programs from the student perspective.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

The literature and research associated in this study highlighted the academic and social stress experienced by high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students. As an educator and the mother of two recently graduated high-achieving students, I had the perspective of “living the experience” with my children as they navigated their final 2 years in high school. From AP English 11 to AP Calculus BC, the stress associated with the academic expectations and the internal drive to succeed led to my doctoral study and research process. I recognized that the stressors experienced by my children are ones that can be mitigated through the development of skills to identify and manage emotions, set achievable goals, and understand the opinions and feelings of others by building positive relationships, developing interpersonal skills, and making responsible decisions (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). As an educator, I know that supporting the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs of students is a priority for all teachers. I also know that in order to ensure teachers have the resources, skills, and knowledge to support their students, they need access to lessons that will cultivate their understanding of SEL and EI to provide their students with the strategies for success. Through the development of explicit SEL lessons and practices in classrooms, students from kindergarten through
12th grade will develop a SEL language that will support them throughout their lives. As supported in the literature, lessons that meet the SEL needs of students provide psychological resources to students that build social and academic competencies (Hamedani et al., 2015). Furthermore, by providing an understanding of the lived experiences of high-achieving 11th- and 12th-grade high school students, their academic and social stressors, and the coping strategies they use to mitigate their stress, teachers can gain an emotional understanding of the needs of their students. Through practices built on social-emotional competencies, teachers and students will develop a relationship that is built on trust and compassion.

Throughout my doctoral journey, I continued to grow in my understanding of stress responses, coping strategies, and the social and emotional needs of students; however, while interviewing 15 of the most amazingly mature humans, I was able to recognize the strength and character that students embody. The participants in this study were candid with their experiences and vulnerable in their description of stressors and processes for coping with that stress. They highlighted their families, friends, and those who have supported them and discussed the details that frustrated them. Through their lived experiences, I was able to recall the moments in my parenting that I could have been a support to my own children and those moments where I struggled. However, through the experiences of the students in this study and through the experiences of my own children, I will continue to support students in their academic, social-emotional, and behavior development while also supporting the teachers and families who love them.
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APPENDIX A

Literature Matrix

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APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Jodi L. Boyle

Interview time planned: Approximately one hour

Interview place: Participant’s school site or other convenient agreed upon location

Recording: Digital voice recorders

Written: Field and observational notes

Introductions:
Introduce ourselves to one another.

Opening Statement: [Interviewer states:] Thank you for taking time to meet with me and agreeing to participate in this interview. To review, the purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses. The questions I will ask are written to elicit this information and to provide you an opportunity to share any personal stories and experiences you have had, at your discretion, throughout this interview. Also, your identity will remain anonymous, our interview will not take place until after a consent form is signed, and I encourage you to be open and honest for the purposes of this research study.

Interview Agenda: [Interviewer states:] I anticipate this interview will take about an hour today. As a review of the process leading up to this interview, you were invited to participate via phone call, and signed an informed consent form that outlined the interview process and the condition of complete anonymity for this study. We will begin with reviewing the Letter of Invitation, Informed Consent Form, the Participant’s Bill of Rights, and the Audio Release Form. Then after reviewing all the forms, you will be asked to sign documents pertinent for this study, which include the Informed Consent and Audio Release Form. Next, I will begin the audio recorders and ask a list of questions related to the purpose of the study. I may take notes as the interview is being recorded. If you are uncomfortable with me taking notes, please let me know and I will only continue with the audio recording of the interview. Finally, I will stop the recorder and conclude our interview session. After your interview is transcribed, you will receive a copy of the complete transcripts to check for accuracy prior to the data being analyzed. Please remember that anytime during this process you have the right to stop the interview. If at any time you do not understand the questions being asked, please do not hesitate to ask for clarification. Are there any questions or concerns before we begin with the questions?
Background Question:

1. How many International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) or Honors courses are you currently enrolled in?

Content Questions: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

Lived Experiences

1. Describe a typical academic day.
2. What are the expectations for IB, AP, or Honors courses?
3. What activities do you participate in beyond IB, AP, or Honors courses?
4. How much time is dedicated outside of class in preparation for IB, AP, or Honors courses?

Academic Stressors

1. Please describe the workload for IB, AP, or Honors courses and identify any stressors resulting from this workload.
2. Please describe your success criteria for your IB, AP, or Honors Courses and identify stressors created by your own expectations.
3. Describe your knowledge of “test anxiety.” Please describe stressors that you experience as a result of test anxiety.
4. Please describe ways in which IB, AP, and Honors course expectations are consistent or inconsistent and any stressors that result from course expectations.

Social Stressors

1. Describe your involvement with social media and any stressors related to it.
2. Describe how your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses affects social interaction with your peers and any stressors that you experience as a result of participating in IB, AP, or Honors Courses.
3. Describe your peer relationships. Describe any stressors that are affected by your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses.
4. Describe your participation level in extracurricular activities. Describe any stressors created by participating in both Extra-Curricular Activities and IB, AP, or Honors.

Coping Strategies

1. Describe how you manage the time and curricular demands of your IB, AP, or Honors courses.
2. Describe your processes for addressing the stress associated with the academic demands of IB, AP, and Honors courses.
3. Where or who do you go to for support when you are feeling academic or social stress?
4. Describe strategies you use to calm academic or social stress.
### APPENDIX C

**Interview Question Development Matrix**

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<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Question(s)</th>
<th>Source</th>
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| RQ1: What are the lived experiences of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses? | **IQ1:** Describe a typical academic day.  
**IQ2:** What are the expectations for IB, AP, or Honors courses?  
**IQ3:** What activities do you participate in beyond IB, AP, or Honors courses?  
**IQ4:** How much time is dedicated outside of class in preparation for IB, AP, or Honors courses? | Source 1: Bandura  
Source 2: Lazarus  
Source 3: Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty  
Source 4: Literature Review |
| RQ2: What are the academic stressors experienced by high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses? | **IQ5:** Please describe the workload for IB, AP, or Honors courses and identify any stressors resulting from this workload.  
**IQ6:** Please describe your success criteria for your IB, AP, or Honors Courses and identify stressors created by your own expectations.  
**IQ7:** Describe your knowledge of “test anxiety.” Please describe stressors that you experience as a result of test anxiety.  
**IQ8:** Please describe ways in which IB, AP, and Honors course expectations are consistent or inconsistent and any stressors that result from course expectations. | Source 5: Bandura  
Source 6: Lazarus  
Source 7: Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty  
Source 8: Literature Review |
| RQ3: What are the social stressors experienced by high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses? | IQ9: Describe your involvement with social media and any stressors related to it.  
IQ10: Describe how your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses affects social interaction with your peers and any stressors that you experience as a result of participating in IB, AP, or Honors Courses.  
IQ11: Describe your peer relationships. Describe any stressors that are affected by your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses.  
IQ12: Describe your participation level in extracurricular activities. Describe any stressors created by participating in both Extra-Curricular Activities and IB, AP, or Honors. | Source 9: Bandura  
Source 10: Lazarus  
Source 11: Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty  
Source 12: Literature Review |
|---|---|---|
| RQ4: What coping strategies do high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses use to manage stress? | IQ13: Describe how you manage the time and curricular demands of your IB, AP, or Honors courses.  
IQ14: Describe your processes for addressing the stress associated with the academic demands of IB, AP, and Honors courses.  
IQ15: Where or who do you go to for support when you are feeling academic or social stress?  
IQ16: Describe strategies you use to calm academic or social stress. | Source 13: Bandura  
Source 14: Lazarus  
Source 15: Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty  
Source 16: Literature Review |
APPENDIX D

Invitation To Participate

Study: The lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses

January _____, 2020

Dear Prospective Study Participant:

You are invited to participate in a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses. The main investigator of this study is Jodi L. Boyle, Doctoral Candidate in Brandman University’s Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program. You were chosen to participate in this study because you are an 11th or 12th grade student participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

Public high schools from Sacramento County in Northern California that offer International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and Honors courses to 11th and 12th grade students were targeted for this study. Participation should require about one hour of your time and is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

PROCEDURES: If you decide to participate in the study, the researcher will interview you. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions designed to allow you to share your experiences as an 11th or 12th grade student participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

RISKS, INCONVENIENCES, AND DISCOMFORTS: There are minimal risks to your participation in this research study. It may be inconvenient to spend up to one hour in the interview. However, the interview session will be held at your school site or at an agreed upon location, to minimize this inconvenience.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: There are no major benefits to you for participation, however, your input and feedback could help determine effective coping strategies used by high performing high school students as they experience academic and social stressors. The information from this study is intended to inform researchers,
policymakers, and educators. Additionally, the findings and recommendations from this study will be made available to all participants.

ANONYMITY: Records of information that you provide for the research study, and any personal information you provide, will not be linked in any way. It will not be possible to identify you as the person who provided any specific information for the study.

You are encouraged to ask questions, at any time, that will help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it will affect you. You may contact me at (916) 230-3904 or by email at jboyle1@mail.brandman.edu. You can also contact Dr. Phil Pendley by email at pendley@brandman.edu. If you have any further questions or concerns about this study or your rights as a study participant, you may write or call the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

Respectfully,

Jodi L. Boyle
Doctoral Candidate, Brandman University
APPENDIX E

Informed Consent

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA  92618

RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: The lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Jodi L. Boyle, Doctoral Candidate

TITLE OF CONSENT FORM: Consent to Participate in Research

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study is being conducted for a dissertation for the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program at Brandman University. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

PROCEDURES: In participating in this research study, I agree to partake in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. The interview will take place, in person, at my school site or other pre-determined location, and will last about an hour. During the interview, I will be asked a series of questions designed to allow me to share my experiences as an 11th or 12th grade student participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

I understand that:

a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.

b) I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recording will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recording will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentiality shredded or fully deleted.
c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding effective coping strategies used by high performing high school students as they experience academic and social stressors. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

d) Any questions I have concerning my participation in this study will be answered by Jodi L. Boyle, Brandman University Doctoral Candidate. I understand that Ms. Boyle may be contacted by phone at (916) 230-3904 or email at jboyle1@mail.brandman.edu. The dissertation chairperson may also answer questions: Dr. Phil Pendley at pendley@brandman.edu.

e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate and may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time.

f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be informed and my consent re-obtained. If I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it and hereby voluntarily consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

_________________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party    Date

_________________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Witness (if appropriate)           Date

_________________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Principal Investigator             Date

Brandman University IRB 2018
APPENDIX F

Parent Informed Consent

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA  92618

ASSENT RESEARCH FORM FOR MINORS

RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: The lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses

Your child is invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jodi L. Boyle, a doctoral candidate from Brandman University, under the supervision of Dr. Philip Pendley. Your child’s participation is voluntary. Please read the information below and ask any questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether to participate. By signing this permission slip, you grant permission for your child to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this form.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Jodi L. Boyle, Doctoral Candidate

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study is being conducted for a dissertation for the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program at Brandman University. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

WHAT WILL BE DONE:

- In participating in this research study, I agree to allow my child to partake in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. The interview will take place, in person, at my child’s school site or other pre-determined location and will last about an hour. During the interview, my child will be asked a series of questions designed to allow them to share their experiences as an 11th or 12th grade student participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.
- I understand that the investigator may take notes as the interview is recorded; however, my child is able to stop the process at any time if they become uncomfortable with the interview or note-taking.
- At the conclusion of the interview, the recording will be stopped, and all recorded information will be transcribed. My child will receive a copy of the complete transcripts to check for accuracy prior to the data being analyzed.
- My child may ask for clarification throughout the interview process and has the right to stop the interview at any time.
The following questions will be asked during the course of the interview:

Background Question:

2. How many International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) or Honors courses are you currently enrolled in?

Content Questions: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

Lived Experiences

5. Describe a typical academic day.
6. What are the expectations for IB, AP, or Honors courses?
7. What activities do you participate in beyond IB, AP, or Honors courses?
8. How much time is dedicated outside of class in preparation for IB, AP, or Honors courses?

Academic Stressors

5. Please describe the workload for IB, AP, or Honors courses and identify any stressors resulting from this workload.
6. Please describe your success criteria for your IB, AP, or Honors Courses and identify stressors created by your own expectations.
7. Describe your knowledge of “test anxiety.” Please describe stressors that you experience as a result of test anxiety.
8. Please describe ways in which IB, AP, and Honors course expectations are consistent or inconsistent and any stressors that result from course expectations.

Social Stressors

5. Describe your involvement with social media and any stressors related to it.
6. Describe how your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses affects social interaction with your peers and any stressors that you experience as a result of participating in IB, AP, or Honors Courses.
7. Describe your peer relationships. Describe any stressors that are affected by your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses.
8. Describe your participation level in extracurricular activities. Describe any stressors created by participating in both Extra-Curricular Activities and IB, AP, or Honors.

Coping Strategies
5. Describe how you manage the time and curricular demands of your IB, AP, or Honors courses.
6. Describe your processes for addressing the stress associated with the academic demands of IB, AP, and Honors courses.
7. Where or who do you go to for support when you are feeling academic or social stress?
8. Describe strategies you use to calm academic or social stress.

BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY: There are no major benefits to my child for participation, however, their input and feedback could help determine effective coping strategies used by high performing high school students as they experience academic and social stressors. The information from this study is intended to inform researchers, policymakers, and educators. Additionally, the findings and recommendations from this study will be made available to all participants.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS: There are minimal risks to my child by participating in this research study. It may be inconvenient to spend up to one hour in the interview. However, the interview session will be held at my child’s school site or at an agreed upon location, to minimize this inconvenience.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Responses will be kept completely confidential. My child’s name will not be used in this research and you will not be identified when the research is published or discussed.

DECISION TO QUIT AT ANY TIME: Participation is voluntary, my child is free to withdraw participation from this study at any time. They also may choose to skip any questions they do not wish to answer.

HOW WILL THE FINDINGS BE USED: The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only. The results from this study may be presented in educational settings and at professional conferences. The results may be published in a professional journal.

CONTACT INFORMATION: If you have concerns or questions about this study, please Jodi L. Boyle at jboyle1@mail.brandman.edu. You can also contact Dr. Phil Pendley by email at pendley@brandman.edu. No information that identifies me or my child will be released without my separate consent and all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed, and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Researcher Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.
Signature of Parent or Guardian

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date
Children’s Assent to Participate in Research

In March of 1983 the Department of Health and Human Services issued the most recent human subject regulation, i.e., “Additional Protection for Children Involved as Subjects in Research” (45 CFR 46-Subpart).

These regulations governing children in research situations decree that investigators need to take into consideration age, maturity, and psychological state of the participating children and include them in the consent form, and soliciting the assent of younger children. The regulation defines “assent” as the child’s affirmative agreement to participate. “Mere failure to object should not, absent affirmative agreement, be construed as assent.”

The following items should be addressed in an assent procedure*, utilizing language appropriate to the child’s age and/or developmental level:

1. a) Why the child is asked to participate.
2. b) What is going to take place from the child’s point of view.
3. c) The risk to the child.
4. d) The benefit to the child.
5. e) Identification of the researcher by name and telephone number in case questions should arise.
6. f) In non-therapeutic research, a statement that the child has a choice to participate or to withdraw at any time without negative consequences.
7. g) A statement that the child may retain a copy of the assent form.
8. h) Date and signature lines for the researcher and, if appropriate, for the child.

* Represented by an assent form, or by a prepared script of the explanation to be tendered.
RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: The lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jodi L. Boyle, a doctoral candidate at Brandman University under the supervision of Dr. Philip Pendley. Your participation is voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form prior to participating in the interview. You will be given a copy of this form.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Jodi L. Boyle, Doctoral Candidate

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study is being conducted for a dissertation for the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program at Brandman University. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

What will happen if I take part in this research:

• In participating in this research study, I agree to partake in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. The interview will take place, in person, at my school site or other pre-determined location, and will last about an hour. During the interview, I will be asked a series of questions designed to allow me to share my experiences as an 11th or 12th grade student participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.
• I understand that the investigator may take notes as the interview is recorded; however, I am able to stop the process at any time if I become uncomfortable with the interview or note-taking.
• At the conclusion of the interview, the recording will be stopped, and all recorded information will be transcribed. I will receive a copy of the complete transcripts to check for accuracy prior to the data being analyzed.
• I may ask for clarification throughout the interview process and have the right to stop the interview at any time.
• The following questions will be asked during the course of the interview:

  Background Question:
3. How many International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) or Honors courses are you currently enrolled in?

**Content Questions:** The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses.

**Lived Experiences**

9. Describe a typical academic day.
10. What are the expectations for IB, AP, or Honors courses?
11. What activities do you participate in beyond IB, AP, or Honors courses?
12. How much time is dedicated outside of class in preparation for IB, AP, or Honors courses?

**Academic Stressors**

9. Please describe the workload for IB, AP, or Honors courses and identify any stressors resulting from this workload.
10. Please describe your success criteria for your IB, AP, or Honors Courses and identify stressors created by your own expectations.
11. Describe your knowledge of “test anxiety.” Please describe stressors that you experience as a result of test anxiety.
12. Please describe ways in which IB, AP, and Honors course expectations are consistent or inconsistent and any stressors that result from course expectations.

**Social Stressors**

9. Describe your involvement with social media and any stressors related to it.
10. Describe how your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses affects social interaction with your peers and any stressors that you experience as a result of participating in IB, AP, or Honors Courses.
11. Describe your peer relationships. Describe any stressors that are affected by your participation in IB, AP, or Honors courses.
12. Describe your participation level in extracurricular activities. Describe any stressors created by participating in both Extra-Curricular Activities and IB, AP, or Honors.

**Coping Strategies**

9. Describe how you manage the time and curricular demands of your IB, AP, or Honors courses.
10. Describe your processes for addressing the stress associated with the academic demands of IB, AP, and Honors courses.
11. Where or who do you go to for support when you are feeling academic or social stress?
12. Describe strategies you use to calm academic or social stress.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY:** There are no major benefits to you for participation, however, your input and feedback could help determine effective coping strategies used by high performing high school students as they experience academic and social stressors. The information from this study is intended to inform researchers, policymakers, and educators. Additionally, the findings and recommendations from this study will be made available to all participants.

**POTENTIAL RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS:** There are minimal risks to your participation in this research study. It may be inconvenient to spend up to one hour in the interview. However, the interview session will be held at your school site or at an agreed upon location, to minimize this inconvenience.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Responses will be kept completely confidential. Your name will not be used in this research and you will not be identified when the research is published or discussed.

**DECISION TO QUIT AT ANY TIME:** Participation is voluntary, you are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time. You also may choose to skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

**HOW WILL THE FINDINGS BE USED:** The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only. The results from this study may be presented in educational settings and at professional conferences. The results may be published in a professional journal.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** You are encouraged to ask questions, at any time, that will help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it will affect you. You may contact me at (916) 230-3904 or by email at jboyle1@mail.brandman.edu. You can also contact Dr. Phil Pendley by email at pendley@brandman.edu.

**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

I have read the information provided above. I have been given a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study.

______________________________
Name of Participant (Minor)

______________________________          _______________________
Signature                      Date
APPENDIX H

Research Participant’s Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

Brandman University IRB Adopted November 2013
APPENDIX I

National Institute of Health (NIH) Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Jodi Boyle successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants."

Date of Completion: 05/15/2018

Certification Number: 2819558
APPENDIX J

BUIRB Approval

MyBrandman
BUIRB Application Approved As Submitted: Jodi Boyle
To: jboyle1@mail.brandman.edu, Cc: Pendley, Philip, buirb, Smith Salazar, Vikki,
Reply-To: webmaster

Dear Jodi Boyle,

Congratulations, your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board. This approval grants permission for you to proceed with data collection for your research. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If any issues should arise that are pertinent to your IRB approval, please contact the IRB immediately at BUIRB@brandman.edu. If you need to modify your BUIRB application for any reason, please fill out the "Application Modification Form" before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at the following link: https://irb.brandman.edu/Applications/Modification.pdf.

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank you,
Doug DeVore, Ed.D.
Professor
Organizational Leadership
BUIRB Chair
ddevore@brandman.edu
www.brandman.edu
RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: The lived experiences and identified stressors and coping strategies of high achieving 11th and 12th grade high school students participating in International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), or Honors courses

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA 92618

I authorize Jodi L. Boyle, Brandman University Doctoral Candidate, to record my voice. I give Brandman University and all persons or entities associated with this research study permission or authority to use this recording for activities associated with this research study.

I understand that the recording will be used for transcription purposes and the information obtained during the interview may be published in a journal/dissertation or presented at meetings/presentations.

I will be consulted about the use of the audio recordings for any purpose other than those listed above. Additionally, I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising correlated to the use of information obtained from the recording.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to the outlined terms. I hereby release all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material.