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Mitigating Burnout in Special Education: The Importance of Connections and Leadership
by

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ABSTRACT

Teacher retention rates are becoming a growing concern, particularly in the field of special education. To gain a deeper understanding of this trend, a pilot study was conducted to illustrate the experiences of teachers who have encountered burnout while working in special education environments. The study found high levels of job satisfaction, sufficient support from administrators, and positive relationships with colleagues all played a critical role in reducing burnout among special education teachers. Mitigating symptoms of burnout requires being inclusive to special educators, creating opportunities for shared responsibility, allowing for collaboration time with colleagues, and providing positive feedback. Addressing this issue is crucial for reducing teacher attrition and ensuring school leaders possess the characteristics necessary to support their special education teachers effectively. These insights are particularly relevant for school leaders overseeing special education programs, as they directly impact student success and teacher retention.

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Mitigating Burnout in Special Education: The Importance of Connections and Leadership

Special education is a challenging field requiring a high level of compassion and expertise to cater to the complex needs of diverse learners with multiple diagnoses. Special education teachers are often tasked with understanding a variety of diagnoses (Jovanović et al., 2019), such as autism spectrum disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Tourette's syndrome, reactive attachment disorder, and cerebral palsy. They must also be proficient in addressing mental health concerns (including suicidal ideations) in children and teens, implementing positive behaviour interventions to reduce challenging or harmful behaviour of students, and adapting educational content to ensure accessibility for those with auditory, visual, or communicative differences. Most students within special education programming also require an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) – alternatively referred to as an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), which is to be reviewed consistently and discussed with those involved in their care (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). In addition, special education teachers are expected to fulfill typical teaching requirements such as assessment and planning, connecting with families, attending professional development, and addressing various other needs. Meeting the diverse needs of special education students can put a heavy workload on teachers, leading to burnout and high levels of teacher attrition (Hester et al., 2020). This poses a significant challenge for school leaders who must ensure teachers have the resources to prevent burnout and provide quality care for students with complex needs (Dye, 2023).

The well-being of students in special education and their learning experience relies on their teachers' dedication, expertise, and well-being. It is crucial for special education teachers to provide a high level of care and support to their students, while principals must ensure their staff

is equipped with the necessary resources to carry out the many aspects of their job effectively. However, special education stakeholders' challenges have intensified in recent years as the teacher attrition rate has increased (Evashkovsky & Osipova, 2023). This ongoing concern highlights the urgent need for proactive strategies in the mitigation of burnout in special education to ensure all students receive the best possible education and support.

To fully comprehend the detrimental effects of teacher burnout on special education and its association with teacher attrition, it is essential to inquire into the various factors which contribute to this phenomenon. As such, I interviewed experienced special education teachers and investigated the existing literature on burnout to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue. Burnout among special education teachers is a complex issue which requires ongoing attention. It is not just a result of excessive workload and stress but also a reflection of the necessity for proactive measures to be put into place. To prevent the alarming rate of burnout in special education, it is crucial for school administrators and stakeholders to address its prevalence actively. Providing teachers with the necessary resources and support they require is imperative for them to support their classrooms efficiently. Additionally, cultivating a culture with rich peer relationships and collaboration is effective in preventing burnout and promoting a healthy work environment in which teachers have a desire to remain.

It is important to note the origin of my interest in the literature and research shared in this capping project, as well as my positionality. I have had the opportunity to work in the area of special education for the last eight years. My experience includes working inclusively with students with special needs, as well as in specialized programs dedicated to individual programming for students with a multitude of needs. Working as both a teacher and now a Learning Coach (i.e., someone who works closely with teachers to build programming based on

unique needs), I am fortunate to work with the dedicated educators who support our most vulnerable students in a non-traditional school setting. Our school consists of four highly specialized programs, each addressing various needs. One program supports students and staff in navigating readiness to learn for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Our behaviour program works with students with extraordinary overt behavioural challenges through positive supports and planning. The mental health program is designed for students who are more successful in smaller environments and requires additional support with mental health challenges and potentially suicidal ideations. Finally, our medical program is for students with multiple severe medical, cognitive, and physical exceptionalities. My colleagues work tirelessly to ensure students' academic, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Unfortunately, amidst the effort I have seen displayed in maintaining this holistic well-being comes the impact of burnout on many of the staff, including myself.

My first-hand experience with burnout prompted me to explore it further in my studies. Seeing the hard work of special educators result in experiencing these negative effects activated my curiosity to know what could be done to prevent it, as well as explore the best ways to cope with it. It would be a true loss in special education, particularly for the students, for the continued strain of burnout to negatively impact teachers in the profession.

Burnout

Burnout, a syndrome vastly experienced within human service occupations (Oliveira, 2021), is becoming increasingly common for teachers working in the special education setting. Maslach and Jackson (1981), who have led a large part of published literature describing burnout, define it as being marked by feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and

low personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to the feeling of being drained and unmotivated, making work feel like a burden (Boujut et al., 2016). Depersonalization involves developing negative and detached behaviour, often toward others in the workplace (2016). Reduced personal accomplishment is marked by an individual being excessively critical of their personal work and abilities (2016). The reported burnout of special education teachers is essential to consider in research to create environments consisting of interventions which will be successful in detecting possible indicators and decreasing their symptoms.

Originally a conversation cited by Freudenberger in a clinical setting, burnout was felt by the “dedicated and committed” (1974, p. 161). He described it using its literal definition: “to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strengths, or resources” (1974, p. 159). In his representation of burnout, physical symptoms included a sense of tiredness and exhaustion, inability to recover from minor illnesses, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, insomnia, and shortness of breath. Behaviourally, Freudenberger noted staff members' tendency to get angry quickly and react with instant irritation and frustration. This was followed by the tendency to become unreasonable and rigid, becoming noticeably depressed to colleagues, with a reduced level of efficiency at work. As a result, colleagues reported feeling their coworkers who were experiencing burnout were less approachable, which was damaging to their relationships (1974).

Since its emergence in the 1970s, burnout has continued to be a topic of interest for researchers and policymakers. They aim to understand its causes and implement preventive measures, which highlights its significance in both theory and practice (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Metaphorically, burnout originates a large flame, dissipating over time due to a lack of fuel to continue its perseverance. Unable to continue burning without assistance, a flame requires

specific means to create something of impact (2009). Much like the sentiments of those in caregiving professions, the flame represents “the exhaustion of employees’ capacity to maintain an intense involvement that has a meaningful impact at work” (2009, p. 205).

The three subscales discussed emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, were developed during Maslach and Jackson’s study in which they constructed the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Acknowledging the increased stress associated with working with individuals with charged feelings, they reported the negative outcomes of self-reported burnout (1981). Building off previous research, a 25-item survey was created to evaluate burnout experienced by various human service workers (not limited to special education) to be incorporated into future research to gain a deeper understanding of the factors which contribute to or prevent burnout. Maslach and Jackson’s intent in its use was to suggest changes in recruitment, training, and job design to alleviate burnout of its emotional and occupational implications (1981).

Since its publication, it has been used widely to identify burnout in a variety of occupations. A relationship between burnout and intention to leave the profession is reported in, but not limited to, child welfare workers (Nielsen et al., 2023), police officers (Correia, 2023), psychologists (Schilling, 2021), accounting professionals (Çollaku et al., 2023), medical and non-medical workers at hospitals (Yamada et al., 2021), nurses, teachers, and medical assistants (Diekmann et al., 2020). The effects of burnout being experienced by such a large variety of occupations further indicate the importance of identifying ways in which it can be mitigated in those experiencing it.

Teacher Attrition

Research has shown burnout caused by job-related stress and low levels of job satisfaction can lead to teacher attrition (Antoniou et al., 2023). Special education teachers are more likely to leave the profession due to higher job demands than general education teachers (McLeskey et al., 2003), with a reported 50% leaving the profession within the first five years (Ansley et al., 2016). The quality of working conditions plays a crucial role in determining teachers' willingness to stay in the profession. School boards continue to have difficulty filling jobs in the special education spectrum due to the requirement of the unique ability to see success in every student, despite the sometimes-intricate planning and effort required to do so (Player et al., 2012). A school climate providing adequate resources, support, and positive social relationships can contribute to job satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of teacher turnover (Bettini et al., 2020). In the modern education environment, burnout may be marked by the imbalance of job requirements and training, as well as resources available to teachers. Larger class sizes, increasingly diverse student profiles, and decreased funding continue to loom in education. Educators in unsupportive work environments or experiencing emotional exhaustion are more susceptible to burnout (Hillel Lavian, 2015). This is particularly true of special education teachers due to the high-pressure nature of their work (Kiel et al., 2016). To ensure a successful special education system, it is essential to prioritize the psychological well-being of teachers, which is linked to reduced burnout. Numerous studies have revealed various effects of burnout, such as struggling with relationships outside of work, developing a pessimistic outlook towards oneself and children, resorting to psychoactive substances to cope with behavioural changes, and experiencing physical symptoms like migraines and insomnia (Ibraimov, 2022) alongside anxiety, high blood pressure, depression, and a fragile immune system (Ansley et al.,

2016). Unsurprisingly, once teachers have experienced significant amounts of burnout, they are more likely to leave the profession (Brunsting et al., 2014).

Madigan and Kim examined how burnout and job satisfaction impact teachers' intentions to leave their profession (2021). They concluded burnout to be a significant factor contributing to teachers' intention to quit, and the incidence of burnout among teachers is increasing. Their meta-analysis study established a strong correlation between burnout and teachers' intent to leave and between job satisfaction and teachers' intent to leave. The alarming rates of teacher attrition associated with burnout solidify the importance of ongoing research in the subject area to refine policies and practices of associated stakeholders.

It is crucial to consider the burnout experiences of special education teachers in research in order to develop effective interventions that can detect potential warning signs and alleviate the negative symptoms. Because burnout is reported to contribute to teacher attrition, seeking to understand its effects on education teachers is essential in reducing both. Before conducting my research, I examined the existing literature on burnout, teacher attrition, and ways to mitigate burnout, as reported above. Based on my findings, it was clear teachers working in unsupportive environments and struggling with emotional fatigue were more likely to experience symptoms of burnout (Lavian, 2015). Key findings from the review of the literature suggested special education teachers, in particular, work in high-stress settings with several stressors potentially increasing the likelihood of experiencing mental health disorders and psychiatric stress, putting them at high risk of burnout (Kiel et al., 2016). Ibraimov emphasized the importance of prioritizing the psychological well-being of teachers for a successful education system (2022). Studies also showed burnout is largely indicated by the disparity between inputs and outputs in education; meaning teachers putting in continuous effort without equitable compensation are

more likely to experience symptoms of burnout (Pavlidou et al., 2022). These findings established the relevance of the continued research into the experiences of special education teachers who identified as feeling burnt out and drove the topic for my pilot study.

Burnout In Special Education, Teacher Experiences: Pilot Study

Below, I provide an overview of the phenomenological pilot study I conducted exploring burnout in special education. It includes the research necessity and goals, methodology, and findings. Following the findings, a deep delve into their implications in the special education field is presented through revisiting relevant literature.

Overview

As part of my research to give voice to teachers who experienced burnout in special education, I sought to answer the research question: How do teachers who work with special needs students experience burnout? In doing so, I additionally focused on answering the following four sub-questions:

What causes educators who work with students with complex needs to experience burnout?

How do educators describe their experiences which have caused symptoms of burnout?

How do educators mitigate the effects of burnout?

How can administrators/principals support the mitigation of burnout?

Method

This study aimed to explore and illustrate the burnout experiences of special education teachers. A phenomenological approach was used, and only three teachers who met specific criteria were selected from a forum. All participants were informed about the study's purpose and provided informed consent before the interviews took place. For the study, 30-minute interviews were conducted with each participant using an online video chat platform. The interviews were semi-structured to promote a natural conversation flow and ensure all questions in the interview schedule were addressed. The schedule consisted of 10 questions with 3 additional probing questions. After recording and reviewing the transcripts, I analyzed them to identify any recurring themes. Open coding was used to create a list of topics which were discussed in all three interviews. Finally, these were categorized into two main themes: (a) understanding, support, and education, and (b) connection.

Results

In this study, participants' experiences with connections to others were found to be the most crucial indicator in determining their levels of burnout and ways to alleviate symptoms. One respondent found social activities outside of work hours helpful in lessening the effects of burnout, allowing her to interact with colleagues with similar experiences and reduce stress levels, leading to a refreshed mindset for the next day. Another participant frequently collaborated with fellow teachers to reduce daily stress. This included brainstorming with colleagues when faced with unresolved issues for a fresh perspective, which led to reducing the likelihood of feeling isolated and burnt out. The final participant emphasized the importance of strong connections with like-minded professionals. Having these connections enables her to be

able to work through challenges with her colleagues to combat the feeling of burnout and as well as to feel less isolated. These comparable findings on the usefulness of connections prove it worth investigating further (Stromecky, 2023).

The three interviewees held similar views on their experiences with their principals in special education. They agreed the leadership characteristics of their principals were critical in establishing a successful special education environment. One respondent expressed her principal was not acquainted with the additional education and support required to provide proper care to the children in her classroom. This left her feeling unprepared and unsupported, leading to increased symptoms of burnout. She indicated, of her principal:

They didn't set us up for success. It was the sense of like, "Here's a new kid, but we're not going to give you any more resources to support him, or any more training, to support him." That really got to me.

Another participant shared the same perspective, reporting her principal was more managerial and lacked empathy, making it challenging to manage the demands of her special needs classroom without the necessary support. Despite requesting additional resources, no solution was found, leaving her feeling unsuccessful in supporting her classroom effectively, which ultimately led to her departure from the program. In contrast, another participant was content with her principal's acknowledgement and understanding, which made the demands of her special needs classroom more manageable. These results indicate a significance in understanding what impact leadership characteristics may have on whether a special education teacher may feel burnout symptoms (Stromecky, 2023).

Alongside leadership and connections, the responses to another interview question stood out in relevance. When each participant was asked what advice they would give to beginning teachers entering the field of special education, each gave constructive responses, which continued to tie to the aforementioned themes. One response involved reaching out to other professionals who have gone through similar experiences to connect with and build morale. The next powerfully asserted “that feeling of belonging and community is so much more important than any academic concept you could ever teach” (2023, p. 17). Finally, the last participant cited the satisfactory feeling of connecting with students as something to strive for in special education. Considering this, the theme of connection continued to build in the relevance of my research (Stromecky, 2023).

Discussion

Through the research I completed in discussing experiences with teachers in special education, the effects of burnout, and the risk of teacher attrition, it is important to consider factors which may either relieve or mitigate these outcomes. It is clear from my conversations: building connections with others has a positive impact on those suffering from burnout. Specifically, in the context of special education, those relationships seem to be the most beneficial when they are with colleagues who share similar experiences. Aside from these critical connections is the leadership guiding the expectations of a special education teacher. Through my participants, I discovered leaders who lack empathy are less effective in creating an environment hospitable for special education. Moreover, leaders who encompass compassionate and understanding characteristics were able to alleviate some of the stressors associated with

burnout (2023). Thus, this leads to further investigation into the role connections and leadership characteristics may have in mitigating burnout and reducing teacher attrition.

With connections and leadership styles being at the forefront of my research, each will be discussed to understand more deeply their reported impact in special education classrooms. Although being discussed separately, they are deeply related to one another. In order for meaningful and organic connections amongst staff to exist, it is important for the principal to create an environment in which they can thrive.

Connections

For the purpose of this paper, connections refer to the relationships between individuals in the special education setting. This may include relationships between special education teachers and general education teachers, special education teachers with one another, with other professionals working with the students (occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, educational assistants, etc.), or special education teachers and principals. Connections, in this context, are mutual, collaborative, and trusted relationships. By nature, special education is a field immersed in connection and collaboration because of the many stakeholders involved in ensuring student success (Jorgensen, 2022).

Having relationships with colleagues in the special education setting is a tool which can be encouraged and practiced to moderate the effects felt by burnout (Boujut, 2016). Adversely, not having relationships in this setting may have the opposite effect. Dye reported the negative impacts one might have without relationships with colleagues, such as isolation, frustration, reduced personal accomplishment, and increased burnout (2022). In many school environments, there is a more significant number of general education teachers, who may even have collegial

partners teaching the same grade, as to the staggeringly low number of special education teachers. Without this same support system, often used to share resources and experiences, special education teachers are left with an increased workload, alongside higher levels of stress and anxiety (2022).

Establishing positive relationships in the school environment can significantly reduce burnout among special education teachers. These relationships need not be limited to the classroom but can be fostered through participation in planning sessions, group events, and emotional support outside school hours. As a result, special education teachers are more likely to remain in their roles and experience higher job satisfaction (2022). Additionally, these acts are beneficial in reducing feelings of depersonalization and increasing teacher retention (Conley & You, 2017).

According to a study on stress levels in special education teachers, there is a correlation between isolation and burnout (Herman et al., 2023). Specifically, when a school has numerous general education teachers, and only one special education teacher, the latter may feel isolated, resulting in burnout (2023). Jorgensen's (2022) research emphasizes the importance of special educators building a strong support network. In order to do so, it is crucial to be open to asking questions and sharing information with their colleagues, whether in general or special education classrooms. By doing this, special educators can create a collaborative and supportive environment which is conducive to the success of all students and prevents feelings of isolation which may lead to burnout. Langher et al. (2017) conducted research on special education teachers to examine how the support from their colleagues affects their reported burnout. The study reported a direct correlation between perceived support and the personal accomplishment of teachers. This suggests having positive connections with colleagues can help teachers feel

more accepted, reducing their perceived burnout. The study emphasizes the importance of actively creating supportive environments to prevent burnout among teachers (Langher et al., 2017).

Fye's (2019) dissertation explored the effect peer relationships in education had on teacher retention. Of the levels of support described by her participants, emotional support from peers was identified as the most motivating factor to determine whether or not one would stay in the field of education. Additionally, during focus groups, teachers from multiple backgrounds and years of experience indicated the importance of working with other professionals willing to share knowledge and resources common to their practice. The importance of feedback from their teacher peers was also prevalent, even among veteran teachers who appreciated the opportunity to have others collaborate with them and offer advice to better their practice. Noted was the necessity for this feedback to be shared between trusted colleagues who had an honest relationship with one another (Fye, 2019). Aside from the professional support provided through collegial relationships, teachers in this study also reported emotional support as an important indicator of their desire to remain in the profession. Her recommendations include offering time for teachers to spend together building friendships (social events) and creating schedules allowing collaboration time (Fye, 2019).

Using a questionnaire, Player et al. (2012) asked existing high-needs high school teachers what might attract others to enter the field and what could retain current special education teachers (Player et al., 2012). In this study, 39% of teachers responded the school environment, and 26% responded caring relationships (Player et al., 2012). Both factors relate to the idea of connections and the impact it might have on reducing teacher attrition.

A study conducted in Jordan discovered different types of connections which could help to alleviate feelings of burnout among teachers in special education, contrary to other published literature which supports collegial relationships (Baiteneh, 2009). Bataineh's (2009) study examined the influence of supervisors, colleagues, friends, spouses, and family members on teachers experiencing burnout. The results revealed family relationships had the most positive impact in reducing burnout and highlighted the cultural significance of this finding. In Arabian culture, family is the primary source of love, support, feedback, and advice, and because of the strong family bonds, it is the preferred method of assistance in Jordan. Supervisors, colleagues, spouses and friends yielded no significant relationship. Despite the differences in these results, this research is important to consider the importance of connections across cultures. Although coming from a different source, Baiteneh (2009) still recommended future research exploring the importance of social support intervention programs when considering the mitigation and prevention of burnout in special education.

Based on the evidence shared, connections play an important role in the satisfaction of teachers, both in special and general education. Most important for teachers, specifically in special education, is reducing isolation by creating time and space to work alongside other teachers instead of being segregated in the school setting. Not only are professional relationships important for teachers in special education, where they can share educational resources and ideas but so are personal relationships, where they can build friendships with their colleagues.

Leadership Characteristics

In Alberta, school principals must adhere to the Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020), which mandates school leaders should be skilled teachers capable of fostering

an environment conducive to high-quality teaching and sustained optimal learning (Alberta Education, 2020). By effectively implementing and fulfilling the nine Standards established by Alberta Education, principals can guarantee inclusive environments are routinely fostered to ensure the success of all school community members, including teachers (Alberta Education, 2020). Principals who work in environments inclusive of special education programs and teachers have an additional responsibility of being attentive to the overall well-being of the teachers and students in those classrooms. As such, the characteristics in which they practice their leadership affect not only the satisfaction of the staff working with them but, ultimately, of the students in the classrooms. Possessing the title of principal is a minuscule factor in determining leadership. In order for a principal to be perceived as a leader, they must exhibit admirable qualities and set shared goals which those working with them have a shared interest in accomplishing. The leadership styles and characteristics of administrators have a significant impact on the burnout level of employees. As a result, the leadership qualities of school administrators can affect the burnout level of teachers (Genç, 2020).

Knowledgeable principals, who trust their staff in the decision-making process through collective responsibility, and who also foster collaboration have a positive impact on the special education teachers working with them (Dye, 2022). By shaping a school culture through these values, educators are encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas, collaborate successfully with their colleagues, and create a more feasible working environment. Doing so may lead to increased special education teacher retention (Dye, 2022).

According to Sires and Tonnsen (1993), burnout among special education professionals is caused by excessive paperwork, slow student progress, feelings of isolation, and a lack of leadership support. Research findings showed special educators experience stress, low morale,

and a high attrition rate due to inadequate support from their school principals. These educators require support from school leadership in several areas, such as understanding their job responsibilities, helping with disciplinary issues, and equal treatment and opportunities as their teacher colleagues (Sires & Tonnsen, 1993). Their recommendations for principals in mitigating symptoms of burnout as a result of leadership characteristics consist of being inclusive to special educators (as well as their students), creating opportunities for shared responsibility, allowing for collaboration time with their colleagues, and being visible and present to them to show understanding and care (Sires & Tonnsen, 1993). These results also confirm the previously addressed importance of connections in special education environments.

Leaders who provide positive feedback to special educators may also make them less susceptible to burnout (Gong et al., 2013). For example, Gong et al. (2013) use Northouse's definition of transformational leadership, which "refers to the process whereby an individual engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower (Northouse, 2004, p. 170). This process elevates the level of commitment and integrity in the relationship. According to research, transformational leadership is linked to lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and higher levels of personal accomplishment (Gong et al., 2013). This reveals a connection between transformational leadership and the three aspects of burnout among teachers, which suggests transformational leadership may play a critical role in preventing burnout in special education teachers (Gong et al., 2013).

Some studies posit strong leadership as one of the highest indicators of teacher retention (Player et al., 2017). Of the characteristics of these principals, the most important indicators were fairness, collaborative efforts with the teachers, support, and effective discipline (Player et al.,

2017). Suggested in this study was a set of behaviours which would be desirable to retain teachers. These included having a shared vision which staff are motivated to work towards, offering support to teachers in any capacity necessary, recognizing the efforts put forward by teachers, and maintaining disciplinary standards which keep teachers safe (2017).

Additional studies indicate special education teachers' desire to remain in the profession may be due to having smaller class sizes, additional planning time, visible administrators, a voice in the decision-making process, support with disciplinary matters, and collegial relationships (Petty et al., 2012). Principals who are able to work alongside special educators to ensure suitable environments are maintained (including the number of students in the class) and issues are addressed collaboratively may play a role in increasing teacher retention. Their presence and attention to current issues in special education can reveal their desire to improve the perceived burnout level of special education teachers.

Neuhoff (2023) called for principals to be mindful of their leadership style with respect to the impact of teacher attrition. Using the Full Range Leadership approach to understanding the different styles in practice, Neuhoff (2023) focused on the impacts of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. As discussed earlier, transformational leadership is linked with a strong dedication to the learning atmosphere, superior performance, and optimal utilization of resources (Neuhoff, 2023). Moreover, transactional leadership focuses on task completion and progress monitoring, which may be effective in some educational situations; however, lacks the encouragement and influence which transformational leaders may embody. Finally, laissez-faire (or passive/avoidant) leadership, as suggested by its name, offers minimal direction to teachers, giving them an increased responsibility to make decisions and solve problems. Based on the results of this study, which are supported by previously published

studies, transformational leaders have the highest positive impact on job satisfaction, decreasing the level of burnout. This means the principal's leadership style is crucial in addressing issues in schools, and by utilizing transformational leadership and promoting a practical work environment, a principal can positively impact teacher retention (Neuhoff, 2023).

Research Conclusions

It is without hesitation to state principals and relationships significantly impact the educational environment, both positively and negatively. Because of the high levels of burnout and teacher attrition reported in special education currently, it is clear teachers are feeling isolated and without adequate support from their principals. By building a positive rapport with teachers, including a shared vision, principals may be better equipped to reduce teacher attrition and negate the effects of burnout. Additionally, a harmonious school climate is likely to exist if principals are mindful of offering teachers time to work with one another, considering the importance of clear and consistent disciplinary standards, and encouraging the voice of all teachers in school matters.

Recommendations and Concluding Thoughts

Recommendations for Practice, Policy, and Research

By understanding the various causes of teacher attrition and taking proactive measures to address them, we can reduce teacher attrition rates and ensure special education students receive the quality education they deserve. Connections and leadership characteristics have both been closely examined in this writing, but other factors have been published when considering mitigating burnout and teacher attrition in special education. Principals working with special

education teachers should ensure adequate time is available for special education teachers to build connections with their colleagues (including their principals), either formally or informally. In the school setting, it is important for principals to be mindful of their special education programs, especially to ensure they are not isolated from the general education programs, physically and pedagogically. Ultimately, principals must ensure they are meeting regularly with special education teachers proactively and either addressing their needs or working towards solutions alongside them. Superintendents can support principals by providing professional development opportunities which seek to increase the understanding of the special education environment for themselves, principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers. By taking this holistic approach to ensure all educators have a knowledge base in special education, those working directly in the programs will have an increase in support available to them when needed.

Addressing the issue of burnout does not solely lie within school divisions. Provincial governments also have an impact through funding concerns, which directly affect the quality of education and the level of burnout in the classroom. Insufficient funding for such programs results in increased class sizes, fewer staff educated to meet the student's needs, and a lack of resources necessary for student success, which each contribute to increased levels of burnout. Policymakers must have a comprehensive understanding of the special education environment prior to allocating funds to special education programs to ensure the safety and success of their students, as well as the satisfaction and retention of their teachers. Additionally, the provincial government can consider University funding targeted to special education as a proactive measure. Ensuring undergraduate students in faculties of education have a reasonable opportunity to prepare for a career in special education will also be advantageous in reducing

teacher attrition and mitigating burnout. This may include a variety of courses offered addressing the multiple needs they will experience in their classrooms, alongside pedagogical recommendations for success. Additionally, offering practicum experience which includes either special education classrooms or inclusive classrooms which have students with unique needs to have the opportunity to work with special needs students alongside their educational teams. The diverse needs of the students accessing special education are detrimental to be considered at the provincial level in order for special education teachers to be able to offer their students a quality education experience without feeling increased levels of burnout symptoms.

Although commencing almost 50 years ago, continued research into burnout, specifically mitigating its negative effects, is recommended to continue. By continuing to narrow in on predictive factors, policies which show promise, and coping strategies, a decrease in burnout may be revealed, which may also result in an increase in the retention of teachers in special education.

Concluding Thoughts

Burnout remains a heavily researched topic in the field of special education. While much has been published, teacher attrition remains a concern. Despite the many factors described to mitigate burnout in published literature, I have chosen to solely shed light on connection and leadership characteristics based on the results of my pilot study. With strong connections to our colleagues, students, and others, special educators are offered a safe space to ask questions, seek advice, and feel heard. Principals who embody leadership characteristics which seek to collaborate with their staff, have a shared vision for success and understand the extraneous difficulties associated with teaching special education play a large role in determining the level

of burnout potentially felt by teachers. Principals working in schools with special education programs should continue to follow research on burnout as it continues to advance, and actively implement recommended strategies in order to reduce its negative effects and promote teacher retention.

In conclusion, we must continue to shed light on the issue of teacher burnout in special education. In coming full circle with the origin of burnout, it is as important today to consider Freudenberger's (1974) synopsis of the topic: "We cannot prevent burn-out, but we can certainly help to avoid it as much as possible and when it does happen to one of us, to admit it, ask others for help and take some time off for ourselves" (p. 165).

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APPENDIX A

Jolene Stromecky
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Faculty of Education, College of Social
Sciences and Humanities
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January 21, 2023

Participant

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Administration and Leadership program at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this letter to you is to take part in a research assignment for my EDPS 509 Research Design and Data Analysis course. My assignment is intended to explore the prevalence and experiences of burnout in teachers who work in special education. Your participation would involve a thirty-minute interview through Zoom involving questions about your personal experiences. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating.

In order to gather data for my research assignment, I will be conducting interviews with 3-4 participants, and then studying their responses. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Please note:

- You may choose not to answer any question.
- You may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by April 1st and I will destroy all data.
- I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as a summary of the main points I understood you to make by email; you will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

Should any concerns, complaints, or questions arise from your participation, you may contact me or my instructor, Dr. Jose da Costa (jdcosta@ualberta.ca).

All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants:

- Participant names will not be revealed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used in all written representations of the data.
- Hard copy data will be locked in a filing cabinet and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Digital data will be stored on my computer under a secure password-protected system and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Data will be used to complete my EDPS 509 course, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in my research. If you wish to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it to via e-mail by March 16th 2023.

The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Should you wish a copy of my research findings, I would be pleased to provide one on your request.

Sincerely,

Jolene Stromecky
Graduate student in the Master of Education in Administration and Leadership
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
587-982-3593
jstromec@ualberta.ca

APPENDIX B

Adult Participant Consent Form

EDPS 509 Research Assignment: Understanding burnout in special education environments.

Researcher: Jolene Stromecky

Date Range of Research: March 1, 2023 – April 14 2023

I, _____ (name of participant), hereby consent to participate in the research, Understanding Burnout in Special Education Environments.

I understand that my participation includes:

- A 30-minute interview with Jolene Stromecky.
- An audio recording of my responses.

As per the Letter of Information, I understand that:

- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I may withdraw from the research without penalty until April 1, 2023.
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- No identifying information will appear on written representations of the data: pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used to convey the data.
- The data will be used for the purposes of completion of the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program and may be used in future presentations and publications in the educational context.
- The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, I can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Schedule:

1. How long have you been working in a special education setting?
2. Tell me about a typical day in your classroom which has students with complex needs in it.
3. What factors motivated you to work in this environment?
4. Give an example of an experience you have had with a student who has complex needs which negatively impacted you.
5. Describe an event that caused you to experience symptoms of burnout.
 - a. Probing: how did this negatively impact you?
6. What strategies do you use to mitigate the symptoms of burnout?
 - a. Can you give me an example of some of those strategies?
7. Do you feel that these strategies are successful?
8. What types of support have you been offered by your administration?
 - a. Can you describe this experience further?
9. What strategies would you suggest for administration to implement to support teachers that are experiencing burnout?
10. What advice would you give for a teacher who's just beginning their career working with students with special needs?