

Experiences of Burnout Among Special Education Teachers

Sierra Q. Williamson

B.A., Bethel College, 2011

M.S., University of Kansas, 2016

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James Robins

James Robins, Ed.D.
Major Advisor

Phyllis Chase

Phyllis Chase, Ed.D.

Tammy Whitlow

Tammy Whitlow, Ed.D.

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Abstract

Burnout is defined as “failure or exhaustion because of excessive demand on energy, strength, or resources (Freudenberg, 1975, p. 73). Special education (SPED) teachers are at risk for burnout and can suffer serious consequences due to an experience of burnout (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of burnout among SPED teachers. Specifically, this study aimed to better understand contributing factors that lead to burnout, strategies for burnout prevention, and consequences from burnout. A phenomenological design and qualitative approach were utilized in this study. Participants included SPED teachers from a suburban Midwestern public school who have had an experience of burnout. During data analysis, participant interview data was assessed in two groups independent of one another. Three major findings emerged. Experiences that contribute to burnout for SPED teachers include experiences that occur inside of school (negative student behavior, unreasonable expectations, coworker challenges, lack of support) and outside of school (outside stressors). Strategies for burnout prevention include those that are provided by the school (adequate training for SPED teachers and adequate support for SPED teachers) and those that are used by the individual (self-care strategies). Consequences for burnout are either inside of school (voluntary attrition, challenges with students and coworkers) or outside of school (negative impact on health and challenges with family life). Increasing awareness of SPED teacher burnout and effectively supporting SPED teachers through preventative strategies are two ways that school systems may better the lives of SPED teachers and those they interact with (students, coworkers, family, community members). Future research is necessary to further understand the complexities of burnout.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. Nelson, Nevaeh, and Rhett, you are my constant inspiration to be a better person, wife, mother, friend, and social worker.

Without the light that you bring to my life, I do not think I could have completed this journey. I love you so much!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I was physically assaulted which started the first day of school, and by the time you get through all of the red tape, and all of the observations and all of the behavior plans, and everybody comes to see what you are doing, and ask all of the questions – we finally got in an outside placement on _____ of that year. We were evacuating the classroom multiple times a day really getting hurt. It was so scary. He would hit a certain tone and I would start shaking, my mouth would go cotton dry and it was so scary. And you are the teacher. You have to keep everyone else safe. All of the other kids and aids. You have to pull it all together and act like it's no big deal, but it was a huge deal for me. Huge. (Reed, 2016, p. 117).

The experience of the SPED teacher described is not uncommon in the world of education today. According to Emery and Vandenberg (2010), SPED teachers are “those who are professionally committed to helping high risk children and are themselves a high-risk group” (p. 119). One major risk for SPED teachers is the experience of burnout. Research behind the phenomenon of burnout dates back to the early 1970s. Initial research was conducted within human service work and healthcare but has since extended to the system of education (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2008). Burnout among teachers can occur through experiences of constant stress resulting in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Brunsting et al., 2014; Maslach et al., 1996). Not only is the system of education affected by these specific facets on a

macro level, but both teachers and students also experience the effects of burnout on a personal level.

The consequences of burnout can potentially affect teachers, students, and the larger institution of education as a whole (Maslach et al., 1996). One of the most glaring issues related to teacher burnout in the current education system is teacher attrition (Akin, 2009; Brunsting et al., 2004). While the issue of attrition is one that largely impacts school systems, there are also negative effects of burnout that are personal to both teachers and students. Teachers who experience burnout report physical symptoms such as chronic fatigue, colds, recurrent flu, musculoskeletal pain, and depression (Brunsting et al., 2014). In some European countries, burnout is even considered a medical diagnosis that can be assessed and treated (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Teachers who experience facets of burnout, especially emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, report less job satisfaction (Lipscomb & Williams, 2014). Further, research shows that students of teachers who experience burnout are more likely to display disruptive behavior, struggle socially and emotionally, and tend to less frequently meet their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals (Brunsting et al., 2004; Zianian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019).

Both situational and individual factors exist that contribute to burnout. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) explain that because burnout is specific to the context of work, much of burnout research in general has pinpointed situational factors which correlate with burnout. These situational factors include job characteristics such as large workload, role conflict, role ambiguity, and absence of resources as well as occupational characteristics such as positions which elicit high emotional stress. Additionally,

individual factors such as age, marital status, length of time in the field, and level of education have also been shown to correlate with burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

However, knowing and understanding the contributing variables and consequences of burnout have not been enough to support teachers in the management or prevention of burnout. Simply knowing that burnout exists or the factors that contribute to burnout is not enough to ensure professional longevity for individuals entering the profession of special education. Future directions in the study of burnout point to needs regarding how individuals can personally manage or prevent burnout and how organizational systems can effectively support their staff in these endeavors as well (Maslach et al., 2001). Today's educators spend ample time ensuring care and consideration of their students; further information is needed regarding how teachers can effectively be supported themselves.

Background

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 49.4 million public school students were enrolled in school in the United States in the fall of 2020. Of those students, 7.2 million (15%) of all public school students in the United States received special education services (see Table 1 for United States SPED prevalence details). In the 2019-2020 school year, there were 3.2 million public school teachers employed in the United States. According to Data USA (2019), in 2019, 430,000 teachers were employed in the United States as SPED teachers. Of those teachers, approximately 5% of teachers are underqualified, meaning that those teachers are "teaching without certification or outside of their subject area" (McMurdock, 2022, para. 5).

According to research by the RAND corporation, a nonprofit research organization, “nearly three-fourths of teachers and 85% of principals complained of frequent stress from their jobs. That’s more than double most adults. Fifty-nine percent of teachers and 48% of principals say they’re burned out” (Perez, 2022, para. 8). Stress is often a primary component of burnout. According to the Gallup Panel Workforce Study (2022), when assessing burnout among 1,263 K(Kindergarten)-12 educators in February of 2022, 44% of K-12 workers in the United States reported that they “always” or “very often” feel burnout at work (Marken & Agrawal, 2022) (see Table 2 for United States burnout rates by industry details). In March 2020, 36% of K-12 educators had already reported always or very often feeling burnout; this percentage was “eight percentage points higher than the 28% found among all other workers as a whole” (Marken & Agrawal, 2022, para. 2). Since then, the gap between reported burnout among educators compared to all other workers has nearly doubled between March 2020 and February 2022 (Marken & Agrawal, 2022) (see Figure 1 for gap in burnout between United States K-12 workers and all other professions details). An unfortunate result of burnout among educators can be attrition. Nationally, an “estimated 36,504 full-time teacher positions are unfilled” (McMurdock, 2022, para. 7).

According to the Kansas State Department of Education Kansas Report Card for the 2020-2021 school year, the state of Kansas served 476,435 students. Of those students, 78,029 of all Kansas students received special education services (see Table 3 for Kansas SPED prevalence details). The state of Kansas employed 43,516 state licensed personnel. The state of Kansas employed 4,236.8 (full time equivalence) special education teachers. However, according to the research by the Teacher Vacancy and

Supply Committee, “roughly 4% of teaching jobs — about 1,400 — are unfilled” (Perez, 2022, para. 4). Further, special education falls in the top five vacancy areas as of February 2022 (Kansas Association of School Boards, 2022, para. 3).

District A is a suburban school district comprised of a Head Start and two early childhood programs, 36 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, five high schools, and five alternative learning programs. According to the 2020-2021 Kansas Building Report Card, District A served 28,828 students; 24.4% of all students were approved for free or reduced lunch. In District A, 4,295 (15.75%) of all students enrolled received special education services (see Table 4 for District A SPED prevalence details).

Statement of the Problem

Special education teachers are at risk of burnout resulting in serious consequences for themselves and their students (Brunsting et al., 2014; Maslach et al., 2001). Currently, quantitative research exists to guide educators in better understanding the phenomenon of burnout, however there is a gap in the literature related to qualitative research on the topic of burnout in education (Akin, 2009). In addition, existing research is limited regarding effective interventions for the management and prevention of general education and SPED teacher burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Maslach et al., 2001). Hester, Bridge, and Rollins (2020) clarify a need for in-depth interviews to understand the complexities involved in the stressors and burnout among SPED teachers. For SPED teachers to be adequately supported while experiencing burnout and to prevent the experience of burnout, more information, especially qualitative information is required to understand the personalized experiences of special education teachers. To better understand possible

contributing factors and possible preventative measures, it is necessary to explore the experiences of SPED teachers regarding burnout with a qualitative approach.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences of burnout among SPED teachers. Specifically, this study was intended to better understand how the experiences of special education teachers contribute to burnout and burnout prevention. In addition, the consequences of burnout among SPED teachers were also explored.

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base of burnout within education. In particular, this study examines the lived experiences of burnout and prevention of burnout among special education teachers in a suburban Midwestern public school. While there have been numerous studies utilizing the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to assess specific facets of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2004), researchers have consistently cited a need for exploration into the management and prevention of burnout for individual educators and for the system in which they work. Maslach et al. (2001) explains that research regarding management and prevention of burnout has resulted in mixed results, thus “initial work in this area is encouraging but incomplete” (p. 419).

Maslach and Leiter (1999) state “the most valuable and most costly part of an educational system are the people who teach” (p. 303). Exploration into the experiences, perceptions, and realities of special education teachers can support the well-being of teachers themselves. The information gleaned from in-depth interviews regarding the experiences that contribute to burnout, prevent burnout, and are linked to the consequences of burnout could provide opportunities for future research in the area of

burnout among SPED teachers. Future research of burnout among SPED teachers may possibly affect policy and procedure for similar school districts in the Midwest.

Delimitations

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), delimitations are boundaries that are purposefully imposed by the researcher to clarify the purpose and the scope. The study was delimited in the following ways:

1. All participants were special education teachers currently working for District A during the 2022-2023 school year.
2. Data collection for this study was delimited to one semi-structured individual interview session for each participant.
3. There were no direct observations conducted for this study.

Assumptions

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) state, “assumptions are postulates, premises, and propositions that are accepted as operational for purposes of the research” (p. 135). The following assumptions were utilized for this study:

1. Participants will put forth their best effort in portraying the descriptions of their experiences.
2. Participants will be honest and accurate in their depiction of their experiences to the best of their knowledge.

Research Questions

According to Lunenberg and Irby (2008), research questions guide and shape the direction for the study. The grand tour question for this study was: What are special education teachers’ experiences of burnout? To explore the perceptions, experiences, and

realities of special education teachers related to burnout the following research questions were developed:

RQ1. What experiences do special education teachers have that contribute to burnout?

RQ2. What experiences do special education teachers have that prevent them from burnout?

RQ3. What are the consequences of burnout among special education teachers?

Definition of Terms

Burnout. “Failure or exhaustion because of excessive demand on energy, strength, or resources (Freudenberg, 1975, p. 73). The definition of burnout has expanded to include three primary components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1999). Maslach also highlights the interpersonal nature of burnout; burnout is more than the stress of an individual. Burnout refers to specific stress as it relates to the interpersonal nature between the individual and the workplace, co-workers, and clients (Maslach et al., 2001).

Depersonalization. Maslach’s MBI includes the following subscales to describe depersonalization: treat patients as impersonal “objects”, become more callous toward people, worry that job is hardening them emotionally, don’t really care what happens to patients, feel patients are to blame for their problems (Maslach, 1999).

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR). The DSM-IV-TR is a manual published by the American Psychiatric Association that is utilized by clinicians and psychiatrists in the United States to diagnose psychiatric illnesses (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Emotional Exhaustion. Maslach's MBI includes the following subscales to describe emotional exhaustion: feel emotionally drained from work, feel used up at the end of the workday, wake up in the morning and feel as if one is at the end of the rope, feel burned out from work, feel frustrated by the job, feel one is working too hard on the job, working with people is stressful, and working with patients is a strain (Maslach, 1999).

Exceptionalities/Disabilities. When a student has an exceptionality it means that they have been evaluated according to federal and state regulations and meet the criteria for at least one of the following exceptionality categories: Autism, Deaf/Blind, Developmental delay, Giftedness, Hearing impairment including deafness, Intellectual disability, Orthopedic impairment, Other health impairments, Serious emotional disturbance, Specific learning disabilities, Speech or language impairment, Traumatic brain injury, Visual impairment including blindness.

Personal Accomplishment. Maslach's MBI includes the following subscales to describe personal accomplishment: can easily understand patients' feelings, deal effectively with the patients' problems, feel positively influencing people's lives, feel very energetic, can easily create a relaxed atmosphere, feel exhilarated after working with patients, have accomplished worthwhile things in their job, deal with emotional problems calmly (Maslach, 1999).

Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a plan utilized to ensure that a student with a disability's learning needs are met. In order to meet student needs, goals are developed based on collected data; data is continually collected to show

progress and to show continued need of services. Once an IEP is developed and signed it becomes a legal document.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA “is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities through the nation and ensures special education and related serves to those children” (IDEA, 2004, para. 1)

Role ambiguity. Role ambiguity occurs when expectations of a given role are not made clear to the teacher; there is a lack of information available to successfully complete the job (Maslach et al., 2001). Role ambiguity can contribute to higher levels of burnout in both self-contained and team-teaching settings.

Role conflict. Role conflict occurs when the demands of the job conflict with one another (Maslach et al., 2001). Like role ambiguity, role conflict can also contribute to higher levels of burnout in both self-contained and team-teaching settings.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized across five chapters. In the first chapter, background information, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the delimitations, the assumptions, the research questions, the definition of terms, and the organization of the study are included. Chapter 2 includes a literature review addressing the concept of and measurement of burnout, burnout within special education, variables that affect burnout within special education, and burnout prevention. Presented in Chapter 3 is the study’s research design, setting, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher’s role, and limitations. Chapter 4 clarifies themes and

categories pertaining to each research question. Finally, Chapter 5 includes the study summary, findings related to the literature and conclusions.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

This literature review is intended to provide background information on the phenomenon of burnout and the ways in which burnout can be assessed, the effects that burnout can have on educators, the variables that may affect burnout among special education teachers, and preventative measures taken to reduce or eliminate burnout among special educators. The review of burnout as a phenomenon includes information about the origins of burnout, assessment of burnout, and the three prominent facets of burnout. The next part of the literature review includes information on the topic of burnout among special educators, background information on special education, a working model of burnout in education, and consequences for burnout among educators. A variety of variables that can affect or contribute to burnout are then reviewed. Finally, possible preventative measures for educators and systems are provided.

What is Burnout?

Research into the phenomenon of burnout dates back to the 1970s in the United States beginning with the work of Freudenberg and Maslach (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Initial research by these researchers provides the basic working definitions for burnout. According to Freudenberg (1975) burnout has been defined as “failure or exhaustion because of excessive demand on energy, strength, or resources” (p. 73). Research by Maslach identified major themes as well as an assessment method for burnout through “thorough interviews, observation, and psychometric development” (Schaufeli et al., 2008, p. 206). Burnout is interpersonal in nature. Burnout is more than general stress in the workplace; the interpersonal aspect of burnout highlights not only the stress of the

individual, but the individual's stress as it relates to the workplace (relationships with clients, co-workers, and interactions with the workplace system) (Maslach et al., 2001). According to Maslach et al. (1996), burnout is comprised of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment; burnout can occur in any profession in which the person works with other humans.

Today, burnout has evolved from a “hazard for naive, idealistic, young service professionals who became exhausted, cynical, and discouraged” (Schaufeli et al., 2008, p. 208) to a phenomenon that can happen to anyone working in a job which requires interpersonal interactions. The phenomenon of burnout can be traced to ways in which the workplace operates within a given cultural context (Schaufeli et al., 2008). The ways in which burnout manifests itself are not necessarily tied to one factor, but instead exist within and among a variety of individual, situational, and contextual factors. Maslach (2003) explains that while burnout has been linked to some individual dispositions within a person (marital status, age, personality type), “the research is much stronger for the contrasting argument that burnout is more a function of the situation than of the person” (p. 191). Research on the topic of burnout reveals an increased discrepancy between the following: work demands and work resources, values held by the individual, and values held by the work system, and what is officially stated as a work system's values and how those values are acted out in day-to-day life. (Schaufeli et al., 2008, p. 210).

Burnout Inventories

Several instruments have been developed to quantify and assess burnout. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was initially intended for use among those in human service work. The survey has since expanded to include a version specified for educators,

the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ESS) and a version specified for the general population, the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-G). Other assessment tools such as the Burnout Measure (Pines & Aronson, 1988) and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005) have been developed and compared with the MBI in terms of the ability to assess the phenomenon of burnout. While other inventories provide a more unified score for burnout, the MBI offers detailed insight into several facets of the phenomenon of burnout (Platsidou & Daniilidou, 2016). The MBI is the most widely used survey regarding burnout, perhaps due to its strong psychometric properties (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 401). The MBI includes 22 assessment items which address three facets of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment.

Maslach's Three Facets of Burnout

The three main facets of burnout according to the MBI are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is the stress felt by those experiencing the phenomenon of burnout. Extreme emotional exhaustion occurs when an individual is depleted of resources, both emotionally and physically (Maslach et al., 2001). Not only is emotional exhaustion the most obvious facet of burnout, but it is also the most frequently reported and therefore the central quality of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). "Depersonalization refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people (often the recipients of one's service or care) (Maslach & Leiter, 1999). The facet of depersonalization often includes actively ignoring what makes those recipients uniquely themselves (Maslach et al., 2001). Reduced personal accomplishment refers to feelings of inefficacy. Emotional exhaustion

and depersonalization can play a role in how effective one feels in their work. When individuals feel exhausted in their work or have a feeling of indifference towards those they are working for and with, feeling accomplished can be quite elusive (Maslach et al., 2001). Additionally, a lack of personal accomplishments tends to grow when a situation is lacking in resources. (Maslach et al., 2001).

Burnout in Education and Special Education

Research on burnout was initially centered on those in human service work. Burnout is most likely to occur among those in careers involving intense communication and interaction (Maslach & Leiter, 1999). The expectations required of those working in education fit this description. Teaching is a value-driven profession that is not often pursued for financial gain. Teaching requires emotional involvement on a daily basis, resulting in a profession that is more vulnerable to the risk of burnout (Akin, 2019). Emery and Vandenberg (2010) explain that “burnout may occur when teachers feel encumbered by job demands and believe that challenges in their work environment impede the ability to accomplish their professional goals” (p. 120).

Research investigating the prevalence of burnout based on occupations has revealed that teaching as a profession maintained the highest level of exhaustion compared to other occupational sectors (social services, medicine, mental health, and law enforcement) suggesting that the experiences of teaching in relation to burnout need to be addressed (Maslach et al., 2001). In fact, a Gallup survey conducted in 2020 revealed that 44% of K-12 workers in the United States report feeling “often” or “very often” burned out at work and these employees were the most likely to report these ratings compared to a variety of other interpersonal occupations such as government, retail, and healthcare

(Marken & Agrawal, 2022). Maslach and Leiter (1999) explain that burnout among educators is unique in that “the quality of the relationship between teacher and student is the basis for the most rewarding aspects of teaching, but it is also the point at which teachers are vulnerable to emotionally draining and discouraging experiences” (p. 295-296).

This risk for burnout can be especially problematic for SPED teachers. In fact, the prevalence of burnout among SPED teachers is higher than for general education teachers (Brunsting et al., 2014; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Lazarus, 2006). Factors specific to special education that may lead to SPED teacher burnout include: expectations for inclusive instruction, increasing paperwork loads, the stress associated with job requirements, lack of planning time, lack of support from administrators, lack of proper staff development training, changes in disciplinary action and behavioral interventions, staff to child ratios, and the type of disabilities present in the classroom (Fore et al., 2002; Weiskope, 1998).

In 1998, the Council for Exceptional Children sought to clarify barriers to high-quality special education for students and to develop a plan to ensure students with exceptionalities have access to a teacher who is highly qualified and working within appropriate conditions (Coleman, 2000). Results from the research by the Council for Exceptional Children identified the following most pressing issues for SPED teachers:

Ambiguous and competing responsibilities, overwhelming paperwork, inadequate district, and administrative support, significant teacher isolation, insufficient focus on improved student outcomes, increased demand for well-qualified special

educators, poorly prepared new general and special educators, and fragmented state and provincial licensing systems. (Kozleski, 2000)

These barriers that are commonly faced by SPED teachers can contribute to burnout. Many of these stressors are the results of well-meaning initiatives and reform for students that have been enacted without consideration of the teacher's needs and role.

Federal and state policy and reform may also have an impact on the experience of SPED teachers. For some time, SPED teachers have had expectations to uphold the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to ensure free appropriate public education for students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004) and to differentiate instruction and focus on means of inclusion (Darrow & Adamek, 2017). Additional initiatives include but are not limited to: standards-based reforms especially related to students' individualized education programs (IEPs), person-first language, increased focus on transition services for students with exceptionalities, increased focus on self-determination for students with exceptionalities, positive behavioral supports (PBS), and Response to Intervention (RtI) (Darrow & Adamek, 2017). A variety of factors at the federal, state, local, and district levels also affect teachers and their ability to successfully support students without issues of burnout.

Contextual factors that might affect a teacher's stress level or workload must also be considered. The 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years included several major national and worldwide crises including but not limited to: the Covid-19 pandemic, a contested presidential election, Russia's war in Ukraine, and national attention related to a variety of polarizing issues such as racial inequity, women's rights, and mental health. The Merrimack College Teacher Survey (2022) sought to highlight teacher voice and

perspective by surveying 1,300 K-12 teachers in 2022. According to the survey, teachers feel overworked, underpaid, forgotten, and overwhelmed with administrative work and other non-teacher-related duties (Merrimack College, 2022). Only 12% of teachers reported feeling very satisfied with their jobs and 44% of teachers reported feeling “very likely” or “fairly likely” to leave the profession within two years (Merrimack College, 2022). According to a study by Cormier, McGrew, Ruble, and Fischer (2021), the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic have affected SPED teachers; 38.4% of SPED teachers met the clinical criteria for generalized anxiety disorder and 37.6% of SPED teachers met the clinical criteria for major depressive disorder. Both percentages are at a higher rate than the national average (Cormier et al., 2021).

Maslach and Leiter (1999) offer a working model of teacher burnout to clarify the development of burnout among educators (see Figure 2 for working model). Notably, this model offers a parallel development of burnout, rather than a sequential development of burnout; one component of the working model does not necessarily affect another component in any particular order. According to Shen et al., 2015, the model:

Presumes a process in which the experience of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment shape teachers’ behaviour. As teacher burnout increases, both the thoroughness of classroom preparation and the involvement in classroom activities decline while student criticism increases. In response, students are likely to change their perception of the teacher, their feelings towards the teacher, and their behaviour in the classroom. Consequently, students’ sense of efficacy in school often declines.

Furthermore, teacher burnout reduces students 'intrinsic motivation, which may diminish learning and engagement. (p. 520)

Special Education Teacher Shortages, Attrition, and Retention

Since the mid-1990s, issues with teacher shortages, high attrition rates and low retention rates among special education teachers have been prevalent. In 2019, 44 states reported shortages of special education teachers. In 2022, a report from the U.S. Department of Education (2020) indicated that 48 states report shortages of special education teachers. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), SPED teachers are predicted to leave the profession at a rate 46% higher than general education elementary school teachers.

The issue of attrition and retention among SPED teachers is further compounded due to some of the solutions states have proposed to manage teacher shortages; these solutions include options such as accelerated programs, alternative teaching programs, or more lenient routes for substitute teaching. "In every year of the 1990s more than 30,000 special education positions were filled by uncertified teachers, and in 2000-2001, over 47,000 (or 11%) of those filling special education positions were not certified to teach in the subject area (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 13). Additionally, in 2022, the Kansas Department of Education approved an emergency declaration that granted individuals with certain qualifications (18 years of age, high school diploma, verified employment commitment from a district, background check, and application completed) the opportunity to apply for a Temporary Emergency Authorized License (TEAL) to substitute teach in both general and special education settings. Unfortunately, these well-meaning solutions have not solved the attrition and retention issues that exist

in our public education system. Research indicates that teachers who enter the profession through alternative pathways resulting in less preparation, coursework, and student teaching are 25% more likely to leave their schools and the profession overall (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Approximately 50% of special education teachers remain in the profession for only three to five years before leaving (Billingsley, 2004; Theoharis and Fitzpatrick, 2013.) According to Mitchell and Arnold (2004), the rate of SPED teachers leaving the classroom is approximately twice the rate of general education teachers leaving the classroom. Through qualitative interviews, Hester et al. (2020) reported that teachers list a number of reasons for leaving the field including emotional and physical health needs, school support and resources, increasing job demands, additional education, career changes, and retirement. Gersten (2001) highlights that SPED teacher stress related to job design specifically can be a major factor in SPED teacher attrition. These issues are not new to the world of special education. Cook and Leffingwell (1982) note a number of these issues related to roles, resources, and relationships have been prevalent since the 1980s.

These ongoing issues are problematic as students with disabilities need highly qualified teachers to maintain progress. With shortages of teachers and an inability to retain the teachers that are hired, individuals without proper background and certification in special education are the ones serving students with disabilities. Continual issues in this area have led researchers to further investigate possible catalysts for the teacher shortage. Teacher burnout is often named as a major reason for difficulties with teacher attrition and retention (Brunsting et al., 2014; Fore et al., 2002).

Consequences for Teachers and Students

While attrition is commonly cited as one of the most concerning consequences of burnout among SPED teachers (Brunsting, et al., 2014; Fore et al., 2002), it is not the only possible consequence. According to Maslach et al. (2001) and Maslach (2003), burnout in general can result in negative outcomes related to job performance, personal life and physical and mental health. In terms of job performance, burnout is associated with lower productivity and decreased job satisfaction; additionally, those who are burnt out can have a negative effect on their coworkers through personal conflict (Maslach et al, 2001). Maslach (2003) reports that burnout can also affect one's personal life, leading to disengagement from family members.

Burnout has also been shown to result in physical symptoms such as chronic fatigue and colds, recurrent flu, musculoskeletal pain, and mental health issues such as depression (Brunsting et al., 2014). Research by Lazarus (2006) indicated a link between high levels of interpersonal conflict (a common source of stress which could lead to burnout) and negative health outcomes. Research by Maslach et al. (2001) also referenced links between burnout and substance abuse and burnout and mental health concerns. Bauer et al. (2006) reported higher psychological and psychosomatic symptoms among teachers who are burned out.

Burnout in SPED teachers can be harmful to students. Until 2013, research on the topic of burnout in SPED primarily investigated how SPED teachers were affected by burnout instead of how burnout affected students and their outcomes (Brusting et al., 2014; McDowell, 2017). However, studies now exhibit that SPED teacher burnout “correlates with low IEP quality and low IEP goal attainment” (McDowell, 2017, p. 112).

Research shows that students are aware of symptoms of burnout among their teachers (Evers, Tomic, and Brouwers, 2004; Oberle, Gist, Cooray, & Pinto, 2020). Oberle et al. (2020) states, “burnout prevention and enhancing teacher well-being are also fundamental to support optimal social, emotional, and academic learning conditions for students” (p. 1751). Further, research by Shen et al. (2015) indicated that teacher burnout maintains a negative impact on students’ autonomous motivation. Each facet of burnout plays a unique and different role in the relationship to student motivation.

Variable Affecting Special Education Burnout

Research indicates a number of variables that affect burnout among special educators (Brunsting et al., 2014). These variables range from the micro to the macro level. While teacher characteristics and traits have been shown to correlate with burnout, classroom-level and school-level variables have also been shown to correlate with burnout. When assessing burnout among special educators, researchers must address both the individuals’ characteristics and group characteristics that may impact burnout.

Teacher characteristics and traits. Several variables exist which can affect a person’s susceptibility to job burnout. Research on the relationship between SPED teacher’s experience, levels of education, gender, marital status, and burnout provides mixed results. When assessing the total number of years in the profession of teaching (either SPED or general education) a negative correlation exists between the number of years teaching and level of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014). However, according to Williams and Dikes (2002), SPED teachers with more than 22 years of teaching experience reported the highest amounts of emotional exhaustion. Evidence also supports a negative correlation between the level of education of a special education teacher has

accomplished and the facets of burnout; as educators acquire more education themselves, their reported experiences of burnout decrease (Brunsting et al., 2014). Results are mixed regarding burnout and gender. Some research indicates that being a male positively correlated with reported burnout, however, other studies showed only a significant relationship between being male and one facet of burnout, depersonalization (Brunsting et al., 2014). Williams and Dikes (2002) indicated no statistically significant difference between males and females on ratings of all facets of the MBI (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment). When assessing the facets of the MBI according to marital status, again there was no statistically significant difference among married versus single SPED teachers (Williams and Dikes, 2002).

Due to the interactional nature of both teaching and burnout, considering teacher traits and perceptions, as they related to the burnout of an individual teacher, could be an important aspect to explore. Special education teacher traits and perceptions include a teacher's particular mindset towards a situation, their approach to teaching, and how they perceive their teaching experience. Emotional exhaustion, one of the most common facets of burnout among SPED teachers is most often predicted by low levels of self-esteem, low levels of efficacy, and low levels of classroom management (Jovanovic et al., 2021).

In their meta-analysis, Brunsting et al., (2014) reviewed the following variables as they related to burnout: experiential avoidance (one's wish to avoid situations, thoughts, or feelings that are unpleasant), mindful awareness (staying present in the current situation), valued living (the belief that one is living as they should), self-efficacy regarding classroom management (belief in one's capacity to execute classroom management) of teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder, and perceived locus

of control (belief about the level of control in a given situation). Experiential avoidance correlated positively with burnout while mindful awareness and valued living correlated negatively with burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014); higher levels of self-efficacy regarding classroom management resulted in lower levels of burnout; and as teachers believed they had less control the higher the levels of burnout reported.

Classroom level variables. Teacher characteristics and traits are not the only areas to consider when assessing factors that may affect SPED teachers. Several factors at the classroom-level correlate with teacher burnout, specifically student age, classroom size, and student special education category. Middle school and high school teachers consistently report higher levels of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014). SPED teachers who work with students between the age of 13-19 reported higher levels of burnout than SPED teachers who taught other age groups. According to Williams and Dikes (2002), results indicated that SPED teachers of pre-kindergarten through third grade experienced the lowest levels of burnout while middle school SPED teachers reported the highest levels of emotional exhaustion and lowest levels of lack of personal accomplishment; high school SPED teachers reported the greatest amounts of depersonalization.

Class size, additional hours spent on paperwork and caseload numbers can be difficult to categorize as there is always a range of numbers. While there is some gray area in the 11-30 students per classroom range, the results from Williams and Dikes (2002) indicated some promising results for classrooms with 1-10 students and 30+ students. When assessing class size (comparing 1-10 students, 11-20 students, 20-30 students, and 30+ students), SPED teachers in classrooms with 1-10 students reported the lowest levels of emotional exhaustion and a strong sense of personal accomplishment.

SPED teachers of students in the 21-30 range reported the greatest levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Williams and Dikes, 2002). In terms of hours beyond the workday, Williams and Dikes (2002) found that when collectively assessing results on the variable of additional time spent on paperwork, “increased paperwork equates to increased stress and conversely, less additional paperwork equates to less stress” (p. 343). Caseload is another important factor to consider. According to Williams and Dikes (2002), a positive correlation exists between levels of burnout for SPED teachers and caseload numbers.

Student exceptionality is also a strong factor in teacher burnout. Research by Nichols and Sosnowsky (2002) indicates greater levels of burnout among special education teachers providing instruction in self-contained classrooms compared to special education teachers outside of self-contained classrooms. Specifically, SPED teachers involved in self-contained classrooms with high proportions of students with the exceptionality of Emotionally Disturbed (ED) and SPED teachers of students with ED reported higher levels of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Zabel & Zabel, 1982). Further, according to Singh and Billingsley (1996), special educators who worked with students with emotional and behavioral disorders were less likely to stay in their current position. Contrasting results were found by Williams and Dikes (2002); their work indicated that SPED teachers in self-contained classrooms reported the greatest percentage of low emotional exhaustion scores.

School level variables. SPED teachers have reported that the work hindrances associated with the role of a SPED teacher can contribute to burnout. SPED teachers exhibit lower levels of burnout when experiencing positive emotional experiences at

school. The degree to which SPED teachers reported levels of security, social connection, esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization was a predictor of burnout; teachers who reported high levels of positive emotional experiences at school reported lower levels of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014). Levels of positive emotional experiences are not the only school-level factors related to SPED burnout, interpersonal experiences among colleagues can also have an effect. According to Hester et al. (2020), teachers cited collaboration with general education teachers and paraprofessionals as sources of stress.

School climate is another important factor when assessing burnout among SPED teachers. Organizational climate is “a set of perceptions that members of an organization share, which reflects how they describe and interpret their organizational environment” (Lavian, 2012, p. 235). The climate within a school building or system can set overt or covert expectations for the students, staff, and community served. According to Lavian (2012), “school organizational climate was found significant in predicting feelings of stress and perceived role complexity. Stress and perceived job complexity were found to predict burnout” (p. 240). Essentially, stress, climate, and the role of the teachers are closely related primarily in their effects on the possibility of burnout for a SPED teacher.

Maslach et al. (2001) explain that a mismatch between a person and their job, whether that mismatch be related to the workload (demands of the job exhaust a person’s ability to fill their duties), control (insufficient access to what is needed to fulfill their role) reward (lack of reward based on achievements), community (loss of connection with coworkers), fairness (perceived unfairness), or values (ethical decision-making) can contribute to feelings of burnout. For teachers specifically, role conflict and role ambiguity are two common experiences. Role conflict exists when a teacher is given

roles and responsibilities that are impossible to fulfill at the same time or within a timely manner. Role ambiguity is when expectations within a role are not made clear to the teacher. Role conflict and role ambiguity both contribute to higher levels of burnout in both self-contained and team-teaching settings. SPED teachers who struggle to access the resources they need while job responsibilities remain high experience intensified levels of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Garwood, Werts, Warghese, & Gosey, 2017) and are more likely to lack the intent to stay in their teaching position (Bettini et al., 2019).

SPED teachers also report higher levels of burnout if they interacted less with principals. “The principal with low burnout interacted more with staff and teachers, engaged in more personal dialogue, provided more support, and observed others doing their jobs significantly more than the principal at the school with moderate burnout” (Brunsting et al., 2014, p. 696). Bettini et al. (2019) expounded on this idea and indicated that both direct and indirect administrative support is a predictor of a teacher’s intent to stay in their current position. Administrative support is an important factor in SPED teachers’ experiences of stress (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley et al., 2004; Hester et al., 2020) a common precursor to burnout. Lawrenson and McKinnon (1982) also found that teachers reported “administrative hassles” or lack of administrative support and feedback as their primary reason for leaving their current job (p. 41). School systems have an opportunity to address burnout through administrative support.

Burnout Prevention

Burnout prevention has been approached from two distinct lenses. One lens views the opportunity for change from the individual teacher and the other lens involves change occurring within the organizational system. According to Maslach et al. (2001),

“most discussions of burnout interventions focus primarily on individual-centered solutions, such as removing the worker from the job, or individual strategies for the worker, in which one either strengthens one’s internal resources or changes one’s work behaviors. This is particularly paradoxical given that research has found that situational and organizational factors play a bigger role in burnout than individual ones” (p. 418).

For preventative strategies to be most effective, an approach addressing both individual level and organizational level change is crucial. Research by Gilmour, Sandilos, Pilny, Schwartz, and Wehby (2022) indicated that for teachers who support students with emotional and behavioral disorders, burnout can take on several different profiles, meaning that each teacher may possess a different type of burnout. Gilmour et al. (2022) suggest that because of these different profiles, teachers may need different supports depending on their profile. These supports may come in the form of individual coping supports or organizational level supports.

Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) aimed to assess the effectiveness of an intervention program which provided both stress management coping skills for teachers and a peer collaboration program and boost collegial interactions, thus attempting to assess the effectiveness of both individual and community level supports. Results indicated that compared to the control group which received no intervention and reported less satisfaction and more burnout, SPED teachers who participated in the interventions reported more job satisfaction and less burnout (Cooley and Yovanoff, 1996). While the results from Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) are promising as a combined intervention,

research is often focused on just the individual components or only the organizational and community level components.

Individual level support and coping skills. Farber (2000) suggested that because burnout among educators is not formally recognized as a formal diagnosis according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR), treatments to address burnout are often included primarily in stress-related treatment approaches (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Burnout is an official diagnosis in other countries according to the International Classification of Disease, ICD-10. While stress-related treatment approaches are effective in terms of treatment at the individual level, Farber (2000) warns that providers should consider treating burnout according to the distinct type of burnout the individual is facing rather than treating burnout as a single phenomenon. For example, if a person is primarily struggling with the facet of emotional exhaustion (a stress-related facet), stress-related treatment may be beneficial, however, it is possible that stress-related treatment might not be as beneficial if a person is struggling more with depersonalization or lack of personal accomplishment.

Common approaches at the individual intervention level include but are not limited to relaxation, meditation, and exercise, time management, seeking alternative sources of satisfaction, strengthening coping skills, and enhancing social support (Farber, 2000). Utilizing coping strategies is one approach teachers can utilize to manage or prevent burnout. These strategies are often offered to teachers as a preventative effort as the initiative lies within the individual rather than on the system.

In a controlled study, Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) assessed the effectiveness of stress management workshops and a peer collaboration program. The stress management workshop included equipping teachers with coping skills (direct, indirect, and active coping strategies) and the peer collaboration program aimed to reduce the isolation of SPED teachers (Cooley and Yovanoff, 1996). “These approaches represent viable, cost-effective avenues of immediate intervention on a few of the most visible and controllable aspects of the attrition problem” (Cooley and Yovanoff, 1996, p. 352). While these approaches are a useful intervention for teachers experiencing burnout, stress, and reduced job satisfaction, these approaches do not offer a complete solution to the attrition issue in education.

Emery and Vandenberg (2010) highlighted the importance of focusing on more than just symptom reduction, but the importance of including mediating psychological processes. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a therapeutic behavioral approach promoting psychological flexibility by targeting experiential avoidance, acceptance, mindfulness, and valued living. Because ACT has been effective in reducing burnout among other helping professionals, Emery and Vandenberg (2010) believed that ACT was a promising intervention for special educators experiencing burnout as it specifically targeted not only symptoms management, but acceptance and values as well.

Research indicates that individual level strategies can be effective in reducing burnout among educators, however, the teacher’s working environment also plays a role. According to Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Soini, & Salmela-Aro (2013), “teachers’ proactive strategies, both self- and co-regulation were found to ameliorate their experience of socio-contextual burnout” (p. 69). However, Pietarinen et al. (2013) also reiterate that

while strategies for teachers to regulate their own behavior and their own working environment simultaneously can be effective in reducing burnout, simply targeting self-regulation skills alone is less effective. In order to effectively manage burnout, SPED teachers have a responsibility in successfully managing their own regulatory systems. In fact, the positive benefits of the use of these strategies are boosted when combined with accessing community and social support and improving the working environment.

Organizational level and community level support. Individual level coping skills are typically not enough for a school system to fully prevent burnout from occurring in the workplace. While individual change on the part of the teacher can be crucial in the prevention of burnout, research shows that organizations, or school systems, must consider the ways in which the system itself is contributing to burnout rather than preventing burnout. Organizational changes can develop through initiatives within a school system and through changes in policy and procedure.

According to Soini et al. (2019), “it is imperative to improve the teacher-environment fit to provide a buffer for feelings of inadequacy, exhaustion, and cynicism” (p. 634). Not only does access to professional community support build support for a SPED teacher, the relationship between a SPED teacher and their professional community can also provide checks and balances for other stressors that SPED teachers face. Examples of these stressors that may be more readily monitored through the professional community include workload, identification of stressors, times to seek help, and the building of community and climate (Soini et al., 2019). Additionally, research indicates that peer-collaboration can result in positive changes in the following areas: job

satisfaction, depersonalization, personal accomplishment, and organizational commitment (Fore et al., 2002).

According to Brunsting et al. (2014) and Wasburn-Moses (2005), increased administrative emotional and instructional support can be beneficial in reducing attrition of special education teachers. Wasburn-Moses (2005) highlights four primary strategies for principals: prioritize collaboration, be personally supportive, handpick mentors, and emphasize continued learning. Further, Williams and Dikes (2002) provide a number of considerations about specific variables associated with job burnout for special education teachers. These variables include but are not limited to caseload numbers, class sizes, and support for SPED teachers who possess traits which might make them more vulnerable to the facets of burnout.

Research by Kaufhold, Alvarez, and Arnold (2006) targeted resources as a commonly neglected factor contributing to burnout, attrition, and stress for teachers. A survey was administered in South Texas in which 228 special education teachers responded, 81% of teachers reported that they either strongly agreed or agreed that they lacked sufficient school supplies, materials, and resources needed to successfully complete their job (Kaufhold et al., 2006). Ensuring teachers have access to funding, resources, and materials needed to simply carry out their job responsibilities could be one way for school districts to directly impact the risks of attrition and burnout among special education teachers.

“Policy makers and administrators interested in reducing attrition must facilitate the development of better work environments for special educators.” (Billingsley, 2003, p. 7). Policy must be in place to directly address issues of burnout among special

educators. A variety of causes have been linked to special education burnout. Each organization must identify areas that are most problematic for special educators within their own school or district. A number of variables exist that contribute to burnout at the school and organizational level and the needs at these levels can differ. According to Billingsley (2003), enacting a prescribed prevention program rather than one tailored to the unique difficulties within a school system will not be effective. "For example, providing beginning teachers with formal induction programs is not likely to be effective in the end unless their work assignments are also reasonable" (Billingsley, 2003, p. 7). Educational systems cannot expect one intervention or approach to solve all issues related to SPED teacher burnout. "Neither changing the setting nor changing the individuals is enough; effective change occurs when both develop in an integrated fashion." (Maslach, et al., 2001, p. 419). Both organizational and individual changes must occur for burnout to truly be addressed in today's education system.

Summary

Burnout is an issue across a variety of careers which require consistent interpersonal interactions. Because of the interpersonal nature of teaching and unique requirements of special education, SPED teachers are susceptible to burnout. Quantitative research has indicated a number of possible causes for SPED teacher burnout, consequences of burnout, and preventative measures that can support teachers experiencing burnout.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate burnout among SPED teachers. This study aimed to assess factors that contribute to burnout, burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout among SPED teachers. In this chapter, the researcher describes in detail the design, setting, selection of participants, sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations.

Research Design

A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was utilized for this study. Lunenburg and Irby (2008) state that qualitative research provides a means of understanding by way of inquiry to study a human or social problem. According to Giorgi (1997), "phenomenology thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness, and, in its most comprehensive sense, it refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to a single person" (p. 235). The phenomenological design allows exploration of the personal lived experiences of special education teachers and how those experiences relate to burnout. Five steps are included in the human scientific phenomenological method: "collection of verbal data, reading of the data, breaking of the data into some kind of parts, organizing and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 235), and the five steps of the phenomenological design will be used in the current study.

Setting

The study was completed in District A, a large suburban public school district, in the state of Kansas. The school district currently has 36 elementary schools (grades K-5), 10 middle schools (grades 6-8), and 5 high schools (grades 9-12). The district also houses a variety of early childhood programs and alternative programs. Demographic statistics of students are represented in Table 5.

The school district currently employs 4,743 staff members, including 348 SPED staff (i.e., teachers, related service providers, and gifted teachers). District A employs 166 SPED resource teachers, excluding SPED teachers in specific programs (i.e., center-based resource programs, autism programs, or programs for students with emotional disturbance), and among them, 85 SPED teachers work at the elementary level, 43 SPED teachers at the middle school level, and 38 SPED teachers at the high school level.

Sampling Procedures

The population for this research included SPED teachers at three grade levels (i.e., primary, middle, and high) in the United States. Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure in-depth responses were collected from the research setting. Purposeful sampling is selecting a sample of participants who are uniquely qualified to participate in the study (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The following criteria were utilized in this study: 1) being a SPED teacher at the primary, middle, or high school level at District A and 2) having at some point experienced burnout. To ensure a representative sample of District A, the researcher started by attempting to recruit 12.5% of all SPED teachers in District A at each grade level which would result in 19 interviews ($n = 9$ from elementary level, $n = 5$ from middle school level, and $n = 5$ from high school level). To do this, the researcher

started by contacting 25% of randomly selected potential participants in each level ($n = 19$ from elementary level, $n = 11$ from middle school level, and $n = 10$ from high school level). The researcher continued this process of random selection of the remaining SPED teachers several times until data saturation was reached.

Instruments

An interview protocol using open-ended interview questions was used in this study. Open-ended protocols allow the participants a chance to provide information about their experiences. Additionally, open-ended interview questions provided the participants with an opportunity to elaborate upon their own volition and through the use of follow-up questions (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

Interview Protocol. The interview protocol was developed based on the literature review on the topic of burnout among SPED teachers. An expert panel reviewed an initial draft of the interview protocol, checked the face validity, and relevance of interview questions, and provided feedback for improvement. Individuals included in this panel were the Director of School Improvement and Assessment from District A, the advisor, and the research analyst from the Graduate School of Education at Baker University. After the interview protocol was revised, the researcher completed three mock interviews with SPED staff from District A to further test the interview protocol, and revisions were made after receiving feedbacks from the mock interviews. The final interview protocol included 11 interview questions. See Appendix F for interview protocol.

In the interview protocol, interview questions related to the experiences that might contribute to burnout, the prevention of burnout, and the consequences of burnout among SPED teachers were posed broadly at first, and then in more detail through follow up

questions. Follow up questions allowed the researcher to clarify and obtain more detailed information about the participants' experience.

Regarding RQ1, participants were asked to describe any experiences they have related to burnout, or any facet of burnout and five interview questions were developed to answer RQ1. Regarding RQ2, to explore the experiences preventing the burnout, participants were asked to describe their experiences and strategies, strategies recommended or offered by the school district or building, and strategies that might be most beneficial, and five interview questions were developed to answer RQ2. Finally, regarding RQ3, participants were asked to describe any consequences they have experienced for themselves, their family, their students, or for their general working environment due to burnout, and one interview question was developed.

Data Collection Procedures

Initial contact was made by the researcher with the Director of School Improvement and Assessment from District A. Through this email correspondence, the researcher obtained the Application to Conduct Research in District A. The researcher completed the application (see Appendix C). The researcher requested permission from the Baker University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research study and the researcher obtained approval from the Baker University IRB (see Appendix A) and obtained Research Approval from District A (see Appendix D).

Once approvals were granted from the Baker University IRB and District A, the researcher acquired names and email addresses for all SPED teachers in District A. The researcher listed all SPED teachers in three separate excel spreadsheets based on grade

level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high) and listed SPED teachers on each list in a randomized order.

Once the lists were randomized, the researcher began the first round of participant selection. The target number of participants per level for the initial round of participant selection was 12.5% of all the SPED teachers in District A ($n = 9$ from elementary level, $n = 5$ from middle school level, and $n = 5$ from high school level). In the initial round of participants selection, to ensure a representative sample of the population, the researcher selected the first 25% of potential participants on the list from each grade level to send out an invitation email and anticipated at least a 50% response rate ($n = 19$ from elementary level, $n = 11$ from middle school level, and $n = 10$ from high school level). The researcher continued this process of random selection of the remaining SPED teachers until data saturation was reached.

Once the participants were selected, the researcher sent an invitation email to the selected SPED teachers. This email included brief background information, purpose of the study, participant selection criteria: 1) the teacher must be a SPED teacher and 2) must have had an experience of burnout, an invitation to participate, and a consent form. Once consent was obtained, the researcher contacted participants through phone or email depending on the participants' preferred mode of communication. An individual Zoom interview time was confirmed by the participant.

During the interview process, the interview protocol was followed. The participant was provided with a review of the interview process and clarification about confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, the participant was reminded about their

right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. The participant was given an opportunity to voice any questions or concerns.

Interviews were conducted and recorded individually using the video-conferencing platform, Zoom. Once the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed verbatim through the Zoom platform in preparation for data analysis.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Qualitative data analysis was utilized in this study. A combination of coding processes by Saldana (2013) and Creswell and Creswell's (2018) five step data analysis process was followed:

Step One. Organize and prepare the data.

Step Two. Read or look at all the data.

Step Three. Start coding all the data.

Step Four. Generate descriptions and themes.

Step Five. Represent descriptions or themes.

Step One, organize and prepare the data. The interviews were recorded using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. Both video and audio (sound) from the interviews were recorded through the platform and saved in the Zoom Cloud. The platform also recorded and saved transcripts of the audio in the Zoom Cloud. Once a transcription was produced and saved, the researcher checked for accuracy by comparing the audio recording with the transcript. The researcher edited the transcript as needed. Then, the transcripts were sent to the corresponding participant for member checking. During member checking, the participants were able to make changes to the transcript as they saw fit. With feedback from the participants, the researcher made changes to the

transcripts to accurately represent the participants' experiences. Each transcript was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality for all participants. Finally, the edited transcripts were separated into two groups: Elementary School SPED teachers and Middle/High School SPED teachers. The two groups of transcripts were uploaded into a qualitative data analysis software called Quirkos for further analysis. These transcripts were analyzed independently of one another. In addition, throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researcher employed the practice of analytic memo writing and reflected on the study's research question, interview questions, emergent patterns or themes as well as possible personal bias.

Step Two, reading and looking at all the data. The researcher read all transcripts and engaged in analytic memo writing to reflect on the data collection process and identify initial thoughts about the transcripts. At this stage, the researcher began an exploratory method of coding: Holistic Coding (Saldana, 2013). The process of Holistic Coding began through analytic memos as the research began to assign codes to large groups of text. According to Saldana (2013), engaging in Holistic Coding "applies a single code to each large unit of data in the corpus to capture a sense of the overall contents and the possible categories that may develop." (p. 143).

Step Three included the continuation of First Cycle Coding (Saldana, 2013) of the data. The researcher continued First Cycle Coding using affective methods: Emotions Coding and Values Coding. "Emotions Coding and Values Coding tap into the inner cognitive systems of participants" (Saldana, 2013, p. 105). The researcher engaged in labeling emotions experienced as well as the "values, attitudes, and beliefs" (Saldana, 2013, p. 289) specific to the participants' point of view and outlook.

Once First Cycle methods were completed, the researcher engaged in Second Cycle Coding methods. Saldana (2013) states that Second Cycle methods “require such analytic skills as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building” (p. 57). The researcher utilized Elaborative Coding during Second Cycle Coding. Elaborative Coding allowed the researcher to synthesize codes from Holistic, Emotions, and Values Coding methods to better clarify and elaborate themes within the research.

During Step Four, the researcher began generating descriptions and themes. Within this step, the researcher engaged in post-coding. The researcher continually referred back to prior coding and reviewed the raw data and codes to ensure consistency and accuracy within codes. The researcher developed descriptions for all possible categories and sub-categories. These categories, sub-categories, and descriptions informed the development of general themes.

During Step Five, the researcher began to represent the data visually using a table to display themes, categories, and sub-categories. The data was represented in two separate tables for the Elementary SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School teacher group. These separate tables allowed the researcher to clearly analyze similarities and differences within the data.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

Throughout this study, the researcher employed a variety of measures to ensure reliability and trustworthiness. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018) and Gibbs (2007) qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent throughout the whole process. To establish reliability throughout the study, the researcher

developed a detailed interview protocol, and this protocol was used with all participants consistently. For example, a variety of specific follow-up questions were developed depending on the answers provided by participants. Participants were also interviewed using the same video-conferencing platform, Zoom.

In addition to reliability, trustworthiness is necessary in qualitative research. The researcher also utilized several strategies to address trustworthiness. To ensure credibility in the study, the researcher employed member checking. Member checking allowed participants the chance to review transcripts to substantiate the data. The researcher edited the data to ensure the transcripts accurately reflect the participant's message. Additionally, the researcher employed the technique of prolonged engagement. The researcher continued to interview participants until data saturation was reached.

To establish confirmability, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing. The researcher enlisted a peer with similar status and experience in qualitative data analysis to review the analysis. The researcher enlisted a peer, who is an associate professor at a U.S. University and has had experience conducting qualitative research and analyzing qualitative data, to review the entire analysis, including the raw data, codes, categories, and themes emerged as well as the final findings. The peer debriefer participated in all steps of the data analysis process.

Researcher's Role

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), it is necessary to reflect on one's own role and possible biases (related to background, culture, and experiences) and how those biases might affect the interpretation of data collected. Researchers must

acknowledge the ways in which background and experiences can affect the interpretation of the data.

The researcher was currently working as a school social worker during this study. Prior experiences supporting SPED teachers through their experiences of burnout may have influenced the interpretation of the data. To monitor possible bias during the interview process the researcher closely followed the interview protocol; during the data analysis process, the researcher monitored bias through analytic memos (Saldana, 2013). The researcher continually documented the analysis process and checked for bias throughout. Because this researcher is currently working in the district where the study took place, this researcher did not recruit any SPED teachers with which this researcher had a current professional relationship. The act of including participants that currently have a working relationship with the researcher could have skewed results. The interviewee could have felt uncomfortable sharing with the researcher due to the working or supervisory relationship.

Limitations

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) state that “limitations are factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings or on the generalizability of the results” (p. 133). The researcher does not have control over the limitations of a study. The study has the following limitations:

1. This study was limited to a sample from District A which is a large, suburban, midwestern district. The results of this study could not be generalized to all SPED teachers.

2. The researcher cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information shared by the participants regarding burnout experiences in SPED due to potential selected memory of the participants.

Summary

This chapter included the methods for the study. This study explored the experiences of burnout among SPED teachers. A detailed description of participants and setting including the processes of purposeful sampling was reviewed. The research was conducted through interviews with SPED teachers following an interview protocol. Once data were collected, transcripts were created. The researcher then engaged in data analysis and synthesis of the transcripts in two separate groups. Finally, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations were also discussed.

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine experiences of burnout among SPED teachers. Using a phenomenological design, the following grand tour question was addressed: what are special education teachers' experiences of burnout? Three research questions related to experiences leading to burnout, burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout were developed to address the grand tour question.

All participants worked in the same large, suburban school district in the Midwest. In the Elementary School SPED teacher group, there were a total of 14 participants, 14% ($n=2$) of participants were male and 86% ($n=12$) were female. Experience in the SPED setting ranged from one year to 20 years of experience. Among Elementary School SPED teachers, 100% ($n=14$) of participants had a master's degree (see Table 6 for a summary of descriptive information for Elementary School SPED teachers).

In the Middle/High School SPED teacher group, there were a total of 13 participants, 38% ($n=5$) of participants were male and 62% ($n=8$) were female. Experience in the SPED setting ranged from three years to 27 years of experience. Among Middle/High School SPED teachers, 100% ($n=13$) of participants had a master's degree (see Table 7 for a summary of descriptive information for Middle/High School SPED teachers).

The Elementary School and Middle/High School data were intentionally analyzed separately to assess the data within each group. The researcher did not initially analyze the data looking to identify similarities or differences. Although the data were

analyzed independently, similar themes and categories emerged from the two groups in all three research questions. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Findings Related to Research Question 1

The first research question addressed SPED teacher experiences that contribute to burnout. While the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School SPED teacher group were analyzed separately and independent of one another, more similarities in themes and categories emerged than differences. In fact, all themes and most categories were the same for research question 1, except for one category and some sub-categories. The same two themes emerged from the Elementary School and Middle/High School SPED teacher interview data: contributing experiences inside of school and contributing experiences outside of school.

Elementary School SPED Teacher Findings Related to Research Question 1

Theme 1: Contributing experiences inside of school. Theme 1 includes SPED teacher experiences that occurred inside the school. Within theme 1, four categories emerged. The categories included negative student behaviors, unreasonable expectations, coworker challenges and lack of support. The category, unreasonable expectations, included three sub-categories: demanding caseload, inconsistent schedule, and overload of daily tasks. The category, coworker challenges, included two sub-categories: difficulties with coworkers and inequality between general education and SPED.

Category 1: Negative student behaviors. Thirteen Elementary School SPED teachers reported that negative student behaviors contributed to their experience of burnout. Negative student behaviors included aggressive and disruptive student behavior. Physical aggression, throwing objects, profanity use, screaming, and disrobing were all

named as specific negative behaviors experienced by participants. Laura explained a scenario that occurred between she and a student, “he was in fifth grade and the kid slapped me, punched me in the face...in the face, and my glasses went flying across the room. And I, I just snapped. I'm like, I'm done. I can't do this.” Additionally, due to the severity of the students' behaviors, these students required more one-on-one support or a substantial amount of time in the SPED teacher's resource room which can often disrupt the learning environment for other students. Rhonda stated, “I've got the most volatile student paired with the most vulnerable student...and now we have to manage this, and they're like, yeah, I'm like, okay. Well, I mean, that's going to be ugly.”

Category 2: Unreasonable expectations. Ten Elementary School SPED teachers reported that unreasonable expectations related to the SPED teacher's role contributed to their experience of burnout. Category 2 refers primarily to responsibilities specific to the role of a SPED teacher. SPED teachers reported that these tasks often cannot be completed within the workday. The demands of their caseload, constant interruptions to the schedule, and excessive paperwork contributed to the overwhelming nature of the SPED teacher role.

Sub-category 2.1: Demanding caseload. Seven Elementary School SPED teachers reported that a demanding caseload contributed to their experience of burnout. SPED teachers reported difficulties with serving the number of students on their caseload. For example, Cara stated, “I mean you can see the emotional exhaustion I know I felt, and I'm like if you add another kid to my caseload, I'm going to explode.” Several SPED teachers reported feeling as if they were doing two jobs at once due to the number and demands of the caseloads they carry.

Sub-category 2.2: Inconsistent schedule. Seven Elementary School SPED

teachers reported that inconsistent schedules contributed to their experience of burnout. Consistently, teachers referred to inconsistencies especially regarding their lunch and their plan time. Carly stated, “[I’m] constantly juggling, trying to get all of my minutes in with like trying to get a lunch break and trying to schedule everything. It's just exhausting.” Additionally, several SPED teachers noted difficulties with working around the master schedule, general education teachers’ schedules, and maintaining their own SPED service schedule.

Sub-category 2.3: Overload of daily tasks. Ten Elementary School SPED

teachers reported that having an overload of daily tasks contributed to their experience of burnout. The overload of daily tasks often included reference to excessive paperwork that could not be completed during contract hours. Often, SPED teachers noted that they began working long hours to compensate for the task that could not be completed during the day. Cara provided an overview of the tasks that tend to take time outside of school hours when she stated,

I would just say the amount of demand...just in the job in general. So, a lot of, you know...when you're focusing on your teaching throughout the day, then that means a lot of that paperwork, curriculum design, collaboration with teachers comes home with you, so you can't just walk in the door when you come home and say, oh, I'm done for the day. So, I mean, there are nights and weekends and more nights and weekends...

Category 3: Coworker challenges. Eleven Elementary School SPED teachers reported that coworker challenges contributed to their experience of burnout. The nature

of coworker challenges centered around managing paraprofessionals and handling coworker conflict. Additionally, navigating inequalities that exist between general education teachers and SPED teachers was also noted as part of coworker challenges.

Sub-category 3.1: Difficulties with coworkers. Ten Elementary School SPED teachers reported that difficulties with coworkers contributed to their experience of burnout. The difficulties reported were related to managing paraprofessionals and coworker conflict. Ensuring coverage for students when paraprofessionals are absent or when paraprofessional positions are not filled and ensuring safety for paraprofessionals when student behavior becomes aggressive were referenced by SPED teachers. Additionally, coworker conflict, including misunderstandings between general education teachers and SPED teachers reportedly contributed to burnout. Yvonne explained a situation with a coworker when she stated,

One of the biggest burnouts for me is when the dynamic is...if a, if a staff person disagrees with, or has a different point of view, or feels like somebody was too blunt with them, which I tend to be a blunt person, that they go to the principal. And, they don't tell you that they have an issue, and then this kind of stacks up.

Sub-category 3.2: Inequality between general education and SPED. Six Elementary School SPED teachers reported that inequalities between general education and SPED teachers contributed to their experience of burnout. Carly explained some of this inequality when she stated,

I think that it's hard in special education, being like, being paid the same as other positions, and not having the same expectations, and that wears SPED teachers out. If I could make the same out of money being an art teacher as I can being a

SPED teacher and I'm not getting punched all the time, like...it just makes you wonder, why?

This sub-category was only reported by the Elementary School SPED teacher group.

Category 4: Lack of support. Eleven Elementary School SPED teachers reported that lack of support contributed to their experience of burnout. Lack of support encompassed several areas lacking in support. SPED teachers noted a lack of administrative support, lack of adult support day-to-day, and feeling underappreciated. For example, Sarah explained,

I voiced my frustrations, like voiced my concerns, and that was seen as like, oh, you're not being a team player. You know, you're, you're being so negative about everything like...You don't care about the kids, and that wasn't it at all. It was just like, if I was supported just a little bit more, maybe it wouldn't get to this point.

Theme 2: Contributing experiences outside of school. Theme 2 included SPED teacher experiences that occurred outside of the school. Within theme 2, one category emerged.

Category 1: Outside stressors. Nine Elementary School SPED teachers reported that outside stressors contributed to their experience of burnout. Outside stressors referred to negative or difficult parent interactions and covid-related issues. Rhonda described a particularly difficult situation with parents,

It is the third time this year, I think, that I have sat through a meeting where I just sit and get verbally abused by parents. And you know they yell at me, the intention is that I spend more time with their child...but yet, they're sitting across a table from me. They're sobbing. They're throwing a fit with their arms going up

and down...or one parent brought in a lawyer and the lawyer spent 70 minutes grilling me. Why, this? Why, that? What's this? You need to clarify this.

SPED teachers also highlighted the ways in which Covid created more stress and affected students and teaching.

Middle/High School SPED Teacher Findings Related to Research Question 1

Theme 1: Contributing Experiences Inside of School. Similar to the Elementary School SPED teacher group, theme 1 for the Middle/High School SPED teacher group included SPED teacher experiences that occurred inside the school. Within theme 1, the same four categories emerged (i.e., negative student behaviors, unreasonable expectations, coworker challenges, and lack of support). The category negative student behaviors included two sub-categories: disruptive and aggressive student behavior and lack of student motivation and investment. The category unreasonable expectations included three sub-categories: excessive paperwork, inconsistent schedule, and overload of daily tasks.

Category 1: Negative student behaviors. Eleven Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that negative student behaviors contributed to their experience of burnout. Similar to the Elementary School SPED teacher reports, negative student behaviors included student behaviors that were disruptive and aggressive in nature or behavior that indicated a lack of motivation or investment. Jayden stated, “there were a lot of behaviors with a lot of, of students that I interacted with...whether it was students on my caseload, or other students that I interacted with, and it just really felt like a mountain of, of issues.”

Sub-category 1.1: Disruptive and aggressive student behavior. Eight

Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that disruptive and aggressive student behaviors contributed to their experience of burnout. For example, Camila reported, “dealing with behaviors all day long was exhausting, especially whenever you're being physically attacked all day long.” Sofia described some of the disruptive and aggressive behaviors she has experienced when she stated,

it's the horse play... kids just don't know when to stop touching each other...calling each other names. It's the mean girl drama, like, it's behavior such as that. But we've also had quite a few fights this year, like physical altercations, and of course, that leads to drama within the classroom.

Sub-category 1.2: Lack of student motivation and investment. Six Middle/High

School SPED teachers reported that lack of student motivation and investment contributed to their experience of burnout. Elias stated, “there were times that you’d be up teaching and kids just were kind of checked out. So, you're like, why am I even up here teaching? They don't care so why should I care?” Natalie echoed a similar sentiment by stating, “they’re not motivated...they’re not wanting...they're not trying to do anything to better themselves”. This sub-category was only reported by the Middle/High School SPED teacher group and not by the Elementary School SPED teacher group.

Category 2: Unreasonable expectations. All Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that unreasonable expectations related to the SPED teacher’s role contributed to their experience of burnout. Category 2 refers primarily to daily tasks required within the SPED teacher’s role. These tasks were reported to be excessive or unmanageable, especially within the allotted contract hours. Unreasonable expectation

sub-categories varied slightly between the Elementary and Middle School SPED teacher groups.

Sub-category 2.1: Excessive paperwork. Eight Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that excessive paperwork contributed to their experience of burnout. Levi explained, “every single year we have a new process, or every single year, there's a new, you know, new paperwork that we have to do. That, that gets very frustrating every year.” Not only was new added paperwork mentioned, Bella noted the sheer amount of paperwork associated with their role; she reported, “you can't keep throwing caseloads of 27 at people and expect them to hang around because that's 27 IEPs [Individualized Education Programs]...”

Sub-category 2.2: Inconsistent schedule. Six Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that inconsistent schedules contributed to their experience of burnout. Participants mentioned issues with the way the schedule itself was set up and the ways in which their schedule was interrupted due to the nature of the SPED role. For example, Bella described issues with the schedule itself:

I've always said that I think that resource is good in theory at the middle school level, but it's, it's... you can't do it effectively and efficiently like I, I mean, I feel like I have finally gotten into being a well-oiled machine, because I've figured out how to hit as many kids as I possibly can because of the fact that I had gen-ed [general-education] teaching in the past. But, in order to really make some serious movement with these kids, I'd have to have them a couple of hours a day.

Similar to the Elementary School SPED teacher group, Camila explained how interruptions to the schedule could impact the day, “if they decided to act up while I was

eating lunch, I had to drop everything and go to that student because it was the safety of other students and other teachers at risk.”

Sub-category 2.3: Overload of daily tasks. Nine Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that having an overload of daily tasks contributed to their experience of burnout. Teachers described working very long hours because there is simply too much to get done during the contract day. Bella reported, “I just feel like they just keep piling things on and piling things on, and nobody takes anything away.” Asher noted issues with long hours and stated,

I've taken a little better care of myself now than what I used to, because early on in my career I would just work, work, work and work, and just, you know, just drill it as much as I possibly can. But I found that, I mean that was burning me out fast.

Category 3: Coworker challenges. Eight Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that coworker challenges contributed to their experience of burnout. Participants reported challenges with negative talk, lack of connection among coworkers, and lack of professionalism. For example, Elias stated, “it kinda felt like people were kind of turning on themselves, so there was not really... not much connection within the building amongst like coworkers.” Sofia explained how challenges with coworkers had directly impacted her experience with burnout by stating, “But I would say, that's the biggest thing...our teachers not pulling their weight, which is making me burn out because I'm pulling my weight 1,000 percent!” Coworker challenges refers not only to uncooperative teachers, but also challenges associated with directing, managing, and supporting paraprofessionals who work in the building. As was noted in the Elementary School

SPED teacher group, Sofia explained the challenges related to managing paraprofessionals, “I have to be in charge of paras. So, I’m, you know, managing what the paras are doing, and where they're going, and if there are student concerns.”

Category 4: Lack of support. Eight Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that lack of support contributed to their experience of burnout. Similar to the Elementary School SPED teacher group, lack of support consisted of lack of support from individuals (administrators or district-level staff) or lack of support related to resources to support student needs. Both Aubrey and Bella expressed that those in administrative leadership positions do not know enough about SPED or know what SPED teachers do. Camila explained her experience with lack of district-level administrative support by stating,

Yet the people who aren't in the building dealing with it every day were telling us how to do that and weren't allowing us the tools and resources in order to, you know, create that safe place that we always talk about.

Further, Middle/High School SPED teachers reported a lack of support related to resources for students' curricular, communication, and behavioral needs. Elias reported, yeah, and then having to deal with behaviors and IEPs [Individualized Education Programs] and all that stuff and there was just no type of support for the teachers, so it made it very difficult, and I felt like I was just kind of getting very exhausted.

Theme 2: Contributing experiences outside of school. Theme 2 included SPED teacher experiences that occurred outside of the school. Within theme 2, one category emerged.

Category 1: Outside stressors. Nine Middle/High School SPED teachers reported that lack of support contributed to their experience of burnout. The outside stressors reported by participants varied greatly in topic and were closely tied to the individual and their life circumstances. Topics of stressors ranged from familial changes to death to experiences in higher education. Covid-19-related issues were also noted by participants as a contributor to their burnout. Brooklyn reported,

I think Covid ...the residual effects have had a lot to do with that [burnout].

We've always had kind of a, a parent...I'd say, parent problem. A lot of our parents are not involved with school. Part of it is, they don't know how to be.

They never grew up in that environment. But you know, I think it's been impacted even more after Covid... a lot of parents lost jobs, you know. Their jobs were impacted. Kids stayed home and babysat, and you know we... it was very common to see...

Stressors related to paraprofessionals and Covid-19 were both noted by the Elementary School SPED teachers, however, personal stressors (e.g. drive-by shootings, overdoses, experiences with higher education, familial death, familial changes) were only noted by Middle/High School SPED teachers.

Finding Related to Research Question 2

The second research question addressed SPED teacher experiences with burnout prevention. Again, despite the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School teacher group having been analyzed separately, similarities emerged more than differences. The same two themes emerged from the Elementary School and

Middle/High School SPED teacher interview data: prevention provided by the school system and prevention used by the individual SPED teacher.

Elementary School SPED Teacher Findings Related to Research Question 2

Theme 1: Prevention provided by school. Theme 1 includes prevention provided to SPED teachers by the school system. One category emerged within theme 1. The category was providing adequate support for SPED teachers. The category related to providing adequate support for SPED teachers included two sub-categories: support from administration and support from coworkers.

Category 1: Provide adequate support for SPED teachers. All Elementary School SPED teachers identified providing adequate support for SPED teachers as a prevention strategy for burnout. Examples of support ranged from general mentions of support to specific ways administrators and coworkers could support SPED teachers in day-to-day life.

Sub-Category 2.1: Support from administration. Ten Elementary School SPED teachers identified support from administration as a prevention strategy for burnout. Support for SPED teachers in the Elementary School Teacher group often referred to support from the building principal including protection for time in their schedule such as lunch and plan time. Johanna explains,

And I think when I reflect on this year, I'm like Holy Cow! Like, this was a really, really good year like, yeah, there were behaviors, but I could handle it, you know. And so, when I reflect on that, it's always gone back to administration, it's always gone back to how did principals assist the SPED team.

Sub-Category 2.2: Support from coworkers. Twelve Elementary School SPED teachers identified support from coworkers as a prevention strategy for burnout. Support from coworkers included support from those who are in the building working with the SPED teacher and SPED team. SPED teachers reported feeling spread so thinly and feeling as if more adult support could prevent burnout. Sarah stated,

I know this is unrealistic, but if once a month, we could have a sub come in and take our kids.....some time...the gift of time, so that I can feel like I am on top of things instead of just sinking all the time.

Theme 2: Prevention used by individual. Theme 2 includes prevention strategies used by the individual SPED teacher. One category emerged within theme 2. The category that emerged within theme 2 was applying self-care practices.

Category 1: Apply self-care practices. Nine Elementary School SPED teachers identified the application of self-care practices as a prevention strategy for burnout. Self-care practices included strategies or interventions that the teacher themselves initiated and carried out to prevent their burnout. Examples of these practices varied based on the individual. Some examples included positive self-talk, seeing a therapist, fitness activities, or general coping skills. Additionally, setting firm boundaries between home and school was mentioned by several Elementary School SPED teachers. Cara explained,

every night I have work I could do, but there are one or two nights of the week you know, especially if I have family home, and it's family time, I just have to unplug...regardless, regardless of what's going on at work, and same thing on the weekends.

Middle/High School SPED Teacher Findings Related to Research Question 2

Theme 1: Prevention provided by school. The same themes emerged for the Middle/High School SPED teacher group as the Elementary School SPED teacher group. Theme 1 includes prevention provided to SPED teachers by the school system. One category emerged within Theme 1 from the Middle/High School SPED teacher group: providing adequate support for SPED teachers. The category related to providing adequate support for SPED teachers included the same two sub-categories as the Elementary School SPED teacher group: support from administration and support from coworkers.

Category 1: Provide adequate support for SPED teachers. Eleven Middle/High School SPED teachers identified providing adequate support for SPED teachers as a prevention strategy for burnout. Similar to the Elementary School SPED teacher group, adequate support primarily centered around having administrative support and supportive coworkers.

Sub-Category 2.1: Support from administration. Nine Middle/High School SPED teachers identified support from administration as a prevention strategy for burnout. Elias noted, “here at my school there was a lot of support where administration would say, hey, if you're having a tough day, just call us, we can step in, take over your class, let you kind of reset.” Additionally, participants reported that it is helpful when administrators truly understand SPED, advocate for SPED teachers and their needs and provide positive feedback for SPED teachers.

Sub-Category 2.2: Support from coworkers. Six Middle/High School SPED teachers identified support from coworkers as a prevention strategy for burnout. Support

from coworkers was primarily centered around having access to coworkers that are reliable. These coworkers might be coaches, other teachers, or paraprofessionals. Aubrey noted the importance of having a safe system of support when she stated, “having just that support system where you can problem solve without it being...and this is important...without it being like you’re a failure.”

Theme 2: Prevention used by individual. Theme 2 includes prevention strategies used by the individual SPED teacher. One category emerged within theme 2. The category that emerged within theme 2 was applying self-care practices. Theme 2 and the corresponding category was the same in the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School Teacher group.

Category 1: Apply self-care practices. Nine Middle/High School SPED teachers identified the application of self-care practices as a prevention strategy for burnout. Just like the Elementary School SPED teacher group, the nature of self-care strategies varied and were closely tied to the SPED teacher’s individual needs and experiences. Some examples noted included taking time off, fitness activities, boundaries between home and school, and investing more in one’s physical and psychological health. Natalie stated several self-care strategies, “I mean, I just think leading a healthy lifestyle with their exercise and eating correctly, and making sure you get enough sleep definitely...making sure you take time for yourself outside of school.”

Finding Related to Research Question 3

The third research question evaluated consequences due to burnout. Consistent with the first two research questions, while the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School teacher group were analyzed independently more similarities

emerged than differences. In fact, all themes, categories, and sub-categories in the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School SPED teacher group were the same. Two themes emerged from the interview data: consequences inside of school and consequences outside of school.

Elementary School SPED Teacher Findings Related to Research Question 3

Theme 1: Consequences inside of school. Theme 1 included consequences from burnout that occurred inside of school. Within theme 1, two categories emerged. Voluntary attrition and challenges with students and coworkers were the two categories that emerged within theme 1. Category 2, challenges with students and coworkers include two sub-categories: negative effects on students and negative effects on coworkers.

Category 1: Voluntary attrition. Ten Elementary School SPED teachers identified voluntary attrition as a consequence of burnout. Items included in this category consisted of teachers who had put in for their resignation or retirement, considered leaving special education, or considered if SPED was the right fit for them. Sylvia stated, “I started again, just started feeling like, maybe, maybe this isn't for me. Maybe I should retire. Maybe I should quit!”

Category 2: Challenges with students and coworkers. All Elementary School SPED teachers identified challenges with students and coworkers as a consequence of burnout. Challenges with students were academic and interpersonal in nature. Challenges with coworkers referred to the exhaustion and strain that occurs among coworkers.

Sub-Category 2.1: Negative effects on students. All Elementary School SPED teachers identified negative effects on students as a consequence of burnout. For example, Sarah reported,

Yeah, definitely, I think the more distant I became, the less I cared about providing services. I mean it's not that I stopped providing services altogether I still did. It was just like, I didn't really care what they were learning, or if they were learning, or whatever it was, just like it...it was almost like being a robot, you know.

SPED teachers also described missing student minutes, feeling as if students were getting the bare minimum, feeling that lessons were not as good as they would like them to be, feeling that connections were superficial and having less patience with students.

Sub-Category 2.2: Negative effects on coworkers. Six Elementary School SPED teachers identified negative effects on coworkers as a consequence of burnout. SPED teachers noted the pressure that is placed on coworker relationships. Rhonda stated, “everybody gets strained. There's a ton of chaos. It it's a horrible cycle.”

Theme 2: Consequences outside of school. Theme 2 included consequences from burnout that occurred outside of school. Two categories emerged within theme 2. The categories that emerged were negative impact on health and challenges with family life. Within the category, negative impact on health, two sub-categories emerged. The sub-categories that emerged were worse psychological well-being and worse physical health.

Category 1: Negative impact on health. Thirteen Elementary School SPED teachers identified a negative impact on their health as a consequence of burnout. SPED teachers referred to psychological health and physical health when describing the impact on their overall health.

Sub-Category 1.1: Worse psychological well-being. Ten Elementary School SPED teachers identified worse psychological well-being as a consequence of burnout. SPED teachers referenced tearfulness, apprehension and dread, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and overwhelming emotional issues. Laura reported,

So I went to the doctor for a migraine, and I, just, you know, did a little number like this and ended up being put on some anxiety medication. And I, I, I really blame a lot of that on that situation and my job.

Sub-Category 2.2: Worse physical health. Nine Elementary School SPED teachers identified worse physical health as a consequence of burnout. SPED teachers referenced a variety of physical health issues. These issues included getting physically hurt at work, high blood pressure, weight gain, sleep issues, and starting medications. Sylvia mentioned several physical issues when she said, “I ended up, you know, one day going to the nurse...well, I started having nose bleeds and one day I ended up with the blood pressure of 200 over 199 so that's pretty much stroke level...”

Category 2: Challenges with family life. All Elementary School SPED teachers identified challenges with family life as a consequence of burnout. Similar to category 1, challenges with family life were specific to the individual teacher. Teachers explained that they felt they often brought work home with them, weren't as patient with their families, and felt as if they didn't have much left for their family after the school day. Caroline stated,

I feel like most of the time I'll come home and tell my kids, my own kids like, okay, I need a minute because it was the worst day ever at work. But then I feel like, I say, that several days a week.

Middle School SPED Teacher Findings Related to Research Question 3

Theme 1: Consequences inside of school. Theme 1 included consequences from burnout that occurred inside of school. Within theme 1, two categories emerged. Voluntary attrition and challenges with students and coworkers were the two categories that emerged within theme 1. Category 2, challenges with students and coworkers included two sub-categories: negative effects on students and negative effects on coworkers. As stated previously, all themes, categories, and sub-categories were the same in the two groups; minor differences in examples and experiences are clarified below.

Category 1: Voluntary attrition. Eight Middle/High School SPED teachers identified voluntary attrition as a consequence of burnout. Several SPED teachers noted their choice to move positions, buildings, or school districts. Sofia clearly stated, “If something doesn't change, there are going to be so many teachers out the door.” This sentiment was echoed by several participants; SPED teachers will continue to struggle to stay in education due to the current conditions.

Category 2: Challenges with students and coworkers. Ten Middle/High School SPED teachers identified challenges with students and coworkers as a consequence of burnout. Challenges with students and coworkers included how burnout negatively affected students and coworkers. For students, academic and interpersonal relationships were negatively affected. For coworkers, interpersonal interactions were affected.

Sub-Category 2.1: Negative effects on students. Nine Middle/High School SPED teachers identified negative effects on students as a consequence of burnout. Academically, teachers expressed feeling as if they didn’t have an impact on their students, that they could have done more, and that the students weren’t learning. In terms

of interpersonal interactions, SPED teachers reported being shorter with students and having less patience. Jayden explained his experience by stating,

one of the bigger consequences that was pretty frequent... It was really hard for me to overcome. It was really hard for me to be able to slow down, and just in regular interactions, take an interest in students and really know what's going on. Ask them what's going on in their lives and, and, and remember things that they're doing. Oh, you went to the lake last weekend. How was that? I just didn't have the capacity to remember and recall things like that. And so, I think students probably felt that I was pretty distant in a lot of ways.

Sub-Category 2.2: Negative effects on coworkers. Six Middle/High School SPED teachers identified negative effects on coworkers as a consequence of burnout. Negative effects on coworkers centered primarily around coworkers getting upset easily and displaying a lack of professionalism in the workplace. Natalie noted, “

I'm just trying to think of what other ones... that people would just get more upset because I wasn't doing what I used to do before, so I would get...the people that were expecting me to do things...would get mad because I didn't, I didn't do it. And I said, no.

Theme 2: Consequences outside of school. Theme 2 included consequences from burnout that occurred outside of school. Two categories emerged within theme 2. The categories that emerged were negative impact on health and challenges with family life. Within the category, negative impact on health, two sub-categories emerged. The sub-categories that emerged were worse psychological well-being and worse physical health.

Category 1: Negative impact on health. All Middle/High School SPED teachers identified a negative impact on their health as a consequence of burnout. Participants included examples of psychological and physical health issues that arose due to burnout.

Sub-Category 1.1: Worse psychological well-being. Seven Middle/High School SPED teachers identified worse psychological well-being as a consequence of burnout. Examples provided by participants included taking mental health days, crying, reference to PTSD, self-medicating, anxiety, and starting medication due to psychological concerns. Aubrey recalled, “I would... there...there were times that I would sit in the parking lot before going in and just cry and have to get myself together and then cry on the way home.”

Sub-Category 2.2: Worse physical health. Eleven Middle/High School SPED teachers identified worse physical health as a consequence of burnout. SPED teachers reported a general lack of healthy habits such as exercise and healthy eating. Issues with sleep and excessive tiredness were also mentioned by several participants. Asher reported,

it's like sometimes my eating habits get off track, you know what I mean, and that doesn't help anything. You know. I'm not sleeping very well, which is another, you know snowball effect. You know, I don't make any bad decisions or anything like that. But you know, like I'll choose to watch TV for several hours instead of maybe getting up and doing something...

Category 2: Challenges with family life. Eight Middle/High School SPED teachers identified challenges with family life as a consequence of burnout. SPED teachers described their experiences with not feeling as if they had anything left for their

families at the end of the day and bringing work home which interfered with their family life. Aubrey tearfully recalled her experience with family life challenges when she stated, “I feel like...I mean, my kids are older now, they're 20, but I feel like I have...I, I spent so much time... I am so sorry. I spent so much time and energy with my students...I feel like my kids didn't get the best of me when they were growing up.”

Additional Observations

Several topics emerged that were reported by several SPED teachers, but the number of participants who reported the topic did not reach an adequate level to be considered as a category or sub-category. In the Elementary School SPED teacher group, the experience of being a new teacher was referenced by five participants when describing contributing experiences to burnout. It is possible these numbers remained low because this study was not directed specifically at new teachers. Further, within the Elementary School SPED teacher group, six participants reported that adequate training and support for new teacher specifically is an effective strategy in the prevention of burnout.

In the Middle/High School SPED teacher group, two preventative strategies were mentioned by several participants: logistics related to SPED schedules and beneficial individuals characteristics. Five participants reported that that considering SPED more in creating schedules and more protections for plan and lunch times would prevent burnout for SPED teachers. Four participants reported that they possess characteristics innately that support their ability to prevent burnout within themselves. Examples of these qualities include empathy, intrinsic motivation, always making kids their priority.

Summary

Data from two groups of SPED teachers, an Elementary School SPED teacher group and a Middle/High School SPED teacher group was analyzed independent of one another to ensure that information obtained was specific to each group. More similarities emerged than differences among the two groups (see Table 8 for a summary of results for Elementary SPED teachers and Table 9 for a summary of results for Middle/High School SPED teachers). All over-arching themes for all research questions and all the categories were the same between the two groups. For the Elementary School SPED teacher group, two unique sub-categories emerged for research question 1. For the Middle/High School SPED teacher group, two unique sub-categories emerged for research question 1.

Chapter 5

Interpretation and Recommendations

Special educators are at risk for burnout and the consequences associated with burnout. This study aimed to investigate SPED teachers' experiences of burnout. Experiences that contribute to burnout, burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout were explored. Chapter 5 contains a study summary, overview of the problem, purpose statement and research questions, review of the methodology, and the major findings of the study. Next, the findings related to the literature are reviewed. Finally, within the conclusion of Chapter 5, implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks are presented.

Study Summary

This study explored SPED teachers' experiences of burnout, contributing experiences to their burnout, prevention strategies for burnout, and consequences of burnout. In this section, an overview of the problem is presented. Additionally, this section includes the purpose of the study and research questions as well as the methodology and major findings of the study.

Overview of the problem.

A need currently exists for qualitative research on the topic of burnout among special educators. Profound consequences can exist for both teachers and students due to burnout. These consequences can affect the teacher, students, or school systems (Brunsting et al., 2014). Because of the complexity of challenges faced by SPED teachers (Hester et al., 2020) and lack of research pertaining to burnout (Akin, 2009) as well as interventions and effectiveness of burnout prevention efforts in education (Brunsting et

al., 2014; Maslach et al., 2001), more information is needed to explore in detail issues faced by SPED teachers day-to-day.

Purpose statement and research questions. To explore the experiences of burnout among SPED teachers was the purpose of this study. Specifically, this study investigated experiences that led to burnout, prevention strategies for burnout, and consequences that occur due to burnout. The grand tour question for this study was: What are special education teachers' experiences of burnout? Three research question were utilized to support the grand tour question:

RQ1. What experiences do special education teachers have that contribute to burnout?

RQ2. What experiences do special education teachers have that prevent them from burnout?

RQ3. What are the consequences of burnout among special education teachers?

Review of the methodology. A qualitative approach and phenomenological design were used to explore the experiences of SPED teacher burnout. Data was collected through interviews with Elementary and Middle/High School SPED teachers who have had an experience of burnout. Using Zoom, a video-conferencing platform, open-ended interview questions were utilized during data collection. Transcripts were generated and edited; transcripts were then sent back to participants for member checking. Once finalized, transcripts were then separated into two group: Elementary School SPED teachers and Middle/High School SPED teachers. These two groups of interviews were uploaded to a data analysis software, Quirkos. The data in the two groups was analyzed

separately; codes, categories, and themes were developed. Peer debriefing and analytic memo note-taking were also utilized throughout the data analysis process.

Major findings. Major findings in this study were tied closely to the topic of each individual research question: experiences that lead to burnout, preventative strategies for burnout, and consequences of burnout. Themes that emerged for each research question were identical for both the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School SPED teacher group. Within those themes, many categories emerged that were the same among the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School SPED teacher group, however a few unique categories emerged as well. Finally, specific examples and experiences provided by participants differed based on their respective groups.

Research question 1 asked participants to identify experiences SPED teachers have that contribute to burnout. For Elementary School SPED teachers, two themes emerged: contributing experiences inside of school and contributing experiences outside of school. Within theme 1, Elementary School SPED teachers identified four categories: negative student behaviors, unreasonable expectations, coworker challenges and lack of support. Category 2 and 3 generated sub-categories. Demanding caseloads, inconsistent schedules, and an overload of daily tasks were sub-categories for category 2; difficulties with coworkers and inequality between general education and SPED were sub-categories for category 3. A demanding caseload was the only category unique to the Elementary School SPED teacher group regarding this research question. Within theme two, one category emerged. The category was outside stressors.

For the Middle/High School SPED teacher group two themes emerged: contributing experiences inside of school and contributing experiences outside of school. Within theme 1, Middle/High School SPED teachers identified four categories: negative student behaviors, unreasonable expectations, coworker challenges and lack of support. Category one and two generated sub-categories. Disruptive and aggressive student behaviors and lack of student motivation and interest were sub-categories for category one. Lack of student motivation and interest were unique to the Middle/High School SPED teacher group. Excessive paperwork, inconsistent schedule, and an overload of daily tasks were sub-categories for category 2. Excessive paperwork was a unique subcategory to Middle/High School SPED teachers within this research question. Within theme 2, one category emerged. The category was outside stressors.

Research question 2 asked participants to identify specific experiences SPED teachers have had to prevent burnout. Among Elementary School SPED teachers, two themes emerged: prevention provided by the school and prevention used by the individual. Within theme 1, Elementary School SPED teachers identified one category. The category was providing adequate support for SPED teachers. Two sub-categories emerged from category 1: support from administrators and support from coworkers. Within theme 2, one category emerged. The category was application of self-care practices.

All themes, categories, and sub-categories for research question 2 were identical for the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School teacher group. Among Middle/High School SPED teachers, two themes emerged: prevention provided by the school and prevention used by the individual. Within theme 1,

Middle/High School SPED teachers identified one category. The category was providing adequate support for SPED teachers. Two sub-categories emerged from this category: support from administrators and support from coworkers. Within theme 2, one category emerged. The category was application of self-care practices.

Research question 3 asked participants to identify the consequences of burnout among SPED teachers. From the data from the Elementary School SPED teachers, two themes emerged: consequences inside of school and consequences outside of school. Within theme 1, Elementary School SPED teachers identified two categories. The categories were voluntary attrition and challenges with students and coworkers. Two sub-categories emerged from category 2: negative effects on students and negative effects on coworkers. Within theme two, two categories emerged: negative impact on health and challenges with family. Two sub-categories emerged from category 1: worse psychological well-being and worse physical health.

All themes, categories, and sub-categories for research question 3 were identical for the Elementary School SPED teacher group and the Middle/High School teacher group. From the data from the Middle/High School SPED teachers, two themes emerged: consequences inside of school and consequences outside of school. Within theme 1, Middle/High School SPED teachers identified two categories. The categories were voluntary attrition and challenges with students and coworkers. Two sub-categories emerged from category two: negative effects on students and negative effects on coworkers. Within theme 2, two categories emerged: negative impact on health and challenges with family. Two sub-categories emerged from category 1: worse psychological well-being and worse physical health.

Findings Related to the Literature

Burnout is more likely to affect those working in careers that require consistent communication and interaction (Maslach & Leiter, 1999), SPED teachers can be susceptible to burnout in the workplace. This study investigated several topics related to the burnout experience in education. Specifically, the research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences that lead to burnout, strategies that prevent burnout, and consequences due to burnout in SPED. Due to the complex nature of SPED, qualitative information is needed to better understand the experience of burnout among SPED teachers (Hester et al., 2020). Maslach and Leiter's (1999) working model of teacher burnout supports the findings of this study. The model notes a parallel development of burnout among teachers, rather than a sequential one (Maslach & Leiter, 1999); participants in this study often spoke about contributing experiences, prevention, and consequences in a way that suggests that each facet affected the other rather than one occurring in isolation prior to another one occurring.

Research Question 1. Research question one aimed at understanding the experiences of SPED teachers that contribute to burnout. This study echoed work by Fore et al., (2022) in that the following experiences inside of school contribute to burnout: paperwork load, stress associated with job requirements, lack of planning time, lack of support from administrators, and staff to child ratios. Further, several examples were consistent with the work by the Council for Exceptional Children (Kozleski, 2000): overwhelming paperwork and inadequate district and administrative support. Specifically, this study identified these issues as: unreasonable expectations, excessive paperwork, overload of daily tasks, inconsistent schedule, and lack of support. SPED

teachers in this study reported that excessive paperwork related to data collection and IEP writing resulted in long hours before or after school. Participants also reported that constant interruptions contributed to an inconsistent schedule and lack of support from administrators and for day-to-day needs contributed to their burnout.

Additional federal and state initiatives were not explicitly mentioned by participants in this study but have been cited as possible stressors for SPED teachers (Darrow & Adamek, 2017). While SPED teachers did note a constant overload of daily tasks, stating, “I just feel like they just keep piling things on and piling things on, and nobody takes anything away,” there was no mention of specifics such as standards-based reforms especially related to students’ individualized education programs (IEPs), person-first language, increased focus on transition services for students with exceptionalities, increased focus on self-determination for students with exceptionalities, positive behavioral supports (PBS), and Response to Intervention (RtI) (Darrow & Adamek, 2017).

Participants in this study reported that outside stressors also contributed to their burnout including effects from the Covid-19 pandemic. This is consistent with statistics from a study by Cormier et al., (2021) regarding experiences of Covid-19 affecting SPED. According to their work, rates of anxiety and depression among SPED teachers were occurring at a higher rate than the national average (Cormier et al., 2021). Additionally outside stressors that were not found in previous literature include negative parent interactions and personal life experiences that contribute to burnout.

Classroom level variables is another possible area to explore regarding contributing factors to burnout. Research by Brunsting et al. (2014) and Dikes (2002)

indicated a positive correlation between student age and levels of burnout. However, a meta-analysis by Park and Shin (2020) indicated that student age was only significantly correlated with one facet of burnout, depersonalization. Due to this research, participants in this study were split into two groups, an Elementary School SPED teacher group and a Middle/High School SPED teacher group. Results from this study indicated that more similarities emerged than differences. All themes in this study were the same between groups related to contributing experiences to burnout.

Another classroom level variable that may be pertinent to burnout is caseload numbers. Williams and Dikes (2002) indicated a positive correlation between levels burnout for SPED teachers and caseload numbers. A demanding caseload was identified by Elementary School SPED teachers as sub-category in this study.

School level variables can also correlate with levels of burnout. Brunsting et al. (2014) noted that a sense of security and social connection can affect levels of burnout for teachers. Further, Hester et al., (2020) reported that collaboration with general education teachers and paraprofessionals can cause stress. This is consistent within this study as participants reported coworker challenges, difficulties with coworkers, and inequality between general education and special education as contributors to burnout.

As mentioned previously, another school level variable, lack of administrative support, has reportedly been associated with high levels of stress, burnout, and attrition (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brunsting et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020). This study supported the relationship between lack of support and burnout. Participants did identify lack of administrative support and feedback contributed to their burnout experience. Additionally, it was reported that lack of support from administrators,

district-level staff, lack of general support day-to-day, and lack of support for resources and curriculum contributed to their experiences of burnout.

One category in particular has not been widely cited in previous literature as a main contributing factor for SPED teacher burnout: negative student behaviors. For the Elementary School SPED teacher group, negative student behavior primarily centered around aggressive and disruptive student behavior. Middle/High School SPED teachers reported this type of behavior in addition to a lack of student motivation and investment. Brunsting et al. (2014) referenced the ways in which a student's exceptionality positively correlates with burnout. While participants in this study did not always identify exceptionality as a contributing factor, oftentimes certain student behaviors may be associated with certain exceptionalities.

Research Question 2. Research question two assessed prevention strategies that are effective in preventing burnout among SPED teachers. Preventative strategies offered by participants in this study align with prior research about the effectiveness of prevention strategies. Maslach et al., (2001) note the importance of both individual and organizational level prevention strategies. The two themes that emerged from all participants in this study were prevention provided by the school (organizational level strategies) and prevention used by the individual (individual level strategies). All participants provided more than one preventative strategy which is consistent with the literature stating that burnout cannot be prevented with one strategy (Maslach et al., 2001).

Individual level prevention strategies reported by participants were closely tied to the individual and their unique experience. A variety of examples were provided

including but not limited to general coping skills, fitness activities, or therapy. These preventative strategies align with research that has identified the effectiveness of coping strategies (i.e., relaxation, exercise, time management, strengthening coping skills) (Farber, 2000), and utilizing a mode of mediating psychological processes such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Emery and Vandenberg, 2010). Other formalized stress-management programs have proven to be effective (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996), however no participants reported ever participating in any type of formalized stress reduction program.

In addition to self-care practices at the individual level, participants provided a variety of prevention strategies provided by the school. Soini et al. (2019) stressed the importance of having access to a professional community. Participants identified that support from coworkers is an effective strategy in the prevention of burnout. Examples provided included access to teams that are supportive and collaborative; coworkers mentioned included SPED team members, paraprofessionals, or other individuals that work within the building.

Administrative support was also identified as a key factor in the prevention of burnout in both this study and in prior research. Participants reported that having a principal who understands special education, advocates for SPED teachers and offers feedback is helpful in preventing burnout. According to Williams and Dikes (2002), principals can also support SPED teachers in monitoring caseload numbers, class sizes, and support for teachers who are struggling. The findings by Williams and Dikes (2002) align with several of the contributing factors to burnout identified by participants in this study.

Research Question 3. Research question three aimed to better understand the consequences experienced by SPED teachers due to burnout. Attrition has widely been cited as concerning phenomenon within special education (Brunsting et al., 2014; Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2017; Fore, et al., 2002). Consistent with prior research, voluntary attrition was reported by participants as a consequence of burnout. Hester, Bridge, and Rollins (2020) reported that teachers list the following reasons for leaving the field: emotional and physical health needs, school support and resources, increasing job demands, additional education, career changes, and retirement.

While work by Hester et al. (2020) cited emotional and physical health needs as contributor to attrition, research has consistently cited physical and psychological health issues related to burnout (Bauer, 2006; Brunsting et al., 2014; Lazarus, 2006; Leiter, 2001). The findings of this study are consistent with the research. Psychological and physical health needs were reportedly a consequence of burnout for participants. Examples from participants included tearfulness, anxiety, medication for emotional stress, sleep issues, weight gain, and high blood pressure.

In addition to consequences for SPED teachers themselves, negative consequences also exist for the students of SPED teachers. Prior research has indicated how SPED teacher burnout correlates with less progress with IEPs (McDowell, 2017), negative effects on students' social emotional and academic learning (Oberle et al., 2020), and negative effects on students' autonomous motivation (Shen et al., 2015). The current study perhaps sheds light on some of the ways in which these consequences exist. For example, participants reported that burnout resulted in negative effects on students. Participants reported that students did not always receive their allotted SPED minutes,

were provided with sub-par lessons, and were met with less patience and understanding from their SPED teachers due to burnout.

While prior research has not identified a correlation between burnout and negative effects on coworker relationships. Some studies have linked security, social connection, and collaborative efforts with burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020). This could be explained by Maslach's Working Model of Teacher Burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1999) as this model indicates that the process of burnout is not parallel or linear (see Figure 2 for Maslach's Working Model of Teacher Burnout). Contributing factors may influence burnout which results in negative consequences and these negative consequences may then continue to contribute to the burnout.

Prior research has not indicated challenges with family life as a consequence of burnout. While prior research indicates a negative effect on SPED teacher health, other outside factors have not been cited as a consequence of burnout. In this study, challenges with family life were reported as a consequence due to burnout by both Elementary School SPED teachers and Middle/High School SPED teachers. Examples included feeling more frustrated at home, having less patience, and not supporting their family like they would like to.

Conclusions

This qualitative study aimed at better understanding the experiences of SPED teachers. Burnout in the workplace can have serious consequences for SPED teachers. Finding ways to reduce or prevent burnout by supporting individual strategies and enacting system-wide change can be tangible for school systems. However, further investigating aspects of burnout can continue to help school systems understand how to

better support their educators. This final section includes implications for action, recommendations for future research and several concluding remarks.

Implications for action. This study demonstrates that despite the complexities of special education, the experience of SPED teacher burnout remains consistent. While prior quantitative research indicates some differences in burnout levels related to student age, when one explores major themes and categories of the experiences of SPED teachers of young and older students, more similarities emerged than differences. Because of these consistencies, school districts can generalize some of the findings in this study in their efforts to make changes for SPED teachers. Increasing awareness of burnout, prevention efforts at the individual level and systems level are three areas for action.

The findings of this study support an increase in general awareness of burnout as a phenomenon among SPED teachers. To create change, one must first be aware of the challenges that exist. For SPED teachers in this study, consistent categories emerged regarding contributing factors to burnout. For a community, a school board, an administrator, or a general education teacher to better understand the complex issues faced by SPED teachers can inspire empathy and understanding. SPED teachers in this study reported negative student behaviors, unreasonable expectations, coworker challenges, lack of support, and outside stressors as factors that lead to burnout. Once awareness of these issues is established, efforts for prevention can be improved.

Prior research and the findings of this study highlight the importance of both individual level and system level strategies in prevention of burnout for SPED teachers. Findings of this study reveal that teachers experience personal factors that contribute to burnout (e.g., familial changes or death, overdose, experiences with higher education) as

well as personal consequences due to burnout (e.g., challenges with family life). It makes sense then that there would be an individual level of prevention for SPED teachers as well. SPED teachers in this study reported a variety of self-care strategies such as therapy, coping skills, exercise, and general healthy habits. Many of these self-care strategies were closely tied to the individuals needs and goals and what their personal life might allow. While many of the participants chose to seek out these strategies themselves, there are ways that school systems can encourage these efforts as well.

School districts or buildings should continue to support these self-care efforts. Providing easily accessible therapy or mental health supports, partnering with a local health center to offer free or reduced fitness or nutrition classes, or encouraging healthy habits within and outside of contract hours are all ways that personal self-care can be encouraged. These strategies must fit the personal needs and goals of the individual; systems must pay close attention in how to tailor these efforts in order to best meet the needs of their teachers.

Burnout prevention is most effective when both individual level and system level strategies are put into place. In this study, participants reported that adequate support, both administrative and collegial, are effective preventative strategies. Again, the type of support needed may vary based on the SPED teacher's experience. This study demonstrates SPED teacher insights into what is contributing to their burnout, consequences of their burnout, and prevention for burnout. School districts and buildings can find ways to better support teachers by both paying attention to what is contributing to a SPED teacher's burnout and finding effective methods to prevent burnout for that SPED teacher.

For example, if a SPED teacher notes continued issues with unreasonable expectations related to their schedule due to constant interruptions from negative student behavior, it is possible that an administrator may consider ways in which they can better protect the SPED teacher's lunch and plan time. Preventative efforts from the administrator might include addressing the negative student behavior themselves during that time, adding a paraprofessional on staff, or collaboratively problem-solving with the SPED team. Further, if this is a repeated and consistent issue for a variety of SPED teachers, district-level initiatives may be needed to truly prevent burnout for SPED teachers in this case. These efforts are not a guarantee at preventing burnout for the teacher, but better understanding the complexities of burnout can support more effective efforts.

Recommendations for future research. This qualitative research study allowed insight into the experiences of SPED teacher burnout. The challenges associated with SPED teacher burnout can be complex and specific to the individual. This research lends itself well to further exploration into two areas for future research: experiences of burnout among new teachers and further exploration of research-based preventative strategies.

This study revealed some additional observations in addition to the major findings. Several participants referenced the vulnerabilities of new SPED teachers and a need for more training and preparation for new SPED teachers. Not only are SPED teachers predicted to leave their positions at a rate 46% higher than general education teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), but 50% of SPED teachers stay in the professions for only three to five years before leaving (Billingsley, 2003; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013). These statistics provide evidence for new SPED teachers as an at-risk

population especially for attrition. Because of the close relationship between burnout and attrition, more information is needed about the complexities of being a new teacher and a SPED teacher. Further, a closer look should be taken at the collegiate programs preparing new SPED teachers for their careers.

In addition to assessing experiences of new teachers and SPED burnout, another area for further study is research-based preventative strategies. Participants in this study were asked to provide information about their experiences with preventative efforts to avoid burnout altogether. While every participant provided several examples of prevention strategies, more research is needed regarding what strategies are most effective in preventing burnout among SPED teachers. Because the challenges associated with teaching special education can be complex, more information is needed on specific strategies that are most effective generally. Based on this study, several areas of exploration might include more system level strategies for adequate support is an area that school districts and buildings can control (as opposed to the individual level strategies which rely solely on the teacher to employ).

Concluding remarks. The experience of burnout among SPED teachers is complex. SPED teacher burnout affects the teacher and their families, students, school system, and communities in negative ways. SPED teachers are able to articulate the ways in which their experiences inside and outside of school contribute to burnout, the consequences that exist inside and outside of school, and prevention strategies provided by the school and used by the individual themselves. These details can provide guidance and insight into the ways in which school districts and buildings can better protect SPED teachers, students, school systems, and communities. Further research is needed to find

healthier ways to prevent burnout for SPED teachers in ways that change the school system and empower the SPED teacher.

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Table 1

United States SPED Student Prevalence age 3-21 for 2020-2021

Disability Type	School Year
	2020-2021
Specific Learning Disability	33%
Speech or Language Impairment	19%
Other Health Impairment	15%
Autism	12%
Developmental Delay	7%
Intellectual Disability	6%
Emotional Disturbance	5%
Multiple Disabilities	2%
Hearing Impairment	1%

Note. Adapted from information from, by *National Center for Education Statistics*, 2021. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2022/cgg_508.pdf

Table 2

United States Workers' Burnout Rates by Industry in 2002

Industry	2022
	% Always or Very Often Burned Out at Work
K-12 Education	44%
College or University	35%
Professional services	33%
Government or public policy	33%
Retail	32%
Healthcare	31%
Law	31%
Entertainment	29%
Manufacturing	28%
Technology	25%
Utilities	25%
Construction	22%
Community/Social Services	22%
Finance	21%

Note. Adapted from information from the *Gallup Panel Workforce Study*, 2022. Retrieved from

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/393500/workers-highest-burnout-rate.aspx>

Table 3

State of Kansas SPED Prevalence for 2020-2021

Disability	School Year
	2020-2021
Autism	1.19%
Deaf/Blindness	0.01%
Developmental Delay	3.08%
Emotional Disturbance	0.64%
Hearing Impaired/Deafness	0.13%
Intellectual Disability	0.76%
Learning Disability	5.57%
Multiple Disability	0.17%
Other Health Impaired	2.00%
Orthopedic Impairment	0.06%
Speech or Language Impairment	3.75%
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.03%
Visually Impaired	0.07%
Total Prevalence IDEA	17.45%
Total Prevalence Gifted	2.24%

Note. Adapted from *Kansas Building Report Card*, by Kansas State Department of Education, 2021.

Retrieved from https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/teacher_quality.aspx?org_no=D0233&rptType=2

Table 4

District A SPED Prevalence for 2020-2021

Disability	School Year
	2020-2021
Autism	1.32%
Deaf/Blindness	0.01%
Developmental Delay	2.43%
Emotional Disturbance	0.66%
Hearing Impaired/Deafness	0.16%
Intellectual Disability	0.57%
Learning Disability	3.61%
Multiple Disability	0.16%
Other Health Impaired	2.37%
Orthopedic Impairment	0.02%
Speech or Language Impairment	4.37%
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.02%
Visually Impaired	0.04%
Total Prevalence IDEA	15.75%
Total Prevalence Gifted	2.35%

Note. Adapted from *Kansas Building Report Card*, by Kansas State Department of Education, 2021.

Table 5

Demographics of Students in District A

Demographic Categories	Valid Percentage
Gender	
Male	51.8%
Female	48.2%
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	64.8%
Hispanic	17.6%
Black/African American	7.7%
Multi-Racial	5%
Asian	4.4%
Alaskan Indian/Alaskan Native	0.4%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0.2%
Students with/without Disabilities	
Students with Disabilities	15.5%
Students without Disabilities	84.5%
Socioeconomic Status	
Economically Disadvantaged	24.4%
Economically Advantaged	75.6%

Note. Adapted from information from *KSDE Report Card Demographics*, 2022. Retrieved from

https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/demographics?org_no=State&rptType=3

Table 6

Elementary School SPED Teacher Descriptive Information

Alias	Gender	Years of Experience in SPED
Diane	F	2
Johanna	F	20
Tracy	F	7
Caroline	F	5
Sylvia	F	12
Tom	M	10
Yvonne	F	6
Cara	F	5
Gayle	F	5
Sarah	F	6
Laura	F	19
Spencer	M	1
Carly	F	7
Rhonda	F	1

Note. Data reported for the 2022-2023 school year.

Table 7

Middle/High School SPED Teacher Descriptive Information

Alias	Gender	Number of Years of Experience in SPED
Elias	M	9
Brad	M	8
Brooklyn	F	11
Aubrey	F	24
Jayden	M	3
Natalie	F	18
Camila	F	5
Felicia	F	28
Shanique	F	11
Sofia	F	9
Levi	M	8
Asher	M	8
Bella	F	9

Note. Data reported for the 2022-2023 school year.

Table 8

Summary of Elementary School SPED Teacher Burnout Experiences

Elementary School SPED Teachers Themes and Categories		N
RQ1	What experiences do special education teachers have that contribute to burnout?	
Theme 1	Contributing experiences inside of school	
Category 1	Negative student behaviors	13
Category 2	Unreasonable expectations	10
	Sub-Category 2.1 Demanding caseload	7
	Sub-Category 2.2 Inconsistent schedule	7
	Sub-Category 2.3 Overload of daily tasks	10
Category 3	Coworker challenges	11
	Sub-Category 3.1 Difficulties with coworkers	10
	Sub-Category 3.2 Inequality between general education and SPED	6
Category 4	Lack of support	11
Theme 2	Contributing experiences outside of school	
Category 1	Outside stressors	9
RQ2	What experiences do special education teachers have that prevent them from burnout?	
Theme 1	Prevention provided by school	
Category 1	Provide adequate support for SPED teachers	14
	Sub-Category 1.1 Support from administration	10
	Sub-Category 1.2 Support from coworkers	12
Theme 2	Prevention used by individual	
Category 1	Apply self-care practices	9
RQ3	What are the consequences of burnout among special education teachers?	
Theme 1	Consequences inside of school	
Category 1	Voluntary attrition	10
Category 2	Challenges with students and coworkers	14
	Sub-Category 2.1 Negative effects on students	14
	Sub-Category 2.2 Negative effects on coworkers	6
Theme 2	Consequences outside of school	
Category 1	Negative impact on health	13
	Sub-Category 1.1 Worse psychological well-being	10
	Sub-Category 1.2 Worse physical health	9
Category 2	Challenges with family life	14

Note. Data reported for the 2022-2023 school year. N=number of participants that mentioned the category.

Total number of participants is $n = 14$.

Table 9

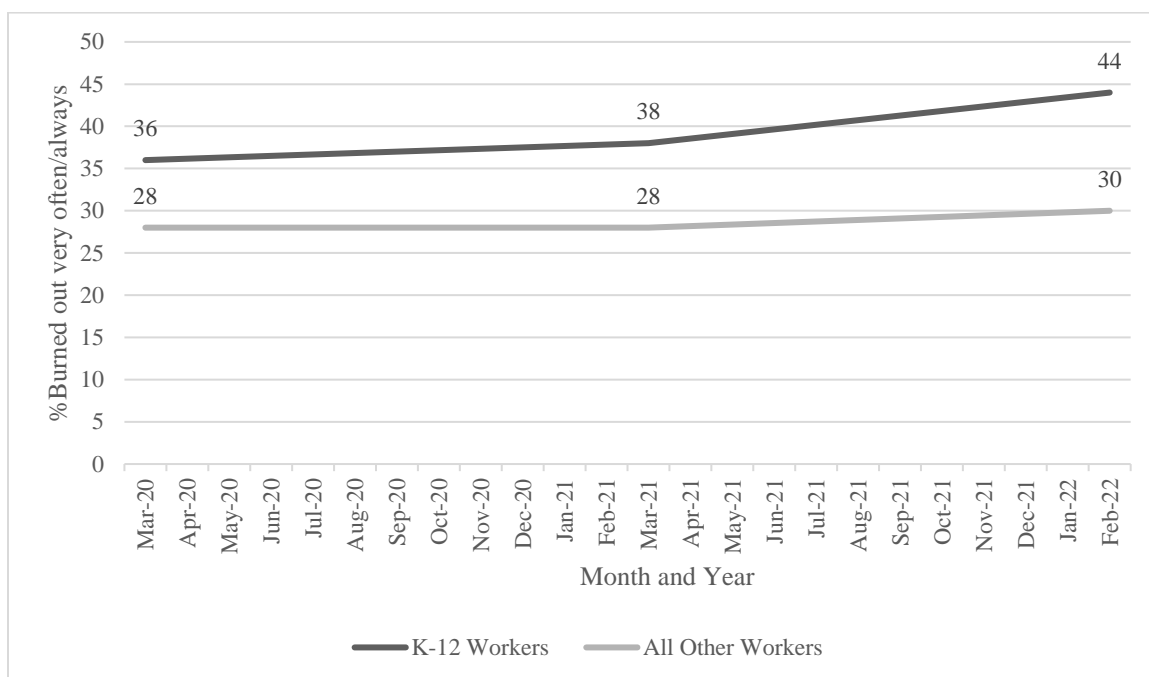
Summary of Middle/High School SPED Teacher Burnout Experiences

Middle/High School SPED Teachers Themes and Categories		N
RQ1	What experiences do special education teachers have that contribute to burnout?	
Theme 1	Contributing experiences inside of school	
Category 1	Negative student behaviors	11
	Sub-Category 1.1 Disruptive and aggressive student behaviors	8
	Sub-Category 1.2 Lack of student motivation and investment	6
Category 2	Unreasonable expectations	13
	Sub-Category 2.1 Excessive paperwork	8
	Sub-Category 2.2 Inconsistent schedule	6
	Sub-Category 2.3 Overload of daily tasks	9
Category 3	Coworker challenges	8
Category 4	Lack of support	8
Theme 2	Contributing experiences outside of school	
Category 1	Outside stressors	9
RQ2	What experiences do special education teachers have that prevent them from burnout?	
Theme 1	Prevention provided by school	
Category 1	Provide adequate support for SPED teachers	11
	Sub-Category 1.1 Support from administration	9
	Sub-Category 1.2 Support from coworkers	6
Theme 2	Prevention used by individual	
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Theme 1	Consequences inside of school	
Category 1	Voluntary attrition	8
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	Sub-Category 2.1 Negative effects on students	9
	Sub-Category 2.2 Negative effects on coworkers	6
Theme 2	Consequences outside of school	
Category 1	Negative impact on health	13
	Sub-Category 1.1 Worse psychological well-being	7
	Sub-Category 1.2 Worse physical health	11
Category 2	Challenges with family life	8

Note. Data reported for the 2022-2023 school year. N=number of participants that mentioned the category.

Total number of participants is $n = 13$.

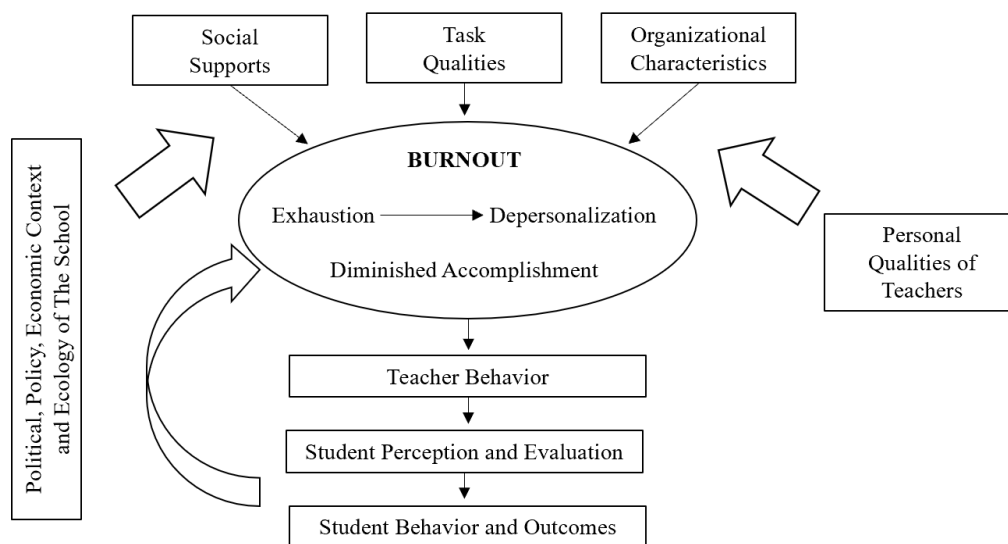
Figure 1

Burnout Gap Between United States K-12 Workers and All Other Professions in 2022

Note. Adapted from information from the *Gallup Panel Workforce Study*, 2022. Retrieved from

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/393500/workers-highest-burnout-rate.aspx>

Figure 2

Working Model of Teacher Burnout

Note. Adapted from a working model of teacher burnout from Maslach and Leiter, 1999.

Appendices

Appendix A: Baker University Institutional Review Board Application and Research Approval Letter



IRB Request

Date 1/20/2023

IRB Protocol Number _____
(IRB use only)

I. Research Investigator(s) (students must list faculty sponsor)

Department(s) Education

	Name	Signature	
1.	<u>Sierra Pryce</u>	<u>Sierra Pryce</u> <small>Digitally signed by Sierra Pryce Date: 2023.01.20 09:16:36 +06'00'</small>	Principal Investigator
2.	<u>James Robins</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Check if faculty sponsor
3.	<u>Li Chen-Bouck</u>	<u>Li Chen-Bouck</u> <small>2023.01.19 10:34:51 +06'00'</small>	<input type="checkbox"/> Check if faculty sponsor
4.	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Check if faculty sponsor

Principal investigator contact information

Phone

316-284-4320

Email

sierraqpryce@stu.bakeru.edu

Address

20365 West 125th Ter.
Olathe, KS 66061

Note: When submitting your finalized, signed form to the IRB, please ensure that you cc all investigators and faculty sponsors using their official Baker University (or respective organization's) email addresses.

Faculty sponsor contact information

Phone

816-604-8045

Email

James.Robins@bakeru.edu

Expected Category of Review: ☐ Exempt ☐ Expedited ☒ Full ☐ Renewal

II. Protocol Title

Experiences of Burnout Among Special Education Teachers

III. Summary:

The following questions must be answered. Be specific about exactly what participants will experience and about the protections that have been included to safeguard participants from harm.

A. In a sentence or two, please describe the background and purpose of the research.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the experiences of burnout among special education (SPED) teachers. Specifically, this study is intended to better understand how the experiences of special education teachers contribute to burnout and burnout prevention. In addition, the consequences of burnout among SPED teachers are also explored.

B. Briefly describe each condition, manipulation, or archival data set to be included within the study.

There will be no conditions, manipulation, or archival data set included in this study.

IV. Protocol Details

A. What measures or observations will be taken in the study? If any questionnaire or other instruments are used, provide a brief description and attach a copy.

An interview protocol using open-ended interview questions will be used in this study to collect participants' experiences. Open-ended protocols allow the participants a chance to provide information about their experiences. Additionally, open-ended interview questions provided the participant with an opportunity to elaborate upon their own volition and through the use of follow-up questions (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The interview protocol will explore SPED teachers' experiences with burnout, experiences with burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout. To support the investigation of experiences that lead to burnout, the researcher will provide the participant with definitions and examples of burnout and the facets of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and

B. Will the subjects encounter the risk of psychological, social, physical, or legal risk? If so, please describe the nature of the risk and any measures designed to mitigate that risk.

There will be no risk of social, physical, or legal harm. However, given the topic of the study, psychological harm must be considered. The topic of burnout may arouse some strong and/or negative emotions in participants. This researcher will make every attempt to eliminate psychological harm for participants during the interview by providing every participant with a list of mental health resources to utilize after the interview in case there is a need for further support regarding the topics discussed or emotions evoked during the interviews. Additionally, the researcher will ensure confidentiality of all information shared. Information provided by participants through interviews will not be associated with their personal name and will not be shared with their supervisors.

C. Will any stress to subjects be involved? If so, please describe.

Because the topic of this study is tied to a working environment, it is possible that the participant may become stressed by a strong emotions during the interviews. Additionally, the participants may have some concern that their information may be shared with their supervisor or district leaders.

D. Will the subjects be deceived or misled in any way? If so, include an outline or script of the debriefing.

The subjects will not be deceived or misled in any way.

E. Will there be a request for information which subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive? If so, please include a description.

It is possible that the participants may consider their experiences related to burnout to be personal or sensitive. The researcher will ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected. Additionally, the researcher will clarify that participants can refuse participation at any time and will be the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy. An informed consent will be obtained before interviews begin.

The following excerpt is taken from the interview protocol: "The contents of the video will only be accessed by this researcher and by the research committee. No identifiable information will be included in the study, and you will be

F. Will the subjects be presented with materials which might be considered to be offensive, threatening, or degrading? If so, please describe.

The subjects will not be presented with materials which might be considered offensive or threatening.

G. Approximately how much time will be demanded of each subject?

The interviews will last approximately 30-45 minutes.

H. Who will be the subjects in this study? How will they be solicited or contacted? Provide an outline or script of the information which will be provided to subjects prior to their volunteering to participate. Include a copy of any written solicitation as well as an outline of any oral solicitation.

The subject in this study will be SPED teachers at all grade levels (i.e., primary, middle, and high) in District A who have had an experience of burnout. The SPED teachers will be contacted through email. The following written information will be provided to the subjects prior to their volunteering to participate.

SPED Teacher Burnout Research Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of burnout among SPED teachers. Specifically, this

I. What steps will be taken to insure that each subject's participation is voluntary? What if any inducements will be offered to the subjects for their participation?

The participant will complete a consent to participate form. No inducements will be offered to the subject for their participation. The participants can withdraw from the study at any time.

J. How will you insure that the subjects give their consent prior to participating? Will a written consent form be used? If so, include the form. If not, explain why not.

A consent to participate will be signed by the participant before the interviews is scheduled.

K. Will any aspect of the data be made a part of any permanent record that can be identified with the subject? If so, please explain the necessity.

No aspect of the data will be made a part of any permanent record that can be identified with the subject.

L. Will the fact that a subject did or did not participate in a specific experiment or study be made part of any permanent record available to a supervisor, teacher, or employer? If so, explain.

The fact that the participant did or did not participate in this reserach study will not be made to be any part of permanent record available to a supervisor, teacher, or employer.

M. What steps will be taken to insure the confidentiality of the data? Where will it be stored? How long will it be stored? What will be done with the data after the study is completed?

The interviews were recorded using a laptop computer and stored online protected by a login and password. Each interview was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity of each participant. After five years, all interview video recordings and transcripts will be deleted.

N. If there are any risks involved in the study, are there any offsetting benefits that might accrue to either the subjects or society?

There are some possible psychological risks present in this study due to the possibility of a strong emotional response from participants. There are several offsetting benefits that might accrue to the subjects or society. Maslach and Leiter (1999) state, "the most valuable and most costly part of educational system are the people who teach" (p. 303). Exploration into the experiences, perceptions, and realities of special education teachers can support the well-being of teachers themselves. The information gleaned from in-depth interviews regarding the experiences that contribute to burnout, prevent burnout, and are linked to the consequences of burnout could provide opportunities for future research in the area of burnout among SPED teachers. Future research of burnout

O. Will any data from files or archival data be used? If so, please describe.

No data from files or archival data will be used.



Baker University Institutional Review Board

January 23rd, 2023

Dear Sierra Pryce and Jim Robins,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Full Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at npoell@bakeru.edu or 785.594.4582.

Sincerely,

Nathan Poell, MLS
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee
Tim Buzzell, PhD
Nick Harris, MS
Scott Kimball, PhD
Susan Rogers, PhD

Appendix B: Initial Contact for Research Proposal

RE: Research Proposal



To: Sierra Williamson

[↩ Reply](#)
[↩ Reply All](#)
[→ Forward](#)
[📧](#)
[⋮](#)

Fri 10/7/2022 8:44 AM

[📧 Follow up](#) Start by Monday, October 10, 2022. Due by Monday, October 10, 2022.

Start your reply all with: [Great, thank you so much!](#) [Okay, thank you!](#) [Thank you, I will do that.](#)

Sierra,

Thank you for reaching out. We do have a process in place. If you use this link, it will take you to the Assessment Office Resources which includes Grands and Research. The forms you will need to submit can be accessed there.

[Redacted]

Let me know if you have additional questions.

Thanks,

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Director of School Improvement and Assessments

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

From: Sierra Williamson <siwilliamson@clatheschools.org>

Sent: Friday, October 7, 2022 6:27 AM

[Redacted]

Subject: Research Proposal

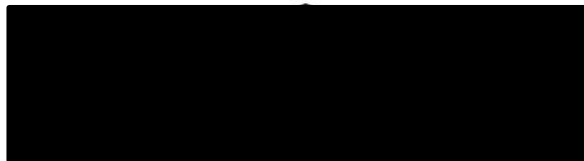
Hello [Redacted]

My name is Sierra Williamson and I am a [Redacted] I am also currently pursuing my doctorate in educational leadership through Baker University. I have spent the last six months researching the topic of burnout in special education. I am interested in the possibility of a qualitative study with special education teachers [Redacted] school district. I am aware of our board policy requirements pertaining to research projects, but wanted to reach out to you first not only to introduce myself, but also to obtain any preliminary instruction or clarification in preparation for this process. I look forward to hearing from you! Thank you!

Sierra Williamson, LMSW

[Redacted]

Appendix C: Application to Conduct Research in District A



Research Application Request – Internal/Dissertation

Applications to conduct research are accepted at any point during the school year. **Allow a minimum of two (2) weeks for completion of the review process.**

INSTRUCTIONS:

Your final application should include submission of the following requirements:

- ✓ The completed application (required for all types of research) – must be typed.
- ✓ If conducting research as a means to secure an advanced degree (doctorate or masters), include:
 - a copy of the university/college Human Experimentation Committee project review and approval letter (if applicable), AND
 - a letter you're your academic advisor/committee (or other appropriate university/college official) indicating that the search project has been reviewed and approved.
- ✓ Acknowledgement that you will abide by the [REDACTED] Student Privacy IDEA policy.
- ✓ You will not use or reference the [REDACTED] (district or individual school) by name in your study.
- ✓ All requirements can be scanned and sent as attachments through email to Dr. [REDACTED]

Research Application Request – Internal/Dissertation

1. **Applicant(s) Name:** *Sierra Williamson*
2. **Position:** *School Social Worker*
3. **School/Location:** [REDACTED]
4. **Telephone:** *316-284-4320*
5. **Email Address:** *sierraqpryce@stu.bakeru.edu*
6. **Project Title:** *Burnout Among Special Education Teachers*

a. The proposed research is for: Seeking an advanced degree: ☒ Yes ☐ No

University/College Affiliation Name:

University/College Name: *Baker University* Department: *Education*

Street Address: *7301 College Blvd.*

City, State and Zip Code: *Overland Park, Kansas 66210* Phone Number: *913-491-4432*

Fax Number: *913-491-0470*

7. Anticipated Dates:

Beginning Date: *February 2022*

Ending Date: *April 2022*

Date Final Report Available/Provided to [REDACTED] *May 2022*

8. Participant Description:

- Educational Level of Students involved in the study (preschool, elementary, middle level, high school):
The study is centered around interviews with special education teachers at the elementary, middle level, and high school level. No students will be involved in the study.
- Number of schools involved in the study:
All schools could potentially be involved in the study depending on interest and availability.
- Names of schools you would like to involve in your study:
All schools could potentially be involved in the study depending on interest and availability.
- Number of teachers involved in the study:

I would like to interview at least 20-30 special education teachers depending on interest and availability.

- Number of students involved in the study:
The study is centered around interviews with special education teachers. No students will be involved in the study.

10.

Has the project been submitted to a Human Experimentation Committee? Respond ☒ Yes or No.

10a. If no, please explain why your project has not been submitted to a committee on human experimentation. N/A

10b. Paste a copy of the letter from the Human Experimentation Committee regarding your study (Word format) Below or attach a scanned copy along with your request.

The IRB Submission Form has been completed and submitted to the Baker Institutional Review Board.

11. Brief review of the literature:

According to Emery and Vandenberg (2010), Special Education (SPED) teachers are “those who are professionally committed to helping high risk children and are themselves a high-risk group” (p. 119). One major risk for SPED teachers is the experience of burnout. Research behind the phenomenon of burnout dates back to the early 1970s. Initial research was conducted within human service work and healthcare but has since extended to the system of education (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Burnout among teachers can occur through experiences of constant stress resulting in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Not only is the system of education affected by these specific facets on a macro level, but both teachers and students also experience the effects of burnout on a personal level.

The consequences of burnout can potentially affect teachers, students, and the larger institution of education as a whole (Maslach et al., 1996). One of the most glaring issues related to teacher burnout in the current education system is teacher attrition (Akin, 2009; Brunsting et al., 2004). While the issue of attrition is one that largely impacts school systems, there are also negative effects of burnout that are personal to both teachers and students. Teachers who experience burnout report physical symptoms such as chronic fatigue, colds, recurrent flu, musculoskeletal pain, and depression (Brunsting et al., 2014). In some European countries, burnout is even considered a medical diagnosis that can be assessed and treated (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Teachers who experience facets of burnout, especially emotional exhaustion and depersonalization report less job satisfaction (Lipscomb Williams, 2014). Further, research shows that students of teachers who experience burnout are more likely to display disruptive behavior, struggle social-emotionally, and tend to meet their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals less frequently (Brunsting et al., 2004; Zianian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019).

Both situational and individual factors exist that contribute to burnout. Maslach et al. (2001) explains that because burnout is specific to the context of work, much of burnout research in general has pinpointed situational factors which correlate with burnout. These

situational factors include job characteristics such as large workload, role conflict, role ambiguity, and absence of resources which elicit high emotional stress. Additionally, individual factors such as age, marital status, length of time in the field, and level of education have also been shown to correlate with burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

However, knowing and understanding the contributing variables and consequences of burnout have not been enough to support teachers in management or prevention of burnout. Simply knowing that burnout exists or the factors that contribute to a possible burnout is not enough to ensure longevity for individuals entering the profession of special education. Future directions in the study of burnout point to needs regarding how individuals can personally prevent burnout and how organizational systems can effectively support their staff in these endeavors as well (Maslach et al., 2001). Today's educators spend ample time ensuring care and consideration of their students; further information is needed in regard to how teachers can effectively be supported themselves.

12. Major research questions and purpose of the study:

The grand tour question for this study is: What are special education teachers' experiences of burnout? To explore the perceptions, experiences, and realities of special education teachers related to burnout the following research questions were developed:

RQ1. What experiences do special education teachers have that contribute to burnout?

RQ2. What experiences do special education teachers have that prevent them from burnout?

RQ3. What are the consequences of burnout among special education teachers?

13. Methodology (be specific) If administering a survey include survey instrument:

The interview protocol was developed based on the literature review on the topic of burnout among SPED teachers. An expert panel reviewed an initial draft of the interview protocol, checked the face validity, and relevance of interview questions, and provided feedback for improvement. The consent to participate and interview protocol are attached at the end of this application. (Interview Protocol is attached.)

14. Method Summary:

The setting for this research is [REDACTED] a large suburban public school district in Kansas. The population for this research includes SPED teachers at all grade levels (i.e., primary, middle, and high) in [REDACTED] will not be referenced by name and a consent to participate will be obtained for all participants (Informed Consent is attached). Purposeful sampling will be utilized to ensure in-depth responses are collected from the population. The following criterion will be utilized in this study: being a SPED teacher at the primary, middle, or high school level and having at some point experienced burnout. An interview protocol using open-ended interview questions will be used in this study. An interview protocol reviewed by the researcher's major advisor and data analyst will be employed with fidelity. Data will be analyzed according to the process from Creswell and Creswell (2018).

Reliability and trustworthiness will be ensured during all phases of data collection and analysis. The researcher's role will also be taken into consideration throughout the process.

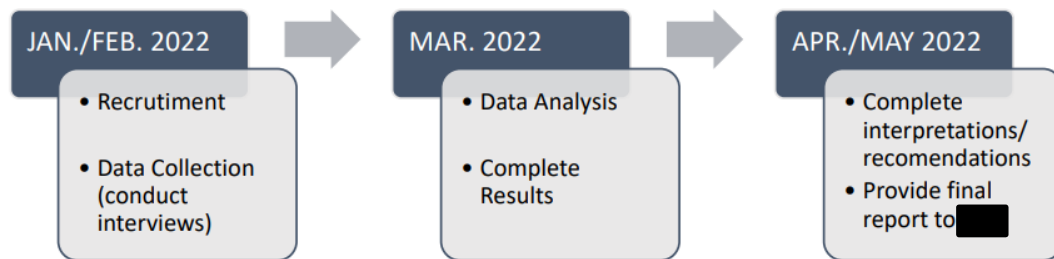
15. Research Design/Data Analysis:

A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design will be utilized for this study. The phenomenological design allows exploration of the personal lived experiences of special education teachers and how those experiences relate to burnout. Five steps are included in the human scientific phenomenological method: "collection of verbal data, reading of the data, breaking of the data into some kind of parts, organizing and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 235), and the five steps of the phenomenological design will be used in the current study.

16. Perceived Benefits of the Project:

This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base of burnout within education. In particular, this study examines the lived experiences of burnout and prevention of burnout among special education teachers in a suburban Midwest public school. While there have been numerous studies utilizing the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) assessing specific facets of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2004), researchers have consistently cited a need for exploration into the management and prevention of burnout for individual educators and for the system within which they work. Maslach et al. (2001) explains that research regarding management and prevention of burnout has resulted in mixed results, thus "initial work in this area is encouraging by incomplete" (p. 419).

Maslach and Leiter (1999) stated, "the most valuable and most costly part of educational system are the people who teach" p. 295. Exploration into the experiences, perceptions, and realities of special education teachers can support the well-being of teachers themselves. The information gleaned from in-depth interviews regarding the experiences that contribute to burnout, prevent burnout, and are linked to the consequences of burnout could provide opportunities for future research in the area of burnout among SPED teachers. Future research of burnout among SPED teachers may possibly affect policy and procedure for similar school districts in the Midwest.

17. Project Dissemination Plan:**18. Briefly describe how this research project supports [REDACTED] curriculum, a district goal, and/or individual school's improvement plan.**

[REDACTED]

19. Please provide a letter from your faculty advisor/committee or other appropriate official indicating that the research project has been reviewed and the researcher has met all requirements necessary to conduct the proposed research. Paste an electronic copy of the letter into this section or attach a scanned copy along with your request.



To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Dr. Jim Robins and I am an associate professor with the Baker University School of Education. Sierra Williamson is one of my doctoral students and is presently working diligently on her dissertation regarding burnout among special education teachers. I am quite proud of her work and would support her request to be granted your permission to continue her work with the voluntary participation of selected Olathe teaching staff.

Sierra has completed three of the chapters of her dissertation and will soon be submitting an IRB request to Baker University. I would anticipate that Sierra will complete her dissertation by Spring 2023.

Thank you for you consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jim Robins
Baker University

I/We acknowledge that we have read and will abide by the [REDACTED] Student
Privacy IDAE policy.

Sierra Williamson

1/3/2023

Signature of Applicant

Date

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Research Title: Burnout Among SPED Teachers

Researcher: Sierra Williamson

Advisor: Dr. James Robins
School of Education
Baker University
8001 College Blvd.
Overland Park, KS 66210
jrobins@bakeru.edu

My name is Sierra Williamson, and I am currently pursuing my doctorate in Educational Leadership at Baker University. The focus of my research is burnout among special education (SPED) teachers. I am interested in interviewing SPED teachers about their experiences that have contributed to burnout, burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout.

During the 30-45-minute interview, you will be asked three major questions about your experiences with burnout from a special education perspective. These questions may include follow-up questions to clarify information and gain a deeper understanding of your experience. You may decline to answer at any time during the interview process. You may also withdraw from the study for any reason at any time.

The interview will be video recorded so that I am able to transcribe the interviews. The interview transcripts will be password protected and only my research advisor and my data analyst will have access to the raw data. You will be given a pseudonym to protect your privacy and all identifiable information will be kept confidential. Once the interview is complete, you will have the opportunity over the two weeks following the interview to perform a member check. A member check is a chance for you to review your response and ensure that the transcript provides an accurate depiction of your experience.

Consent to Participate: I understand that my participation in this research study is completely voluntary. I understand that I can discontinue my participation in this study at any time for any reason. I understand I can contact the researcher, Sierra Williamson, by email (sierraqpryce@stu.bakeru.edu) with any questions or if I wish to withdraw from the study.

I have read and understand the above statement. By signing, I agree to participate in the research study. The Baker University Institutional Review Board approved this study on **DATE** and will expire on **DATE** unless renewal is obtained by the review board.

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Internal

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Basic Information

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interviewer Name:

Introduction

Thank you participating in this study aimed at exploring burnout among special education (SPED) teachers!

This interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The session will be video recorded. The contents of the video will only be accessed by this researcher and by the research committee. No identifiable information will be included in the study, and you will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Please remember that these questions are intended for information gathering purposes. You may refuse to answer any questions at any time. Once the interview is complete, you will be provided with an opportunity to review your responses and make changes to those responses if you feel that they are not represented accurately. You may also refuse to participate at any time. If you choose not to participate at any point in the interview, I will not use any portion of your responses. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

We will begin the interview with a few basic questions about your role and job responsibilities. We will then discuss your experience of burnout, burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout. These terms will be explained by the researcher through the interview. The interview will include six main questions which will be asked concerning your experience.

Opening Questions

1. To begin this interview, I would love to get to know you a bit. Please describe your job or role in the school district included *grade(s)* taught.
2. What is your educational background?
3. How many years have you been teaching as a special education teacher?

Grand Tour Question: What are special education teachers' experiences of burnout?

RQ1. What experiences do special education teachers have that contribute to burnout?

Internal

1. Burnout is defined as “failure or exhaustion because of excessive demand on energy, strength, or resources” often associated with work that is interpersonal in nature. For example, A SPED teacher feels as if she has emotionally over-extended herself; she wakes up and goes to bed feeling overworked and fatigued. She notices herself becoming callous towards her students and she might feel as if she no longer has a positive impact on her students. Have you ever experienced burnout in your role as a SPED teacher?

Follow-Up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

Could you please share with me a couple of the burnout experiences you have had? (Response could be brief; focus on response to next question).

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have led to the burnout experiences you described?

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds no, then state:

It is necessary to have had an experience of burnout to participate this study. I will not use any of the information you have provided to me up to this point. I will end the interview at this time. Thank you for your time!

If the participant begins to describe stress rather than burnout:

Remember, burnout is different from stress. Burnout entails failure to adequately do your job or exhaustion due to excessive demands. These demands might be related to your role as a SPED teacher, your expectations within your role, or the resources you’re able to (or not able to) access (Refer to Handout).

2. The experience of burnout includes three specific facets, such as: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments. Emotional exhaustion refers to a SPED teacher’s feelings of being emotionally drained from work. For example, they feel used up and fatigued. They feel as if they’re at the end of their rope and feel they’re working too hard. They are frustrated by their role as a SPED teacher or from working with students. Have you ever experienced emotional exhaustion in your role as a SPED teacher?

Follow Up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have led to emotional exhaustion?

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question.

Another facet of burnout is depersonalization. It refers to a situation where a SPED teacher views their student as an object. For example, they have noticed they have become more callous towards their students; they don’t care about what happens to the student and feel the student is to blame for their problems. The teacher notices themselves hardening emotionally. Have you ever experienced depersonalization in your role as a SPED teacher?

Internal

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have led to depersonalization?

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question.

3. The last facet of burnout is reduced personal accomplishment. It refers to a situation where a SPED teacher doesn't feel they have a positive impact on their students' lives. They are not exhilarated after work and do not feel energetic. They don't feel they can create a relaxed environment. Have you ever experienced reduced personal accomplishment in your role as a SPED teacher?

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have led to reduced personal accomplishment?

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question.

4. In addition to the three facets of burnout we discussed, have you had other experiences that have led to burnout?

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

What experiences have you had that might have led to the burnout?

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question about RQ3.

RQ3. What are the consequences of burnout among special education teachers?

5. Now that you've described your experiences of burnout, I would like to hear about any of the consequences you've experienced from burnout. What are the consequences you have experienced from burnout.

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **personal consequences** of burnout, then ask:

What consequences of burnout have you experienced in your personal life?

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **consequences for students** from burnout, then ask:

What consequences exist for your students from your experiences of burnout?

Internal

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **consequences for the school building or district** from burnout, then ask:

What professional consequences exist from your experiences of burnout?

RQ2. What experiences do special education teachers have that prevent them from burnout?

6. Please describe any experiences you have had with preventing burnout as a SPED teacher. Be sure to describe experiences of prevention rather than management (how do you prevent burnout from happening in the first place, not necessarily what you do once you've become burned out).
7. In addition to experiences, have you used any strategies to prevent burnout? If so, what are they?

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **prevention of emotional exhaustion**, then ask:

Have you utilized any strategies that have prevented emotional exhaustion?

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **prevention of depersonalization**, then ask:

Have you utilized any strategies that have prevented depersonalization?

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **prevention of lack of personal accomplishment**, then ask:

Have you utilized any strategies that have prevented a lack of personal accomplishment?

8. Has your school district or building provided you with prevention strategies to prevent burnout? Describe these efforts.
9. What strategies would be most effective to support SPED teachers in the prevention of burnout?

Closing Instructions

Thank you again for your participation in this study! Do you have any final questions about the research study or about the interview today?

I want to assure you that everything you've shared today will be kept confidential. I know that some of the topic of burnout can also spark some emotional responses for people. Whether you have experienced an emotional response today or happen to experience an emotional response after this interview, I want to provide you with a list of resources that may be helpful in managing those feelings.

In the next two weeks, you will be given a chance to review a transcript of your interview to ensure they accurately reflect your experiences with burnout as a SPED teacher.

Appendix D: Research Approval from District A



February 2, 2023

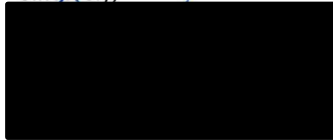
Dear Sierra:

I am pleased to inform you that your request to do research in the [REDACTED] staff concerning Burnout Among Special Education Teachers has been **approved**. Thank you for providing our office the information for your coursework. You are free to reach out to special education resource teachers, making sure to let them know your request is voluntary.

In any of your work, please do not make any reference to the [REDACTED] or any specific school. Please reference [REDACTED] as a “large suburban district in the mid-west” or a school as a “suburban school in the state of Kansas”– or some other reference name of your choice, but do not use the [REDACTED] name or any school names. Additionally, please do not use any student or staff identifying information.

Good luck with your research!

Sincerely,



Director of School Improvement and Assessments



Appendix E: SPED Teacher Recruitment Email

Subject: SPED Teacher Burnout Research Study

Hello!

My name is Sierra Williamson, and I am a Social Worker with [REDACTED] at the Elementary level. I am also a doctoral student at Baker University and am currently conducting research on the topic of burnout in special education. I am interested in interviewing special education (SPED) teachers about their experiences of burnout.

Specifically, this study is intended to explore the experiences of SPED teachers that lead to burnout, the experiences of preventative measures related to burnout, and consequences of burnout among SPED teachers. **Burnout** is failure or exhaustion because of excessive demand on energy, strength, or resources often associated with work that is interpersonal in nature. *If you are a SPED teacher and have at any time had an experience with burnout, please consider participating in this study.*

If you choose to participate, a 30-45 minute Zoom interview will be conducted and scheduled at a time that is most convenient for you. For data collection purposes, the interviews will be video-recorded. Within one month following the video-recorded interview, you will have the opportunity to review your responses to ensure your responses accurately reflect your experience. The information you provide and the recordings will all be kept confidential and will only be viewed/seen by me and my research team.

If you are interested in participating, please email me back with the following information:

1. Are you willing to participate in this study?
2. Have you had an experience of burnout?
3. What is the best way to contact you to set up an interview (phone, email)? Please provide your preferred phone number or email.

Feel free to reach out at any time if you have any questions! Thank you!

Sierra Williamson, LMSW
School Social Worker

[REDACTED]

Appendix F: SPED Teacher Interview Protocol

Basic Information

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interviewer Name:

Introduction

Thank you participating in this study aimed at exploring burnout among special education (SPED) teachers!

This interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The session will be video recorded. The contents of the video will only be accessed by this researcher and by the research committee. No identifiable information will be included in the study, and you will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Please remember that these questions are intended for information gathering purposes. You may refuse to answer any questions at any time. Once the interview is complete, you will be provided with an opportunity to review your responses and make changes to those responses if you feel that they are not represented accurately. You may also refuse to participate at any time. If you choose not to participate at any point in the interview, I will not use any portion of your responses. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

We will begin the interview with a few basic questions about your role and job responsibilities. We will then discuss your experience of burnout, burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout. These terms will be explained by the researcher through the interview. The interview will include eleven main questions which will be asked concerning your experience.

Opening Questions

1. To begin this interview, I would love to get to know you a bit. Please describe your job or role in the school district included grade(s) taught.
2. What is your educational background?
3. How many years have you been teaching as a special education teacher?

Grand Tour Question: What are special education teachers' experiences of burnout?

RQ1. What experiences do special education teachers have that contribute to burnout?

1. Burnout is defined as "failure or exhaustion because of excessive demand on energy, strength, or resources" often associated with work that is interpersonal in nature. For example, A SPED teacher feels as if she has emotionally over-extended herself; she wakes up and goes to bed feeling overworked and fatigued. She notices herself becoming callous towards her students and she might feel as if

she no longer has a positive impact on her students. Have you ever experienced burnout in your role as a SPED teacher?

Follow-Up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask: Could you please share with me a couple of the burnout experiences you have had? (Response could be brief; focus on response to next question).

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have **led** to the burnout experiences you described?

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds no, then state:

It is necessary to have had an experience of burnout to participate this study. I will not use any of the information you have provided to me up to this point. I will end the interview at this time. Thank you for your time!

If the participant begins to describe stress rather than burnout:

Remember, burnout is different from stress. Burnout entails failure to adequately do your job or exhaustion due to excessive demands. These demands might be related to your role as a SPED teacher, your expectations within your role, or the resources you're able to (or not able to) access (Refer to Handout).

2. The experience of burnout includes three specific facets, such as: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments. Emotional exhaustion refers to a SPED teacher's feelings of being emotionally drained from work. For example, they feel used up and fatigued. They feel as if they're at the end of their rope and feel they're working too hard. They are frustrated by their role as a SPED teacher or from working with students. Have you ever experienced emotional exhaustion in your role as a SPED teacher?

Follow Up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have led to emotional exhaustion?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one experience or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another experience with me? (Repeat as needed.)

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question.

3. Another facet of burnout is depersonalization. It refers to a situation where a SPED teacher views their student as an object. For example, they have noticed they have become more callous towards their students; they don't care about what

happens to the student and feel the student is to blame for their problems. The teacher notices themselves hardening emotionally. Have you ever experienced depersonalization in your role as a SPED teacher?

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have led to depersonalization?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one experience or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another experience with me? (Repeat as needed.)

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question.

4. The last facet of burnout is reduced personal accomplishment. It refers to a situation where a SPED teacher doesn't feel they have a positive impact on their students' lives. They are not exhilarated after work and do not feel energetic. They don't feel they can create a relaxed environment. Have you ever experienced reduced personal accomplishment in your role as a SPED teacher?

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

Could you please describe any experiences you have had that have led to reduced personal accomplishment?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one experience or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another experience with me? (Repeat as needed.)

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question.

5. In addition to the three facets of burnout we discussed, have you had other experiences that have led to burnout?

Follow-up Question. If the participant responds yes, then ask:

What experiences have you had that might have led to the burnout?

If the participant responds no, move to the next interview question about RQ3.

RQ3. What are the consequences of burnout among special education teachers?

6. Now that you've described your experiences of burnout, I would like to hear about any of the consequences you've experienced from burnout. What are the consequences you have experienced from burnout?

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **personal consequences** of burnout, then ask:

What consequences of burnout have you experienced in your personal life?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one consequence or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another consequence with me? (Repeat as needed.)

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **consequences for students** from burnout, then ask:

What consequences exist for your students from your experiences of burnout?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one consequence or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another consequence with me? (Repeat as needed.)

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **consequences for the school building or district** from burnout, then ask:

What professional consequences exist from your experiences of burnout?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one consequence or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another consequence with me? (Repeat as needed.)

RQ2. What experiences do special education teachers have that prevent them from burnout?

7. Please describe any experiences you have had with preventing burnout as a SPED teacher. Be sure to describe experiences of prevention rather than management (how do you prevent burnout from happening in the first place, not necessarily what you do once you've become burned out).
8. In addition to experiences, have you used any strategies to prevent burnout? If so, what are they?

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **prevention of emotional exhaustion**, then ask:

Have you utilized any strategies that have prevented emotional exhaustion?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one strategy or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another strategy with me? (Repeat as needed.)

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **prevention of depersonalization**, then ask:

Have you utilized any strategies that have prevented depersonalization?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one strategy or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another strategy with me? (Repeat as needed.)

Follow-up Question. If the participant does not describe **prevention of lack of personal accomplishment**, then ask:

Have you utilized any strategies that have prevented a lack of personal accomplishment?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one strategy or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another strategy with me? (Repeat as needed.)

9. Has your school district or building provided you with prevention strategies to prevent burnout? Describe these efforts.

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one strategy or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another strategy with me? (Repeat as needed.)

10. What strategies would be most effective to support SPED teachers in the prevention of burnout?

Follow Up Question. If the participant only describes one strategy or did not provide enough information, then ask:

Could you share another strategy with me? (Repeat as needed.)

11. Is there anything else that you would like to add about the questions I asked today?

Closing Instructions

Thank you again for your participation in this study! Do you have any final questions about the research study or about the interview today?

I want to assure you that everything you've shared today will be kept confidential. I know that some of the topic of burnout can also spark some emotional responses for people. Whether you have experienced an emotional response today or happen to experience an emotional response after this interview, I want to provide you with a list of resources that may be helpful in managing those feelings.

In the next month, you will be given a chance to review a transcript of your interview to ensure they accurately reflect your experiences with burnout as a SPED teacher.

Appendix G: SPED Teacher Burnout Handout

Burnout: failure or exhaustion because of excessive demand on energy, strength, or resources” often associated with work that is interpersonal in nature.

Burnout Example: A SPED teacher feels as if she has emotionally over-extended herself; she wakes up and goes to bed feeling overworked and fatigued. She notices herself becoming callous towards her students and she might feel as if she no longer has a positive impact on her students.

Emotional Exhaustion Example: A SPED teacher feels emotionally drained from work. They feel used up and fatigued. They feel as if they’re at the end of their rope and feels they’re working too hard. They are frustrated by their role as a SPED teachers or from working with their students.

Depersonalization Example: A SPED teacher views their students as objects. They have noticed they have become more callous towards their students; they don’t care about what happens to them and feel that they are to blame for their problems. They notice themselves hardening emotionally.

Reduced Personal Accomplishments Example: A SPED teacher cannot seem to understand their students’ feelings or problems. They don’t feel they have a positive impact on their students’ lives. They are not exhilarated after work and do not feel energetic. They don’t feel they can create a relaxed environment. They do not deal with emotional problems calmly.

Appendix H: Consent to Participate

Research Title: Burnout Among SPED Teachers

Researcher: Sierra Williamson

Advisor: Dr. James Robins
School of Education
Baker University
8001 College Blvd.
Overland Park, KS 66210
jrobins@bakeru.edu

My name is Sierra Williamson, and I am currently pursuing my doctorate in Educational Leadership at Baker University. The focus of my research is burnout among special education (SPED) teachers. I am interested in interviewing SPED teachers about their experiences that have contributed to burnout, burnout prevention, and consequences of burnout.

During the 30-45-minute interview, you will be asked three major questions about your experiences with burnout from a special education perspective. These questions may include follow-up questions to clarify information and gain a deeper understanding of your experience. You may decline to answer at any time during the interview process. You may also withdraw from the study for any reason at any time.

The interview will be video recorded so that I am able to transcribe the interviews. The interview transcripts will be password protected and only my research advisor and my data analyst will have access to the raw data. You will be given a pseudonym to protect your privacy and all identifiable information will be kept confidential. Once the interview is complete, you will have the opportunity over the two weeks following the interview to perform a member check. A member check is a chance for you to review your response and ensure that the transcript provides an accurate depiction of your experience.

Consent to Participate: I understand that my participation in this research study is completely voluntary. I understand that I can discontinue my participation in this study at any time for any reason. I understand I can contact the researcher, Sierra Williamson, by email (sierraqpryce@stu.bakeru.edu) with any questions or if I wish to withdraw from the study.

I have read and understand the above statement. By signing, I am confirming that I have had an experience of burnout as a SPED teacher, and I agree to participate in the research study. The Baker University Institutional Review Board approved this study on January 23rd, 2023, and will expire on January 23rd, 2024 unless renewal is obtained by the review board.

Participant Signature _____ Date _____