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Dear Education System, It's You, Not Me:
Burnout in Elementary Special Education Teachers
by
Bernadette Putman-Bailey

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctorate in Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, MN

August 2023

Dissertation Chair: Trish Harvey
Reader: Amy Cochran
Reader: Peter Bailey

ABSTRACT

Putman-Bailey, B. (2023). *Dear education system, it's you, not me: Burnout in elementary special education teachers.*

Burnout is not new to the education system as there seems to be a news article around burnout in the teaching profession and the shortage of teachers nationwide. Minnesota is not immune to this problem, but it is particularly true in special education. Special education teacher positions are the most difficult to recruit and retain for school districts in Minnesota. This research focused on the phenomenon of burnout in elementary special education teachers in urban and suburban areas of Minneapolis. The primary research question was *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* Through in-depth interviews of six elementary special education teachers, themes of high needs of students, too much paperwork and not enough time to complete it, and being required to complete evaluations were identified as job demands pushing them into burnout. They also identified needing more administrative support in the ways of providing empathy to the special education teacher, observing their classroom more, and trusting their abilities and judgements when working with students with disabilities. The study had a secondary research question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* This was explored through discussion of resources that supported the special education teachers, as well as gathering ideas from the teachers themselves of what they need to continue being a special education teacher.

DEDICATION

In memory of my mother, who taught me to be fiercely independent and to never give up.

To all the special education teachers and related service providers who work tirelessly to make the world a better place for every person and every ability.

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” - Albert Einstein

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

"Burnout is nature's way of telling you, you've been going through the motions your soul has departed; you're a zombie, a member of the walking dead, a sleepwalker."

-Sam Keen

Introduction

I am going to make a difference. This is what I said to myself when I took on a job of coordinating the special education services of a middle school in 2021. It was a grueling school year and by March I was having panic attacks weekly and coming home feeling exhausted. I stopped connecting with my friends and family because I was too exhausted and embarrassed that I was failing. All I wanted to do was put my head under the covers and go to sleep. I would wake up in the middle of the night thinking about work. Sleeping for only four or five hours per night. At work, I went through it hour by hour. Telling myself I can get through this day.

My special education colleagues shared they were going through the same thing. I was a teacher on special assignment, not an administrator. This means I was on a teacher contract, but served outside the classroom setting for a variety of different assignments within the special education department. I did not supervise or evaluate colleagues; therefore, I could connect with my colleagues on a personal level. We all talked about how exhausted we were and how it felt that we could never do enough for the students or for the school. Teachers were frequently in my office crying, not knowing how to handle a situation, nor feeling like they had the resources to handle it. All of us, when asked how we were, would say "Well, I'm here". One staff member confided in me that they were

going to the bar every day after work and crying. I worried for myself and for them. We were in burnout.

Burnout is the response people have to chronic interpersonal stressors at work. It has three key dimensions that occur: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment from the job (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Looking back at that school year, I can identify those dimensions in my own life and in my colleagues. I returned to my old job as a speech-language pathologist at an elementary school the next school year. I noticed that my special education colleagues at the elementary school were feeling the same things as the middle school. They were all exhausted, unable to access resources to help their students, and feeling that they were “just there”. I realized that this was not an isolated problem.

Statement of the Problem

From 1984 until 2012, the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher surveyed teachers to examine the responsibilities and challenges in education. The survey asked how satisfied were teachers with their chosen profession. In 2008, 62% of teachers who responded were very satisfied with their profession, and in 2011 it was only 44% (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2012). In 2022, Merrimack College, in conjunction with the EdWeek Research Center, conducted that same survey with 1,324 teachers in the United States. They revealed that only 12% of those teachers surveyed indicated they were very satisfied with being a teacher (Merrimack College & EdWeek Research Center, 2022). Job satisfaction in education has been in decline well before the COVID-19 pandemic, but I wondered if the pandemic had pushed teachers to feel, as I did, “I can’t do this anymore”.

In 2021, the National Education Association conducted a survey of 3,621 educators where 67% were feeling burned out. In that same survey, 55% of those educators indicated they are more likely to leave or retire from education sooner than planned (as cited in Walker, 2022). The Merrimack College survey indicated that 20% of those surveyed are very likely to leave teaching within the next two years (Merrimack College, & EdWeek Research Center, 2022). National Public Radio interviewed four teachers from around the country, all of whom echoed worries that teachers will be leaving the profession (Lopez Restrepo & Chang, 2022). Tiki Boyea-Logan, a 4th grade teacher in Rowlett, Texas stated:

I feel like they expect us to juggle 18 different balls and hop on one foot while saying our ABCs backwards. I mean, that's how it feels. And I feel like it doesn't seem like there's any relief in sight (Lopez Restrepo & Chang, 2022, para. 16).

School districts, education agencies, and politicians should be worried about these statistics. In Minnesota, the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) conducted a "Teacher Supply and Demand Report" and released the findings in 2021. Three of the ten key findings illustrate that charter schools and public school districts are having difficulty hiring highly qualified teachers. I have defined "highly qualified" as teachers who hold a Tier 3 or Tier 4 teaching license in Minnesota, which are the only licensed teachers that are allowed to be on continuing contracts with school districts. Findings 7-9 are:

7. A majority of districts reported being "somewhat significantly" or "very significantly" impacted by the teacher shortage (70%) and substitute teacher shortage (88%).

8. Minnesota continues to lag significantly in the ability to hire and retain racially and ethnically diverse teachers even close to the proportion of students of color and indigenous students in the state.

9. Nearly a third of new teachers leave teaching within the first five years of the profession (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021a, p.5).

PELSB (2021a) also noted that licensure areas charter and school districts had the most difficulty filling were in special education, specifically autism spectrum disorders, emotional behavioral disorder, and learning disabilities. The most unfilled teaching positions were in the areas of special education teaching (cross-categorical or other disability specific licensure areas), speech-language pathologists, and school psychologists. It is clear that teachers are feeling burnout and leaving the profession.

Research Questions

Research is needed to determine why special education teachers are feeling burnout to prevent them from leaving the profession. My research question was, *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* It is important for stakeholders to understand the reasons behind burnout to avoid solutions that only address the symptoms, instead of tackling the core issues. Peter Senge (1990), in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, talks about what can happen when organizations do not look deep into a problem.

Solutions that address only the symptoms of a problem, not fundamental causes, tend to have short-term benefits at best. In the long term the problem resurfaces and there is increased pressure for symptomatic response. Meanwhile, the capability for fundamental solutions can atrophy. (Senge, 1990, p. 103)

The idea of finding solutions led me to my secondary question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* This research question is only the start of a conversation about change needed in the special education system. Peter Block (2008) stated,

All transformation is linguistic, which means that we can think of community as essentially a conversation. Then we act on the principle that if we want to change the community, all we have to do is change the conversation. The shift in conversation is from one of problems, fear, and retribution to one of possibility, generosity, and restoration. (p. 31)

The conversation must start with understanding the why from those who experience it, the special education teachers. Only then can stakeholders fully understand and discuss the possibilities of decreasing burnout and retaining special education teachers.

Positionality of Researcher

I identify as a middle class, white, cis-female educator who has worked in special education in public schools for over 16 years, 15 of those years in a suburban district in Minnesota. I hold a teaching license in speech-language pathology and have worked as a speech-language pathologist for the majority of my educational career. I also identify with having a disability, although my diagnoses were acquired later in life and did not

affect my own K-12 education. I have depression, anxiety, and Crohn's disease. These three diagnoses can be considered "invisible" disabilities, meaning someone would not know I had these disabilities unless I told them. I mention these as they affect how I live my life and affect my own worldview. It is because of my depression and anxiety that led me to this topic. Burnout in my job as the special education building coordinator was a major factor in experiencing debilitating depression and anxiety. It is important for me to examine how my personal experiences and biases affect how I conduct my research and interpret results.

Background and Context

During the 2021/22 school year, I was the special education building coordinator at a middle school. I was considered a "teacher on special assignment", so there was no pay raise and I was required to work an additional 10 days of the school year. I was feeling the stress of this job a month before I officially started the position, as I was already working to plan for the start of the school year. I was okay with not being paid for the additional time, as I understood that working outside of my contract was expected of me. When workshop week began I was not sleeping and felt overwhelmed. I worked to keep it together, and when people asked me how I was doing, I stated "I am stressed, but if I wasn't stressed I wouldn't be doing my job".

I thought about my experience and wondered if this was an isolated experience. I had a new position, new expectations, and was in a new setting (I had never worked in middle school before that school year). It should be normal for me to feel overwhelmed; however, I noticed that my experiences were similar to my experienced special education colleagues. All school year, teachers commented how hard this school year was for them.

I observed many teachers get to work at 6:30am and leave after 4pm, although our normal working day was 7:50am -3pm. I would open my email on Sunday night to have five or more emails from teachers who were working over the weekend.

Teachers lamented how difficult it was navigating teaching in this “normal” year, which was a year and a half after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. School culture has completely changed due to, not just the pandemic, but other forces including racism, hate, and other traumas. I felt it every day when I walked into my school building. I listened to the middle schoolers in the hallway and I heard pain taking shape in the forms of disrespect, bullying, suicidal threats, and other harmful behaviors.

Fear also contributed to mine and my colleagues’ stress. During that year my school was in lockdown for 50 minutes when a dangerous situation occurred in the school. It was difficult, but I remained calm while getting students into a safe place, and then comforting them during that lockdown. I went home feeling fearful that my workplace was no longer safe. I put my own feelings aside and went back to my everyday work for the next few months. Two months later, in Texas, a gunman murdered 19 children and two teachers who were protecting their students. That feeling of fear came back as I listened to tragic news. My colleagues echoed my own thoughts the next day. It felt impossible to feel safe when we all have lived through another mass shooting in a school.

I felt very lucky to have personal resources of friends, family, and excellent medical care to help me through my anxiety and depression during that period. I was able to take a leave of absence and complete a three-week mental health program to give me additional personal resources to go back to work. I was also able to return to my

speech-language pathology position the next school year. I felt I was abandoning my middle school special education colleagues as they struggled with their own burnout. I heard the strain in their voices as many said they wish they could do something different too. That they did not blame me for leaving.

I returned to my elementary school position feeling hopeful that this school year would be better. I was saddened to see that the special education team there was in burnout even before the school year began. One of my former elementary special education teachers had even left her job to only do general education interventions. This teacher was very upfront saying she was burned out. She was going to either find a different job in the district or leave teaching. The school I worked in hired another special education teacher who did not have a special education license. That teacher was able to get a variance through the state of MN due to shortages of special education teachers. This created more work for the other special education teachers in the building. I thought I would be able to help, but I had my own problem. The building I worked in had a caseload that is normal for one full-time and one part-time speech-language pathologist. The school was unable to hire that part-time speech-language pathologist; therefore, I was tasked with the entire caseload without additional help or resources. That meant any additional support I could give teachers, particularly for those students with significant communication difficulties, would not get it from me.

My experiences and observations have made me think about looking for work outside of education. I wondered if there are other ways to work education without the conditions that led to anxiety and eventual burnout. The future of special education will be in peril if changes are not made to sustain the workforce. The fact is this, the working

conditions of special education teachers is not just about teachers. This is about educating those students who have disabilities. These students are losing out on a quality education without quality teachers to lead the way. I believe that special education teacher burnout must be addressed if the United States wants to fulfill its promise it made when PL 94-142 was signed into law that made free and appropriate public education a right for all students with disabilities (US Department of Education, 2023).

Philosophical Assumptions

It is important to understand the philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks that I used to guide this research study. I have an ontological assumption of reality, which means that I am embracing the idea of multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This assumption makes sense to me as every person has their own reality of a situation. Two people can have different perspectives of the same situation, which are based on their own experiences. To me, it is important that those realities are revealed when looking at the causes of special education teacher burnout. There are three studies on teacher burnout that have noted in their research that teachers experience similar situations differently (CeCe, Guillet-Descas, & Lentillon-Kaestner, 2021; Hultell, Melin, & Gustavsson, 2013; Park & Shin, 2020).

I also view research and education from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism is a theory of gaining knowledge “that construes learning as an interpretive, recursive, nonlinear building process by active learners interacting with their surround-the physical and social world” (Fosnot, 2005, loc. 795). In the study, I used the knowledge that the special education teachers share to create new knowledge in finding

solutions to the problem of special education teacher burnout. It is these two philosophical assumptions that have guided this research study.

Definition of Terms

There are a few terms that are used in everyday vernacular of education that I defined below, so that there is a clear meaning of these terms in relation to this study:

Burnout: a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job that has three key dimensions: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment from the job (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Highly Qualified Teacher: Any person who holds a Tier 3 or Tier 4 license as standards set by the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB).

These teachers have completed several requirements, including, but not limited to having a Bachelor's degree and passing scores on content and pedagogy exams. Teachers in these tiers are able to acquire continuing contract rights (Education Minnesota, 2021).

General Education Teacher: A teacher who teaches the general education curriculum. Examples include a 1st grade teacher, a music teacher, or a high school social studies teacher.

Special Education Teacher (SET): A teacher who is licensed in an area of special education and whose work expectations are around the education of students who receive special education services.

Chapter One Summary

It is clear that teachers are feeling burned out and wanting to leave the profession. This is compounded by the critical shortage of special education teachers that plagues the nation, and specifically in Minnesota. This research study looks to understand the causes

of burnout for special education teachers in elementary schools in Minnesota and discusses the changes that can be made to decrease burnout among those teachers.

This chapter gave critical evidence of why the subject of special education teacher burnout is important. In Chapter Two, I address the existing literature around burnout and teachers, as well as discuss the roles and responsibilities that make special education teachers different than the general education teacher. Methodology and research design is described in Chapter Three, and in Chapter Four the results of this study are presented. The conclusions, implications, and limitations of this study, as well as considerations for future research are shared in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the causes of burnout in special education teachers. The primary research question of this study is *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* The secondary research question is *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* This chapter reviews the literature around what is burnout and the theories of burnout. It also discusses the research around burnout and teachers. This chapter explores the roles and responsibilities of the special education teacher in what makes them different from the general education teacher.

Burnout

Burnout is a term that is thrown around in casual conversations, books, and newspaper articles; however, it has a research base that has gone back to the 1970s. Some of the earliest research was from Freudenberger (1980) within the human services sector. Freudenberger, in his book with Richelson, discussed his own burnout while starting a non-profit clinic in New York (1980). He described burnout as “Whenever the expectation level is dramatically opposed to reality and the person persists in trying to reach that expectation, trouble is on the way” (p. 13). Symptoms included exhaustion, detachment, boredom and cynicism, impatience and heightened irritability, a sense of

omnipotence, a suspicion of being unappreciated, disorientation, psychosomatic complaints, depression, and denial of feelings (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980).

Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) further conceptualized the term and described it “as a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (p. 399). They defined burnout as requiring three key dimensions: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment from the job (also called disengagement). Within this is also a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. In 1982, using this specific definition, Maslach developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory, a research-based tool that can be used to determine if someone is experiencing job burnout, and can put it on an intensity scale (as cited in Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Since the 1980s, there have been several other scales and studies done on burnout using one or two of the key dimensions that Maslach identified, with a frequent focus on exhaustion. Exhaustion is an important symptom; however, Maslach and Leiter argued that focusing only on exhaustion is just renaming of the symptom (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). They stated that ignoring cynicism and professional efficacy limits the value of the research and the complexity of job burnout. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) also stated "Exhaustion is not something that is simply experienced - rather, it prompts actions to distance oneself emotionally and cognitively from one's work, presumably as a way to cope with the work overload” (p. 403).

There are individual characteristics that impact if a person will experience job burnout. Personality traits of those who were prone to job burnout frequently showed low self-esteem, an external locus of control, low levels of hardiness, and a Type A behavior style (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Although external factors and personality have an

effect on burnout, research has shown there is a distinct difference between clinical depression and job burnout (Bakker et al., 2000; Glass & McKnight, 1996; Leiter & Durup, 1994). Bakker et al. (2000) were able to show how the symptoms of job burnout are clearly within the context of a job setting; whereas depression shows in every context of someone's life. Age is another consistent individual characteristic that has shown a clear correlation to job burnout. Younger individuals (under 30 years old) have a higher risk of burnout than their older counterparts (Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

Outcomes of burnout affect both workplace and homelife and affect more than just an individual. At work, burnout is associated with an individual reporting job dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, poor attendance, intention to leave a job, and job turnover (Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Burnout also affects an individual's colleagues by causing greater personal conflict and disruption of job tasks (Bakker, LeBlanc, & Schaufeli, 2005; Gonzalez-Morales, Peiro, Rodriguez, & Bliese, 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Individuals who experienced burnout reported that their work had negative effects on their families, and spouses rated their partners in more negative ways (Burke & Greenglass, 2001; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Zedeck, Maslach, Mosier, & Skitka, 1988). The most obvious, but still significant, outcome for both the individual and workplace is poor job performance (Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

There are health risks associated with job burnout as well, both mental and physical. Ahola and Hakanen (2014), in their chapter on burnout and health, found that burnout is related to heart disease, diabetes, common infections, musculoskeletal pain, and depression. It is also noted that depression symptoms may start at work, but

generalize to life in general. Overall, burnout is related to numerous negative outcomes to individuals in work and in their overall quality of life.

Sequential Models of Burnout

Theoretical models have been established to describe the developmental path of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). There are three sequential models of burnout that have been published: stages model, phase model, and transactional model. In the stages model, a person would experience emotional exhaustion due to a demanding workload. To cope, a person would detach from their work, develop negative feelings, and become cynical to those around them. Eventually, if things did not get better, that person would experience feelings of ineffectiveness (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Essentially, this model suggests that the three dimensions of burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, and detachment) are sequential in nature. Research shows more empirical support in linking the sequence of the first and second stages, rather than the second and third stages. Since 2000, there have been longitudinal studies that support the entire model (Bakker, Schaufeli, Sixma, Bosveld, & VanDierendonck, 2000; Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, & Mutanen, 2002).

Golembiewski and Munzenrider developed the phase model in 1988. In this model, Golembiewski and Munzenrider split each dimension into a high and low phase, with cynicism being the earliest phase and followed by inefficiency and then exhaustion.

In 1980, Cherniss developed the transactional model of burnout, which utilizes its own dimensions, or stages. The first stage is an imbalance of work demands and individual resources (such as mental coping mechanisms), then exhaustion and anxiety, and last a change in attitude, such as cynicism. Several studies have shown empirical

support for this sequential model of burnout (Burke, Shearer, & Deszca, 1984; Burke & Greenglass, 1989; Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

Conceptual Models of Burnout

The above models focus on the individual going through the sequence of burnout; however, one can not forget the system/job's role in burnout. Job burnout research has its roots in human and health service industries, in which the core job characteristics are the relationships between providers and recipients (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

There are four conceptual models of burnout that address burnout as a social construct between the individual and the job itself. Cherniss' transactional (1980) was a start by discussing the imbalance of work demands and individual resources. There are three additional models that also address burnout through this lens: conservation of resources (CoR), areas of worklife model (WL), and the job demands-resources model (JD-R).

Conservation of Resources Theory (CoR). The conservation of resources theory (CoR) is framed around job demands and job resources imbalance (Hobfall & Freedy, 1993; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Individuals are motivated to conserve, recover, and require resources to address job demands. Therefore, when individuals perceive resources being threatened or resources being lost, they are at risk for burnout. Hobfall and Freedy (1993) described resources as objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies that are valued or serve as a way to gain another resource. They also noted that individuals are more sensitive to losses of resources than there are of gains of resources. The theory suggests that to decrease burnout, interventions should focus on eliminating vulnerability to resource loss and increasing resources (Hobfall & Freedy, 1993). A meta-analysis of CoR and social supports found that work-related social supports were

more strongly related to individuals feelings of exhaustion, while nonwork-related social supports were more strongly associated with detachment from the job and lack of personal accomplishment (Halbesleben, 2006). CoR addresses how resources can affect the three dimensions of burnout (overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment from the job); however, it simplifies burnout as only associated with resources. The areas of worklife model explores several areas that can cause burnout.

Areas of Worklife Model. Leiter and Maslach (1999) created the area of worklife model (AW), which focuses on individual and job imbalance and identifies six areas where that imbalance can occur. Those areas are workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values. The greater the imbalance, the greater the risk of burnout. The converse also holds in that the greater the perceived balance in the six areas, the greater likelihood of full work life engagement by the individual (Leiter & Maslach, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). The areas of worklife model also addresses the three dimensions of burnout; however, it does not address how those dimensions fit into each area. It insteads names the six areas as equally important to all three dimensions. The Job Demands-Resource theory only looks at two of the dimensions of burnout, but puts those dimensions in context to how they are affected by both job demands and resources.

Job Demands-Resource Theory (JD-R). The job demands-resources model (JD-R) was developed by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001) and examines burnout as two factors, exhaustion and disengagement, rather than the three factors (exhaustion, cynicism, and disengagement) identified by Maslach (as cited in Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The central idea is that when job demands are high and job resources are low, there is a high risk of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job

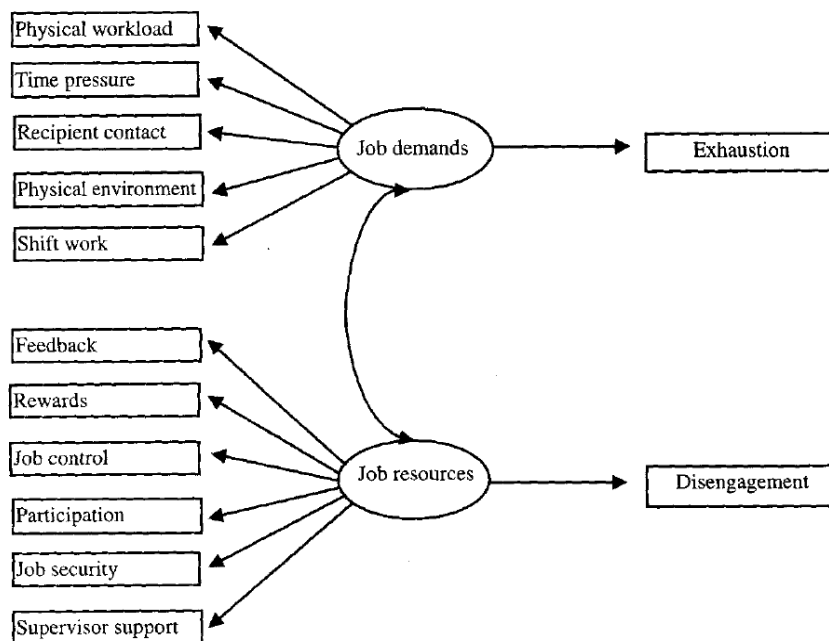
demands are defined as “physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort” (p. 501). High job demands increase exhaustion. Job resources are “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job” (p. 501) that serve a purpose of achieving work goals, reducing the physical/mental costs of job demands, and/or stimulate personal growth and development. The original model (see Figure 1) focuses on the external job resources, rather than social (colleague or family support) and internal (cognitive features and action patterns) resources, as external job resources are more stable and situation independent. These job resources can look like job control, potential for advancement, participating in decision making, or task variety. Participating in committees can be a job resource. For example, the writer, in their current job as an educator in a public school, participates in decision making when a part of the school improvement plan committee. When job resources are high, there is high engagement for individuals, and conversely, when job resources are low, job engagement is low. When job resources are low, individuals are unable to cope with the negative influences of high job demands, which increases risk of burnout.

Since its creation, the JD-R has evolved to reflect the various types of employee well-being (Bakker & Demerouti 2016). The original theory (see Figure 1) has two factors that impact job performance: job demands and job resources. Bakker and Demerouti (2016) discussed how several other factors have shaped the JD-R theory. One factor is that both job demands and job resources bring about two different processes: health impairment processes and motivational processes. An example would be that job demands would predict an individual’s absence duration, indicating a health-impairment process. A position with low job resources would predict an individual’s absence

frequency, indicating a motivating process (Bakker, Demerouti, deBoer, & Schaufeli, 2003).

Figure 1

Job Demands-Resources Model



(Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001. Used with permission from authors)

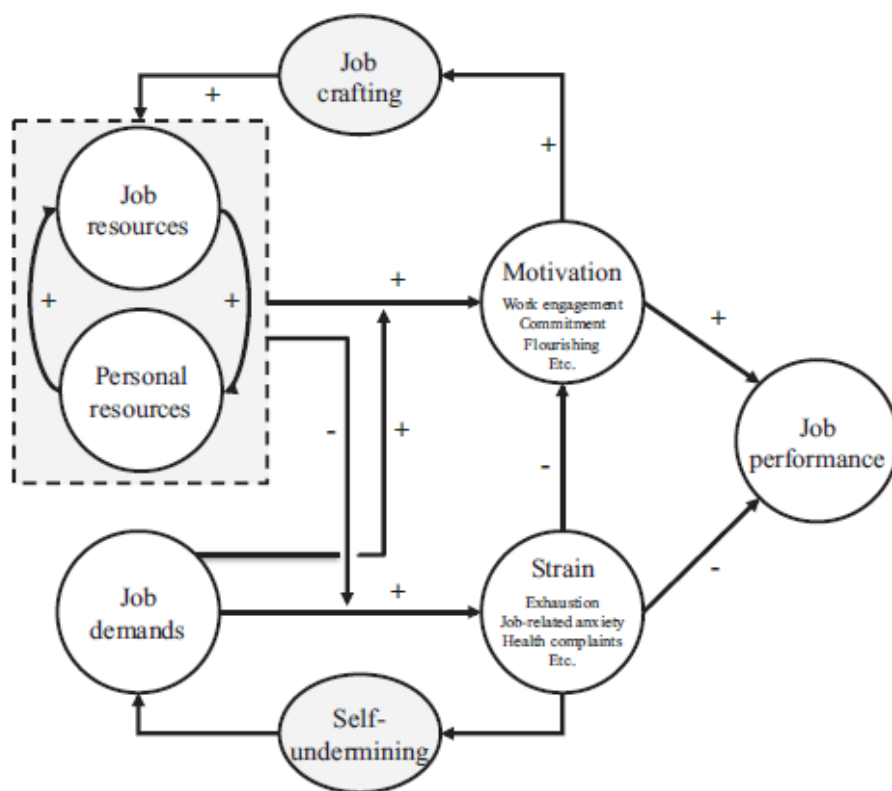
Another factor is that job resources can buffer the impact of job demand strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). Personal resources of optimism and self-efficacy were also added to the theory of resources that can buffer job demand strain. More was added to the theory about the role of motivation, which can have a positive impact on job performance, and the role of job strain, which has a negative impact on job performance. Further detailing the causes of motivation and job strain are job crafting (an individual making changes to the job demands and resources) and self-undermining.

When addressing these additional factors, the JD-R theory becomes more complex than its original iteration. High job demands, combined with high job and

personal resources increase motivation. Increase in motivation will also allow for job crafting, which will increase the resources. This together will increase job performance. High job demands with low resources (both job and personal) lead to job strain. Increase in job strain increases self-undermining, which increases job demands, which leads again to high job strain and poor job performance. See Figure 2 for a visual reference.

Figure 2

Job Demands-Resources Model Revised



(Bakker & Demerouti, 2016. Used with permission from authors.)

Crawford, LePine, and Rich (2010) further defined job demands as they argued that some demands reduce job performance, while others will increase job performance. There are two types of job demands: challenges and hindrances. Challenges are “stressful demands that have the potential to promote mastery, personal growth, or future gains” (p. 836). An

example of a challenge demand is a high level of job responsibility, which employees see as an opportunity to grow. Hindrances are “stressful demands that have the potential to thwart personal growth, learning, and goal attainment” (p. 836). An example would be job ambiguity, which employees view as a constraint to goal attainment.

The JD-R model has evolved from a simple two-part model to a complex model that has many factors. These factors account for the complex nature of human behavior. The authors of the studies above also note that there are also individualized differences in how employees view both job demands and resources. For example, what one employee sees as a job challenge, such as time pressure to complete a project, may be considered a job hindrance to another. It is also noted that within a work context, individuals tend to rate work-related stressors in a similar way (Brief & George, 1995).

Summary

Burnout is a phenomenon that an individual experiences due to stressors of working at a job. It contains three components: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment from the job. Burnout can lead to negative outcomes, such as poor work performance, low organizational commitment, and health problems. There are three sequential models of burnout that describe how burnout manifests itself in an individual: the stages model, the phase model, and the transactional model. There are also three conceptual models that describe how and why burnout occurs within a job setting. The job demands-resources (JD-R) is when job demands are high and resources are low, the risk of burnout is high (Demerouti et al., 2001). Conservation of resources (CoR) model states that when individuals perceive resources being threatened or lost there is a risk of burnout (Hobfall & Freedy, 1993). And finally, the areas of worklife (AW) model

is based on six areas of worklife and states that when there is imbalance in one or more of these areas of worklife that there becomes a risk for burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 1999).

It is noticed that race and ethnicity have not been studied in a general sense of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). A study on Black mental health therapists and burnout showed that race-related stress, plus certain working conditions (such as long working hours) increase the risk of burnout in that particular occupational group (Shell, Teodorescu, & Williams, 2021). This was the only study found that specifically looked at burnout and race. This is important as the MN Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board reported that school districts in Minnesota “lag significantly in the ability to hire and retain racially and ethnically diverse teachers even close to the proportion of students of color and indigenous students in the state” (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021a, p. 5). This study does not investigate the connections between race and burnout; however, it should be considered for future research (see Chapter Five: Future Research).

Job burnout is a phenomenon that has occurred in many occupations; however, this study will specifically focus on burnout among special education teachers. The next section will discuss the literature around burnout in teaching and, specifically, in special education.

Teacher Burnout

The National Education Association conducted a survey of 3,621 educators in 2021 where 67% were feeling burned out (as cited in Walker, 2022). This survey did not delineate between special education teachers (SETs) and general education teachers. The research examines teachers in a general sense and SETs specifically. The review of this

research will be categorized into the factors of job/personal resources and job demands, as indicated in the job demands-resource model (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). I found that the research fit into these factors, even though all but one of the research studies on teachers did not use a conceptual model of burnout in their research.

Rajendran, Watt, and Richardson (2020) found that using the JD-R as a fitting theory for explaining the job related outcomes of Australian teachers. These areas lead into two of the dimensions of burnout: exhaustion/strain and detachment/motivation (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Demerouti et al. (2001) defined job resources as parts of the job that serve the purpose of achieving work goals, reducing the physical/mental costs of job demands, and/or stimulate personal growth and development. In 2016, Bakker and Demerouti updated the model to add personal resources of self efficacy and optimism to their model. Personal and job resources can increase motivation and reduce strain caused by job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). Two studies discussed how teachers' ability to build relationships with students as a personal resource that teachers need to avoid burnout. Lee (2019) studied physical education teachers in high school and noted that those teachers who created genuine relationships with students were at a decreased risk of burnout. A study of preschool teachers in New York post during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the loss of norms from the pandemic accounted for a loss of relationships between teachers and students, which led to teachers losing a sense of identity (Rodriguez, Rojas, Rabadi-Raol, Souto-Manning, & Brotman, 2022).

The personal resource of self-efficacy has been noted as a factor specifically in SET burnout in several studies. High SET self-efficacy is related to high motivation and

higher expectations and outcomes for students. The inverse relationship of this is also true, that low SET self-efficacy is associated with exhaustion and low motivation (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Hopman et al., 2018; Park & Shin, 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Self-efficacy has been shown to be related to student outcomes. Kim and Seo (2018) put it best that "teacher efficacy enhances students' academic achievement" (p. 538). A more recent review of literature revealed that teachers with high self efficacy have high expectations for students, which allows for high student achievement (Bardach, Klassen, & Perry, 2021). Pas, Bradshaw, Hershfeldt, and Leaf (2010) found that teachers who reported low levels of self-efficacy were less inclined to follow-up on discipline problems and failed to refer students to proper care as compared to teachers with high levels of efficacy. Studies of SETs in burnout also showed poor student outcomes (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). A study looking at SETs who work with students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) found that the emotional exhaustion of SETs accounted for a 9.3% variance in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goal attainment (Ruble & McGrew, 2013). It is clear that self-efficacy is an important factor when considering burnout in teachers.

As for job resources, administrative support was mentioned frequently as a factor in teacher burnout, particularly with SETs (Billingsley, 2004). SETs who work with students with emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD) reported administrative support over student behavior as a primary reason for burnout (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). In a meta-analysis of SET burnout, Park and Shin (2020) stated "Lack of support from school personnel has one of the most frequently cited relations with teachers' burnout" (p. 14).

Billingsley (2004) noted in her analysis of the literature that low salary, poor climate, and role conflict/ambiguity contributed to SET burnout, in addition to lack of administrative support. Work climate relating to burnout was considered by Haberman (2007) for all teachers, but particularly teachers who identify as Black.

Given the conditions under which teachers must work in highly bureaucratic school systems and which make burnout and attrition a highly predictable process, what are the most powerful mitigating factors which might counteract or slow down these processes? Do the conditions of work in bureaucratic school systems have differential effects on African American and white teachers? (p. 170)

Aspects of work climate were also noted in an article from National Public Radio, where an interview with three teachers noted the areas of stress including safety, academic delays of students due to COVID-19 pandemic, and student mental health. They noted that lack of support in these three areas have new teachers feeling overwhelmed and wanting to leave the profession (Lopez Restrepo & Chang, 2022).

Job demands were noted as factors in burnout for SETs. The two meta-analyses of burnout in SETs found that job demands were contributing to burnout (Billingsley, 2004; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). Two other studies found that conflicts in job demands and home/family demands also contribute to teacher burnout (Haberman, 2007; Rajendran, Watt, & Richardson, 2020).

There were other factors that did not fit into the job demands and job/personal resources categories. Billingsley (2004) found that teachers who were young and had fewer years of service were more at risk for burnout. This coincides with Maslach and Leiter, who noted that in general, individuals under 30 years old have a higher risk of

burnout than their older counterparts (2017). Billingsley (2004) also noted that teachers who are uncertified and teachers who had higher test scores (e.g., National Teacher Exam) were at high risk of leaving the profession. Two studies of teachers and one study on SETs found that student misbehavior was not directly related to teacher burnout (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Rajendran, Watt, & Richardson, 2020; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). Lastly, it is noted that burnout is contagious among teachers. Meredith et al. (2020) found that relationships among staff (especially when relations are strong in terms of frequency, embeddedness, and multiplexity) play a role in teacher burnout.

Summary

Teachers and specifically SETs are at high risk of burnout. The personal resource of teacher efficacy and job resource of administrative support were the two sources of burnout that had the greatest amount of research backing. With that being said, job demands were a factor for SETs, and conflict between job demands and home demands were also noted. What the research did not note was the types of job demands or the type of administrative support that was factoring into burnout. This will be considered when conducting and interpreting the results of this study. The next section will discuss the role of the special education teacher, and how it is different from general education teachers, particularly within the elementary school setting.

Special Education Teacher Roles and Responsibilities

Although public education has been an inalienable right for all since the 1830s (Kober & Rentner, 2020), education for those with disabilities did not become law until 1975. On November 29, 1975, President Gerald Ford signed into law PL 94-142 The

Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which is the cornerstone of special education in the United States (as cited in US Department of Education, 2023). This law ensured that students with disabilities have due process under the law for receiving a free and appropriate public education.

With this federal mandate, teachers became specialized in providing special education services to students. Teachers are licensed in specialty areas for specific or general disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, and developmental cognitive disability. Even with a license in a particular disability, that special education teacher may provide services to a wide variety of abilities and disabilities. For example, in the district I work in, a teacher who is licensed in autism spectrum disorder works with students with specific learning disabilities, developmental cognitive disorder, emotional behavior disorder, as well as autism spectrum disorder.

Expectations for special education teachers (SETs) can vary, based on school district or setting; however, there are job responsibilities that are expected of all special education teachers. In a study around special education retention, the researcher identified 16 tasks that are expected for special education teachers to gain insight on the amount of time spent on each task (Kaff, 2004). Some of those tasks included delivery of direct instruction to students, monitoring student progress, allocation of resources for student support, supervision of paraprofessionals, monitoring the use of curricular adaptations and modifications in general education settings, case coordination, developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), collaboration with general and special educators, designing and implementing modifications of curricular materials,

collaboration/consultation with parents, evaluation of students, and student scheduling (Kaff, 2004).

SETs work in a variety of different settings, based on the level of disability their students present with, as well as the different types of service delivery models. In my experience, the most common service delivery models are as follows:

1. Pull-out or push-in to general education classroom setting

In this setting, SETs are expected to schedule students for either push-out services or push-in services. In push-out services, students with an IEP are taken out of their general education classroom and provided services in a small group or individual setting. These groups are taught by the special education teacher and only have students with IEPs within these groups. Push-in services are when the special education teacher goes into the general education classroom and provides special education services to students on IEPs. They are working with students on IEPs and are not considered to be teaching the class, as that is the general education teacher.

2. Co-teaching setting

SETs and general education teachers teach a subject matter as a team. They may teach content together or one teacher will teach content while the other supports all students in the classroom setting. Students on IEPs are provided their special education services within the general education classroom with their general education peers.

3. Self-Contained setting

A self-contained setting is when students with IEPs are provided their special education services in a separate classroom for only students on IEPs. Students in this setting typically have a high amount of needs and are with their peers in their separate

classroom for at least 60% of the school day. This setting usually has a high adult to student ratio, for example eight students to three adults. Those adults are typically one licensed special education teacher and supported with paraprofessionals.

4. Separate school

Students with IEPs can be placed in separate schools with self-contained classrooms. These students do not have access to a general education classroom or to students without IEPs. This is the most restrictive setting for students on IEPs.

When special education teams are determining services and service models, they must consider the students' least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE placements must be based on a child's unique needs and IEP, not on administrative convenience, disability/program label, or allocation of funds (Rebhorn & Smith, 2008). Depending on an SET's school and circumstances, SETs can teach in one or more than one of these settings.

Federal and state laws require paperwork to be completed to ensure that due process is being followed for students with disabilities to ensure that all students receive a free and appropriate public education. For SETs, this includes specific due process documentation around evaluations and the IEP. There are timelines that are associated with documentation that are required to be followed by federal and state law. To meet these requirements, many school districts will require paperwork to be done earlier to ensure that staff are meeting the federal and state requirements. It was even noted by the Office of the Legislative Auditor for the State of Minnesota (2013):

Educators noted that much of the paperwork burden is required by federal law but several said the length of required documents, such as IEPs, evaluations, and prior

written notices, has greatly increased, although the federal requirements themselves have not changed recently. (p. 97)

Paperwork is something that SETs know to expect when they become an SET. It is the time and energy that the paperwork requires, on top of the other job demands, that makes completing paperwork a factor in SET burnout.

Summary

In summary, SETs have a variety of different roles and responsibilities they are tasked with in their job description. SET's are tasked with evaluating and providing special education services to students on IEPs, but also must modify curriculums, collaborate with many professionals and parents, provide case management, and complete due process paperwork. These are just a few of the roles and responsibilities that SETs take on when working in a public school setting.

Chapter 2 Summary

Burnout is a phenomenon that an individual experiences due to stressors of working at a job. It can lead to negative outcomes, such as poor work performance, low organizational commitment, and health problems. Teachers, specifically special education teachers, are at high risk of burnout. A lack of personal/job resources and stressful job demands put special education teachers in a precarious situation. To understand these job demands and personal and job resources, this study aims to answer the question of *Using the job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* This study will go further in searching for solutions in answering the question *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would*

decrease special education burnout? Chapter Three describes the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

In 2021, more than half of teachers who responded to a National Education Association survey indicated they were feeling burnout (as cited in Walker, 2022). Both general education (GenEd) teachers and special education teachers (SETs) have a range of factors that are related to burnout, including paperwork, challenging student behaviors, and role overload (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). SETs also feel there is a lack of resources needed to manage the overload of responsibilities and receive poor support from principals (Kaff, 2004). This is an addition to the non-instructional tasks (e.g. Individualized Education Plan meetings, evaluations of students) they are required to do within a legal timeframe (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). The purpose of this research is to understand the phenomenon of special education teachers experiencing burnout. The primary research question is *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* The secondary research question is *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers implement that would decrease special education burnout?* This chapter describes the research design for this study. It explains the research paradigm, methodology, setting, participants, research tools, Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, and data analysis for this study.

Research Paradigm

A qualitative study allows for one to study a reality, as “reality adheres in the perceptions of individuals” (Joyner, Rouse, & Glattorn, 2018, p. 81). Burnout is “a

psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 399), and therefore, should be researched in a way that reveals this phenomenon within the human experience. This approach also makes sense as qualitative research “inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 14). Burnout is a human problem that can affect someone in any job; however, it is a problem among teachers in the United States. The National Education Association survey indicated 67% of responding teachers indicated they were feeling burnout in 2021 (as cited in Walker, 2022). Another survey by the Rand Corporation in 2022 revealed that 59% of their respondents reported experiencing indicators of burnout, compared to 44% of other working adults (as cited in Steiner et al., 2022). This qualitative study increases the understanding of burnout as it explores the meaning SETs ascribe to burnout within their own reality.

Methodology

This is a phenomenological study to describe burnout among elementary SETs in suburban and urban public schools. A phenomenological study describes “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). This study specifically is a transcendental phenomenological study, in that it will develop a textural description (what participants experienced) and structural description (how participants in terms of conditions, situations, or context) (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of burnout in elementary SETs.

Interviews are the source of data in phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). “Interviewing is an activity process where interviewer and interviewee through

their relationship produce knowledge” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 21). This is important in this study as the question is asking for knowledge to be formed in the what and how of burnout in SETs. The interviews gave structure and purpose to obtain the lived experience of burnout from an SET’s perspective (2015). Overall, a transcendental phenomenological study was the most appropriate way to study burnout in SETs as it seeks to create knowledge about burnout within the perspectives of the SETs themselves. To put it succinctly, “phenomenology... promotes questioning and encourages expansive critical thinking” (Laletas & Grove, 2021, p. 254), which is what this research study accomplishes.

Participants

In phenomenology, the interview “seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees’ lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31). With that understanding, participants were chosen with specific criteria to gain knowledge on SET burnout. The first criteria chosen was that the participants must be currently teaching in special education in a public elementary school/s in the west suburban or urban area of Minneapolis, Minnesota during the 2022/23 school year. Narrowing the participant pool to only the west suburban or urban area of Minneapolis allowed for possible homogenous caseloads for each participant. As a practitioner in the west suburban area of Minneapolis, I am aware that most districts in this area have similar ways of handling caseloads among special education teachers. School districts within the west suburban and urban area of Minneapolis also face similar abilities to recruit and hire full special education staff.

This criteria was important as the research question is asking about the phenomenon of burnout as it is occurring in the 2022/2023 school year. The past three years of teaching (and the entire world) have been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research study was conducted during the 2022/2023 school year, where public schools have not been disrupted with changes to learning models due to COVID-19 or other pandemics. The teaching profession has not been the same since March 15, 2020, when in Minnesota, the Governor of Minnesota issued Executive Order 20-02, directing all schools in Minnesota to close and engage in a planning period. On March 25, 2020, the Governor issued Executive Order 20-19, directing the Department of Education to implement distance learning. On April 23, 2020, that order was extended until the end of the 2019/2020 school year. Since then, public school boards have been given the control of the learning model their district implements. During the 2020/21 and 2021/22 school year, public schools in Minnesota were varied in their response, based on the guidance they received, but also the belief systems of school boards. The expectations of teachers in previous years, versus the 2022/2023 school year, were much different due to the changes in teaching models, which could have affected the results of this study based on the year the teacher was in burnout. To account for this, this study's participants were to be current special education teachers experiencing burnout during the 2022/2023 school year.

The second criteria was that the participants must be experiencing severe risk or very severe risk of burnout based on the "Burnout Self-Test". To determine if the participant was experiencing burnout, they were asked to take the "Burnout Self-Test" from the website www.mindtools.com (Emerald Works Limited, 2022). This is an

informal approach to assessing burnout where potential participants were placed into five categories: (1) no sign of burnout, (2) little sign of burnout, (3) at risk of burnout, (4) severe risk of burnout, and (5) very severe risk of burnout. This is a standardized assessment, but not validated through controlled scientific tests. Participants who were in the severe risk of burnout or very severe risk of burnout were selected for this study. This was used only to select participants and not as a data collection tool.

Participants were recruited through several sources available to the researcher. E-mails were sent through two listservs for teachers in MN with licenses in teaching in developmental cognitive disability and autism spectrum disorders; as well as through former colleagues of the researcher. Facebook posts were also used by utilizing specific special educator Facebook groups, such as “Special Education Teachers”, “MN Educators”, and “MN Metro SPED Teachers and Service Providers”. Cold emails were also sent to various special educators found on school websites. Interested participants completed a participant form (see Appendix C) to identify names, emails, if they were a working special education teacher in a public elementary school, if they self-identify as at risk or in burnout, the name of the school district they work in, and if they were willing to participate in a short survey and interview. This google form allowed the researcher to collect names of interested participants and determine if they met inclusion criteria for the study.

Once participants completed the participant form, participants were contacted by email by the researcher and asked to fill out the Burnout Self-Test (see Appendix D). Once participants were determined to be in the “severe risk of burnout” or “very severe risk of burnout”, the researcher reached out to schedule an interview over Google Meets.

The study had six participants who met the criteria based on the participant form and the Burnout Self-Test, and agreed to be interviewed. Those interviews were collected, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher who determined that a saturation of themes was reached and no more interviews were needed for the study.

Setting

The setting of this research study was elementary public schools in the suburban and urban Minneapolis, MN area. The participants were only special education teachers who were working during the 2022/23 school year. Interviews were conducted over Google Meet arranged by the researcher and the participant. Participants were asked to find quiet and private space to join the Google Meet. This was to ensure that participants felt comfortable in providing honest and complete information without interruption during the interview. The researcher conducted the interviews on Google Meets in a personal office that was private and quiet to ensure confidentiality of information.

Research Tools

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants over Google Meets. Interviews were recorded on the Google Meet software to allow for the researcher to refer back to them for transcribing and data analysis. Interview recordings were deleted once the dissertation was completed through defense.

IRB Process

Permission to conduct the research using human subjects was granted by the Hamline University Institutional Research Board (IRB) on April 4, 2023. Participants were provided with an Informed Consent to Participate in Research form, approved by the IRB board), through email and it was linked in the participant form (see Appendix C)

and on the Burnout Self-Test (see Appendix D). Participants were asked to consent to the research on the Burnout Self-Test form, and again verbally before the start of the interview.

Data Analysis

Interviews were initially analyzed through a listening of the recording and simultaneous reading of the transcript of each interview. During the listening sessions, portions of the interviews were highlighted and notes were written on the margins, an analytic strategy discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). Notes were focused on finding themes within the interviews that most participants shared. These notes were also used to “bracket” my own theories and experiences of the subject matter, as suggested by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015). This is particularly important, as I found myself thinking about my own experiences as a working practitioner in the special education field. Knowing that this could affect the meanings I make from the interviews, I put those experiences in brackets to attempt to “arrive at an unprejudiced description of the essence of the phenomena” (p. 31).

Subsequent readings of the transcripts were conducted to allow for memoing of ideas and to start describing and classifying codes into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2019). The Job Demands-Resources Theory (Demerouti et al., 2001) was used as a framework for the interview questions; therefore themes of job demands and resources were already within the data sets. Within these two themes, three to six sub-themes were discovered within the data. The theme of administrative support was also a clear theme in the data; however, it did not fit with the main themes of job demands and resources.

I believe that it is important that I am both a researcher and a practitioner in this study. My background as a practitioner provides me with a deep understanding of the burnout phenomenon that non-practitioners would not understand. I can interpret the nuances of how special education services are provided and how it is structured in a school setting, because I am currently working within that realm. I also provided an understanding and empathy to my interviewees that would not be available from a non-practitioner point of view. Three of the interviewees even noted how talking to others with a teaching background were helpful in their own interpretations of their lived experiences. I did not share my own experiences with the interviewees; however, my experiences were helpful when I was recasting what was said during the interview. The interviewees were given the opportunity to comment if I was understanding them, but also allowed them to reflect on what they said, which was another step within the interview analysis noted by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015).

The structured analysis of the interviews, as well as my own reflections on being both researcher and practitioner can “validate” the data and interpretations. Wolcott (1990) talked about how validation, although not to be dismissed, is not the point of quantitative research. The point is to understand what is going on, not to convince others of the validity of the research. The goal is to identify “critical elements” and write “plausible interpretations from them” (p. 146). This study was developed to promote questioning and encourage expansive critical thinking (Laletas & Grove, 2021) through the stories of teachers who are currently living within the phenomenon of burnout.

Chapter 3 Summary

The primary research question of this study is *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* The secondary research question is *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers implement that would decrease special education burnout?* These two questions were examined using a qualitative design utilizing a phenomenological approach. Participants were found utilizing social media, email listservs, and school websites to find special education teachers who were interested. A short survey was conducted to ensure that participants were indeed experiencing job burnout. Interviews were conducted, recorded, and analyzed using the JD-R theory as a framework. This research design was chosen as it allowed for participants to describe burnout within their “lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning”(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31) of burnout. The analysis and interpretation detailed above are in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results and Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand why special education teachers are feeling burnout within the profession, with the primary research question: *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?*

In this chapter, an overview of each participant and job background is provided to give readers a sense of the participants' lived experience. There is explanation of service delivery models and federal settings to give understanding of what terminology the participants used during the interviews.

Themes of job demands and resources help categorize the data into different sub-themes of the two areas. Under job demands, sub-themes of students with high needs, paperwork, and evaluations emerged in the data. Under resources, categories of job resources and personal resources were identified. Sub-themes emerged within these categories, with staff as resources, specific professional development, and the teachers' union as job resources. Personal resources of friends/family, mental health resources, and personal boundaries also came up as themes in that category. The theme of administrative support also emerged from the data. It did not fit into the categories of job demands or resources, but the data showed this to be a significant factor in burnout among special education teachers (SETs).

This study has a secondary question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* This

question was answered, in part, through looking at the resources that have supported SETs. It was also partially answered in the theme of administrative support, and will also be further discussed in the implications section of Chapter Five.

Overview of Participants

Interviews were conducted with six participants in this study in April and May, 2023. Each participant identified as a licensed special education teacher (SET) with between 1 and 8 years of service as an SET. Their age ranges were between 20-40 years old. All but one participant identified as White females, with the one participant identifying as a White, Ashkenazi Jewish male. The participants' demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of Participant Demographics

Participant	Age Range in years	Years of service	Gender	Race and/or ethnicity	Service Delivery Model	Enrollment size of district**
Sara	31-40	8	Female	White	Self-Contained	10,000-20,000
Noah	20-30	1	Male	White, Ashkenazi Jew	Resource	20,000-40,000
Kelsey	31-40	5	Female	White	Self-Contained/ EBD*	10,000-20,000
Allie	20-30	4	Female	White	Resource/ Lead teacher	20,000-40,000
Crystal	31-40	2	Female	White	Self-Contained/ EBD*	Less than 5,000
Kari	20-30	8	Female	White	Resource	20,000-40,000

*EBD is an acronym for Emotional Behavior Disorders

**based off of enrollment data for 2021-22 school year (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022)

Pseudonyms

Participants' names were coded to protect their identity. The school or school district they work for is not named within this paper. The size of their school district will be referenced within a range of enrollment numbers to keep the anonymity of the participant, school, and district. Each participant was given a pseudonym that shared the gender and ethnicity that the participant identified as on the participant form.

Service Delivery Models and Settings

Three of the participants taught students in a "resource" setting. "Resource", a term used by all participants, referred to a setting where the teacher pulled students out of their general education classroom to provide special education services. Not all resource SETs pull students out of their general education classroom; however, the three resource SETs in this study indicated that pull out services were the way they provided special education services this school year. One teacher, Allie, also held the title of "lead teacher", as well as a resource SET. She stated that the lead teacher role typically did not provide services to students, but instead coordinated the special education services for students in the school building. A shortage of SETs in Allie's building prompted Allie to provide special education services to students in a resource setting, as well as perform the duties of the lead teacher.

The other three participants taught students in a self-contained setting. The participants used the terms "self-contained", "center-based" or "setting three" interchangeably; however, for continuity, I will be using the term "self-contained". This setting is when an SET has a specialized classroom for students with significant disabilities. Students typically spend 60% or more of their day in this specialized class,

with the SET as the main teacher throughout the school day. These classes have a high ratio of adults to students, usually up to eight students to three adults. This ratio of students to adults can fluctuate depending on student need, enrollment, etc. The adults are typically an SET and two paraprofessionals in the classroom for the school day. Students can range in ages, grades, disabilities, and ability levels depending on the schools and students that are enrolled. Sara taught in a self-contained classroom room that has students in grades 3rd to 5th with a range of disabilities, but all having significant cognitive/learning challenges. Kelsey and Crystal both taught in self-contained classrooms that had students in grades kindergarten to 5th who also ranged in disabilities, but who all had significant needs in social and emotional behaviors.

Federal settings were mentioned by four of the six participants; therefore, it is important to understand what is a federal setting and why it is important to SETs. Federal settings refers to the percentage of time a student spends in special education (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) also uses instructional setting codes that they match with the federal settings (2016). Table 2 outlines how MDE describes codes 1-4 for students ages 6-21 years old. Sarah, Noah, and Kelsey use the terms “setting” or “federal setting” to refer to these descriptions; however, it can be confusing as sometimes the SETs use “setting” or “federal setting” to refer to how much time a student is receiving special education services, and other times they are referring to the classroom type. As a practitioner, I was able to understand what they were referring to, as well as clarify those moments during the interviews. The students’ federal setting was important to understand when discussing the demands of the job in relation to student needs.

Table 2***Instructional Setting Codes***

Instructional Setting Code	Classroom type	Federal Setting Number	Description
A	Regular Class	1	Special education services primarily within the regular class. (Outside of the regular classroom for less than 21 percent of the school day.)
B	Resource Room	2	Special education services primarily within a resource setting. (Outside of the regular classroom (typically a resource room) between 21–60 percent of the school day.)
C	Separate Class or Self-Contained Class	3	Special education services primarily within a special class. (Separate classroom more than 60 percent of the school day.)
D	Public Separate-day School	4	Special education services in a public separate-day school facility. (Public separate-day school facility greater than 50 percent of the school day.)

(Minnesota Department of Education, 2016)

School District Size

The size of the school district was not brought up by the participants, but could be a reason for some participants having access to resources versus the other participants. Educational funding, both general and special education, is complicated; however, the majority of state funds are allocated per pupil within a school district. Therefore, school districts with larger enrollments receive more money than those with smaller enrollments. This can affect what and how a school district allocates funds for SETs. Four of the participants (Noah, Allie, Kelsey, and Kari) mentioned having access to curriculum, trainings, and other resources that cost money for their school district. They all worked

for school districts that had 10,000 or more students enrolled. Sara also worked for a school district of 10,000 or more students, and she stated that she was not refused those types of resources, but that it was difficult to obtain them due to the amount of paperwork involved. Crystal worked for a school district of less than 5,000 students. She stated that she was denied resources of curriculum and even supplies due to the budget within the school district.

Themes

Job demands-resources theory (JD-R) examines how when job demands are high, and job resources are low there is a risk for burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). This theory was used to support answering the research question of *What are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in a suburban and urban area?* Through analysis of the interviews and using the job demands-resources theory (JD-R) of burnout, three major themes appeared: job demands, resources, and administrative support. The job demands of working with students with high needs, paperwork, and being required to complete evaluations were the themes that the SETs identified as pushing them into burnout. Job resources of other staff members, specific professional development, and the teachers' union were resources named by the SETs as factors that help mitigate their burnout. Personal resources of friends and family, mental health professionals, and personal boundaries were also named by the SETs as factors that mitigated their burnout. Those resources were not enough to keep SETs from experiencing burnout. Administrative support was a theme that did not fit into either job demand or a resource. It was given its own category and was examined on how the SETs

felt administrators were or were not providing the support they needed to do their job with success.

Job Demands

The participants were asked specifically what job demands they believed were affecting their burnout. Job demands are defined as “physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Within this category, there were three sub-themes that emerged: students with high needs, paperwork, and evaluations.

Students with High Needs. Four of the six participants discussed that the students on their caseload had significant needs in social and emotional behaviors. All four all mentioned that students were physically aggressive towards them and other staff. Kelsey and Crystal’s job positions are within self-contained classrooms for students with social-emotional needs, and they both noted that they knew working with students with aggressive behaviors was part of the job. What was difficult for both of them is that they spent so much time de-escalating and/or regulating students that they did not have time for the other demands of the job. Crystal also talked about how she has paraprofessionals that work with her, but that she does not expect or ask them to de-escalate students when they become physically aggressive. Crystal was a paraprofessional in a school before becoming a teacher, and uses that experience to reflect on how she works with paraprofessionals and students. Crystal stated:

I mean, not that I make a ton of money, but paras [paraprofessionals] make less. I remember what that felt like as a para when I was always getting the brunt of it, and the teacher just stood there. So I make a point to make sure that I’m the one

that's in there and I'm helping that kid and I'm knowing what's going on and I know those kids the best. So because of that and having to regulate so many kids, their skills are lacking. Not just because I don't have curriculum, but because I don't have all the time and the spaces.

Sara, Noah, Kelsey, Allie, and Crystal said that they needed more staff available to meet the needs of these students. Sara stated she had students who moved into her school district and were placed into her self-contained classroom; however, the students had higher needs and needed a higher setting. The next setting for those students would be a "setting four", which is a public, separate day school for over 50% of the students' school day (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016). To move students into that higher setting, data and paperwork must be completed, along with meetings with supervisors and parents, to meet the due process requirements in Minnesota and federal law. Sara said:

It's very much the case right now of too many students, not enough staff. So there's a lot of demands on trying to meet all their [students] needs and taking care of that. We have a lot of students moving in who are not in the appropriate setting, who need a higher setting and it takes far too long to get the move to that higher setting. Also teachers, both myself and my co-worker, have pretty much gotten physically assaulted by kids for months on end. And then that doesn't allow me to do the job I need to do and then you get something like your supervisor going "well, why haven't you done this paperwork?". It's because I'm getting hit by a student and I'm just trying to control my students throughout the day.

Kelsey described being frustrated as she has students she believes would be better served in a setting four program (separate school), but that the administration in the district have communicated that they do not have a setting four program.

When I first started the job I was specifically told, like if students were being physically aggressive every single day they would not be held in the program. They would move to setting four, but with no setting four, we just keep on. There's nowhere for them to go. And so we have these students who are showing physical aggressive behaviors everyday towards staff, towards students, towards anyone that comes their way in the school setting. And we, you know, we just have to deal with the behaviors, and it really puts a strain on our program and the resources, because we're not equipped like a setting four program.

Kelsey also talked about not having enough mental health support for these students in the school setting. The students in her program have mental health diagnoses, such as PTSD, from a medical setting; but are unable to access mental health supports outside of the school as there are no openings in programs such as therapy, day treatments, or in-patient programs. At school, students work with a school social worker who works with all the students in the school building. Kelsey stated,

We have a social worker who services the whole school, but she's very involved in the program. I, yeah, I mean, just like a lot of these kids don't have parachutes. I mean, when they hit a mental health crisis, that's it. Right. It's me and the rest of the team who are not mental health professionals. We're school staff.

Noah also talked about having students in the "wrong setting" as an issue. He stated that he had many students who needed to move to a self-contained classroom

setting, but that the teacher the previous year did not complete the paperwork required to make that move. Noah specifically discussed the lack of staff as a problem. In his district, a typical 1st year teacher, which Noah was, would have a caseload of 10 to 14 students. Noah started the school year with 25 students on his caseload. Another SET teacher was hired, which brought his caseload down to 20. He mentioned that his school is not fully staffed with paraprofessionals, which was also needed to address the needs of the students. "I have one student who's developmentally [*sic*], who is a kindergartener, who's developmentally two years old. So trying to figure out how to help that student all day. Yeah, because they can't be left alone at all." There was also a student who was physically aggressive that also needed additional staff to be with during the school day. The lack of staff, either being SET or paraprofessional, added to the job demands for Noah. Without the additional staff, Noah felt there were just not enough people to meet the needs of students. Noah tried to meet all those needs, but felt strained, which led to his feelings of burnout.

Allie did not talk about physical aggression of students, but did talk about how the needs of students outweighed the amount of support available in her school. Allie was initially hired as a self-contained SET for students with significant cognitive/learning challenges. She was told three weeks before school started that her school was being closed after the school year ended. It was decided that before the school year even started, her students would be moved to different school buildings, and her job was eliminated in August. Allie was offered the lead teacher position, which had a lot of responsibilities, but working directly with students was not supposed to be one of them. Allie's school was short staffed; therefore, she was tasked with having a small caseload of

students who needed more support than students being seen by the resource SET, but not necessarily needing a self-contained classroom. She was working with a small number of students on reading, math, social skills, and functional skills, as well as holding all the responsibilities of the lead teacher. "...we were very short staffed to start the school year and we continue to be on and off. It's worked out better for their, the students' sanity, for me to kind of jump in and do both roles."

Crystal felt she needed more staff to support her students with high needs. The school district posted for an SET position in December, only to take the posting down in February due to no applicants. In that time, no substitute teacher or substitute paraprofessional was provided to help out. After February, Crystal's supervisor was going to the school board to ask for permission to post a paraprofessional position; however, as of May, Crystal had not heard or received any help in her classroom. Crystal is having to work with students during her lunch and prep times to support the needs of her students.

All of the teachers were accepting of the needs of the students, and voiced that they wanted to meet all of their needs. They all said that they went into teaching to help students. "...lightbulb moment when a kid finally cracks the code on something is always just so great. And that kind of keeps me going day to day" (Noah). It was the feeling that they are not able to meet those needs that is leading them to feel exhausted. "...as it's almost as if all my energy is being used at work to keep up with the demands there" (Allie). The significant amount of needs that students have that these SETs were expected to meet was pushing the SETs into burnout.

Paperwork. There is a certain amount of paperwork that is required to meet the due process requirements in special education. All six participants stated they knew there

would be a lot of paperwork going into the job (specifically IEPs and behavior support plans); however, it was noted that it took time and effort to get all of the paperwork completed to the degree that they felt was necessary for their students. There was also additional paperwork that was not directly related to due process requirements that was taxing on the SETs. The time and the amount of paperwork required for the SETs was another demand that was pushing these teachers into burnout.

Sara talked about how she had to take additional data on students for four or five months to get a student moved from her self-contained classroom to a setting four, separate school placement. In that time, the student was continuing to have physically aggressive behaviors towards staff every day. She also discussed how in order to get supplies for her classroom it required completing paperwork, and then having to wait for it to be accepted and bought. She stated that for regular supplies, such as gloves or medical chuck pads, she was able to get those as long as she was able to “stay on top of my requisition forms”. It was for specific supplies, such as a particular type of pencils, that would take too long and was just easier to buy them herself than wait. Third-party billing was another aspect of paperwork Sara discussed as a factor contributing to her burnout. Third-party billing is the paperwork that is required for the school district to bill Medical Assistance to recoup the costs of what can be considered “medical needs” of students. It is not required as part of due process for the student, but for the school district to receive additional funds. Sara stated that she would get emails from her administrators when she did not complete this paperwork; however, Sara believed that it was not her priority at the time.

Its, I mean, paperwork in itself is a bear. Yeah, I mean, you know you're going to do it as part of the job. But when it comes back to that, what's the priority of me at the present verses what administration seems to care about? ...I know I have paperwork, but the huge concern of everybody I get that done, when it's just like, well, I'm actually trying to take care of the kids. That was supposed to be my primary job, you know. (Sara)

Sara felt that her school day was spent entirely in directly working with students and that there was not time to complete the required paperwork.

Noah felt that additional paperwork was how his district could deny him resources. He told the story of how he was told that if he filled out some paperwork, he would be able to get an additional paraprofessional to help meet student needs. He filled the paperwork out, but it was initially denied as he did not fill it out properly. He had broken data down by 5 minutes, instead of 10 minutes. Or he would have used the word "gym" instead of "physical education". As Noah said, "A lot of red tap. And weirdly specific red tape."

Kelsey, Kari, and Crystal talked about needing additional time to complete the paperwork that is required. Kelsey stated, "... time is always an issue, I guess. Like time for paperwork. I don't mind paperwork at all. I think it's like, a very necessary part of the job or like writing IEPs and behavior plans." Kari brought her paperwork home and on trips with her to complete when she was not at work. She talked about how it took her time, because she wanted to write thorough reports for her students.

...I try to write pretty thorough IEPs, I think that is part of it. ...But I do spend a lot of time writing those because, you know, I want to be thorough. And I do

have, like a template I use, so I can reuse certain verbiage and such, but it just, it does take a lot of time to write a good, solid IEP.

Crystal noted that because she loses her prep and lunch to working with students, she does not have time to complete the paperwork during the work day.

I mean, IEPs are part of the job. My IEPs are obviously bigger, because they all have behavior plans in them. And you know, I think if I had prep it would be a lot different. It's like I'm doing that on my *[sic]* all my time. And it's like, I think if I literally had my prep time that I probably could bring less work home. But, I mean, I knew IEPs going in that. That's part of the job and you know, some people can get it done during the school day and some people can't, and it's just hard when you know, mine are like a minimum of 21 pages.

Sara and Kari noted that they are offered what are called "due process days".

These are days where a substitute teacher will teach their students while they work on paperwork for the day. They are required to create sub-plans for the day, which both Sara and Kari concluded that it was more work for the due process day, than to complete the work at home. If they took a due process day, someone within their school districts would be covering their classes. Frequently, that person would need to either leave or need help working with the students. The SETs would be called back to their room to work with students, losing the day for paperwork.

Allie felt pressure from others to continue to work, even if she was sick or taking paid time off.

...I was home last week, very ill with the flu. ...and I was still getting calls and texts and emails of "what do I do here" and "what should I do" and "what do you

want”, and like, I’m not there, and I can’t even practically breathe, so I can’t help you. But it was the expectation of you. I came in the next day after three days... and immediately was bombarded with “well did you get this done?” And that was a lot to not snap at, because I didn’t get those things done and very behind right now. When you’re ill and you can’t do the job. We have those sick days for a reason, but for some reason, it’s not respected as a boundary.

Allie also talked about how her school district would encourage staff to take time for themselves, but then administrators and co-workers were still pressured to complete work outside of the workday.

Paperwork is a fact of life for all SETs, and the participants all agreed they knew that when they took their jobs. They were not expecting to spend so much time on paperwork, particularly outside of the workday. It was also unexpected to have so much paperwork that was not related to due process, but instead to gain resources such as supplies, extra paraprofessional support, or money for the school district. “If I were able to spend less time doing all of the other things, like the paperwork and such, and I could focus more on just the teaching and the engaging with the kids, then that would help” (Kari).

Evaluations. Noah, Crystal, and Kari stated that completing evaluations of students not on their caseload were a part of their responsibilities, and a cause of their burnout in the profession. Many of these evaluations were of students who had not yet received special education services, but were in evaluation to determine if they would qualify for those services (initial evaluations). Noah and Kari talked about how much additional work these evaluations added to their plate, as they are responsible for direct

academic testing, reviewing of records, interviewing teachers and/or parents, and observations of the student. Crystal was required to do the observations for these students, but did not have time as she was de-escalating/regulating students with social-emotional needs or trying to teach those students the skills they needed as part of their IEP.

Noah had an experience where the school district hired a “teacher emeritus” to complete all initial evaluations; however, after a couple months, the administration moved the teacher emeritus to another building. The staff were not told why that teacher emeritus was moved, and the staff believe that it was due to “pettiness” and “political” reasons. And so he, and the other SETs at his building, were required to complete these evaluations, in addition to providing services to the students on their caseload.

Kari had a lot of initial evaluations this school year, which was an increase within the last couple of years. Kari said that each evaluation takes her “at least 10 hours of my time to finish”. She talked about how she misses her prep and due process time to complete the evaluation components with the students during the school day.

Crystal, being a self-contained SET, was expected to be teaching the majority of her day within her classroom; however, due to her specific license, was also required to consult and observe other students in the building who were in the evaluation process. Minnesota Department of Education (2017) required that “assessments and other evaluation materials used to assess a child are administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel” (p. 6). This means that when observing a student, the SET must have a license that indicates they are knowledgeable in the disability area. For example, if a student is being considered for special education services under the disability category of autism

spectrum disorders (ASD), the person observing the child must have a license in the area of ASD or an academic behavior strategies (ABS) license. The ABS license allows SETs to “work across multiple disability areas with students who have mild to moderate needs in the areas of academic, behavior, social/emotional, communication and functional performance” (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2022). Crystal and one other SET in her building held this license; therefore, was told she needed to participate in the evaluation process to meet Minnesota Department of Education requirements. This was difficult for Crystal, as she was often busy working directly with students in her self-contained classroom.

And then it feels like it, personally to me, it feels like I’m not a team player.

Because it’s like, I can’t do an observation, because I don’t get to leave my room.

I don’t have a prep time. I don’t have a lunchtime to go do an observation to help out.

For Crystal, this was another demand that she was unable to meet due to trying to meet the needs of students and lack of time during her school day.

Summary. As noted in Chapter 2, the job demands of the SET can vary, based on the school district or setting; however, the participants in this study talked about similar demands that were weighing heavily on their minds. They identified high student need, paperwork, and completing evaluations as the most significant of the SET job demands and that these demands were causes of their burnout. In the theme of resources, the participants identified specific resources that helped them; however, it has not had the effect of reducing their burnout in the profession.

Job Resources

Resources can be put into two categories: job resources and personal resources. Job resources are aspects of a job that serve a purpose of achieving work goals, reducing the physical/mental costs of job demands, and/or stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). Personal resources are those psychological and social aspects of a person that can reduce the physical/mental costs of job demands, and/or stimulate personal growth and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). In job resources, sub-themes of using staff as resources, specific professional development, and the teachers' union were noted as positive resources. Personal resources of friends/family, mental health resources, and personal boundaries also came up as themes.

Resources are important in the JD-R theory, as resources are there to mitigate the effects of job demands and reduce strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). It was important to identify what resources were working for the SETs to answer the secondary research question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* There could be resources that are under utilized, or changed to increase the resources ability to serve its purpose in the system.

Staff as Resources. All six participants noted specific staff members in their school district that they valued as resources. In Sara's school district, they hire "coordinators", who were teachers in a classroom, but now help coordinate the special education services among several different schools. They are still on a teacher contract, and they do not supervise teachers. This person was invaluable to Sara, as they were the person she could go to and feel support. Her coordinator had a deep understanding of her students, as well as provided helpful support with both due process and students without

making Sara feel judged for asking. The coordinator is also someone who Sara can go to discuss frustrations with administration.

Noah also talked about having a person similar to Sara's coordinator, who was called a special education facilitator, who had an understanding of what was happening and felt could offer specific help without judgment. That person was only available for a short while, before they left due to health issues and was not replaced. Noah talked about how there were supposed to be several more facilitators in the school district, but that due to staffing issues there were only four for the entire district. This made it difficult for Noah to use the facilitator as a resource. Noah also talked about using a "teacher emeritus" as a resource to complete evaluations, but that was also not available after a couple months. Noah's consistent resource was his mentor teacher, who worked in the same building.

I have a great onsite mentor which has been absolutely fantastic. She's been very helpful. Just letting me vent even sometimes, and helping me through things, and yeah. In real terms, and not just pretending and putting a mask on. (Noah)

His mentor was helpful, but he talks about how this mentor is also providing him support on top of the mentor's SET job. "...but there's only so much that she can do as well. She's got 25 kids herself. Now I've got to figure out a lot of paperwork on my own." Noah's principal and assistant principals were a resource, particularly in helping him keep his prep time. He said,

We're at the beginning of the year, I had behavior staff coming and going, "hey, you need to deal with your kid" constantly during my prep, and not having any

prep at all. And then admin [specifically, his principal and assistant principals] stepping in and going, “no, this is his time”.

Noah also felt that his principal and assistant principals gave him trust and autonomy when working with students, which was the support he needed in his building.

Kelsey talked about having three behavior strategists whom she could go to as a resource. These behavior strategists were helpful in finding solutions to difficult situations; however, she felt that her supervisor would send behavior strategists to her, instead of coming and providing other resources.

...that those three roles have been huge, because they’ll come in, they’ll help brainstorm with the time, but not giving us any more resources, because they’re not admin, but just trying to help us work with what we have.

She also discussed using a person who is a curriculum specialist to help determine what curriculums would be appropriate and how to use them in the classroom.

Allie had a behavior strategist, as well as an occupational therapist, who she utilized as resources to help with students.

Our BIT [Behavior Intervention Teacher] is fabulous. He’s helped me a lot, increase my skills with things. ...So I’m especially working mostly with those higher needs kiddos and accessing him a lot more than I probably would any other district resource, between him and our occupational therapist. I think those are the two that I reach out to the most for support. They’re both just great. They can get me resources. They get me things really fast. So they’re a great resource to have.

Allie had her supervisor as a resource to get staff in her building.

So I think what's been helpful is this is, like I said, my previous lead. She's now my supervisor, and that has helped tremendously when she was going through her job transition. ...So we didn't have teachers. We didn't have paras. It was really difficult and I felt like there was no one to go to at that time. When she finally got put into that position, she put her authority in place and she got us those staff members that we needed.

Allie also talked about the need to have "your person" in the building where you work. When her supervisor was the lead teacher, that was "her person", and now that person is a co-worker. She stated,

My supervisor has always been my person for my entire teaching career. Not having her in the building everyday is hard. But my - who was supposed to be my co-teacher in the DCD [developmental cognitive disabilities] program - she and I have a great relationship too. So we become each other's people this year. Trying to keep each other sane.

Crystal was given a teacher mentor, as this was only her second year as an SET; however, it was not the resource she had expected.

They gave me and another brand new teacher... they gave us the same mentor who is trying to figure out if she can retire this year. So she is completely checked out. She comes to me for questions on stuff and it's like, you're supposed to be my mentor, right?

A behavior analyst was also available for her to consult with during the school year. This was a helpful resource for Crystal, as they were able to help do observations, complete Functional Behavior Analysis (FBAs), and work with Crystal on behavior support plans.

A behavior analyst was also a resource for Kari, along with the school psychologist. They both imputed behavior data into spreadsheets for Kari, as she was busy tracking behavior data on up to five different students at one time. Kari also received support from a special education coordinator, who like for Sara and Noah, was a person who did not teach, but also was not a supervisor. The coordinator was able to help Kari with paperwork when moving students into different settings.

All six participants were able to name staff members that were provided to them as resources for their job. Behavior specialists and special education coordinators/facilitators/team leads were just two of the common people named as resources for the participants. These roles were important to the SETs, but many of the SETs stated that these resources were either not available enough, given limited resources themselves, or were also feeling burnout. These limitations on the support staff members made it difficult to be a resource that could serve a purpose of achieving work goals, reducing the physical/mental costs of job demands, and/or stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). This led to job demands being too high for the SETs, which contributed to their feelings of burnout.

Specific Professional Development. Two of the participants, Kelsey and Kari noted they received specific professional development that applied to their positions. Kelsey was able to attend two different conferences on children's mental health, and she felt that if she asked to go to conferences the school district would agree to let her go. Kari talked about how her school building was participating in a program called Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Training. As part of this training, Kari joined a cohort of teachers in her building to attend training with the program's founder. She met

with this cohort during district professional development days and every few weeks to complete a binder study. Kari stated that this training “reinvigorated” her desire to teach. This resource fit into the JD-R theory, as it increased the SETs knowledge and motivation for the job and allowed for job crafting to fit the SET (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016).

Teachers’ Union. Both Sara and Noah talked about how their teachers’ union was a resource to them. For Sara, it was job security, as well as having the union negotiate benefits that she sees as a resource. When asked why she does not leave teaching she stated,

...I don’t really have the capacity to do anything else that wouldn’t be putting me at a much lower salary and without much protection or potentially benefits so, ...I’ve built up experience, union protection, medical and dental and all the things that, you know. You have to consider the benefits are huge.

Noah talked about how his district’s teacher contract allows for protection in how many students are “placed” into their school for special education. When asked about the contract as a resource Noah said,

We play that card as much as we can... with few things that we have. It’s all about things that were good for the parents, so the district can’t take that away and look great at the same time.

Staff, specific professional development, and teachers’ unions were the job resources that came up as themes in the data. Again, this is important as when these resources were used, the SETs identified that it either reduced the job demands that were causing burnout, or it increased their motivation to continue as an SET.

A number of personal resources were revealed in this study, including friends/family, mental health resources, and personal boundaries. These are also important to understand, as just like job resources, personal resources also buffer the impact of job demand strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). This goes to answering the secondary research question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?*, as these are resources that can be both indirectly and directly supported by school district administrators and in policy.

Personal Resources

Friends and Family. Sara, Noah, Allie and Kari all stated that friends and/or family were important resources in their lives. They discussed how, even though their family may not understand, their families listen to them talk about the difficulties of the job. Noah, Allie, and Kari also talked about having someone to talk to who was in education was important. For Noah, it was his aunt who was an SET in another district comparable to his. “So just getting to hear her and her perspective is always nice.” Allie’s mother-in-law was her former principal in elementary school. She stated that her mother-in-law was able to help her know if she should be worried or not. “And she’s been just, she kind of puts it in perspective for me. So, if I come to her and say, ‘Hey, this happened.’, she can be like ‘yep, that’s normal’ or ‘oh boy, that’s not okay.’” Although not a family member, Kari had a mental health therapist who was previously an SET. Kari states, “when I talk about things, she at least has an understanding from her years doing special ed. She gets it more than, like other, any other therapist I’ve had.”

Mental Health Resources. Mental health resources came up as a resource for two of the participants, Allie and Kari. Allie's mental health was a concern during this school year to the point where she considered leaving her job. Allie noted, as in the sub-theme above, that her husband was very supportive of whatever choice she decided to make at that time. Allie wanted to push through the school year; therefore, she was able to meet with a doctor and get prescribed medication. She tried to see a mental health therapist; however, was unable to get an appointment. Kari, as stated above, had a mental health therapist whose previous job was an SET. Kari was previously married, and since her divorce did not have anyone to talk to about her job. She said,

Like, I don't have anybody at home that I can kind of talk to and like, you know, just get all the things off my chest with. So do you think that does affect me a little bit, where it's like I'm holding on to a lot more day-to-day.

Noah, Allie, and Kari all noted that their school districts offer mental health resources; however, they stated that those resources were too broad or too complicated. Noah stated, "they [the school district] put things out there that are there to be there. They don't work necessarily, or they lead you to nowhere." Allie talked about how her school district offered mental health professional development. "We have to do a lot of professional development on mental health and making sure that we're taking time for ourselves. But again, it's not really respected [by school district administration] when we do that." Kari was called into her principal's office for having a classroom that was messy and unwelcoming. Kari told both her principal and special education supervisor that it was because she was stressed. Her supervisor then offered the district's mental health resources as help to her. Mental health resources could be considered a job resource;

however, the two participants who accessed those supports, found the resources on their own and not through their employer.

Personal Boundaries. Having to create their own personal boundaries from work and home was mentioned by Sara, Noah, and Allie. In Sara's interview, she says "I've really had to teach myself, leave your work at work". She admits to bringing home some work, but that it will be activities that she can do while watching a video, "so basically, I can do it while I'm still doing something I like to do." Noah does not give out his personal phone number to parents. He tells a story of how he has a parent and a child's therapist emailing him constantly to tell him "how I should change my teaching techniques to this particular student". He gets constant emails, but at least they are not phone calls. In January, Allie found out she was pregnant with her second child; therefore, she felt boundaries were required so that she can get the right amount of rest.

I have not been working at home as often. There are still days when I do, but I'm not up until 12 [midnight], I'm not rushing my baby to bed, like I play with her. I feed her. I do all that first. Then I go to bed or do some work and go to bed. Um, so that was the first step of [*sic*] I needed to make clear to myself. Like, I had to be my own resource to say no, we're not doing this. That's not worth it.

In these instances, the SETs identified that personal boundaries were important to buffer the job demand strain, but that those boundaries were not respected by the school district or by parents.

Summary. Resources are the things that serve the purpose of achieving work goals, reducing the physical/mental costs of job demands, and/or stimulating personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job resources of staff, specific

professional development and teachers' unions were sub-themes that SETs received from working in their school district that helped them do their job. Personal resources of friends/family, mental health resources, and personal boundaries were the resources that SETs had either found themselves or were skills they had developed to do their job. These resources were helpful for the SETs to reduce the job demand strain; however, they were not enough to keep the SETs from job burnout. There is one other theme that did not quite fit in the job demands or resources categories. The theme of administrative support could have been considered a job resource; however, all six of the participants viewed this as a hindrance, rather than something that would mediate the job demands or encourage personal growth. This is why it was decided to give administrative support its own category.

Administrative Support

Administrative support, particularly from special education supervisors, was a theme among all of the participants. When asked about what support would look like, participants talked about having supervisors observe their classrooms more often, providing empathy, and trusting the SET. Each participant had a story to tell, but it is first important to understand the hierarchical structure of elementary special education within the Minneapolis and West metro area.

In all of the participants' interviews, the hierarchical structure of elementary special education was described in similar terms. The SETs had two direct supervisors: the principal in the building where they worked and the special education supervisor assigned to that building. Principals held a K-12 Principals License through the MN Board of School Administrators. The principal was responsible for the entire school, and

was in charge of curriculum and instruction in the general education classrooms. The principal was considered a direct supervisor of the SET, but depending on the principal's background and leadership style, it varied on how involved they were with the SET. The special education supervisor held a license of Direction of Special Education through the MN Board of School Administrators. In the participants' school districts, the special education supervisor was in charge of the special education programs of several elementary schools, which included providing direct supervision to SETs.

Sara expressed deep frustration with her special education supervisor. "I mean, it really feels like that administration is in their white tower over in the central building. And they don't actually see or experience what goes down in the classrooms. They just make decisions for us." Sara talked about how difficult it was to complete paperwork when she was spending the day working with students with physically aggressive behaviors. She felt that her supervisor was critical of her and her teaching, when Sara was looking for empathy and grace. She stated,

...I do have someone, like my direct supervisor, come in, and can't even handle this situation themselves. But then is telling me I'm not doing my job. Right? Kind of like, "have you tried this, this, and this?" And it's like, well, you walked into my room, lasted about 30 minutes, and then walked out. Like, yeah, the gall to tell me you know. "Or maybe you haven't tried this". Or maybe it's because I have three different kids and almost all need one-on-ones right now.

When Sara asked for help from her special education supervisor, she felt shame from her supervisor. "It got to the point where I felt I was being shamed every time for asking for support." Sara also said that once she had the data to move students into a higher

instructional setting, that the decision was then up to the special education supervisors. Sara was not a part of those conversations, which frustrated Sara as the supervisors making those decisions were not in the classroom.

When asked what special education supervisors could do to support her, Sara stated she wanted the supervisors to observe and get to know her classroom. "...just to come and look, you know, especially higher up admins. And just really observe it." She then told a story of how when a supervisor observed her room, she was able to move a student into a higher instructional setting in three weeks (verses 4-5 months), because the supervisor understood the student's needs. Sara also asked that supervisors provide "grace" to SETs, especially when the demands of providing for student needs in the classroom are overwhelming.

Sara only mentioned her principal in a comment that they do not require her to use the same curriculum as the general education teachers. Noah, however, talks about his principal and assistant principal as the reason why he is not leaving his school.

...Building admins are fantastic where I'm at. They are probably the only reason I stay in the district. As poorly as many offices run, having principals and assistant principals that are super supporting and helpful is not something that I'm ready to run away from.

He credits his principal and assistant principal with trusting him as a teacher, and giving him autonomy with his teaching. "They trust what I saw with my kids. If I feel like a kid needs something, they work with me. They don't check me and say 'no, this is what they need actually.'" This principal and assistant principal helped Noah protect his prep time by stepping in when other staff members were asking for Noah to work with students. "A

lot of that falls on leadership and how they view your time.” It showed Noah that he was respected as an SET.

Noah did not feel the same respect from special education supervisors. He and his SET colleagues felt discouraged when a teacher emeritus was hired to help them, and then moved to another school without a clear explanation by the special education supervisors. Noah stated that the move was out of “pettiness” and was politically motivated. He talked about how the school district’s leadership had drastically changed after a teachers’ strike the year before he was hired. Noah felt there was animosity between district administration and teachers, because of what was said by both parties during the strike. It was difficult working with district special education administration. “...reaching out to [*sic*] for support to a district and being shut down by them.” Noah also stated that many of the administrators, including those who worked in the main offices left the school district. This left many positions filled with new people and other positions unfilled. When asked if he has contact with his special education supervisor, Noah said,

We’re supposed to, it doesn’t always happen. And if they’re there for meetings and things like that, I don’t know if they’re always paying attention to be completely honest. Which is understandable, when you stretched so thin, if you have other problems that you’re trying to deal with. ...it’s difficult to get people to come in, look, and see what’s actually happening.

When asked what support would look like for Noah, he stated that he would like special education administrators to listen and trust him. “Listening, and even looking at the students that we have sent out [to different instructional settings], seeing the changes in behaviors and going, ‘maybe they know what they’re doing.’”

When asked what experiences were contributing to her burnout, Kelsey immediately said she did not feel her program (self-contained EBD program) was going to be successful. She stated that her administration (both principals and special education supervisors) were not making any decisions that helped her program. Kelsey stated that she had several students who were verbally and physically aggressive, but that her administrators did not step in to help. She stated,

We've had students stab adults. We've had students, you know, hit adults to the point where there's marks, and death threats, and students trying to choke adults. ...there are so many red flags and admin don't have any solutions or answers, and they're just letting it ride and it's gonna sink.

Administrators had inconsistent responses to Kelsey's concerns about the threatening behavior from students, which led Kelsey to believe that there were no procedures around how to support staff when working with these students. Kelsey was also concerned when she would have the data that supported a decision to move a student to a higher instructional setting, but it was ignored. "I'm not an administrator. I can't make big picture decisions, and I totally get that. But when the data shows the need, and I present that need, and nothing happens."

There was no crisis team available in Kelsey's building; therefore, SETs are the ones expected to handle students who show significant, negative behaviors.

When things get aggressive, when things get unsafe, it's [*sic*] my teaching partner and I will initially try to de-escalate the situation. And then it's tricky, because if we call admin too early, then we're pulling them away from their jobs. But if we

call admin too late, I mean, we've just you know, go through the wringer for 20 minutes with no success.

Kelsey felt she was inconveniencing administration when asking for help during a crisis situation, and she described that this happened everyday in her school. There was also no follow-up with teachers from any administrator after a crisis situation. She told a story of a colleague who was stabbed by a student with a pair of scissors. That colleague was expected to work with the student the next school day, without a meeting with the administrators on what had happened, how to restore the situation, or how to keep the staff safe.

I mean, there are things that we [teachers] can do internally as a team within the program to like, you know, remove the triggers as much as possible throughout their [student's] day, but, um, at some point there needs to be, you know, talk about how to keep staff safe. Right? I mean, you can't predict everything.

Special education supervisors not being in the building was noted in Kelsey's interview. She talked about how her supervisor would send the behavior analyst to her classroom, instead of coming to see what was happening. "...I've seen my supervisor twice this year, and the conversations that I do have with her, they're just so out of touch." When asked what administrators could do to support her, Kelsey stated she wanted her administrators to give specific support around issues.

I think admin support, and like when I say support, it's just not them validating that this is a hard job and like "you're doing great". Like, actual tangible things that, like, when I bring up issues, they have a game plan for. ...I think whenever I bring up these issues in the program, or things that aren't working, I just get like

“you’re doing the best you can.” “This is a hard job.” “We appreciate you.” ...So, like tangible changes to things that aren’t working. Instead of just, like, mixing the deck.

She also would like administrators to support her when speaking with parents. Kelsey talked about how parents often spoke to her in an unprofessional manner and/or made demands that she felt were unreasonable. Administrators agreed to these demands, as they did not want to “ruffle feathers”, but then expected Kelsey to go along with these demands without consulting her. Overall, to Kelsey, it felt that administrators were telling both parents and teachers what they thought they wanted to hear, instead of providing any guidance or supportive measures to improve the program.

Allie had a much different experience with her special education supervisor, as she knew her special education supervisor before she became a supervisor. Allie and her supervisor worked together when her supervisor was the lead teacher at her school. The lead teacher role was not a supervisor role, but instead an SET who coordinated the special education services within a school. This allowed them to build a relationship before they each took on different roles. Allie had moved into that lead teacher role, and her supervisor became her supervisor. This gave Allie someone to talk to and use as a resource. Her supervisor was able to hire staff, which was not happening before the supervisor moved into that role. “...she made some waves to get what we needed. So she’s been great. As a resource, there is a positive.” Allie had frustration with district leadership in more of a broad sense. She refers to this as “the district”, verse naming particular leaders in her district. In August, the district had informed the staff at her

school that the school would be closing the following school year. This created a low morale among the staff in the building.

I think, knowing that the building's closing, that obviously put a damper on everything this year. You can just tell the morale of the whole team is low.

Because, we all know that this is it, and there's kind of just never been a point of, you know, let's just get through it together. It's always just kind of been, "well it's over." So we couldn't get past that as a team. (Allie)

This also caused skepticism among the teachers in the district leadership. "When the district is closing, how do you feel like anything they say is sincere. When they say, 'oh, we're here to support you', and you are like, 'Keep it. You're closing us', it's just hard." This skepticism was evident when asked about what administrators could do to support her work as an SET. Allie said, "...it just seems like they say that they want to support, but it's just piled on." She did mention that better staffing of programs (i.e. hiring the appropriate number of SETs and paras), better training for lead teachers, and respecting boundaries were things administration could do. In respecting boundaries, Allie talked about how the leadership in her district had busy jobs that required working at home; therefore, it felt it was expected for her to do the same.

And I don't think I even see it [boundaries], like with my supervisor or her coworkers, my principal. It's just again, it's a systemic thing. It's not necessarily teaching, but like knowing when I'm getting emails at 10:30 at night from a different supervisor. ...they're still working too. It's not just me. ...it can feel like, "oh the district doesn't do anything", but no, the district level people are also

working hard. And truly, if the job is that demanding, that we're up that late then something is wrong.

For Allie, boundaries were important, as she mentioned this as a personal resource as well. For Crystal, as for Kelsey, it was about tangible actions. When asked what experiences were contributing to her burnout, Crystal stated, "The fact that I have no support from admin." Crystal, like Kelsey, did not differentiate between her principal or her special education supervisor. Crystal was in her second year as an SET and was hired to create an instructional level three program for students with emotional and behavior disorders. She had asked her administration for more staff, and another SET position was posted, but never filled. Crystal was frustrated that the posted position was only open for two months, and that it was never filled by a substitute teacher or with a paraprofessional. Crystal was working with students during her prep and lunch periods, which she brought up to her administrators that this was a breach in her contract. Her administrators worked to have Crystal receive additional pay for that time lost for the first half of the school year. She was told someone would be available to cover her classroom for the rest of the school year. That person assigned only comes sporadically, which was frustrating for Crystal. "So when you work, you know, when you feel like everything's working against you, that's where the burnout comes from."

Having her administrators in the building to support was also noted in Crystal's interview. "The sped supervisor is only in our building one day a week. And she's went into my room six times this year. She's afraid of my room as are many people." When there is a difficult situation, Crystal will call her principal; however, she noted that her

principal is often not available to help. She is then the only person left to handle the situation.

Crystal states that she had a good relationship with her special education supervisor, but did not feel listened to by that same person.

I feel like I have a good relationship with admin as well. Even though I feel like I'm not listened to, or valued in that sense. But I also know a lot of their decisions don't come from them. It comes from higher up. It's part of the district. It's not them that can say yes or no to some of these things.

Overall, Crystal felt that she was given a program and then left alone to a very difficult job. "Because, when you feel like you're just sinking in your own ship, it's, it's hard. It's a lot, you know."

Kari's experience with administration was that they (both special education supervisor and principal) were not involved in her day-to-day, or they would become involved in a way that was critical of her ability to do the job. "I would say my special education supervisor just doesn't really exist. And my principal doesn't really exist." She tells a story of how she was called into a meeting with both administrators to talk about how messy and unwelcoming her classroom was that year. It was not about any student or teaching style, only about her classroom. Kari described this as "unsupportive" and felt this was happening frequently with her principal.

For my principal, that was just like another thing in a long line of things that don't feel supportive from her. Like last year and my final observation meeting. She was, like, being super critical of everything that I was doing, and gave me maybe one or two positives, which [*sic*] gave me a lot of negatives. And it got to the

point where I started crying, because it [*sic*] just was feeling like, because I bust my ass to do this job.

During her meeting about her messy classroom, Kari told her administrators that she was overwhelmed, to which her special education supervisor asked if she needed to access the mental health supports from the school district. Her principal told her to “work smarter, not harder.” “...she’ll say things, acting like the job I have is not as hard as it is, and it just feels really...[trails off]”. Her principal also stated that Kari needed to ask for help. This was difficult for Kari, stating “I’ve been so overwhelmed. I don’t even know what I need to ask for to get help.”

When asked what support administrators could give her, Kari talked about having her special education supervisor come and observe her more often. She also talked about having her principal to show empathy and understanding, instead of judgment or wanting to fix a situation.

I think being more present in a way that truly is like coming in to see, like, what is going on. Just try to see me and what I do. I don’t feel like my special ed. supervisor is just ever there. ...you know, having people [administrators] more present would be helpful, but also, then with my other supervisor [principal], having her be present in a way that doesn’t feel judgmental. ...Having somebody who really comes in and is able to see people for who they are, I guess, that would be helpful from my administrators.

Although each participant had a unique experience with their administrators, they collectively had themes of being present, showing empathy, and to take action when needed. Those actions can be in moving students to different instructional settings,

adding staff to support student needs, or even having consistent procedures of supporting SETs when a student crisis occurs. It is in being present, showing empathy, and taking actions that can show SETs they are valued members of the school community.

Chapter Four Summary

The primary research question of this study was *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* This chapter reviewed the data collected from interviews with six participants in April and May of 2023. Two main themes, job demands and resources were found in the data. Within these two themes, several sub-themes emerged as specific findings to answer what was causing job burnout, as well as what resources were helping the SETs. Those resources, both job and personal, were not enough to keep the SETs from experiencing burnout. The theme of administrative support was also a clear theme in the data; however, it did not fit with the main themes of job demands and resources.

This study has a secondary question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* Data around this question was addressed in the themes of resources and in administrative support. Chapter Five discusses what was learned from the data, and how it supports the current literature in burnout. Implications, limitations, and future research will also be explored.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

This study used in-depth interviews of six participants to examine the phenomenon of burnout among elementary special education teachers (SETs) in an urban and suburban area. The primary research question was *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* It was found that among these six participants, the job demands of working with students with high needs, paperwork, and completing evaluations all contributed to their feelings of burnout. Job resources of specialized staff, specific professional development, and teacher unions were named as helpful for SETs, but did not do enough to mitigate the hindrances of the job demands. Administrative support was also a theme that was revealed among the six participants as impacting their feelings of burnout as an SET.

Chapter Five reviews the results and connects them to the literature review to give deeper meaning of how the data is relevant to the phenomenon of burnout. It also revisits the secondary research question, *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* Recommended changes by both the researcher and the participants are explained in the implications section of this chapter. Limitations of the study, future research, and how the results of this study will be communicated are also addressed in this chapter.

Major Learnings and Connections to the Literature

There were four major learnings that came out of this study and in this section those learnings will be discussed, as well as how they connect to the previous literature around burnout. Who has burnout and how it affects them explains what the phenomenon of burnout looks like in special education teachers. Job demands as hindrances discusses how, when using the job demands-resources theory of burnout, these demands are causes of burnout in special education teachers. The resources provided are not enough section will explain how these resources, although helpful, did not mitigate the effects of burnout on special education teachers. Lastly, the section of administrative support discusses the research and the specific support that these SETs were looking for when working with their administrators.

Who has Burnout and How it Affects Them

The profiles of the participants validated the research found for this study. Maslach and Leiter (2017) stated that it was younger individuals who have a higher risk of burnout. Billingsly (2004), when looking specifically at teachers, also stated that younger and had fewer years of service were at high risk of burnout. All participants in this study indicated that they were under 40 years old with less than 10 years as a special education teacher (SET).

Two of the participants indicated they were seeing a doctor and/or therapist for mental health support, due to the demands of the job. This also validates Aloha and Hakanen's (2014) work that showed that there were both mental and physical health risks when an individual is experiencing burnout. Even myself, during my own year of being burned out in the profession, had physical health issues that appeared that school year.

Outcomes of burnout affect both workplace and homelife (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). This was also evident in the data that was collected. Kelsey talked about how she and her partner wanted to have kids, but that she could not see a safe way to be pregnant and continue to hold her current job. Crystal stated that she needed to be present when she was home to help her daughter, who was battling an eating disorder; however, she always felt conflicted as she knew there were things that she needed to do for her job as an SET. Allie went into detail about how she spent the majority of her time at home completing tasks for her SET job, and that she was not prioritizing her family. It was only after discovering she was pregnant with her second child that she realized she needed to create boundaries and make time for herself and her family.

Our young teachers are burning out fast, and it is concerning how much burnout affects their everyday lives outside of the classroom. Given the negative effects on their lives, if these teachers end up leaving the profession, it is a wonder who would even want to take their place.

Job Demands as Hindrances

Demerouti et al. (2001) defined job demands as “physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort” (p. 501). It was further defined by Crawford, LePine, and Rich (2010) as hindrances and challenges. Hindrances are “stressful demands that have the potential to thwart personal growth, learning, and goal attainment” (p. 836), and challenges are “stressful demands that have the potential to promote mastery, personal growth, or future gains” (p. 836). The job demands that were identified in this study would be characterized as hindrances. Four of the six participants discussed how students were physically aggressive towards them

and other staff. Three of the four talked of the behaviors happening every day. Kelsey and Crystal, both working in classrooms specifically for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, said that they knew about these job demands, but that they received no help when the behaviors happened every day. Kelsey described reporting concerns she had about dangerous behaviors from students, but that there was never follow-up from administration. Crystal and Kelsey felt that they were inconveniencing administration if they called them for help during a difficult situation. Sara talked about how, because she had students who were aggressive to her every day, she had limited patience for any of her students. The everyday nature of responding to these types of needs from students without additional resources made the job demand a hindrance, rather than a challenge.

The participants also talked about the number of students with high needs made it difficult to meet the demands of the job. Noah talked about needing an “extra body” to support a kindergarten student who was at the developmental level of a two-year-old. He also stated he had a caseload with a higher number of students than expected for a first year teacher in his school district. Crystal also needed extra adult support so that she could have the time to teach social and emotional skills to students to avoid the crisis situations that were happening on an everyday basis. Allie was working with students with high needs, in addition to completing the full-time job expectations of the lead teacher. The number of student needs outweighed the SETs ability to meet, which again, turned these demands into a hindrance versus a challenge.

Paperwork and evaluations were both demands that could have been considered challenges, but became hindrances as the SETs had no time to complete these tasks during the workday. Sara said that she was already exhausted working with students with

high needs; therefore, she was unable to complete paperwork. Kelsey said that time was always an issue when it came to paperwork, but that she understood why the paperwork needed to be completed. Noah talked about how his year was going well when a teacher emeritus was hired to complete evaluations, but that he quickly became overworked once that teacher emeritus was no longer available. Crystal also talked about how she wanted to be a “team player” and help with evaluations, but that she had no time due to working with students with high needs.

All six participants talked about how working with students with disabilities was the challenge that they signed up for when taking this job. When asked what keeps them in the profession, they all talked about their work with students. Sara was the least enthusiastic about her work, saying, “It’s like, yeah, I do it for the kids, but great. I’m not getting pain enough for anything you know. I’m overwhelmed, and I can’t find that a lot anymore”. In that, Sara was saying that the burnout was overpowering her desire to work with students. The other five were all still wanting to help students with disabilities.

Below are what those SETs stated as their reasons for continuing as an SET:

Noah: ...I have a strong sense that I just want to help kids and I just want to, I like hanging out with them. They continue to amaze me every day with their knowledge. Once, just one thing that keeps me coming back every day. Okay, lightbulb moment when a kid finally cracks the code on something is always so great. And that kind of keeps me going day to day.

Kelsey: I think it’s just the kids. I mean, honestly, like I look at a gen. ed. teachers job that is, know of, just, like, boring. Like you’re just teaching, you’re teaching the whole group; whereas I like the individual goals and, like, just building those,

like super strong relationships with kids. You know, especially being in a behavior program, like that's huge. And I just really enjoy getting to know the kids, having that connection with them. That is so strong. That you can, like, build on the skills for them. Improving on their behaviors. It's just so many fun moments, and just having fun with the kids. And you know, finally seeing the lightbulbs click. ...I just, I couldn't imagine not having that piece of my job.

Allie: ...you just feel like you're actually doing something that makes a difference. That helps others that's not just passive. Like, you're actually actively engaged with the kids, with the families, to help get them what they need.

Crystal: My students, I love every single one of them. And you know, I give them a new start every single day, no matter what happened the day before. And I think that they, they feel that. I finally just broke through to one of mine, which was like, the biggest! ...Yes, I don't love my job right now, but I make an impact on these kids. And I need to do it for the kids.

Kari: I put relationships really high up in my priority list, because I think students are more willing to put in hard work and effort when they see they have somebody who's in their corner who cares about them. Students make more growth when they have somebody who cares about them. ...The students, 100%. And that's like, what it's always been about is, there's always been, you know, cool things that I've seen from kids, like growth that they've made.

SETs want to be challenged by the work they do. They want to work with students and see student growth more than anything. It is when the demands of the job are too much that the challenges of the job turn into hindrances.

Resources Provided are Not Enough

Resources are described as aspects of a job that serve a purpose to achieving work goals, reducing the physical/mental costs of job demands, and/or stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). They are to buffer the impact that job demand strain can have on an individual (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). All six participants named resources they had available to them; however, these resources were not enough to keep the SETs from feeling burnout.

Four of the six participants stated they had a teacher who could be considered the go-between for SETs and administrators. They were referred to as coordinators, facilitators, or lead teachers. These teachers were on teacher contracts and had no supervisory role with the SETs. These teachers were there to coordinate the special education services within buildings, as well as mentor and support the SETs. The participants noted it was difficult to access this resource, as these teachers were also overwhelmed with job demands. Noah talked about how his district normally had seven of these types of teachers (facilitators), but this school year there were only four. When a facilitator was hired, they were helpful and had lots of ideas of how to help. That person ended up leaving the position and was not replaced. Sara stated that the person in that position at her district (called a coordinator) was also in burnout. “Yeah, but unfortunately, it’s one coordinator for five schools. Yeah, and they’re facing the same burnout I do.” Allie was one of these types of teachers (called a lead teacher), and she

ended up teaching a small caseload of students with high needs on top of her already full time job as lead teacher. This was a valuable resource for SETs, but was not available or as useful as it could be, because the resource was also stretched among responsibilities.

There were also resources that were available, but turned into more job hindrances than resources. Two of the teachers, Sara and Kari, talked about getting what is called a “due process day”. On this day, Sara and Kari would be able to get a substitute teacher to fill in their classroom while they worked on required paperwork. Both Sara and Kari stated this was more work than what it was worth. They both stated that they had to create sub-plans for the day, which they had to do on their own time. They also both indicated that they would be called back to teach in their classrooms before the day was over for various reasons. It did not make sense to them to take time to create sub-plans to only have to go back into the classroom and teach.

Kari also talked about how specific professional development, which was seen as a resource, was becoming a hindrance. When she started in a cohort to learn about Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching, Kari was motivated and excited to take part and use what she had learned. By the end of the training sessions, Kari was not as optimistic as it became one more thing she had to attend. “It’s been fun to, like, do some of that training. But we have our last training session next week, and I’m not feeling as excited about it now. So that was a resource that was making me feel better, but now I’m just like.. [trails off] okay.”

The one resource that four of the participants agreed was helpful was having a behavior analyst (or behavior intervention teacher) available to problem solve students with high social and emotional needs. What was difficult for the participants was that

even when they received help from this person, there were still many things the SETs needed that the behavior analyst could not provide. And so it was, along with the other resources that were made available, not enough to buffer the strain from the job demands.

Administrative Support as a Factor in Burnout

In the literature, administrative support was mentioned frequently as a factor in teacher burnout, particularly with SETs (Billingsley, 2004). SETs who work with students with emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD) reported administrative support over student behavior as a primary reason for burnout (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). In a meta-analysis of SET burnout, Park and Shin (2020) stated “Lack of support from school personnel has one of the most frequently cited relations with teachers' burnout” (p. 14). The data collected in this study affirmed the literature and went into detail of what SETs need when it comes to administrative support.

There were four specific ways that the participants felt that administrators could do to provide them support: observe their classrooms more often, provide additional resources, give trust and autonomy to SETs, and show empathy to the SETs. Special education supervisors not being in classrooms, and actually rarely being seen was a theme among the participants. Sara stated her supervisor “could not handle” her classroom, while Crystal thought her supervisor was “scared of her room”. It was Sara, Kari, and Noah who specifically stated they wanted their special education supervisors to observe their classrooms to really understand the needs of their students. As Kari stated, “I think being more present in a way that truly is, like, coming in to see, like, what is going on. Just try to see me and see what I do.”

Providing resources was also a theme among all of the participants, particularly additional staff. Even the posting of positions and trying to find additional staff would be helpful for the SETs. Noah was frustrated when he was given support by a teacher emeritus, only to have that person moved to another building by administration. Crystal talked about having a job posting for another teacher to support her program, only to have it taken down after two months with no applicants or ideas from administration of how to support Crystal without that teacher. Allie praised her supervisor for finding staff when it was desperately needed. Allie still needed to help support by providing special education services, but it was at least a start; whereas before her supervisor stepped into that role, no staff was being provided. “She put her authority in place and she got us those staff members that we needed. Again, still short, but she made some waves to get what we needed” (Allie).

Kelsey needed resources that were in the form of procedures and actions that could be taken by administrators. She was frustrated students were unable to move into a federal setting four (separate school) when she felt she had the data to prove that was what they needed. Kelsey was also disappointed in the lack of response from administrators when crisis situations occurred. “...when I say support, it’s just not them validating that this is a hard job, and like, ‘you’re doing great’. Like, actual, tangible things that, like, when I bring up issues, they [administration] have a game plan” (Kelsey). Crystal also was discouraged about not getting tangible resources, particularly curriculum and school supplies. She believed that resources for special education were “not the priority” of her school district.

For three of the participants, they wanted their administrators to provide them with trust and autonomy within their jobs. Sara and Kelsey talked about how their special education supervisors either made decisions about students on their caseload without their input, or would not provide any decision for a difficult situation. They did not believe their special education supervisors understood the complexities of their students or classrooms. Kelsey said, “I’ve seen my supervisor twice this year, and the conversation that I do have with her, they’re just so out of touch.” Sara’s stated,

...there’s this big divide between classroom teacher [the SET] and the administration that makes all the decisions for you. ...I do have someone, like my direct supervisor, come in and can’t even handle the situation themselves. But then is telling me I’m not doing my job.

Noah’s principal and vice-principal gave him trust and autonomy, and so he wanted to continue to work for them because of it.

...building admin are fantastic where I’m at. They are probably the only reason I’d stay in the district. ...they’ve given me a lot of trust. ...If I feel like a kid needs something, they work with me. They don’t check me and say no, this is what they need actually.

And lastly, the participants would like administrators to listen to them, treat them with respect, and give empathy when needed. Sara and Kari describe their administrators making them feel bad for asking for help. “...don’t make us feel bad for asking for support. ...I felt like I was being shamed every time for asking for support” (Sara). Kari’s principal made her feel bad when she was overwhelmed and having difficulty collecting data. “She was saying something like, ‘well, like you just have to, like, get it done in a

better way, because I've done it before, and it's not that hard." Kari also talked about how she needed empathy from her principal. "She'll [her principal] kind of just jump into situations, and want to solve everything. Or thinks she is capable of solving things when, like, that might not be what I need."

Kelsey had a situation where parents were speaking to her in a disrespectful way. She felt that she just had to "take it" as her administrators were not going to back her up. "And, like going back to admin support. It's like, at what point are we going to tell parents they can't talk to me like that." Allie wanted her administrators to respect her boundaries and not expect her to work all the time, even when she is out sick. "I feel it, even on my sick days, I'm working. ... We have those sick days for a reason, but for some reason it's not respected as a boundary".

In all of the interviews, there was a general sense of not feeling respected by administrators. That could be from special education supervisors, principals, or even higher in the hierarchy of the public school system. Below are the quotes that support the sense that I, as the researcher, got from all the participants.

Sara: Don't make us feel bad for asking for support. ... I get the whole school needs something, but we shouldn't feel like we're causing trouble for asking for support. ... So give us support, give us grace.

Noah: ... and reaching out to for support from the district and being shut down by them. [When asked what administrators can do to support him] ... not trying to make it difficult in every move that we try to make with a student.

Kelsey: So I don't know, I just feel like, with me and like my burnout with this specific position, is just there are so many red flags. And admin don't have any

solutions or answers, and they're just letting it ride and it's [the setting three program] gonna sink.

Allie: I honestly can't tell you resources that my district can provide. I'll just be honest that I don't feel like they can. To me, and I don't know other districts, I'm only speaking about mine, but it just seems like they [the school district administrators] they want to support, but it's just piled on.

Crystal: I feel like I have a good relationship with admin as well, even though I feel like I'm not listened to, or valued in that sense. [When asked what administrators can do to support her] ...just the support. I mean, that's the biggest thing. Because when you feel like you're just sinking in your own ship, it's hard. It's a, you know [trails off] having another body in the room isn't going to make it perfect, but it can run a whole lot smoother. And when things run smoother, then you don't feel like you're, you know, sinking and no one's coming for you.

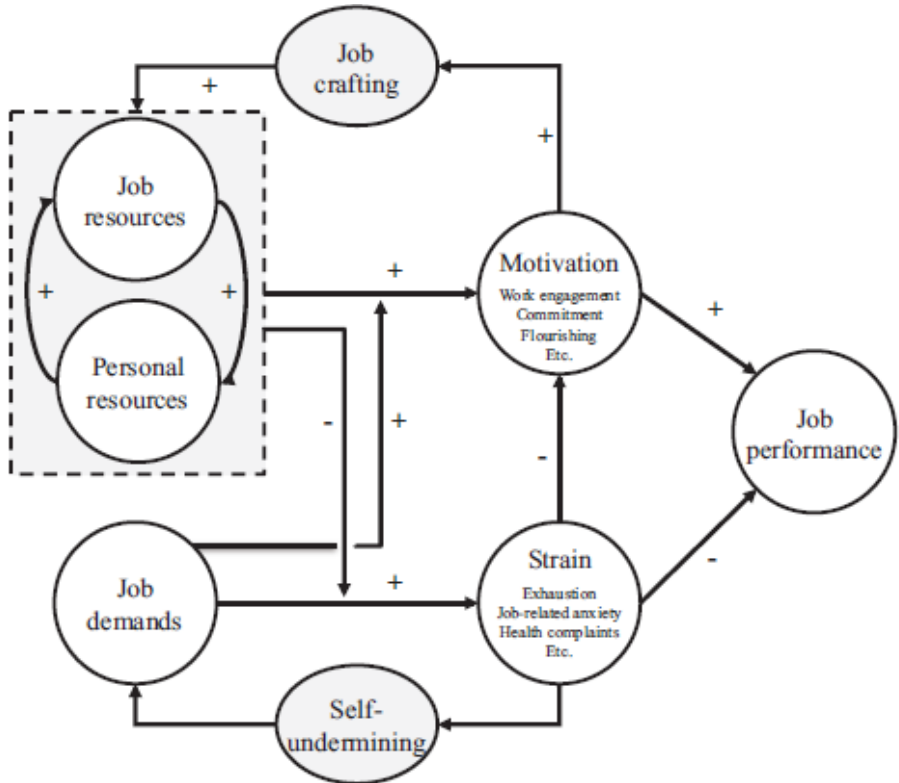
Kari: My special education supervisor just doesn't really exist. And my principal doesn't really exist. ...[When asked what administrators can do to support] Having somebody who really comes in, and is able to see people for who they are. I guess that would be helpful from my administrators.

Northouse (2019), in his book *Leadership*, defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 5). He used the term “process” intentionally, as he goes on to say that leadership is not about a person's characteristics, but that it is “a transactional event that occurs between the leader and the followers” (p. 5). This is important to understand, because if

administrators are to be seen as leaders, they must respect and invite the SETs to be part of the event, which is teaching and supporting students with disabilities. When looking through the lens of the job demands-resources theory of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016), if SETs could see themselves as part of the leadership event and receive additional job resources, this could allow for some of those job demands to turn from hindrances to challenges, which would increase SET motivation, which also would increase job performance (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3

Job Demands-Resources Model Revised



(Bakker & Demerouti, 2016. Used with permission from authors.)

Implications

The implications of this study go along with the secondary research question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* There were three big ideas that were named by the participants in this study: additional staff of SETs and paraprofessionals, feeling supported by administrators, and additional time for paperwork.

Changes in how many SETs are hired, as well as how many paraprofessionals are hired and retained are needed to support SETs in their jobs. It was stated many times that the SETs in this study did not feel there was adequate staff to support the needs of the students. The participants also talked about how it was difficult to hire and retain both teachers and paraprofessionals. Kelsey talked about having three different co-teachers in five years. Allie stated that all the SETs at her school were new that school year. Crystal's school district could not find applicants for the SET job they posted. Sara, Noah, Kelsey, Allie, and Crystal all noted that their districts were short staffed in paraprofessionals for their school districts. The MN Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) has a report that states school districts are having difficulty with hiring and retaining teachers, particularly within special education jobs (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021). All six of the participants have considered leaving the profession, with one of the participants (Allie) stating she was "taking the next year off" from teaching. Crystal wanted to "give it one more year", and Kari was not sure she could continue with the job and maintain her mental health. Sara said she would leave, except she did not know what else she could do without taking a pay and benefit cut. This should concern both school districts and policymakers, as it

supports Minnesota PELSB's findings that "nearly a third of new teachers leave teaching within the first five years of the profession" (2021, p. 5). Allie and Crystal have four and two years of experience as SETs, respectively. Sara and Kari are at 8 years of service. Having appropriate staffing and retaining of paraprofessionals is also important, as these are the people who are supporting the SETs in directly working with students with disabilities. This makes a huge difference in SETs ability to meet the needs of the students in their schools. School districts and policymakers MUST find new ways to recruit and retain SETs and paraprofessionals if they want to reduce the job demands of SETs, which can help alleviate burnout.

Changes in how administrators work with SETs must also be made at the school district level. It was clear in the data that SETs did not feel supported by their administrators, and it went beyond hiring additional staff. SETs want administrators to observe and understand the needs of their students in their classrooms. This is particularly true for the special education supervisors of the participants, as it was said the supervisors were rarely in the buildings to see the SETs and their students. SETs also want trust and empathy from their administrators. That data shows that SETs feel shame or not listened to when they ask for support. This, along with the strain of the job demands, increases the feeling of burnout among SETs.

Additional time for paperwork was an idea that was brought up by three of the six participants. They talk about having to bring their work home with them, and that their current system of giving them extra time is actually more of a hindrance than a resource. Sara had stated that even having a day for paperwork, instead of professional development, would be helpful for her. The other two participants noted that they

understood why they needed to complete the paperwork, but that having the additional time during their work day, instead of having to take it home, would be beneficial for their ability to keep home/work boundaries.

And so, to answer the research question of *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?*, this study found that having additional staff, administrative support, and additional time for paperwork would be helpful in decreasing the burnout among special education teachers.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study, particularly in the generalization of the data to an entire population of SETs. Phenomenology “seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees’ lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31). This study was meant to describe the lived experience of the six participants of this study. It did not, nor was it intended to, overreach and state this was the lived experience of all SETs. This study did find commonalities among the participants, which was appropriate to use to understand the phenomenon of burnout among special education teachers. It also allowed for deeper understanding of the themes that were already within the literature, particularly the theme of administrative support.

This study was limited in its scope, as the participants were only from the urban and west suburban area of Minneapolis, MN. This was intentional, as the researcher believed this would control for caseload numbers among the SETs knowing that many of the school districts in that area handled caseloads in a similar fashion. It was noted that in

the six participants, caseload numbers were only mentioned in one interview. What was more consistent among the interviews was the discussion of the needs of the students, rather than the number of students. In talking about student needs, rather than number, it broadens the theme in a way that caseload does not necessarily matter. With that in mind, this study could have been extended to look at the phenomenon of burnout among SETs in all of Minnesota. In fact, when recruiting participants, four SETs were disqualified from the study as they were from outside of the metro area of Minneapolis. It would be interesting to see if similar themes would be evident in SETs outside of the suburban and urban areas.

The similar ethnicities and genders of the participants also limited this study. All but one participant identified as a white female, with the one participant identifying as a White, Ashkenazi Jewish male. Because of the homogeneous nature of the participants, racial and gender differences were not able to be explored. Sharif El-Mekki is a former teacher, principal, and is the founder and CEO of the Center for Black Educator Development. In his article for *Educational Leadership*, El-Mekki (2020) discussed the challenges of being a Black educator.

We often face social isolation from a lack of Black colleagues, a lack of trust and support from administrators and other faculty, and even an unfounded disrespect for our intellectual capabilities, subject-matter expertise, and classroom autonomy. (p. 41)

All students benefit from diversity in their schools, particularly racially diverse teachers; however, the teacher population in the US remains overwhelmingly White (US Department of Education, 2016). In special education, the majority of SETs are white, but

only 15% of the students who receive special education are identified as White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). It is a concern that many students with disabilities may never have an SET that looks like them in their lifetime. This study was unable to look at any of the unique challenges that may come with being a Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color (BIPOC) SET. These challenges should be considered in future research on special education teacher burnout.

Future Research

Future research should, as stated above, consider the challenges that may be unique to BIPOC special education teachers. It would be interesting to know what are the challenges and hindrances that all SETs share, and what is unique to the BIPOC population. Research on how to recruit and retain BIPOC SETs is also important, knowing that many students with disabilities may never have a teacher who looks like them. I also believe that the results of this research study could be used to develop a more widespread study. Using what was shared by the six SETs in this study, a new survey could be created to determine if the challenges of these six SETs can be translated into more generalized data across Minnesota. This type of survey would possibly give stakeholders more information to create policies and change operating systems to alleviate burnout among SETs. The Educator Policy Innovation Center, a think tank by Education Minnesota (the MN teachers union), recently published a similar narrative study of 191 teachers in MN with similar findings (2022). This study did not discuss the narratives as general education teachers or as special education teachers. It would be interesting to see how a similar study of that nature would look with just SETs.

The data around administrative support was interesting, and could be used in future research in studying the leadership styles of administrators and the perceptions of administrators by both general education and special education teachers. There are also wonderings about how paraprofessionals fit the job climate in special education. There was no deep discussion of working with paraprofessionals by this study's SETs. Only that the SETs needed more of them to support the high needs of students. A study about paraprofessional burnout would be interesting, as many of the SETs discussed the inability to recruit and retain paraprofessionals as a problem.

Communicating the Results

The results of this study will be published in the Digital Commons@Hamline through the Bush Memorial Library on the Hamline University website. Dissemination of results will also occur through my own discussions on teacher burnout with administrators where I work, politicians during teacher advocacy days at the MN State Legislature, and conferences through Education Minnesota.

Conclusion

My research question was, *Using job demands-resources theory of burnout as a framework, what are the causes of job burnout for public elementary school special education teachers in suburban and urban areas?* Through interviews with six special education teachers, who all identified that they were in burnout, data revealed that due to the nature of the job demands (particularly students with high needs), most job demands became hindrances for SETs, which led to job strain and increased burnout. Job resources that were useful for SETs included specialized staff (such as behavior analysts),

professional development, and teacher unions. These resources were not enough to reduce the physical and mental aspects of the job demands for SETs. Administrators played an important role as well, as the SETs described feeling unheard, not trusted or respected by their administrators. The secondary research question was, *What are the changes that school districts or policymakers should implement that would decrease special education burnout?* The study found that policymakers and school district leaders look to find ways to recruit and retain staff, both SETs and paraprofessionals, to meet the high needs of students with disabilities. It is also recommended that administrators reflect on their relationships with SETs to determine how to support SETs to retain teachers, and build them up to be leaders for their students, schools, districts, and community.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent to Participate in Research

IRB number: 2023-3-231E

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The student researcher or faculty researcher (Principal Investigator) will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your reference, and will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions.

This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights as a research participant.

- If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the research team for more information.
- You should feel free to discuss your potential participation with anyone you choose, such as family or friends, before you decide to participate.
- Do not agree to participate in this study unless the research team has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

Title of Research Study:

Dear Education System, It's you, not me: Burnout in Special Education Elementary Teachers

Student Researcher and email address:

Bobbie Putman-Bailey; bputmanbailey01@hamline.edu

Principal Investigator or Faculty Advisor, Hamline affiliation/title, phone number(s), and email address:

Dr. Trish Harvey, Associate Professor, School of Education, tharvey03@hamline.edu

1. What is the research topic, the purpose of the research, and the rationale for why this study is being conducted?

The research topic is burnout in special education teachers who work in public elementary schools. The purpose is to determine what are the causes of job burnout in public elementary school special education teachers and to identify changes that stakeholders should implement to decrease special education teacher burnout. A survey will be used to identify participants who are experiencing burnout.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted and analyzed for content, narrative, and themes to find causes of special education teacher burnout in elementary schools.

Through this analysis, this study also will find changes that stakeholders could make to reduce burnout among special education teachers.

2. What will you be asked to do if you decide to participate in this research study?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to fill out a google form to identify yourself as a possible participant. You will then be asked to fill out a google survey that will collect demographic information and a burnout self assessment. If you meet the participant criteria, you will be asked to complete a 45-minute semi-structured interview with the researcher on Google Meet, which will be recorded. Consent will be asked for verbally by the researcher before recording will begin. Questions in the

interview will pertain to your experiences of burnout as a special education teacher. You may opt-out of this research at any time without consequence.

3. What will be your time commitment to the study if you participate?

If you choose to be a part of this study, you will fill out the survey (15 minutes) and an interview (45 minutes). Total time of approximately 1 hour. This will be over the course of two months.

4. Who is funding this study?

The research is being conducted without funding.

5. What are the possible discomforts and risks of participating in this research study?

By participating in this study, there is a small chance you become uncomfortable with the survey and/or the interview. It is vital you are aware that this is a voluntary study. You may abstain from any question or statement presented by the researcher, Bobbie Putman-Bailey. There is a small risk of loss of confidentiality. If this occurs, step six in this document outlines what will occur if a loss of confidentiality does indeed take place. Steps will be taken to minimize loss of confidentiality at each interval along the way of this research

In addition, there may be risks that are currently unknown or unforeseeable. Please contact me at bputmanbailey01@hamline.edu, or my faculty advisor Dr. Trish Harvey at tharvey01@hamline.edu or 651-523-2532 to discuss this if you wish.

6. How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your data and research records be protected?

Privacy and confidentiality are of the utmost importance to this research study. The researcher will provide a number of safeguards for protection. The participant form and burnout self assessment will be conducted in an online format through google forms. The only person who will have access to this information will be Bobbie Putman-Bailey, the researcher. That information will be kept within the google programs of forms, survey, and google meet. The semi-structured interview is confidential, recorded through Google Meet. She will use the interview for data analysis on her computer. After the interview analysis is complete, the data will be deleted once the dissertation has been approved.

If confidentiality is lost, you will be contacted immediately and all forms of data will be destroyed.

7. How many people will most likely be participating in this study, and how long is the entire study expected to last?

Elementary special education teachers have been sent the participant form through email and Facebook group posts. Participants who meet criteria will be asked to fill

out the burnout self assessment and a semi-structured interview within two months.

The researcher aims to have 8-10 participants for this research.

8. What are the possible benefits to you and/or to others from your participation in this research study?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to and your refusal will not influence your current or future relationships with Hamline University. In addition, if significant new findings develop during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to continue participation, we will provide that information to you.

9. If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?

Participating in this study will not cost you anything.

10. Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

11. What if you decide that you do not want to take part in this study? What other options are available to you if you decide not to participate or to withdraw?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study, and your refusal will not influence your current or future relationships with Hamline University. In addition, if significant new findings

develop during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to continue participation, we will provide that information to you.

12. How can you withdraw from this research study, and who should you contact if you have any questions or concerns?

You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participating in this research study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. If you wish to stop your participation in this research study for any reason, you should tell the researcher, Bobbie Putman-Bailey, or contact them at bputmanbailey01@hamline.edu, or Professor Trish Harvey at 651-523-2532 for any questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints about the research and your experience as a participant in the study. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at Hamline University at IRB@hamline.edu.

13. Are there any anticipated circumstances under which your participation may be terminated by the researcher(s) without your consent?

There are no circumstances under which your participation would be terminated by the researcher without your consent.

14. Will the researchers benefit from your participation in this study?

The researchers will gain no benefit from your participation in this study beyond the publication and/or presentation of the results obtained from the study, and the

invaluable research experience and hands-on learning that the students will gain as a part of their educational experience.

15. Where will this research be made available once the study is completed?

The research will be made available through the Hamline Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository and that it may be published or used in other ways, such as in conference presentations or published in research journals.

16. Has this research study received approval from the organization/school/district where the research will be conducted? Participants of this survey will be academic and research library leaders throughout the United States. This is not approved or endorsed by any organization, school, or district.

Participants of this study will be special education teachers who work in elementary schools in the west suburban and urban area of Minneapolis, Minnesota. This is not approved or endorsed by any organization, school, or district.

17. Will your information be used in any other research studies or projects?

No - your information collected as part of this research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used in or distributed for future research studies.

Appendix B: Recruiting Email

Subject Line: SpEd teacher burnout study

Dear Special Education Teacher,

My name is Bobbie Putman-Bailey and I am a doctoral student at Hamline University. I am conducting a research study on special education experiencing job burnout.

Participation will include one short survey and an interview with myself over Google Meet. Your participation will take approximately one hour of your time.

Participants must be licensed special education teachers who currently teach in a public elementary school in the west suburban or urban area of Minneapolis, MN. Participants must also identify that they are currently feeling burned out in their profession.

If you, or someone you know, is interested in participating please fill out this google form: [Special Education Teacher Burnout Research Study](#)

There are no known risks involved in this research and your personal information (i.e. name, place of employment) will be kept confidential. If you have questions about this research, please contact me by email at bputmanbailey01@hamline.edu.

If you know someone who may be interested in this research, please forward this email to them.

Thank you for your consideration.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Bobbie Putman-Bailey". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "Thank you for your consideration."

Bobbie Putman-Bailey

Appendix C: Participant Form

Special Education Teacher Burnout Research Study

My name is Bobbie Putman-Bailey and I am a doctoral student at Hamline University. I am conducting a research study on the causes of elementary school special education teacher burnout in the west suburban and urban Minneapolis, MN area.

Participation will include a burnout self-test (through Google Forms) and an interview with myself over Google Meet. Your participation will take approximately one hour of your time.

Participants must be licensed special education teacher (tier 3 or tier 4) who currently teach in a public elementary school in the west suburban or urban area of Minneapolis, MN. Participants must also identify that they are currently feeling burned out in their profession.

If you are interested in participating please fill out this google form.

To read more information about this study, please refer to the *Informed Consent to Participate in Research* document linked [here](#). If you have questions about this research project, please email bputmanbailey01@hamline.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Trish Harvey, at tharvey01@hamline.edu.

* Required

1. First and Last Name*
2. What e-mail address would you like the researcher to use to contact you?*

3. Are you currently working as a special education teacher in a public elementary school?*

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

4. Are you feeling that you are at risk, or actually in burnout, in your current job?*

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 Maybe

5. What school district do you teach in?*

This question is only for verification that your school is in the suburban or urban area of Minneapolis, MN. This will not be reported in any way.

6. Are you willing to complete a short survey and be interviewed over Google Meet about your burnout experience? This should take approximately 1 hour. *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 Maybe

Appendix D: Burnout Self-Test

Burnout Self-Test

Thank you for participating in this study on special education burnout. The purpose of this study is to identify the causes of elementary school special education teacher burnout in the west suburban and urban Minneapolis, MN area.

Please fill out this survey as part of the study. The first section is to collect demographic information. The second section is a burnout self assessment. Privacy and confidentiality are of the utmost importance to this research case study. Identifying information will not be shared with anyone, nor will it be published in the finished research report.

The researcher, Bobbie Putman-Bailey, will email you about your self assessment results and if you fit the criteria to be interviewed for this study. If you meet that criteria, the researcher will contact you through email to set up an interview over Google Meet.

The study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks can be found in the Informed Consent to Participate document linked [here](#).

By selecting "I CONSENT" below, you are endorsing and acknowledging the following:

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks, and you have received the opportunity to download or save a copy of this form.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you consent, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to

participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

* Required

1. I CONSENT*

Check all that apply.

Yes

2. First and Last Name*

3. What e-mail address would you like the researcher to use to contact you?*

4. How old are you?*

Check all that apply.

20-30 years

31-40 years

41-50 years

50 years or older

5. How many years have you worked as a special education teacher?*

6. What is your gender?*

7. What is your race and/or ethnicity? Please answer with as much or little specificity as you wish.*

8. What type of special education model do you teach in? For example, push-inservices, pull-out services, co-teach, self-contained, etc.*

9. What grades do you provide special education services to?*

Burnout Self Assessment

This assessment, taken from <https://www.mindtools.com/auhx7b3/burnout-self-test>, is being utilized as a tool to select participants for a research study on Special Education Teacher burnout.

For each question, click the response that most applies.

Use this key for your response:

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

1. I feel run down and drained of physical or emotional energy.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

2. I have negative thoughts about my job.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

3. I am harder and less sympathetic with people than perhaps they deserve.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

4. I am easily irritated by small problems, or by my co-workers and team.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

5. I feel misunderstood or unappreciated by my co-workers.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

6. I feel that I have no one to talk to.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

7. I feel that I am achieving less than I should.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

8. I feel under an unpleasant level of pressure to succeed.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

9. I feel that I am not getting what I want out of my job.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

10. I feel that I am in the wrong organization or the wrong profession.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

11. I am frustrated with parts of my job.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

12. I feel that organizational politics or bureaucracy frustrate my ability to do a good job.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

13. I feel that there is more work to do than I practically have the ability to do.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

14. I feel that I do not have time to do many of the things that are important to doing a good quality job.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

15. I find that I do not have time to plan as much as I would like to.*

1 = Not at all

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Often

5 = Very Often

Scoring Key:

15-18: No signs of burnout

19-32: Little signs of burnout

33-49: You may be at risk of burnout

50-59: Severe risk of burnout

60-75: Very severe risk of burnout

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Before we start - do you have any questions about this study?

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of the Informed Consent. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you agree, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. Do you voluntarily agree to participate in this study? By agreeing to this, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

1. Explain the model of services you use, what you are teaching, as well as the types of students that you serve. (follow up to survey question)

Definition of Burnout: Burnout is the response people have to chronic interpersonal stressors at work. It has three key dimensions that occur: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment from the job.

2. Thinking about the definition of burnout, what are your experiences that tell you that you are in burnout?
3. Tell me about how job demands have affected your experiences of burnout.
4. Tell me about how job resources have affected your experiences of burnout.

- a. Probing Question: Were there job resources that were there that did not help or had negative effects on you?

5. Tell me about how personal resources have affected your experiences of burnout. Personal resources can be optimism and self-efficacy, as well as family resources, strategies you use to help mental and physical health, etc.

6. How did your relationships with others, such as students, parents, co-workers, and supervisors affect your experiences with burnout?
 - a. Probing questions: Have you considered leaving the profession? What keeps you from leaving?

7. What are the resources you need to decrease burnout?
 - a. Probing question: What can administrators do to help decrease burnout?
 - b. What needs to be available to you to make this a job you enjoy and motivate you to continue?