

Coping or Surviving? Exploring the Work-Life Balance of Special Education Teachers

Lizet Zuñiga¹

Rutgers the State University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA

ABSTRACT

Special education teachers face multiple professional career challenges, resulting in mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. Although previous research has explored professional stressors and burnout for teachers, limited research has examined the interaction between professional and personal stressors and how teachers cope with these complex and compounding factors. This qualitative study explored special education teachers' experiences working with students who faced emotional and behavioral difficulties and on work-life balance, and the strategies that these teachers employed to keep burnout at bay. The results reveal how stress associated with their jobs has impacted these teachers' personal lives and their ability to cope with work-related burnout and prioritization of self-care. This study has strong implications for teachers and administrators and makes recommendations for both parties. These recommendations include establishing sustainable measures that can help alleviate teacher burnout, such as the implementation of mental health support and specialized training for staff and administrators to foster a supportive work environment.

KEYWORDS: Burnout, work-life balance, self-care, coping, surviving, special education teacher

Extensive research has explored the challenges for special education teachers (SETs) of working with emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBD) students in professional settings (Agyapong et al., 2023; Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien, Brunsting, Rangunathan, Sutton, & Chopra, 2020; Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019; Brunsting et al., 2022; Gilmour et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018); however, these studies have not explored the potential interaction between professional and personal life challenges, leading to a compounding effect on teachers. This study explores that intersection and these compounding effects in order to provide insight into better supporting teachers.

This study aims to explore the relationship between the professional demands faced by SETs and their personal lives. By understanding these challenges, we can identify effective strategies to better support educators (Zuñiga, 2024). The insights derived from this research are intended to inform the development of policies for improving SETs' well-being and subsequently enhancing outcomes for educators and their students.

¹ Corresponding author; Dr. Lizet Zuñiga, DSW- School of Social Work, Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, 390 George Street, 6th Floor, New Brunswick, NJ, 08901 E-mail: lizet@scarletmail.rutgers.edu

Literature Review

Special Education Classroom Management

In the school system, SETs can work in various settings, including self-contained classrooms or inclusion classrooms, also known as in-class resource rooms (Lohman, 2011). These classroom settings are designed to meet the unique educational needs of students with disabilities in order to help them achieve academic success (IDEA; US Department of Education, 2004). However, recent research suggests that the current approach is primarily theoretical, needs more empirical support, and needs to address the complex challenges SETs face when working with students exhibiting EBD (Klopfer et al., 2019). Insufficient access to the necessary resources can hinder a teacher's ability to manage challenging classroom behaviors effectively (Klopfer et al., 2019).

Working with Students with EBD

Research shows that SETs who work with students with EBD often experience high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout due to a lack of support in addressing students' educational needs (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019; Brunsting et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018; Zuñiga, 2024). In accordance with the guidelines outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; US Department of Education, 2004), emotional disturbance is characterized as the inability to establish or maintain positive relationships with peers and educators, a propensity to exhibit inappropriate behavior or emotions in typical situations, and a persistent experience of sadness or despair.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Brunsting et al. (2022), a sample of 230 SETs working with students with EBD were surveyed, revealing that burnout and exhaustion among SETs were diminished when the administration provided more autonomy for lesson planning and classroom management. The literature also suggests that burnout stems from a lack of administrative knowledge, support, and setting of clear expectations (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2019; Gilmour et al., 2022), ultimately leading to the school district's inability to retain SETs (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien, Brunsting, Raganathan, Sutton, & Chopra, 2020).

Special education teachers are tasked with developing a customized academic program for each student to meet their specific needs. This may involve adapting assignments, providing individualized interventions, and addressing unexpected behavioral challenges during instruction (Zuñiga, 2024). A study by Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, and Schutz (2019) examined the role of SETs in self-contained settings. The study found that although the teachers aimed to promote student success, there was a mismatch between their job descriptions and actual responsibilities. It was found that additional duties and behavioral issues, beyond their primary academic responsibilities, consumed a considerable amount of time. While there is abundant literature discussing the overwhelming working conditions that SETs experience and the related reasons why they choose to leave their careers (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien, Brunsting, Raganathan, Sutton, & Chopra, 2020; Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019; Gilmour et al., 2022), there is limited literature on how these teachers cope with stress.

Burnout Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges

The challenges faced by SETs have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. The increased teaching demands resulting from pandemic-related changes, such as remote learning, hybrid models, and heightened health and safety protocols, have added more pressure on these educators. As a result, there has been a surge in stress, burnout, and, unfortunately, higher resignation rates (Pokhrel et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2023).

The pandemic has caused significant challenges for school districts in recruiting and retaining staff. The increased responsibilities and stress, combined with the overall pressure on the education system, have made roles in special education even more demanding. While teacher shortages have been a long-standing issue, the pandemic has exacerbated the turnover of qualified teachers. This perpetuates a cycle where the shortage of staff across the United States puts even more strain on existing teachers, leading to increased job dissatisfaction and turnover (Dos Santos, 2021; Pokhrel et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2023).

This research provides guidelines to help diminish teacher burnout and highlights potential solutions to address the challenges they face by providing empirical data on a previously unexplored aspect of SETs' experiences: work-life balance. In addition to documenting interacting stressors that may impact teachers' experiences, this research also examines how coping mechanisms have been employed to reduce burnout and keep SETs in the field. This study comes at an important time, at the tail-end of the COVID-19 pandemic, when stressors on teachers have been particularly high. Learning from teachers themselves allows us to better understand how to support them so that they can fully meet both their own and student needs.

Methods

Qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding and varied perspectives on specific areas of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Galvan & Galvan, 2017; Padgett, 2017). This study utilized Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and collected data via semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom to gain insight into SETs' lived experiences and perspectives. The research question guiding this study was: How do SETs cope when working with students with EBD? A related question asked what supports might help SETs under conditions highly associated with burnout. The Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study on December 21, 2022, and it meets all ethical standards.

Recruitment

This study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit SETs for participation. These methods were chosen because they allowed the researcher to identify individuals who had knowledge of the area being studied and were best suited to answer the research questions (Padgett, 2017). The PI used flyers sent to local teachers' unions and social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Teachers also recommended each other to participate in the study. The criteria for participation in the interview were: (1) Teachers actively working as a SET in a public or private school in New Jersey; (2) Experience working in a self-contained classroom (SCC) or an in-class resource classroom (ICR); and (3) Participants needed to have at least one year of experience working as a SET. Teachers were excluded if they worked in the general education setting or outside of New Jersey.

After verifying a potential participant's eligibility, a 60–90-minute semi-structured online interview was scheduled. Participants were compensated for their time with a \$25 e-Mastercard, which was delivered electronically upon completion of the interview.

Participant Sample

The final sample consisted of the first 15 qualified respondents to respond to recruitment. The participants' ages ranged from 26 to 65. Participants identified themselves as female (n=14) and male (n=1). Although the gender distribution appears skewed, this is representative of the field as a whole (Taie & Lewis, 2022). Their race/ethnic identities included White-Caucasian (n=13), Hispanic (n=1), and Afro-Latinx (n=1). Their level of education was Bachelor's (n=6), Master's (n=8), and Postgraduate (n=1).

Reflexivity

After working as a school social worker in special education for over 14 years, I understand that my unique perspective could influence data analysis. This dual perspective, as both an insider and outsider, has informed the development of my research questions. To ensure thorough and impartial analysis and to minimize biases, I sought feedback from my faculty advisor, professional colleagues, and fellow doctoral students through peer debriefing. Their input was essential in identifying and addressing potential biases, ultimately improving the credibility and reliability of my research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Padgett, 2017).

Data Collection Procedures

Before each interview, informed consent procedures were followed, and information including age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, and years of experience was gathered. The participants took part in semi-structured interviews that explored their lived experiences working with students with EBD and how they were coping. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, including the following domains: motivations for becoming a SET, satisfaction with work, levels of stress and burnout, self-care practices, and what supports they have available. To gain an understanding of the participants' feelings regarding the phenomenon of SETs leaving teaching, the PI posed the following question near the end of the interview: Lately, many teachers are leaving the field. Have you ever considered leaving teaching and why?

To protect privacy, every participant was given a letter/number code and allowed to choose a pseudonym. Those who did not respond were given a pseudonym. The interviews were conducted from January 2023 to February 2023 and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the participants' responses, the PI used reflexive thematic analysis, which was chosen for its ability to capture the real experiences of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The PI reviewed each transcript several times to become familiar with the data, check its accuracy, and iteratively refine codes.

At the beginning phase of the process, line-by-line coding was undertaken, and codes were created and examined for similarities and differences that were later sorted into coherent categories. The categories were examined for how they created the story of SETs' experiences in their work

settings and how that affected their lives in general. These then cohered into patterns that helped generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Themes were developed further using constant comparative analysis and work to clarify theme boundaries and definitions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coding began with identifying challenges and coping strategies. Once these overarching codes were developed, subthemes were explored related to motivation, self-care, and survival. The PI met with peers who also worked in school settings as well as with her academic advisor, to discuss, define, and refine the themes. Memos were created to identify possible biases throughout the analytic process and to identify a coherent narrative among the findings.

To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis (Padgett, 2017), the PI used triangulation of data—comparing data from notes on body language and affect, interviews, and peer debriefing—to obtain and provide feedback, ameliorate biases, and discuss developing themes.

Results

The analysis generated five overall themes that captured the experiences of SETs who worked with students with EBD. These themes surrounded questions involving entering and exiting the special education field, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and coping with the stressors of work and work/life balance. To showcase the experience of SETs, this research emphasizes relevant quotes about the realities of teaching, which can serve as a valuable resource for improving educational practices.

Working with Special Needs Students: Prior Relationships and Other Motivating Factors

During the interview, the participants were asked about their path to becoming SETs and what inspired them to pursue this career. Each participant shared their reasons for working in this field. Participants shared varied motivations for pursuing careers in special education, such as having a family member with special needs, long-standing aspirations to become a teacher, or wanting to make an impact in others' lives.

Several participants shared their experiences with family members with special needs. For Lavender, having children with special needs and a background in teaching inspired her to pursue a SET career:

I have two special needs children. I started doing research to learn about their disabilities and how I can help them, and it got me interested in helping more children, and I already had a teaching certificate, so I figured, 'Why not keep going?'

Similarly, Aurora, Barbara, and Emily noted specific family members as motivation for becoming SETs. Aurora stated, "I had an uncle with special needs, so I was very familiar with home life with someone with special needs." Barbara shared, "I have a cousin that has Down syndrome, so just seeing him grow up and seeing all his devoted teachers made me realize that, like, okay, everyone can learn, you just have to teach them differently." Similarly, Emily explained how she was motivated to pursue special education due to her cousin:

I went through the route of special ed because of my cousin. He is low-functioning, autistic, and nonverbal, and he is right now about 41. So, when he was diagnosed, he was three years old, and he was back in the eighties when no one knew what autism was.

In addition to being motivated by her experience of witnessing a family member with special needs, Emily shared that becoming an educator was a natural extension of her personality and a long-held aspiration. “I was always wanting to be a teacher since I was a little girl. I’ve always played school when I was little with my friends or family members.” Other participants, such as Lillian, stated that entering the special education field stemmed from a general desire to help others: “I became a special education teacher because I wanted to make an impact on those that were not going to be able to fit the mold of what education was defined as.”

Across the sample, motivations for pursuing a career as a SET primarily centered on aspirations to help, which were tied to personal experiences with family members and self-perceptions. When asked about their motivations, none of the participants mentioned any perceived challenges associated with working with students with EBD.

“In Everything We Do, We’re Getting Yelled at and Attacked”: The Prevalence of Lack of Support and Acknowledgment Leading to Regrets

When asked if participants had regrets regarding their career choices, some participants regretted their career choice of becoming SETs. This regret was not linked to the job itself but instead to feeling unappreciated, unsupported, and occasionally demonized by school administrators and members of the public. Becky shared that she loved working with her students but felt overly criticized by school administrators: “I don’t have regrets about becoming a special education teacher. I love working with the kids. I do regret the way it’s going now. In everything we do, we’re getting yelled at and attacked for.” Tanya also shared that she feels unfairly judged or demonized when discussing her career with strangers:

It’s hard sometimes, like, if you meet somebody in public, you almost don’t want to say, ‘Oh, what do you do?’ You hesitate before saying, ‘I’m a teacher,’ because you don’t know how they’re going to react. There are also times in public spaces I personally have been attacked for being a teacher.

Most participants reported a need for more time to meet work demands. Tanya specifically highlighted how this became a hurdle in meeting the requirements her district had set:

I teach three grade levels. I have no common planning time with anybody. That makes a teacher feel isolated, too, because you may be collaborating on the curriculum and material demands of the district. A lot of the time, I literally have hall duty at the end of the day. I’ll be sitting in my hall duty doing work. I eat and work at the same time for my lunch. Sometimes if the students are taking a test and there’s not a student that needs me, I’ll be doing work.

Stress and frustration also stemmed from a lack of support. For Matilda, the lack of support contributed to unmanageable stress: “My days in the past few years have been stressful not only due to student behaviors and needs but the lack of support that I have within my classroom and the lack of support I have from the administration.” Lillian recounted how not having aides in her classroom led to challenging situations to handle on her own:

So, there’s one day where it was consistent fighting in the class. I’m not one to call down the office unless it’s like physical harm to the students. I try to handle a lot of things in-house, whether it be behavioral, everything like that. And it was insanely stressful to the point where again, kids were

fighting and, you know, had us then down in the office. But then, five minutes later, the kids are right back up.

Similarly, Aria noted that the lack of training made her role more challenging:

I think that every single student is different; no training that would be given to me might be able to fulfill that need. But I do believe that more training or more support could be beneficial. There's no rule book for kids. Every single kid is different. But I do think that it would've been nice to have more training or more support in that specific area.

Lacking support in the classroom and the necessary tools to teach were identified by most of the participants, leading some to tap into their own resources to be able to provide the students with learning materials. For instance, Lillian shared the methods she employed to gather class materials:

I have continuously tried to reach out and ask for materials or other tools, and it's been difficult to receive them. Sometimes there's been multiple meetings over them which then it's just so frustrating. I end up paying for it by myself, or I'll end up just with stress because it's like, where do you want me to reach these goals and these types of PDPs and SGOs and all this other kind of stuff? And yet I can't get certain types of materials and certain things, so that's kind of frustrating.

Additionally, participants were asked if they collaborated with school social workers or received support from the Department of Special Services within their school district, and only two of the 15 reported receiving this kind of support. Those who had received it shared that it was critical for both equipping them to deal with students' emotional needs and providing an outlet for them as teachers. For Aurora, her school social worker filled many roles, such as ensuring that legal and ethical obligations were met:

I think that she is supporting the program that the child is currently enrolled in. I do feel like she's making sure that everything is being done the way that it's supposed to be done, both legally and for the emotional needs of the child. I do think that the communication with the family has been, and also within the building, advocating for the child, from coworker to coworker explaining, this is like breaking it down for all of us, being like the glue of the team.

Despite the beneficial impact of school social workers on both teachers and students, this kind of support was rare in this sample. The participants were clear in their belief that there is a pressing need for action to be taken in order to retain staff, as districts are failing to meet teachers' needs and thus failing to provide adequate support for their students. This point was best summed up by Lillian, who argued that teachers are the crux of the educational system and need to be prioritized accordingly:

Where do you think anybody would be without a teacher? I would like to see that there is more support and acknowledgment given to the educational system. I think it's so important to really prioritize what education stands for and what I can give you, especially special education.

The participants shared the sentiment that SETs lacked support. Specifically, participants called for more support with regard to classroom aides and training, as well as more positive feedback and emotional support from school staff and the public. In addition to these work-related stresses, SETs' experiences were compounded by experiences in their personal lives.

The Overwhelming Responsibility of Balancing Work, Family Obligations, and Personal Interests

Participants commonly identified feeling overwhelmed by the combination of work and outside responsibilities. Many shared stories of trying to balance their jobs, family obligations, and personal interests, all while feeling like there were not enough hours in the day. Some talked about the stress of constantly feeling behind or struggling to keep up with deadlines, while others described the emotional toll of feeling like they weren't doing enough for their loved ones or themselves.

Several participants reported that their dream job had become a source of personal problems. One mentioned being told by loved ones that they often seemed checked out, while another reported having a “short fuse” with their family and friends after stressful days at work. Additionally, some participants shared that their job had negatively impacted their physical and emotional health. Nora shared her feelings about how the job she loves has become a dreadful experience:

It's hard to go to comprehend something I love so much turning into something that has made me feel so anxious, stressed, depressed, and unable to be present with my fiancé when he gets home from work. It's impacted, I think, my fiancé's relationship because, at the end of the day, I'm just so worn out mentally and physically that I don't have the energy to engage too much with him. I think it's affected me and also my relationship with my fiancé for sure.

Lillian shared her husband's response to her “not being present”:

He frequently is like; you need to leave work at work and be a wife and mom at home and not be on the phone or take work calls at home, and you need to do more things for yourself at home and be present.

Aria reported increased irritability and having a shorter fuse with her parents on days when she is stressed from work:

I'm more irritable with my family, in all honesty. When I get home after a long day, I've noticed that I think being very patient at work sometimes has caused me to have a shorter fuse once I get home, especially if there's a rough day. Even if I go to the gym, if it's a really rough day, sometimes I come home, and I have a shorter fuse with my parents.

Barbara shared a scary moment about her health right before Christmas:

Recently I was in the hospital because of those [sic] stress because it's overwhelming at times. It was right during Christmas break, and my stomach was just so bad. I was like, 'What's wrong? Is it my gallbladder? Is it my liver? No, just gastritis.' If you Google it, it says, okay, your food, the alcohol intake, and then it's a stress. Stress triggers everything. I think that was my sign.

For Becky, the stress associated with the job led to a combination of health issues, irritability, and emotional outbursts:

I put on a lot of weight; I started losing weight again. It sometimes affects my kids' home life because I'm just in a mood. I really don't want to talk to anybody. They all need me for something, and I have snapped at them. That's why I went back to therapy. I was getting into a bad depression. It was just turning into anger, which was spiraling. It gets like a vicious cycle.

Aurora mentioned that her students' emotions have a personal impact on her. At times, she even doubted her own ability to handle situations properly:

Oh, I find it stressful when I see a child in distress, and I feel like I need to help that student whether they're talking about self-infliction or they can't regulate their emotions and they're trying to communicate to me. Whether they're physical or just very emotional, that, I think, is very stressful because I'm trying to figure out how to best meet their needs, and sometimes I don't feel like I am. That can definitely be very stressful.

Especially obviously, if they're very physical, that's very difficult.

Many of the SETs in this study felt that the demands of teaching negatively impacted their personal lives, which occasionally impacted their teaching. The challenge to stay afloat in both their personal and professional lives led to several teachers employing coping strategies to get by.

“I'm Surviving”: SETs Employ Coping Mechanisms Just to Get by

Most participants found it difficult to determine whether they were coping or simply surviving. Of the 15 participants, 11 indicated that they were only surviving and utilizing a variety of coping mechanisms to manage stress but not to reduce it. Their support systems consisted of friends, colleagues, and family members. Despite their best efforts to separate work from their personal lives, job demands often infringed on their personal time, making it challenging to use effective coping mechanisms. For Nora, coping became a challenge:

To be honest, I don't think I cope well. The stress the past two years, specifically, just with the lack of in-class support. I try to make my weekends fun, so I try to do things I really like on the weekends to have something to look forward to at the end of the week.

I think by the end of the day, the way I cope is just to come straight home and sit on the couch and try to decompress and process what happened that day because, during the day, it's just trying to survive and keep everyone safe so I don't cope with it. I don't cope well with it.

Similarly, Aurora struggled to manage the overwhelming number of tasks she had to handle, often feeling like she was in survival mode:

I'll be honest, I'm probably surviving. The term cope, I feel like I table a lot at work. Then what happens is I have so many things on my plate that certain things take priority. I feel I procrastinate with certain things because I know, 'Oh, I have time with that, I have time with that, but I need to handle this immediate thing.' It's trying to juggle and meet all those needs and survive and make sure I get the stuff that I need to get done because, I'll be honest, my lesson plans that's not the bottom for me.

Becky took the initiative to be proactive when she did not have the proper tools, instead of waiting for assistance:

I can't even get supplies. I couldn't get workbooks, textbooks, or math books. I had to go around the school to classes and say, 'Hi, do you have an extra math book or an extra workbook?' That's how I got workbooks for my kids. Do you have an extra set of workbooks? Do you have an extra set of this? That's how I got enough for my eight kids. I would just go and nitpick and get it from—Like I'd go to the first-grade teacher, and she'd

say, ‘Oh, I have one.’ Then I’d go to another one. She had two, and this one had one, and this one—That’s how I got the books I needed.

Bianca felt that the way she was coping was not the best or healthiest, but it helped to avoid having a short fuse with her family:

When I decompress on my own, sometimes it’s just wanting to be alone, not being able to really communicate with family or friends in the moment. If I am interacting, I might be a little short-fused, or I might present as tired or irritated when it really stems from the stress or frustration that occurred during the school day.

Barbara stated not having any coping skills had led to negative outcomes, “I’ll absorb everything, and eventually I’ll explode.” In contrast, Anna learned to accept and move on from the things that were beyond her control. Nora felt she was surviving and stated, “I’m surviving. It’s a survival kind of a year, unfortunately.”

When discussing ways to cope, participants shared strategies such as going to the gym, taking walks, getting a monthly massage, seeking therapy, prioritizing tasks, and practicing self-care. Although coping was difficult for most, the majority acknowledged that they were making an effort to engage in some form of coping to get through challenging times and survive. For Anna, it took some time to learn coping strategies, but she learned to adapt:

I have learned not to open up my MacBook when I get home. For a long time, I would, and I would do work or try to catch up. I don’t do it at home anymore. I think it’s my own mindset. I’m at the point now; it’s like I can’t go back to how I was a year ago or even during the pandemic when I know I was emotionally raw. Now I just, there’s only so much I can do. There’s only so much that I can control, and if I have no control over it, I just have to let it go.

Emily found that prioritizing coping mechanisms helped her prevent burnout. She made a conscious effort to consistently practice these coping strategies:

So, for me I try to give myself a facial once a month. My little treat I will go get my manicure done, my nails done. I also like to, on the weekends or even on weeks days, for example, I took today off as a personal day. Did not check my work email during the weekend. I make sure that my lesson plans are done in advance where I can just submit them, do what I got to do. Kind of sit pretty on my lunch breaks. It’s actually a break for me. I try not to work. I’ll be on my phone or, like I said, watching my favorite reality shows, stuff like that.

Aria shared about healthy transformations and how identifying the indications of burnout helped her develop positive habits to bring peace into her life:

I go to the gym every single day after work. I taught myself to weightlift about five years ago when I was in grad school, and I put my headphones in with my music, and I tune out the world for a little while, and that’s like my bubble if that doesn’t work. And I noticed that I am really just burnt out from students or sometimes even teachers, to be honest. I like to watch animated movies. I feel like they bring a sense of peace to me. I know that I need to step away on the weekends. So, if there’s something that I don’t absolutely have to do, I don’t touch my teacher bag on the weekend, I put it aside, and my time is my time, and I don’t let that affect me.

Participants described their satisfaction with becoming SETs despite the daily challenges they endured. Highlights of the job included celebrating a student's accomplishments and growth and establishing what keeps them going. When asked about job satisfaction, Anna shared the following:

When they remember stuff I taught them because they all have intellectual disabilities. Yesterday, I went over something that I went over before winter break, and it was just a compass that rose north, east, south, and west, and I taught them a mnemonic device never eat soggy waffles. When they saw the compass rose, they were yelling at the top of their lungs, 'Never eat soggy waffles.'

Peter also shared how the good aspects of the job still outweigh the bad, while Aria wanted to send a message to all teachers about coping:

As hard as it is sometimes, the good still outweighs the bad, if that makes sense. I still feel like when I see kids that I've taught in the past, those moments outweigh the really frustrating ones. You have to have a sense of humor, or you'll die at this job. (Peter)

I think that special ed teachers and teachers overall need to realize that they are not just a teacher, they're a human, and they have a life outside of teaching, as hard as it may be to separate the two. If you don't, you will burn out, and they need to find those little things that help them cope. Whether that is setting aside the work and compartmentalizing almost and saying, this is work. It's days at work, or this is home; this is my time. (Aria)

Similarly, Peter concluded his interview by sending a message of support to all his colleagues who may feel undervalued and unsupported.

I would just say that for anyone that's in special education, God bless them, number one. It's not an easy job. You will probably fail more than you succeed; our kids are, for a variety of reasons, below their peers. Their self-esteem is low; their self-confidence is low, their social skills are low, their coping skills are low, all of that. I think that you have to understand that from a teaching perspective, from any teacher, really that their success is not really a reflection of you or the job that you're doing.

Despite most of the participants in this study struggling with the negative feedback loop created by work-life balance challenges, many were able to develop and employ coping mechanisms that allowed them to continue on and find satisfaction working in the field. However, several teachers still considered leaving their SET careers at various stages.

“Deciding on If This is My Last Year as a Teacher”: Factors Contributing to Widespread Career Change for SETs

When asked if participants had ever thought about leaving their profession, 13 mentioned that they had indeed considered leaving at some point during their careers. The main reasons cited were a lack of support and feeling undervalued by the administration. Lauren recounted the instance when she was ready to leave and how her colleagues convinced her to stay:

There were times when I was ready to leave, and I went to colleagues, and I said, 'Is this a sign I need an out?' They'd be like, 'No, it's not a sign that

you need to out; it's a sign that we're in a bad space, and admin aren't addressing us being in a bad space.'

In a similar situation, Nora had considered what the next step in her life would be, "Very seriously, yes. Last year I considered it. This year, I am spending the next several months deciding if this is my last year as a teacher because it's gotten that stressful and that bad."

Bianca also shared a moment when a lack of support from her principal almost led her to leave her career:

When I had a student with a lot of behavioral needs, where I felt that I wasn't able to meet their needs, and I didn't have support from my principal at the time, I felt that I was in a place where I was actually thinking about potentially looking for another job during that summer. I just felt the lack of support from my former principal was pushing me in the way of potentially going down another career path or working somewhere else.

Although most of the participants had considered leaving the field at some point due to lack of support, all had decided to stay in the short term.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide empirical data on the experience of SETs working with EBD. The findings provided a unique perspective on the interaction between professional and personal challenges and how SETs cope with these combined stresses; specifically, this research highlights how the significant challenges encountered by SETs not only adversely affect their relationships with students but also can have detrimental repercussions on their personal lives. Three aspects of this study have particularly strong implications for both research and practice.

Firstly, many teachers explicitly pursued SET careers but did not consider potential challenges during this pursuit. These teachers had strong intrinsic motivations for pursuing special education in particular. This finding aligns with other research on SET pre-service teacher (PST) motivations (Gavish, 2016; Lavian, 2013); however, it has significant implications for PST education. Other studies have shown that training teachers on how to handle student behaviors has significant positive impacts on teachers' emotional exhaustion and feelings of burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; Tsouloupas et al., 2010). Although these other studies did not explicitly explore SET PSTs, in combination with this research, these findings suggest that emphasizing potential challenges and coping strategies early in the teacher training process may positively impact SETs' perceptions of stress and burnout.

The second key finding relates to the interaction between SETs' professional and personal lives. This research shows that SETs working with students with EBD face significant emotional challenges. They manage difficult behaviors, provide personalized support, and cope with setbacks, all of which can take a toll on their emotional well-being. This burden often carries over into their personal lives, making it hard for them to "switch off" after work. The ongoing emotional work required to do their job often led to burnout and compassion fatigue. These findings align with previous research, which demonstrates that stress and burnout negatively impact teachers' ability to do their jobs (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019; Brunsting et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018). This situation is particularly difficult in environments with limited resources, where teachers may not receive the necessary support. Brunsting et al. (2022) have shown that when educational administration provides support—such as sufficient planning time, access to classroom resources, wellness programs, and emotional support—teachers experience reduced emotional exhaustion. They demonstrated that by prioritizing teachers' well-being, these supportive

measures not only aid the educators themselves but also lead to better outcomes for students. Engaged and motivated teachers create a more positive learning environment, ultimately enhancing student achievement (Holzner & Gaunt, 2023; Price & McCallum, 2015).

Additionally, Holzner and Gaunt (2023) and Price and McCallum (2015) found that when school principals and administrators proactively implement ecological approaches—such as mental health practices, teacher mentoring, and fitness programs—this effectively establishes a positive school culture that greatly enhances teachers’ well-being. Similarly, Garwood (2023) highlighted that numerous researchers employing the Bronfenbrenner (1976) ecological model have investigated the interactions within the microsystem, particularly the relationships between teachers and students in the classroom and the mesosystem, which includes support from colleagues and administrators. This framework has proven essential in identifying key variables that can effectively address challenges such as teacher burnout, stress, and attrition. In combination with the findings of this study, these results suggest that by attending to all aspects of teachers’ lives and providing support that addresses the multiple sources of stress teachers face, SETs can be retained longer, leading to better outcomes for students.

The third key finding relates to coping strategies. Previous literature exploring teacher burnout notes a lack of administrative knowledge, support, and clear expectations for SETs working with the EBD student population (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019; Gilmour et al., 2022); however, there is limited information about how teachers were coping with the stress of their jobs and work-life balance. This study found that teachers were developing their own coping mechanisms that went beyond administrative support. Some relied on social support from family members, spouses, friends, and co-workers, among others. Research by Song et al. (2024) indicates that social support plays a crucial role in helping individuals reassess their experiences of stress, significantly reducing the negative effects that stress can cause. This suggests that not only should researchers interested in burnout explore self-developed supports but also that school-provided support should encourage opportunities for teachers to create these social connections. As previously mentioned, for the two participants who had access to school social workers, those social workers were able to act as social support and help relieve stress.

Special education teachers need help, want to be valued and acknowledged, and are often leaving rather than demanding assistance. As one of the participants argued, “Where do you think anybody would be without a teacher?” Some participants’ perceptions were that school district administrators do not seem to understand their needs; participants felt that administrators pretended to care but brought “broken promises” or “band-aids” to the table instead of true change. MacCormack et al. (2021) conducted research involving 21 school principals to examine how they support their teachers. The study found that transformational leaders motivate their staff through coaching and enhance their self-esteem. In contrast, transactional leaders prioritize rules and rely on rewards to manage performance. This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that transformational leadership helps reduce teacher burnout, while transactional leadership may increase burnout due to its reliance on external control.

This issue can be addressed by a two-pronged approach. Firstly, there are coping strategies that teachers can employ to help themselves, but potentially more impactfully, there are several strategies that school administrators can explore to better support their teachers. With regards to teachers’ strategies: First, teachers experiencing burnout should prioritize their needs and engage in self-care. Second, teachers can build a network of emotional and social support; this support enables teachers to manage challenging situations more effectively. Lastly, SETs should not delay seeking help when feeling overwhelmed. Identifying the signs of exhaustion and burnout can be the first step toward resolving these issues effectively. Although this study revealed several

approaches teachers can take, tackling teacher burnout does not solely rest on the teachers themselves. School districts must establish a comprehensive system that offers all teachers the resources they need, including self-care opportunities and counseling services to regularly manage symptoms and causes of burnout effectively. Identifying and addressing the root causes of teacher turnover is important, especially since most teachers enter this profession with a strong desire to help and teach children with special needs. Therefore, based on the literature review and results of this study, it is recommended that teachers and administrators establish a supportive and sustainable framework to reduce teacher burnout. The specific suggestions are:

- Implement mental health support plans that make it easier for teachers to access mental health resources and counseling services. Examples of this include in-house counseling, partnerships with local mental health professionals, or instruction to obtain confidential support services.
- Provide regular training and development focused on mental health awareness, stress management, and burnout prevention. These professional development programs should be required for both staff and administrators. Training should begin during teacher education programs.
- Create a supportive environment that promotes open dialogue about mental health and personal well-being, while encouraging peer support systems, and ensuring that teachers have opportunities to share their challenges and seek advice.

Limitations

Although the findings of this research provide a productive starting point for exploring SETs' work-life balance coping mechanisms, the generalizability of these findings is limited by the sample. Although in qualitative research, a 15-participant sample is considered appropriate for reaching saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), a larger sample size could confirm the generalizability of these results across geographic areas, gender identities, and various contexts. Additionally, this study did not include the experience of SETs who had chosen to leave the field, but hearing from teachers who had made the decision to leave special education would also provide a useful perspective on this problem. Despite the sample limitations of this study, the results provide unique insight into the experience of SETs and the complex and interrelated challenges that affect their teaching experiences.

Conclusion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the challenges that SETs face and the strategies they use to persevere. The study emphasizes how stress and burnout among educators can have a negative impact on their relationships with students. Although there are coping mechanisms that teachers can employ to help themselves, it is essential for school districts to prioritize and implement targeted programs and interventions that address the mental health needs of their staff, thus creating a supportive work environment. This study comes at a particularly important time, at the tail-end of the COVID-19 pandemic, when helping teachers deal with stress is of the utmost importance. This study has significant implications for future research, specifically that those interested in studying teacher burnout should look beyond professional stresses and consider the compounding effects of work and personal lives. Additionally, future research should focus on why certain strategies for dealing with burnout have worked in order to understand the causal mechanisms behind them.

References

- Agyapong, B., Burbach, L., Agyapong, V. I., & Wei, Y. (2023). Interventions to reduce stress and burnout among teachers: A scoping review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(9), Article 5625. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20095625>
- Aloe, A. M., Amo, L. C., & Shanahan, M. E. (2014). Classroom management self-efficacy and burnout: A multivariate meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 26(1), 101–126. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-013-9244-0>
- Bettini, E., Cumming, M. M., O'Brien, K. M., Brunsting, N. C., Ragnathan, M., Sutton, R., & Chopra, A. (2020). Predicting special educators' intent to continue teaching students with emotional or behavioral disorders in self-contained settings. *Exceptional Children*, 86(2), 209–228. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402919873556>
- Bettini, E., Wang, J., Cumming, M., Kimerling, J., & Schutz, S. (2019). Special educators' experiences of roles and responsibilities in self-contained classes for students with emotional/behavioral disorders. *Remedial and Special Education*, 40(3), 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932518762470>
- Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 697–744. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1976). The experimental ecology of education. *Educational Researcher*, 5(9), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X005009005>
- Brunsting, N. C., Bettini, E., Rock, M., Common, E. A., Royer, D. J., Lane, K. L., Xie, F., Chen, A., & Zeng, F. (2022). Working conditions and burnout of special educators of students with EBD: Longitudinal outcomes. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 46(1), 44–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064221076159>
- Dos Santos, L. M. (2021). The relationship between workforce sustainability, stress, and career decision: A study of kindergarten teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland)*, 13(20), Article 11521. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011521>
- Galvan, J. L., & Galvan, M. C. (2017). *Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences* (7th ed.). Routledge.
- Garwood, J. D. (2023). Special educator burnout and fidelity in implementing behavior support plans: A call to action. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 31(2), 84–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10634266221099242>
- Gavish, B. (2017). Special education trainee teachers' perceptions of their professional world: Motives, roles, and expectations from teacher training. *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice*, 23(2), 153–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1204285>
- Gilmour, A. F., Sandilos, L. E., Pilny, W. V., Schwartz, S., & Wehby, J. H. (2022). Teaching students with emotional/behavioral disorders: Teachers' burnout profiles and classroom management. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 30(1), 16–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10634266211020258>
- Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine*, 292, Article 114523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>
- Holzner, K. L., & Gaunt, L. (2023). Wellbeing promotion in Tasmanian schools: Have we forgotten support teachers? *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 47(2), 96–109. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2023.10>

- Klopfer, K. M., Scott, K., Jenkins, J., & Ducharme, J. (2019). Effect of preservice classroom management training on attitudes and skills for teaching children with emotional and behavioral problems: A randomized control trial. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 42*(1), 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406417735877>
- Lavian, R. H. (2013). "You and I will change the world": Student teachers' motives for choosing special education. *World Journal of Education, 3*(4), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wje.v3n4p10>
- Lohman, A. E. (2011). *Special education learning environments: Inclusion versus self-contained* (Publication No. 2011.3450216) [Doctoral dissertation, Lindenwood University]. ProQuest LLC. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/864544429?pq-origsite=primo>
- MacCormack, J. W. H., Sider, S., Maich, K., & Specht, J. A. (2021). Self-determination and inclusion: The role of Canadian principals in catalysing inclusive-positive practices. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership, 17*(2). <https://doi.org/10.22230/ijepl.2021v17n2a969>
- Padgett, D. K. (2017). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Pokhrel, S., & Chhetri, R. (2021). A literature review on impact of COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning. *Higher Education for the Future, 8*(1), 133–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631120983481>
- Price, D., & McCallum, F. (2015). Ecological influences on teachers' well-being and "fitness." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 43*(3), 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2014.932329>
- Robinson, L. E., Valido, A., Drescher, A., Woolweaver, A. B., Espelage, D. L., Murray, S., Long, A. C. J., Wright, A. A., & Dailey, M. M. (2023). Teachers, stress, and the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative analysis. *School Mental Health, 15*(1), 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-022-09533-2>
- Smith, S. W., Poling, D. V., & Worth, M. R. (2018). Intensive intervention for students with emotional and behavioral disorders: Intensive intervention for students. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 33*(3), 168–175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12174>
- Song, Y., Zhao, W., Wang, X., & Li, J. (2024). The impact of job stress on burnout in Chinese teachers: The mediating roles of social support and psychological empowerment. *Psychology in the Schools, 61*(1), 253–271. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.23052>
- Taie, S., & Lewis, L. (2022). *Characteristics of 2020-21 public and private K-12 school teachers in the United States: Results from the National Teacher and Principal Survey. First Look*. NCES 2022-113. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2022/2022113.pdf>
- Tsouloupas, C. N., Carson, R. L., Matthews, R., Grawitch, M. J., & Barber, L. K. (2010). Exploring the association between teachers' perceived student misbehaviour and emotional exhaustion: The importance of teacher efficacy beliefs and emotion regulation. *Educational Psychology, 30*(2), 173–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410903494460>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>
- Zuñiga, L. (2024). Positive interventions in practice: Working with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. *School Social Work Journal, 48*(2), 38–55.

L. ZUÑIGA

Notes on Contributors

Dr. Lizet Zuñiga is a licensed bilingual social worker in New Jersey, specializing in school social work. She also serves as a lecturer at Rutgers University, where she instructs courses in Social Work. Dr. Zuñiga holds both a Doctoral degree and a Master's degree in Social Work, which she attained from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and a degree in Psychology from the Interamerican University of Puerto Rico. Dr. Zuñiga's professional interests include supporting students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBD) and promoting self-care practices for educators working with students with EBD.

ORCID

Dr. Lizet Zuñiga, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6017-4074>