



# Factors Affecting Special Education Teachers' Feelings of Burnout and Perceptions of Mindfulness-based Practices to Build Social and Emotional Competence

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## Abstract

*This convergent parallel mixed methods study addressed the challenges special education (SpEd) teachers of students with learning disabilities (LD) face, the supports SpEd teachers need to help with feelings of burnout, and SpEd teachers' perspectives about the benefits of mindfulness-based practices to help with burnout and social and emotional competence (SEC). Results from the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educator Survey noted emotional exhaustion was the dimension that contributed most to burnout. Semi-structured interviews and observations established factors leading to burnout, supports needed to help alleviate feelings of burnout, and benefits and challenges of mindfulness-based practices to build SEC. Mixed-methods results confirmed factors leading to burnout affect emotional exhaustion more than personal accomplishment or depersonalization. In addition, mindfulness-based practices were discussed as one method to help teachers reduce feelings of burnout and increase SEC.*

**Keywords:** *special education, burnout, mindfulness, social and emotional competence*

## 1. Introduction

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, schools are held accountable for providing a high standards-based education for all students. Students with disabilities are expected to be at grade-level in reading and math every year. Expectations, such as these, add to the challenges SpEd teachers face when teaching students with learning disabilities (LD), and the social and emotional needs that affect their ability to access the curriculum and show mastery on assessments. In addition, SpEd teachers have an increased workload, including additional meetings and paperwork, and are more susceptible to lawsuits. These add to feelings that they lack control over curriculum, instruction, and assessment decisions, and to feelings of burnout. When SpEd teachers' have support in SEC, teachers are capable of dealing with the unique challenges of being a SpEd teacher. When teachers are not supported, they are more likely to burnout, which is a prolonged condition of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997). This study investigated the challenges SpEd teachers face in the classroom that lead to burnout, the supports they feel are necessary for them to build SEC, and their perspectives on mindfulness-based practices to help built SEC.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

The sample (N=8) was purposefully selected because of their experience within SpEd and working with students with LD and participated on a voluntary basis from one school site, in Southwestern United States. Years of experience teaching students with LD range from 9 to 19 years.

### 2.2 Data sources

The Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educator Survey (MBI-ES) was utilized to gather quantitative data to determine levels (low, moderate, or high) of the three dimensions of burnout: personal accomplishment/self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization [4]. The personal accomplishment subscale assesses educator's feelings of success and competence, in relation to one's work. The emotional exhaustion subscales "assesses feelings of being emotionally exhausted and overextended in one's work" [4, p.4]. The depersonalization subscale assesses feelings of detachment and negativity in regards to one's work.

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Semi-structured interviews were used. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observations were also completed in each participant’s classroom, in order to better understand the challenges and workload SpEd teachers face.

### 2.3 Analysis

Descriptive statistics were run on the scores of the three subscales of the MBI-ES, using the Microsoft Excel Analysis Toolkit. Means were determined for each dimension. Data collected from interviews and observations were analyzed by going through the data, locating significant statements, and then developing clusters of meaning [1]. Inferential coding was completed. All data was coded using NVivo Version 11.1, and organized into themes and their corresponding categories. Mixed methods data analysis involved three of the seven stages, as outline by Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003). Three stages utilized were data reduction, data display, and data comparison.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Quantitative data

Each participant (N = 8) completed the MBI-ES and Mind Garden scored the inventory. Table 1 summarizes the results of the three dimensions of burnout.

Participant	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Self-Efficacy
Jonathan	11	8	37
Athena	19	7	31
Paul	11	2	35
Sahra	31	3	39
Tam	28	18	33
Alfredo	23	11	44
Arlina	11	1	40
Cristina	16	5	43

Table 1. Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educator Series results

Mean scores were calculated for each category. Emotional exhaustion mean (18.75) fell within the moderate range for burnout, while depersonalization mean (6.88) fell within the low range burnout. The self-efficacy mean (37.75) fell within the high range for the category, but in the low range for burnout. No overall score for burnout was determined with the used of the MBI-ES. Mean scores were used to determine which dimension of burnout affected SpEd teachers the most. Individual participant scores were discussed during the interview process to determine factors that contribute to each component of burnout.

### 3.2 Qualitative data

Based on teacher interviews and observations, factors contributing to teacher burnout include parents, students, and mandates and workload. Athena stated working with parents can be “maddening”, when parents “have no faith in [teachers’] abilities”, which affects the collaboration with parents. Jonathan noted his frustrations with working with students with LD, where students exhibit low motivation and show no interest in school. Paul stated, “when [students] show a lack of interest no matter how much effort you put into a lesson”, his motivation decreases, affecting his desire to create new and improved lessons. Sahra spoke to the challenges related to the new mandates within SpEd, and how they increase the pressure for teachers to meet the expectations. Arlina stated the most challenging part is “managing the social and emotional piece” of with students LD.

For supports needed, teachers spoke to incentives and resources that were lacking. Financial incentives as one area that was missing. Sahra stated, “what’s missing for me was the incentive to work on changing my pay, increasing my pay” and the lack of retirement contributes to her wanting to leave the profession. Athena spoke to resources she needed, such as more time and assistance to manage her workload.

Lastly, teachers spoke to their understanding of mindfulness and how these practices can help build SEC. Jonathan noted mindfulness creates “a type of calm” where you can “hear, listen or understand some of [your] students, get a better idea of where their challenges are.” He also focused on being



present as a benefit to mindfulness-based practices, which can help him be more empathetic to his students. Another potential benefit is to be present in the moment, free from anxiety and pressure to help him be able to connect with students in class. Athena spoke to being present in the moment and the non-judgmental aspect of letting things be as they are.

Paul's understanding of mindfulness suggested a way to de-stress or the ability to recognize what is happening in the moment and bringing yourself back to present. However, he also felt that mindfulness is dependent on the person and may not work for all teachers, especially if they are mandated to participate. Sahra's concerns focused on time. Her willingness to consider participating in a mindfulness program was dependent on whether the program would add more work to her already immense workload. Alfredo and Cristina add that mindfulness might not be right for them, but agree that it would be really beneficial for their students. All participants had limited understanding of mindfulness and only one participant had experience with mindfulness.

Mixed methods data analysis sought out to understand the relationship between the dimension of burnout and the factors that affect teacher burnout. Results from the MBI-ES indicated that emotional exhaustion contributed the most to feelings of burnout. When asked what contributes most to the emotional exhaustion of being a SpEd teacher, participants all focused on parents adding the most challenges, especially when the collaborative relationships are unbalanced. Challenges with working with students with LD added to the emotional exhaustion through the discrepancy between ability and disability, in addition to lack of motivation. Lastly, the extra workload/mandates also added to the emotional exhaustion of the profession. Therefore, the qualitative data supported quantitative findings and yielded more detailed specifics regarding factors leading to SpEd teacher burnout.

#### **4. Discussion**

Results from this study support that there are unique factors to the SpEd profession that contribute to feelings of burnout. Teachers who feel supported in their work and who have high SEC are more likely to stay in the profession and are more adept at managing the stressors and challenges of being a SpEd teacher [2, 3]. As pressures increase on the state and federal levels, SpEd teachers will need more support and trainings to help them cope with accountability mandates and increased workload in SpEd.

Analysis of the MBI-ES indicated teachers felt that their personal accomplishments within the profession was high, while feelings of cynicism or depersonalization was low. Emotional exhaustion was the factor that became a greater predictor of teacher burnout. Factors most challenging to SpEd teachers also contributed most to emotional exhaustion. Though these feelings can fluctuate, teachers indicated emotional exhaustion of being a SpEd teacher lead to the most burnout.

Mindfulness may be one method of potentially helping SpEd teachers cope with feelings of burnout and increase SEC. Mindfulness can help teachers be present in the moment and be more aware of their thoughts and feelings, which can help build empathy towards their student [6]. Teachers were also careful to say that mindfulness will depend on the person and the person must be open to engaging in these practices. They are unsure if this practice will be beneficial to all SpEd teachers. The findings help advocate for further research in teacher burnout to better understand how schools and districts can support teachers and lower attrition rates. Limitations included one particular school and one small group of SpEd teachers. Though all participants have experience working at the same school, their subject matter competencies are different, which may affect certain stressors related to individual learning challenges of students with LD. Though the school must abide by the same federal and state mandates, the school is a specialized SpEd school and not a public school.

#### **4.1 Conclusion**

*"Be that charismatic adult in the classroom for the kids who can latch on and that's good enough,"* Jonathan stated, as to why he is a SpEd teacher and why he thinks some people are made for teaching. This sentiment should be at the main focus of teaching, but often, other factors affect a teacher's ability to reach students. These factors, such as difficulties with parent-teacher relationships and with workload, contribute to feelings of exhaustion and stress, which can lead to teacher burnout. More can be done to help teachers build high SEC, in order to be able to connect with students and create a learning environment for types of learners. Mindfulness-based practices can be a viable method to decrease feelings of burnout and build SEC.



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