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# Teacher Burnout: Special Education versus Regular Education

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Teacher Burnout: Special Education versus Regular Education

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In School Psychology

By

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### Abstract

Teacher burnout is a serious problem in education today. Studies have been conducted on teacher burnout and the effect it has on regular education and special education teachers. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship of teacher burnout between regular education and special education teachers. One-hundred-and-two surveys were distributed to kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in two school districts in Ohio. Thirty-two surveys were randomly chosen for the study. Regular education teachers had higher scores on the Teacher Burnout Scale than special education teachers. There was no difference concerning job satisfaction between regular or special education teachers. There was a very weak correlation between job satisfaction and teacher burnout for both regular education and special education teachers.

## Chapter I

### Literature Review

Most teachers begin their careers excited and genuinely care for their students. However, over time they can lose that feeling. Teaching can be an incredibly fulfilling occupation but at the same time can be very stressful. Teachers interact with students, parents, and coworkers which can lead to stress. Teacher stress is defined by Kyriacou (2001) as “the experience by a teacher of unpleasant emotions, such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger, and depression, resulting from aspects of work as a teacher.” Teacher stress may be perceived as the imbalance between demands at school and the resources teachers have for coping with them (Esteve, 2000; Troman & Woods, 2001). Anxiety and frustration, impaired performance, and ruptured interpersonal relationships at work and home can be symptoms of teacher stress (Kyriacou, 2001). Researchers (Farber, 1982; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Troman and Woods, 2001) note that teachers who experience stress over long periods of time may experience what is known as burnout.

Burnout is a function of feeling inconsequential—feeling that no matter how hard one works, the payoffs in terms of accomplishment, recognition, or appreciation are not there (Anderson & Iwanicki, 1981). A national study of over 1,000 special educators conducted by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) concluded: “Poor teacher working conditions contribute to the high rate of special educators leaving the field, teacher burnout, and substandard quality of education for students with special needs” (CEC, 1998). The purpose of this study is to examine special education versus regular education burnout rate in teachers in an Ohio school district.

*Teacher Burnout*

Block (1977) and Maslach (1978) described characteristics of burnout or its effects as the following: “a reaction of the nervous system to stress, leading to a variety of physical diseases; destructive feelings of emotional stress as a result of ineffective coping; loss of concern about and detachment from those with whom a person works; and a cynical and dehumanized perception of students, accompanied by a deterioration of the quality of teaching.”

The 1979 National Education Association (NEA) poll, for example, noted that 1/3 of teachers surveyed stated that if they were “starting over a gain” they would not choose to become teachers (Nationwide teacher opinion poll, 1979), and only 60% of teachers report that they plan to remain in the profession until retirement (McGuire, 1979). Farber & Miller (1980) discovered that teachers who become burnout may be less sympathetic towards students, their tolerance level for frustration in the classroom is lower, they plan less or less carefully for classes, may think about leaving the profession, may feel frequently emotionally or physically exhausted, and may feel anxious, irritable, depressed, and less dedicated to their job.

Recent studies have examined sources of burnout in both teaching and human service organizations. These studies indicate that the primary sources of burnout are related to organizational conditions and personal characteristics of the helping profession (Iwanicki, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1983; Schwab, 1983). Studies have found that the following are related to burnout: organizational conditions, lack of control or autonomy in one’s job, the absence of a support group, reward and punishment structures in organizations, background and personal characteristics, age of teacher, and the expectations one has for what can be accomplished on the job. Research has also found that burnout is related to a combination of the individual’s unmet expectations and job conditions where low participation in decision making, high levels of role

conflict, a lack of freedom and autonomy, absence of social support networks, and inconsistent reward and punishment structures are present (Huston, 2001). These results point to several causes of burnout.

Twillie and Petry (1990) attempted to examine the question: “Do teachers who work in a more supportive educational environment exhibit less burnout as measured by the teacher burnout questionnaire than do teachers who work in a less supportive educational environment?” Teachers were classified into two groups based on their responses to the questionnaire: one group exhibiting burnout and one group not exhibiting burnout. The Teacher Burnout Questionnaire was administered by each principal. Findings of this study indicated that teacher burnout exists regardless of environment, whether the school is supportive or non-supportive.

Farber (1982) attempted to investigate the satisfactions and stresses of teachers, with reference to identify factors which either impede or promote teacher burnout. Few significant subgroup differences were found among the teachers. Teachers found most satisfying experiences made them feel sensitive to and involved with their students and committed to and competent in their jobs. The relationship between friends, family, and colleagues were important. Sources of stress that were indicated included excessive paperwork, lack of advancement opportunities, and unsuccessful administrative meetings.

Questions about the perceptions of high and inequitable workloads that are prescribed for beginning teachers were examined by Goddard, O’Brian, and Goddard (2006). In this study, the researchers, using a sample of beginning teachers, collected self-report data on burnout, work climate, the personality trait neuroticism, and self-report data on burnout and perceptions about the work environment. This information was collected on three subsequent occasions over a two-year period. The Work Environment Scale, Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the Eysenck

Personality Questionnaire were used to measure neuroticism. The results of the study indicated that work environments that rated low on support of innovative teaching were associated with significant increases in teacher burnout, even after controlling for neuroticism.

Teachers with different burnout risks differ in their mental and physical state of health. Teachers with low burnout risk seem to mentally feel healthiest whereas teachers with high burnout risk show highest deficits in their mental state of health. Teachers with high burnout risk reported significantly higher levels of complaints and lower levels of well-being after vacations. Teachers who have a low burnout risk exhibited high levels of well-being and low levels of complaints over time. Teachers who have a varying burnout risk reported increased levels of well-being and decreased levels of complaints after vacations (Hoyos & Kallus 2005).

Research indicates that burnout is a problem and there are many factors which contribute to its existence. A study conducted by Huston (2001) indicated that over one-half of the teachers who responded to the study showed moderate to high degrees of burnout. Teachers need to see measurable results of their teaching, to be recognized and complimented, and given more opportunity to participate in the decision-making process.

### *Special Education*

According to Miller, Brownell, and Smith, 1999, when special education teachers are highly stressed by the unmanageability of their workload, they are more likely to leave the special education classroom. Special education teachers have many reasons to feel stressed. A study from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) concluded, "Poor teacher working conditions contribute to the high rate of special educators leaving the field, teacher burnout, and substandard quality of education for students with special needs" (CEC, 1998). A series of



studies have documented higher levels of stress experienced by special education teachers in relation to their job responsibilities (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999 ; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). All of these studies indicate that there is a connection between mentoring support for special education teachers and teacher retention. A series of studies suggested that reducing stress might assist with enhancing retention for special education teachers (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Russ, Chiang, Rylance & Bongers, 2001 Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

Educators have been voicing concerns about higher burnout rates in special education as compared to general education since 1990 (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1990). Kaufhold, Alvarez, and Arnold (2006) discuss the retention of special education teachers in Texas schools as well as around the nation. Recent studies show that the main component of stress was frustration due to a lack of materials for the special education teachers. Several studies that examined burnout in special education teacher found that increased expectations for inclusive instruction, the changes in newly mandated behavioral intervention plans and the increasing paperwork load on special education teachers increased the risk of burnout.

Burnout appears to be directly related to the degree of stress within a person's occupational and personal life (Dixon, Shaw, & Bensky 1980). Olson and Matuskey, (1982) explored the self-reported causes of stress of specific learning disabilities (SLD) teachers. Findings show that there are job related factors causing stress in SLD teachers. However, these stress factors appear to affect both regular education and special education teachers. Both SLD teachers and regular education teachers felt that high pupil teacher ratio and inadequate planning

time were both stressful. Stress factors appear across the characteristics of sex, age, education, length of teaching and level of teaching.

### *Purpose of Study*

Studies appear to suggest that burnout occurs in higher rates in Special Education as compared to Regular Education. This study compares the burnout rates for regular education and special education teachers in two schools in Ohio.

### *Hypothesis*

1. Special education teachers will have significantly higher scores on the Teacher Burnout Scale than regular education teachers.
2. Special education teachers will have significantly lower scores on the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire than regular education teachers.
3. There will be a significant relationship between the scores on the Teacher Burnout Scale and the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire for special education teachers.
4. There will be a significant relationship between the scores on the Teacher Burnout Scale and the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire for regular education teachers.

## Chapter II

### Methods

#### *Participants*

Teachers from two public school districts in Southeastern Ohio participated in this study. Teachers that participated included elementary, middle, and high school regular and special education teachers. The school districts are rural districts with the majority of the students being caucasian. Twenty-five percent of the teachers were male and 75% were females and their ages ranged from 20 to 61 years of age. Fifty-three out of the 102 surveys distributed were completed and returned. Thirty-two surveys were randomly selected, sixteen from the regular education surveys and sixteen from the special education surveys. Of the 32 surveys; 20% were between the ages of 20 and 30, 30% were between the ages 31 and 40, 20% were between the ages of 41 and 50, 25% were between the ages of 50 and 60 and 5% were over 61. The teachers had experience ranging from 1 year to 40 years. Thirty-three percent had 1-10 years experience, 27% had 11 to 20 years experience, 25% had 21 to 30 years experience and 15% had 31 to 40 years of experience. Forty-seven percent of the teachers had a Bachelors Degree and 53% had a Masters Degree.

#### *Instruments*

Two scales were used, The Teacher Burnout Scale and the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire. The Teacher Burnout Scale was developed by Seidman and Zager in 1987. This scale is used to measure teacher burnout. This survey consists of four factors that the authors found related to burnout. These factors include coping with job-related stress, career satisfaction, perceived administrative support, and attitudes toward students. This survey takes about ten minutes to complete and contains 21 self-report items.

The Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire is used to assess the job satisfaction of teachers. Paula Lester developed the questionnaire in 1984 containing 77 self-reported items on a five point likert scale. Lester found nine factors that were important to job satisfaction. These factors include the following: Recognition (3 items), Security (3 items), Advancement (5 items), Pay (7 items), Working Conditions (7 items), Responsibility (8 items), Work itself (9 items), Colleagues (10 items), and Supervision (14 items).

### *Procedures*

Approval was obtained from Marshall University's Internal Review Board. Approval to conduct the study was also obtained from the participating school districts. A description of the study was given to the principals of each participating school. The investigator discussed the study's participation requirements (completion of the two rating scales). Participating teachers signed an informed consent form (see Appendix A). The participating teachers were given the two questionnaires to complete. The teachers indicated on the forms whether they are regular or special education teachers. Confidentiality of the responses was ensured because the teachers did not put their names on the forms and deposited the completed rating scales into a designated box. Once the surveys were collected 32 were randomly selected, sixteen regular education teacher surveys and 16 special education teacher. Sixteen surveys were chosen from each group because there were only 16 special education teacher surveys available. The investigator scored the completed rating scales and analyzed the results.

## Chapter III

## Results

The Teacher Burnout Scale was scored the following way according to the authors, Seidman and Zager. Once the 20 questions were completed, the investigator added all the scores together. The meaning of the scores is as follows: 20-35 means you have few burnout feelings; 36-55 means you have some strong feelings of burnout; 56-70 means you have substantial feelings; 71-80 means you are experiencing burnout.

Table 1.1

Cut-off scores for The Teacher Burnout Scale

	Scores			
Range	20-35	36-55	56-70	71-80
Number of teacher response	0	2	17	13
Percentage	0%	6%	53%	41%

After scoring the Teacher Burnout Scale, teacher burnout rates were determined as shown in Table 1.1. Six percent of teachers had some strong feelings of burnout; 53% had substantial feelings of burnout and 41% were experiencing burnout.

After all the material was collected from the participants, the data was analyzed using *t*-tests. The results of the *t*-test were significant for the Teacher Burnout Survey between special education teachers and regular education teachers as shown in Table 1.2. Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected. The significance was tested at the *p* less than 0.05 level.

Table 1.2

*T*-Test for Independent Groups between Special Education Teachers and Regular Education Teachers on the Teacher Burnout Scale

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig. (1- tailed)
Special Ed.	66.19	16	6.00	2.01	30	0.014
Regular Ed.	71.25	16	8.01			

When examining The Teacher Burnout Scale between special education teachers and regular education teachers, it was determined that there was a significant difference. The original research hypothesis proposed that teacher burnout would be greater for the special education teachers. However, these results showed that the regular education teachers had a higher burnout score than the special education teachers.

Table 2.1

*T*-Test for Independent Groups between Special Education Teachers and Regular Education Teachers on the Job Satisfaction Scale

.	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	T	DF	Sig 1 tail
Special Ed.-	233.56	14.63	16	0.989	30	0.083
Regular Ed	239.06	16.75	16			

The difference between special education teachers and regular education teachers for the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire was analyzed. The results were not significant. There is no difference in job satisfaction scores between special education teachers and regular education teachers.

Table 3.1

Correlation between Burnout and Job Satisfaction for Special Education Teachers

	Burnout – Special Education	Satisfaction – Special Education
Burnout – Special Education	1	
Satisfaction - Special Education	0.08	1

The  $r$  value obtained when correlating special education teacher burnout scores and job satisfaction scores was very low. Therefore, there was a very weak relationship between the teacher burnout scores and the teacher job satisfaction scores for special education teachers.

Table 4.1

Correlation between Burnout and Job Satisfaction for Regular Education Teachers

	Burnout- Regular Education	Satisfaction – Regular Education
Burnout – Regular Education	1	
Satisfaction - Regular Education	0.02	1

The  $r$  value obtained when correlating regular education teacher burnout scores and job satisfaction scores was very low. Therefore, there was a very weak relationship between the teacher burnout scores and the teacher job satisfaction scores for regular education teachers.



## Chapter IV

### Discussion

It was hypothesized that special education teachers would have significantly higher scores on the Teacher Burnout Scale than regular education teachers. This study's findings show that regular education teachers scored higher on the Teacher Burnout Scale than special education teachers. Although there is no answer as to why regular education teachers scored higher, other factors could have been surveyed in the study to help determine that answer. This could have included surveys that involve personal factors. As previous studies have shown factors such as background and personal characteristics, age of teacher, and expectations have been found to be related to teacher burnout (Jackson & Schuler, 1983; Schwab, 1983). The other factors may have helped explain why the regular education teachers had a higher rate of burnout results. These variables should be investigated further in future studies.

It was hypothesized that special education teachers would have significantly lower scores on the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire than regular education teachers. Results found no difference in job satisfaction scores between special education teachers and regular education teachers. It was also hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between the scores on the Teacher Burnout Scale and the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire for special education teachers. There was not a high correlation between Teacher Burnout and Job Satisfaction. The last hypothesis was that there would be significant relationship between the scores on the Teacher Burnout Scale and the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire for regular education teachers. Findings show there is a very weak relationship. Teachers do not appear to experience burn out because they are dissatisfied with their jobs. Once again, personal factors of

the participating teachers could have impacted the results of the study. Further studies are needed to determine what other factors are contributing to teacher burnout.

This study shows interesting findings but could have been impacted by some procedural issues. There were a lot more regular education teacher surveys than special education surveys. The method of randomly selecting 16 regular education teachers but including all special education teachers could impact the results of the study. Sixteen was chosen from each group because there were only 16 special education teachers available between the two schools. Future researchers could utilize all surveys that were returned to the investigator or sample a larger number of special education teachers and do random selection from both groups.

The results of the study were not consistent with some of the prior research relating to burnout and job satisfaction. According to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, educators have been voicing concerns about higher burnout rates in special education as compared to general education since 1990. Yet prior research also finds stress factors appear to affect both regular education and special education teachers according to Olson and Matuskey, (1982). So the stress on regular educators may be increasing and result in higher burnout.

The present study did find that 6% of teachers had strong feelings of burnout; 53% had substantial feelings of burnout and 41% were experiencing burnout, reported on the teacher burnout scale. It is interesting to note that none of the teachers reported few burnout feelings. All of the teachers surveyed experienced strong feelings of burnout with regular education teachers having higher levels than the special education teachers. In spite of feeling burnt out, more teachers were satisfied with their job than nonsatisfied. Consequently future studies need to look at personal factors of teachers to further assess what contributes to teacher burnout.

*Limitations*

The study was limited by a small sample size. The district's small sample size, limited ethnically diversity and the geographic region may have influenced the results of the study.

*Recommendations*

Teaching can be a very stressful job. This study's findings concluded that regular education teachers scored higher on teacher burnout than special education teachers. However, there is no relationship between special education teachers, regular education teachers and Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire. It would be interesting to evaluate the years of experience between the regular education and special education teachers to determine if there is a relationship between burnout and job satisfaction. Also studies which look at personality variables and the relationship to severity of teacher burnout would be helpful. Further studies with more participants are needed to confirm the link between special education and regular education teachers and who experiences more burnout.

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## Appendix A

### **Anonymous Survey Consent**

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “Teacher Burnout: Special Education versus Regular Education” designed to analyze the burnout rates for regular education and special education teachers. The study is being conducted by Dr. Sandra Stroebel and Amanda Roach from Marshall University. This research is being conducted as part of the thesis class requirements for Amanda Roach.

This survey is comprised of The Teacher Burnout Survey and The Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire. It will take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete each survey. Your replies will be anonymous, so do not put your name anywhere on the form. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is completely voluntary and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose to not participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate you may either return the blank survey or you may discard it. You may choose to not answer any question by simply leaving it blank. Returning the survey in the envelope that will be provided in the counselor’s office indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply. If you have any questions about the study you may contact Dr. Sandra Stroebel at 304-746-2032 or Amanda Roach at 606-923-7297.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant you may contact the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity at (304) 696-4303.

By completing this survey and returning it you are also confirming that you are **18** years of age or older.

Please keep this page for your records.