Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

Coping strategies and burnout in staff working with students with special educational needs and disabilities

Bonnie Brittle

Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, United Kingdom

HIGHLIGHTS

- SEND staff reported notable levels of burnout.
- Emotional coping was a significant predictor of burnout.
- Avoidance coping was a risk factor for disengagement.
- Rational coping was a protective factor for disengagement.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Research on special educator burnout has predominantly focused on demographic, environmental and situational factors, with few studies exploring individual characteristics. This cross-sectional self-report study focused on coping strategies as predictors of burnout among Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) staff. The survey results from 169 participants showed that emotional coping predicted greater levels of burnout. In addition, avoidance coping predicted higher levels of disengagement, whereas rational coping predicted lower levels of disengagement. These results emphasize the importance of examining individual characteristics in SEND staff burnout. This would have implications for monitoring and addressing the psychological wellbeing of SEND staff.

© 2019 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Teaching in a school has been identified as a highly stressful occupation and unsurprisingly a vast amount of the literature has been dedicated to this topic (Mearns & Cain, 2003). Research has found that high levels of stress can lead to burnout when teachers perceive the occupational demands as exceeding their resources and abilities to cope (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Maslach and Leiter (1997) defined burnout as "an erosion of engagement that what started out important, meaningful and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling and meaningless" (as cited in Maslach et al., 2001, p. 416). Burnout is characterised by high levels of exhaustion and disengagement (Demerouti, Mostert, & Bakker, 2010; Maslach, 2003). Exhaustion is a consequence of any intensive physical, cognitive or affective strain and disengagement involves

experiencing negative attitudes towards one's work and distancing oneself from the work object or content (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

There are many consequences of teacher burnout as fatigue can lead to ineffectiveness, withdrawal from student-teacher relationships and feelings of incompetence which inadvertently causes the class and school to suffer (Chang, 2009). Burnout has also been associated with many negative teacher health outcomes (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). Kim, Youngs, and Frank (2017) found that organisational exposure and social network exposure to burnout positively correlated with novice teachers burnout levels. Higher burnout levels among colleagues increased the likelihood of novice teachers experiencing higher levels of burnout. There are consequences for the teacher workforce with burnout resulting in teacher shortages. In the UK, it has been found that more teachers leave the profession than stay until retirement (Macdonald, 1999). In addition to causing a staffing problem, this leads to degraded quality of teaching due to a high turnover of staff (Chang, 2009). The different components of burnout have been found to have

direct and indirect effects on the individualized education program outcomes of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Wong, Ruble, Yu and McGraw (2017) found personal accomplishment was directly related to student outcomes and exhaustion and depersonalisation were indirectly related to student outcomes through teaching quality and student engagement. Therefore, it is important to understand the mechanisms behind burnout to try and alleviate the levels experienced, as it does not only affect individual teachers but negatively impacts students and the teaching profession (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003).

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) teachers have been recognised as most prone to high stress and burnout (Chang, 2009), with these teachers reporting higher levels of exhaustion and depersonalisation than mainstream teachers (Kucuksuleymanoglu, 2011). This is problematic as 39% of teachers transferring from special to general education cited burnout as the cause of their transfer (Billingsley & Cross, 1991). Research has identified that special and mainstream teachers experience different types of stressors (Williams & Gersch, 2004). Mainstream teachers are more stressed by a lack of time, whereas teachers in special education are stressed by a lack of resources (Williams & Gersch, 2004). Furthermore, inadequate resources in mainstream schools have been attributed to stress in teachers supporting students with SEND (Engelbrecht, Forlin, Eloff, & Swart, 2001). There are also more significant emotional demands on teachers in comparison to other professions (Chang, 2009) with inclusion of a student with SEND introducing additional demands (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). In interviews conducted by Trendall (1989) teachers in special schools reported experiencing difficulties in forgetting student's problems after work and a lack of support, with teachers expressing that they had nobody they could confide in. However, there has been a relatively small amount of attention paid to SEND staff in comparison to general educators. Therefore, there is a need to examine SEND staff as a distinct population in order to understand burnout in those working in educational settings.

1.1. Burnout in special educational needs and disabilities staff

The literature on SEND staff has identified a range of factors that are associated with the onset of burnout, with the vast majority of research focusing on demographic, environmental and situational factors (Brunsting et al., 2014). It has been reported that teacher age, years of experience, higher levels of education and being female negatively correlates with burnout (Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Embich, 2001; Zabel & Zabel, 1983). In regard to classroom level factors, it has been found that teachers of older students (Frank & McKenzie, 1993) and students with emotional disturbances, rather than intellectual disabilities (Banks & Necco, 1990), experienced higher levels of burnout. Interestingly, it has been found that, as the number of students with ASD in a class increases, teacher burnout level decreases (Coman et al., 2013). Whereas, Irvin, Hume, Boyd, McBee, and Odom (2013) found as the number of adult members of staff in a class increases so do levels of burnout.

In addition to these factors, a number of school level variables have also been identified as contributing to burnout. These include role conflict, role ambiguity and levels of support (Brunsting et al., 2014). Role ambiguity refers to situations where job descriptions and expectations are vague and role conflict refers to situations where it is unreasonable to expect an individual to be able manage their workload (Brunsting et al., 2014). Both role ambiguity and role conflict predicted higher levels of burnout (Crane & Iwanicki, 1986). A recent study by Garwood, Werts, Varghese, and Gosey (2018) used a mixed-methods approach to explore the effects of school level variables on rural special educator teacher burnout. They found that role conflict was a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion and role ambiguity was a significant predictor of personal accomplishment. A high level of self-advocacy, positive student relationships and supportive relationships with colleagues and administrators were also noted as potential buffers for burnout. This aligns with an earlier finding that teachers who receive support from headteachers, fellow teachers and parents of students experience less burnout (Zabel & Zabel, 2002).

While the relationship between situational factors and burnout has been demonstrated, it is important to note that these factors do not always result in burnout (Mearns & Cain, 2003). Therefore, individual characteristics that may place staff at higher risk need to be understood, yet few studies have been conducted. Biglan, Layton, Jones, Hawkins and Rusby (2011) found that experiential avoidance, the tendency to avoid unpleasant thoughts and feelings, positively correlated with burnout in early childhood special educators, whereas valued living and mindfulness negatively correlated with burnout. This finding is supported by Donahoo, Siegrist and Garrett-Wright (2018) pilot study that found a significant decrease in stress levels in special educators participating in a mindfulness intervention. Teachers' happiness and job satisfaction among special education teachers at Italian preschools and primary schools have also been reported to negatively predict personal, student-related and work-related burnout (De Stasio, Fiorilli, Benevene, Uusitalo-Malmivaara, & Chiacchio, 2017). Self-efficacy and burnout has been explored by Ruble, Usher, and McGrew (2011), who report mixed findings. They found that burnout levels among teachers of students with ASD decreased with high levels of self-efficacy in regard to classroom management. However they found no relationship between burnout and self-efficacy in regard to obtaining support from fellow teachers. The role of coping strategies as potential buffers for burnout has been identified as an area in need of additional research (Brunsting et al., 2014; Hurt, Grist, Malesky, & Mccord, 2013).

It can also be seen that the literature heavily focuses on the experiences of special education teachers, however it is important to note that paraeducators are vital in the delivery of special education (French, 1998). Paraeducators are also referred to as para-professionals, aides or teaching assistants within the literature. The roles of paraeducators have been increased along with the emergence of inclusive education. Paraeducators are now expected to provide support with instruction, tutoring and managing student behaviour, in addition to many other tasks that overlap with the classroom teacher's responsibilities (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). Webster and Blatchford (2015) observed that students with a 'statement' setting out their SEND and the additional provision they require to meet their needs were almost constantly accompanied by a teaching assistant. However, the literature on paraeducators and burnout is lacking. Shyman (2010) conducted a preliminary study that explored one of the components of burnout, namely emotional exhaustion, among special education para-educators. It was found that more than 70% of the sample reported notably high levels of emotional exhaustion. Role conflict, supervisor support, sense of efficacy and emotional demand were found to be significant predictors of emotional exhaustion, reflecting findings on general teachers. Therefore, this study will examine the effect of different coping strategies on the levels of burnout amongst special education teachers, paraeducators and support staff.

1.2. Coping

Coping has been defined as "an individual's efforts to master demands (conditions of harm, threat or challenge) that are appraised (or perceived) as exceeding or taxing his or her resources" (Monat & Lazarus, 1991, p. 5). Coping styles are considered