



Teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder across various educational settings: The factors involved in burnout

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H I G H L I G H T S

- We compared the experience of teachers according to their educational setting.
- We investigated adjustment mechanisms in teachers of children with ASD.
- Teachers of children with ASD showed lower levels of burnout than regular teachers.
- Perceived stress, social support and self-efficacy predicted burnout levels.

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This study aimed to 1) compare the experience of 115 French-Canadian teachers of typical children and children with ASD according to their educational setting (i.e., mainstream classes, specialized settings), through dispositional (i.e., self-efficacy, empathy) and transactional variables (i.e., perceived stress, social support, coping strategies) and burnout; 2) assess the influence of these variables on burnout. The results indicate that teachers of typical children have higher levels of burnout than teachers of children with ASD. Perceived stress and social support predict burnout among teachers of children with ASD in mainstream classes while self-efficacy also predicts burnout among teachers in specialized settings.

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1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a heterogeneous neuro-developmental disorder characterized by impaired social interaction and communication, as well as restricted or stereotyped

patterns of behavior or interests. It affects about 1–2% of children worldwide and epidemiological studies conducted over recent decades reveal a constant increase in its prevalence (Elsabbagh et al., 2012). Consequently, the ASD is considered today one of the most prevalent disabilities in school settings (Shattuck, 2006). Its associated core impairments greatly impact children's learning abilities as well as their overall autonomy (Rogers & Vismara, 2008). Therefore pupils with ASD often require the intervention of a wide range of services adapted to their specific needs. Despite some common features, each case of autism is unique, which impedes the adoption of general guidelines. However, past findings

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support the integration of children with ASD as early as possible in the same educational environment as typically developing children, in order to promote positive outcomes in terms of social and cognitive development (Ferraioli & Harris, 2010). Policy-makers have followed these recommendations to such an extent that, today several schooling options are available according to the needs of the child with ASD. They range from total inclusion in a mainstream class to schooling in a specialized institution.

1.1. *Teaching pupils with ASD*

The responsibilities that come with teaching children with ASD raise many educational challenges (Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003). Even though teachers' work vary depending on the school setting, research has shown that both, mainstream and specialized educational teachers experience higher levels of psychological distress when children with ASD are included in their class (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001).

In Québec (Canada), a continuum of educational services, from mainstream classes to special schools, is available to provide the best education possible for all children with ASD. These continua refer to models such as response to intervention, within the global movement towards inclusive education generalisation (Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2011). Inclusive education is a classroom model where students with special needs integrate an ordinary class corresponding to their age within his neighbourhood school, regardless of their intellectual abilities or of their level of daily functioning. A governmental law in Québec stipulates that children with special needs have to benefit from services and adaptations, within the regular or adapted school curriculum, based on an evaluation of individualized needs and abilities (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport [MELS], 2007). Regardless of the type of education setting, schooling of students with ASD requires adaptations (e.g., adapted pedagogic material and curriculum), modifications of the environment (e.g., visual timetables or schedules), additional services (e.g., special needs assistance, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and educational psychology) and interventions beyond the usual curriculum (Poirier & Cappe, 2016).

The ASD form severity is taken into account when deciding of the type of the school setting the students integrate. Regular schools include students with a medium form of the disorder, while students with a severe form of ASD, associated with a severe or profound intellectual disability, or multiple diagnoses usually attend special schools. However, regular teachers of inclusive classrooms are generally not trained to teach students with special needs such as ASD. They usually benefit from the support of a special needs assistant qualified on adapted interventions for children with special needs. Special education teachers received specific training on ASD as part of their university curriculum and work either in support classes within mainstream schools or in special schools. The special class and schools commonly observe an autism-specific approach based on TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped Children; Schopler & Olley, 1982), ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis; Lovaas, 1987) or on sensorial stimulation programs (Poirier & Cappe, 2016). Moreover, the ratio pupil to student in these settings is smaller than in a regular classroom, with approximately 6–12 students for a special education teacher and a special needs assistant (Poirier & Cappe, 2016). Children with ASD in special schools are taken in charge by professional teams comprising psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, nurses and social workers.

Findings suggest that teaching students with ASD is more challenging than teaching students with other disabilities, as this group of teachers shows higher levels of stress and burnout (Zarafshan, Mohammadi, Ahmadi, & Arsalani, 2013) and a lower sense of self-efficacy (Symes & Humphrey, 2011). Many teachers report feelings of powerlessness, confusion, frustration, disappointment, defeat and professional inadequacy (Baghdadli, 2011; Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Oliver, & Lyons, 2012). Certain environmental constraints, such as a lack of adapted teaching equipment, increased administrative responsibilities and feelings of limited support from educational authorities (i.e., school principals, government) may also explain the greater the prevalence of stress and burnout among these teachers (Antonioni, Polychroni, & Kotroni, 2009; Baghdadli, 2011). Moreover lack of social support and feelings of isolation are likely to contribute to increasing stress (Baghdadli, 2011). These social aspects are sources of concern as social support has been found to be valuable asset to cope with stressful situations (Curchod-Ruedi, Doudin, & Peter, 2009). In this respect a recent empirical study on factors linked with teacher self-efficacy put into light a common pattern in 14 OECD countries (Fackler & Malmberg, 2016), including teacher characteristics, teaching practices, classroom and student group characteristics.

1.1.1. *Teaching pupils with ASD in a mainstream class*

Children with ASD are generally first admitted into a mainstream school and then transferred to a better-adapted schooling environment if needed. Mainstream teachers of children with ASD often report inadequate preparation and a lack of specific training (Busby et al., 2012). However, teachers who have undergone in-service training on autism show a greater sense of self-efficacy, a critical factor in improving their overall experience (Benoit, 2013). Conversely, teachers who lack training have poorer relationships with pupils with ASD (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, & Webster, 2009), leading to higher levels of occupational stress (Baghdadli, 2011). Findings have highlighted that low levels of self-efficacy and poor sense of control are chiefly linked to professional stress (Symes & Humphrey, 2011). School resources also appear to play a key role. For example, even though mainstream teachers of inclusive classes generally benefit of a special needs assistant support, and despite the school principals agreement on its crucial role for successfully schooling children with ASD (Ruel, Poirier, & Japel, 2015), teachers regularly report lacking resources and support (Busby et al., 2012; Ruel et al., 2015). In summary, the inclusion of a pupil with ASD in a mainstream class creates a stressful context that greatly affects the environment of teachers and contributes to the adoption of inadequate coping strategies (Brackenreed, 2011).

1.1.2. *Teaching pupils with ASD in specialized settings*

Teachers in specialized settings generally teach pupils with a moderate or severe form of ASD associated or not with severe intellectual disabilities or other comorbidities. Despite their academic background in special education, some researchers point out that many teachers are unprepared to work with children with ASD (Loiacono & Allen, 2008). This situation is potentially harmful for these teachers because low self-efficacy makes them more vulnerable to negative emotional reactions in stressful situations (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011). Specialized classes and institutions for children with ASD commonly use an autism-specific approach based on various methods that enables teachers to feel more competent towards the special needs of children with ASD, and better prepares them to deal with behavioral problems (Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003). Moreover, teachers in specialized settings benefit of teams of various professionals support and of

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