



The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Special Educators' Perceived Levels of Burnout

Citation

Fitzpatrick, Erin V. 2022. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Special Educators' Perceived Levels of Burnout. Master's thesis, Harvard University Division of Continuing Education.

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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Special Educators' Perceived Levels of
Burnout

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A Thesis in the Field of Psychology
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

May 2022

Abstract

Using a mixed methods approach, this study examined special education workers' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on professional experiences and burnout. Burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory on three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide context for and clarification on special educators' perceptions of burnout before and after the COVID-19 pandemic altered educational processes. The proposed hypothesis was that the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent changes to special education in a large urban public school system negatively impacted special educators by increasing burnout. While the MBI raw scores indicated significant burnout among participants, the statistical scores were not as robust. The interviews, however, mirrored the trends of the raw scores as every participant interviewed indicated experiencing burnout.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Jane Fitzpatrick, for teaching me perseverance especially when it is difficult to keep going and providing her unyielding support and encouragement in everything I do. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my late father, Bob Fitzpatrick, who was always courageous in the face of adversity and in the pursuit of truth; in the darkest days, you are the light that leads me through.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my research advisor, Dr. Adrienne Tierney, and my thesis advisor, Dr. Mandy Savitz-Romer, for their help and guidance through the research and thesis processes. I am deeply grateful to have had the chance to work with both of you on this project and could not have done it without you. I would also like to express my gratitude for my dear friend, Kristen Haws; thank you for always hearing me and grounding me.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the United States' educational system, disrupting the operations of many educational institutions, including public school districts across the country (Estes, 2021; Iivari et al., 2020; Jones, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Klein, 2020; Murray, 2020; Samaila et al., 2020). This disruption in public schools impacted educators as well. There are groups of educators, however, for whom the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting educational upheaval is potentially more severe and detrimental. Special educators, for example, may be more vulnerable to increased work-related stresses from the pandemic-related changes and challenges because of the nature of their roles and their working conditions. Prior to the pandemic, special education workers were already identified as an at-risk group for burnout and stress. (Brunsting et al., 2014). Soini et al. (2019) found that the nature of services provided by special educators, as well as the lack of sufficient resources and supports, contribute to significantly higher rates of turnover, burnout, and disengagement among special educators as compared to their general education counterparts. In addition, contradictory or unclear role expectations and insufficient peer and administrative support were also identified as contributing to the negative outcomes (Soini et al., 2019).

Policies put in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted educational processes, roles, relationships, and tools available to many educators. The magnitude of the changes required for school systems to adapt to the pandemic, however, often resulted

in broad approaches that lacked provisions necessary for the differentiated teaching required in special education. For special educators, the pandemic-related discord impeded their work by, at times, displacing them from classrooms and, at others, forcing them into an unsafe and chaotic physical work environment; isolating them from necessary collegial relationships, materials, and structure; and requiring the use of virtual programming without training or proof of efficacy (Callanan, 2021; Bedford, 2020; Boston Teachers Union, 2020; Jones, 2021; Murray, 2020; Schwan, 2021). Insufficient planning, preparation, and management at the administrative and operational level to identify and address the unique needs of this student population and the models of instruction required to effectively provide services impeded the continuation of legally mandated, student-specific differentiated learning. The pandemic essentially created a chasm between the educators, central resources, and students while those at the operational level still carried the burden for adhering to the legal requirements of meeting the needs of students with special needs. The very foundation of special education requires individualized educational plans (IEP) implemented through instructor-intensive interventions, such as hand-over-hand instruction and errorless learning. The methods required to support children with special needs typically include close personal contact and frequent intervention. The techniques applied are designed to enhance each students' outcomes using approaches that facilitate rapport building and relationships, access to materials, utilization of visual aids, regulation of task timing, continuous assessment of student comprehension, and measurement and modification of nonfunctional or disruptive student behavior (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018; Hopman et al., 2018; Hehir et al., 2014).

Pre-pandemic fundamental differences already existed between the roles and experiences of special educators and general educator's; however, the pandemic may have widened this gap. In one large urban public district, in-person special education services were deemed necessary throughout most of the 2020-2021 school year, whereas general educators were able to continue working remotely during a time of high infection rates. This decision was made despite a high risk for COVID infection and transmission in the communities served by the schools; the district's inability to ensure all staff had appropriate personal protection equipment (PPE); and the lack of access to and requirements for COVID testing of staff and students returning to school buildings (Boston Teachers Union [BTU], 2020). According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE] (2020), special educators working with students labeled "high needs" are responsible for maintaining the delivery of in-person services, regardless of whether the rest of their schools/districts have become hybrid or transitioned to remote models of instruction while meeting current health and safety requirements. The school administration's decision to keep the onus on special educators to physically report to and teach in buildings that were known to be unsafe and without the necessary COVID precautions in place (BTU, 2020) presumably compounded work-related stress for special educators. Further complicating this already complex issue was a directive from DESE requiring special education services across the state's public-school districts to be delivered as specified by students' IEPs regardless of the model used in delivery of services, i.e., in-person, hybrid, or virtual (DESE, 2020). One factor that uniquely impacted special educators versus their general education colleagues was the incompatibility of DESE's orders to maintain pre-pandemic services. Unlike general

education curriculum which does not require close physical interaction with students, special educators were required to provide physical services, i.e., teaching to IEP objectives written with specific interventions such as hand-over-hand, errorless learning, and other physically involved teaching methods, while simultaneously being tasked to maintain public health and safety regulations of social distancing and limiting physical contact prescribed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2020).

DESE's directives were contradictory but they were not the only source of confused messaging for the special educators who were required to provide in-person services in the district during the pandemic. Administrators' and appointed officials' reassurances that special educators were completely safe to provide the required in-person services were at odds with special educators' personal knowledge and experience with outdated and often dilapidated school buildings (Boston Teachers Union, 2020 and Bedford, 2020). Many schools lacked any form of air ventilation systems, and in others, there was an inability to access functioning windows (BTU, 2020). The regular and ongoing reports of structural concerns in most of the urban district's facilities directly negated the administration's declaration of safety and low risk of COVID infection and spread. In addition, after the BTU negotiated the right for transparency surrounding school-based cases by requiring the posting of the numbers of positive COVID-19 infections in the district and broken-down by school, the initial number of school-based infections was confirmed as 423 COVID-19 cases district-wide, with 167 student cases and 256 staff cases reported (BPS, 2021). These numbers reflect cases that were determined to be the result of school-based transmission. Thus, these cases seem to

contradict administrators' and elected officials' assertions that students and staff were safe from COVID-19 infection spread when reporting in-person to school buildings.

Based on the working conditions created by the pandemic and the expectations to adhere to pre-pandemic requirements imposed by administrative leadership, it is proposed that special educators in an urban public district are likely to have experienced increased burnout during the 2020-2021 school year. The lack of essential supports and protections to ensure safety to function in-person during the pandemic lends evidence to the belief that there would be increased stress among special education workers. In addition, COVID-related health concerns had the potential to severely impact traditional special education instructional resources, tools, and techniques. These elements coupled with the expectation that special educators maintain preexisting requirements for student outcomes and factors identified in earlier research as inherently problematic in the role of special educators created the potential for the perfect storm for special educators.

One example identified in previous research as underlying special educator burnout was isolation from colleagues. Isolation from colleagues has been empirically identified as a factor that positively correlated to increased job stress and burnout in special educator's pre-pandemic (Langher et al., 2017). Given that the COVID-19 created situations of mandatory distancing and isolation, it is quite possible that instances of isolation from colleagues while working in special education during this time were intensified. Another important aspect identified in the literature as contributing to the special educator's burnout is the inability to be successful in meeting the needs of the students. The absence of tools and programs to effectively meet the needs of this population under pandemic conditions, potentially created situations that made positive

feedback in this regard increasingly challenging. In addition, the ability to meet parent expectations, traditionally a challenge, were susceptible to being strained at this time, both due to the pandemic constraints on the education process and the personal burden the virtual and hybrid models placed on parents. Unfortunately, as reflected in some of the news articles cited below, educators were often the target of blame versus the pandemic or the school system's inability to adapt. It is strongly possible that the pandemic created a loss of positive feedback and an increase in negative circumstances for special educators attempting to maintain unrealistic expectations of meeting IEP requirements as written pre-pandemic.

To assess whether the pandemic did in fact exacerbate negative impacts that have been reported to result in special education burnout and attrition, this study was designed to compare special educator's perceptions of burnout across different time periods. Using a mixed methods approach, special education workers' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on professional experiences and burnout was assessed. Burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) on three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide context for and clarification on special educators' perceptions of burnout. It was hypothesized that the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent changes to public education concerning high needs students in a large urban public school district negatively impacted special educators by increasing burnout. This research seeks to validate the hypothesis that special educators were negatively impacted in their working conditions during the 2020-2021 school year, the culmination of preexisting issues compounded by the existence of the global pandemic. Further, this

study seeks to determine whether special educators had access to the differentiated tools, alternative methods, and professional support necessary to be successful in their roles and whether restricted or lack of access essential resources led to decreased role satisfaction, perception of effectiveness, stress, and burnout. The proposed research stands to benefit the disciplines of psychology and education, as well as the intersection of the two, in identification of any adaptations made by special educators to successfully bridge the gap and maintain a sense of positive momentum, job satisfaction, and personal achievement under the ensuing circumstances. This information would be paramount in understanding how individuals can better manage or prevent negative psychological impacts during times of great social upheaval and challenges in the workplace. Finally, the proposed research stands to inform our understanding and identification of resources, tools, and supports that could be of assistance in creating structure in possible future situations requiring increased adaptation and flexibility.

Research Problem

Work-related stress and burnout are serious occupational problems among special educators in the United States and in countries around the world (Brunsting et al., 2014; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Jovanovic et al., 2019; Langher et al., 2017; Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002). According to this research, special educators are, in fact, at higher risk for job-related stress and burnout than their general education colleagues. Research has further identified that job characteristics prevalent in special education- including the high-performance expectations and the psychological challenges of working through students' severe behaviors- are also linked to special educators' increased risk for

negative personal psychological impacts (Jovanovic et al., 2019). A lack of adequate resources and insufficient availability of administrative and collegial support is also reported as contributing to the negative occupational mental health of special educators (Jovanovic et al., 2019; Langher et al., 2017; Nichols and Sosnowsky, 2002).

While general educators and special educators have goals and responsibilities in common and may at times work with the same students, the role of special educators differs in many ways. Both roles are responsible for the instruction and learning of assigned pupils and are focused on understanding of and adherence to curriculum, lesson planning, formal and informal testing/assessments, and regular student and family communication. Unlike the majority of their general education colleagues, however, special educators are required to perform additional responsibilities including: devising alternatives for student discipline systems used in general education (Dovey et al., 2017); conducting functional behavioral analysis assessments; developing and implementing behavioral intervention plans; and complying with stringent legal oversight, requiring on-going recertifications, rigorous documentation and paperwork, implementation of alternate assessment, and, overall, increased accountability, involvement, decision-making and collaboration with other special educators (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002).

The numerous and often challenging responsibilities required of special educators not only increase stress and burnout but are linked to higher attrition rates as well. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Postsecondary Education reported a drastic shortage of special education teachers in 92% of states (Robinson et al., 2019). Numerous studies concerning the attrition of special educators have identified burnout as the strongest positively correlated factor to attrition (Robinson et al., 2019), which is

evidence further supporting the claim that individual special educators are at an increased risk for job dissatisfaction and burnout, and thus more likely to quit their jobs, due to the increased pressures and responsibilities special educators face without access to adequate support.

Research efforts have attempted to provide an explanation concerning high attrition among special educators. According to Langher et al., (2017), about two thirds of special educators who leave the profession cite the amount of paperwork, ineffective administrative support, number of students per classroom, and lack of collegial collaboration, as well as increased pressure from students' families as reasons for leaving their positions. Special educators' interactions with parents and/or guardians can be more complex and intense than that of their general education colleagues given the sensitive nature of the information being shared, the range of emotional responses parents may experience, and parent expectation that is either too high or too low given the reality of the student's circumstances (Langher et al., 2017). The complexity of special educators' interactions with parents/guardians are further evidence of the unique and demanding nature of special education that can potentially contribute to educator burnout.

According to Langher et al., (2017) burnout, "characterized by feelings of low personal accomplishment, reduced professional self-efficacy, job disengagement, [and] poor interactions and attitudes towards students and colleagues" is more prevalent among special educators than other professionals. While Langher et al.'s study, like others of its kind, attempts to identify a causal relationship between certain characteristics of special educators and their perceived level of burnout, the research provides only pieces – albeit valuable pieces – to the larger puzzle of what is working and what is not working in

special education; and while research on special educator burnout spans three decades, the work is far from a comprehensive understanding of the problem. This is perhaps due in part to the ever-changing societal and cultural climates that influence what constitutes “good” public education and what level of investment and resources should be allocated to fund services for those who require additional services, and what those services should look like.

In the past two years, the United States and much of the world have been thrown into economic, psychological, and societal upheaval stimulated by the global pandemic. The COVID-19 virus has in novel ways impacted not only millions of individuals, but also whole professions and specific groups of people on a macro- and micro-level. The most notable and documented example of public and media attention to a specific group covered the experience and impact of COVID-19 on frontline healthcare workers—a group belonging to a profession that is vital to combatting this deadly virus, but whose members must assume a great amount of personal risk of exposure to do so (Antonijevic et al., 2020; Brenner, 2020; Englund, 2020; Foli, 2020; Gold, 2021). Depictions of physicians, nurses, and other healthcare workers overwhelmed by their experiences and their loss of self-efficacy and control based on known science and practice have been covered regularly in the mainstream media for more than a year. A simple Google search in the news tab with the keywords “healthcare workers suffer during COVID-19 pandemic” populates the screen with attention-grabbing and empathy-evoking headlines like “‘We are still people’: Pandemic takes mental toll on health care ‘heroes’” (Lane & LaRose, 2021); or “‘I just feel broken’: doctors, mental health and the pandemic” (Ross, 2021); to “Covid combat fatigue: ‘I would come home with tears in my eyes’” (Brenner,

2021); and “In a relentless pandemic, nursing-home workers are worn down and stressed out” (Englund, 2020). The stories and snippets published by media outlets painted a picture for the public of how coronavirus was impacting those in healthcare.

As the pandemic evolved, attention began to focus on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on other groups within the community who were severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Public educators, and more acutely, special education staff found themselves under scrutiny. Educators, however, were not depicted so positively in the media or commended for their efforts as was the case with healthcare workers, but rather more so defined by their shortcomings in serving their students. To make this distinction is by no means an attempt to imply coverage of and exposure to healthcare workers’ experiences in the media was unfounded or inappropriate; on the contrary, it is the author’s position that exposing the public to the inner workings and plights of members of the healthcare community only helps to strengthen and focus public support for them.

The same quick Google search under the news tab with keywords “educators suffer during COVID-19 pandemic”, however, yields different sorts of headlines. From titles like “K-12 education appears on downward slide as pandemic continues” (Powell, 2021); or “Why personalized learning is struggling during COVID-19” (Klein, 2020); or “The impact of COVID-19 on student achievement and what it may mean for educators” (Soland et. al., 2020); or “Schools have failed children of color during the pandemic” (Giegerich, 2020); to “Baker’s office slams teachers unions for vaccine demands” (Schwan, 2021); and “Opinion: Don’t put teachers at the front of the vaccine line” (Domanico, 2020); and, finally, “School wasn’t so great before COVID, either” (Christakis, 2020). The picture painted in the media about educators’ experiences during

the pandemic was less than flattering, a far cry from the sympathy and empathy elicited by the healthcare workers' portrayals.

This portrayal in the media potentially exacerbated the stress and negative impact of the pandemic on educators and in particular special educators because while trying to respond and adapt to unprecedented circumstances and challenges, these workers were singled out for very public criticism and blame. Additionally, the real barriers and obstacles that existed at the school and system level were not identified and called out for solutions but rather teachers themselves were held responsible for the situation and, at the same time, criticized for their requests for personal and group safety. Special educators were singled out in these discussions due to a policy determination that special education was an essential service that must be provided in person and that pre-pandemic student plans that required close personal contact must continue to be met. An important contributor to special educator burnout was identified pre-pandemic as the ability to meet student needs and parent expectations. This public blaming could potentially have further strained the relationship and interactions between special educators and parents trying to navigate this uncharted territory to continue to meet student needs.

To be clear, not all media coverage of educators' experiences working during the COVID-19 pandemic were as dismissive of the actual *educators* as the aforementioned samples. For example, the title of one article reads, "New Study: Teachers Also Suffering from Digital Divide in Pandemic: Remote Learning Challenged Educators, Exacerbated Inequities Among Students" (Callanan, 2021). Another example, a different article this time from Time Magazine, reads "We Must Invest in Teachers to Prevent COVID-19 From Exacerbating the Racial Educational Divide" (Khanna & Baldwin,

2020). In both examples the authors have at least alluded to educators' experiences as being relevant in discussions concerning issues in education. Media publications that *did* center on educator experiences working during a global health crisis did not conjure up the same attention-grabbing, empathy-evoking energy seen in the healthcare workers examples. For example, articles with headlines such as, "Virtual School Is Weighing on Teachers" (Estes, 2021); or "'COVID teaching is so hard': Educators share fears and frustrations about school in pandemic" (Jones, 2021); or "Special needs students and teachers face hurdles that seem impossible" (Murray, 2020), do little to illuminate to outsiders the innerworkings of education, and thus how it is impacting educators, during a global pandemic. While media coverage may have contributed to educators' job satisfaction and burnout, further evidence is needed to determine whether increased educator burnout occurred due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Research and literature concerning how the COVID crisis impacted educators is not yet in evidence, however, studies examining the impact on healthcare workers is currently well under way. Antonijevic et al., (2020) conducted a study concerning the pandemic's impact on medical personnel in which they described frontline healthcare professionals' as experiencing significantly higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than pre-pandemic. In the study, factors cited as contributing to the negative impacts included the lack of knowledge with the disease, personal exposure, the burden and nature of work, and fear of infecting loved ones. A second study conducted by O'Connor et al. (2020) on the negative psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for healthcare professionals cited excessive workload and workplace trauma, diminished resources, and lack of support from managers and colleagues.

These studies may provide insight into the education sector and in particular the experience of special educators as similar situations occurred in education that reportedly led to the negative psychological effects on healthcare workers. While healthcare workers understandably experienced significant stress managing the demands of their roles, it is important to note that some of the factors identified as putting healthcare workers at an increased risk for job-related stress and burnout are similar to challenges faced by special educators during the COVID-19 outbreak, i.e., unmanageable workload/work expectations, inadequate resources/access to resources, and insufficient collegial supports (Langher et al., 2017; Antonijevic et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2020). In addition to the uncertainty of exposure, morbidity and mortality faced by the public at large, special educators were required to continue to work despite putting themselves at greater risk of exposure. In some circumstances, workers lacked confidence in the reliability of the information being provided and the absence of established standards and protocol to ensure safety and protection during the unprecedented, unfolding pandemic (Bedford, 2020; Boston Teachers Union, 2020; Jehlen, 2020). In addition, for roles in which there is strong public interest, the pressure and scrutiny were intense (Christakis, 2020; Domanico, 2020, Powell, 2021; Schwan, 2021). Public school educators' services were at the center of public and political concern, and, among this group, special educators were singled out as critically important to meeting the needs of a high-risk student population. As the structure and resources typically available broke down, workers continued to be expected to perform at pre-pandemic levels. While before the COVID-19 pandemic, special educators were at a high risk for negative, job-related psychological impacts (Brunsting et al., 2010; Jovanovic et al., 2019; Langher et al., 2017; Nichols and

LaPlante, 2002), during and after the pandemic one might anticipate that special educators would be a particularly high-risk group for exacerbated stress and burnout.

In many cases, the pandemic caused a degradation in traditional working conditions in education. Contradictory, changing, and unclear role expectations for special educators, placed this vulnerable population under the influence of political and public scrutiny. Throughout the country, public school districts faced pressure to return to in-person, pre-COVID learning with a priority for special education and high need students. Politicians, public stakeholders, and some parents/guardians have declared public schools and the in-person education they provide societal necessities, institutions that cannot shutter their doors in response to times of national chaos and crisis, including a global pandemic. On the other hand, teachers unions, many educators, and another group of parents/guardians have largely taken the position that, while public schools and in-person education are wholly necessary, it does not supersede the fact that our educational institutions do not currently have the appropriate parameters in place (including sufficient personal protection equipment, adequate job-specific knowledge and training pertaining to pandemic-related challenges, and ability to socially distance and limit physical contact) to ensure community members' - students, staff, and their families- safety from infection and illness. Special education has been an increased focus within this larger 'in-person public education during a pandemic' debate due to the heightened needs and risk for regression of the student population served.

During the pandemic, factors defined in the literature as directly correlated to special educator role satisfaction and retention including support from administration and colleagues, adequate resources to perform work, and positive interactions with students

and families were severely disrupted. The importance of special education services was underscored during the pandemic and deemed an essential service. While pre-pandemic research has identified special educators as a high-risk group for stress, burnout, and attrition, the COVID pandemic created conditions that not only subjected workers to the stressors experienced by their general education colleagues but also created unique challenges due to their roles and, at the same time, eliminated access to critical supports that prior research identified as correlated with job satisfaction and retention. Research into the nature and experience of special educators during the pandemic is vital to a greater understanding of the factors that impeded the work of special educators and may have led to decreased job satisfaction and burn out. Such research would not only create a greater understanding of how to modify working conditions for special educators during a period of national or regional crisis but also address issues in general that have led to the attrition and high vacancy rates among special educator positions across the country.

Using a mixed methods approach, special education workers' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on professional experiences and burnout were assessed. Burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory on three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide context for and clarification on factors contributing to special educators' burnout. Given both the preexisting conditions of working in special education pre-pandemic, as well as the mounting and emergent political and public pressures on public special educators in response to the nation's COVID-19 pandemic, it is hypothesized that special educators were likely negatively

psychologically impacted by the complex conditions of working in special education during the 2020-2021 school year.

Chapter II.

Method

To capture the unique lived experiences of special educators, and the degree to which they experienced burnout brought on by the pandemic, this study draws on two sets of protocols, one for the quantitative portion- the MBI-ES- and one for the qualitative portion—the semi-structured interview—of the study. Using a mixed methods approach, special education workers’ perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on professional experiences and burnout will be assessed. Burnout will be measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory on three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to provide context for and clarification on factors contributing to special educators’ burnout.

Participants

This study was conducted within a large urban public school system in the Northeast that included special educators across four schools – including two high schools (grades 9-12); one elementary school (grades K0-6); and one combined elementary and middle school (grades K0-8) school. Some special educators across the four schools were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. From that outreach, ten participants were added to the study; an additional five participants were added to the study after hearing via word of mouth about it and inquiring with the principal investigator (PI). Every member of the population surveyed spends the majority of his or her workday working with students who are classified as “high needs” and are

assigned to substantially separate classrooms via the student's IEP, a vast majority of whom have a primary diagnosis of ASD. More specifically, inclusion criteria for this study required that participants function in one of the following roles: Paraprofessional, Teacher, or Itinerant Staff (denotes professionals and specialists who spend the majority (>50%) of their workday in substantially separate special education classrooms, including but not limited to: Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs), Behavioral Therapists (BTs), Occupational Therapists (OTs), and Physical Therapists (PTs)).

Recruitment of participants began once the study was granted approval by the Harvard IRB. Fifteen participants responded from January 2022 to April 2022 and participated in the quantitative part of the study. From the group, a subset of five educators were recruited to participate in the qualitative part of the study. All interviewees have worked in special education within the same large urban public school district for a range of 4-6 years with an average employment length $\mu = 5.2$ years and within special education for a range of 4-12 years with an average employment length of $\mu = 8.6$ years. The group of interviewees consisted of three females and two males. The interviewees were of diverse ethnicity including African American ($n = 2$), Hispanic ($n = 1$), and white ($n = 2$).

Design

The study used a mixed methods approach to assess special education workers' perceptions of their level of burnout resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the possible impacts on special educator retention, level of engagement, and role satisfaction.

Quantitative Materials and Design

A self-administered burnout scale called the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was distributed to special educators in the school system to assess educators' level of burnout in relation to three specific dimensions and mental health during the pandemic as compared to before the onset of COVID-19.

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The MBI requires respondents to respond to 22 items across three different scales- emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment- and takes about 10-15 minutes. The items are chosen specifically to determine how often (the frequency) the respondent experiences the three dimensions of burnout. The respondent assigns each item a value from zero- "never"- to six- "every day"- which the researcher then uses to quantify the frequency with which the three dimensions of burnout are experienced by each individual respondent (Maslach et al., 1986). A full sample of the MBI-ES survey can be found in Appendix A.

Surveys were made available in common school spaces or other centralized locations for special educators. Completed surveys were returned anonymously at a designated drop off spot within the school building. Information about the interview portion of the study was included with the survey and interviewees either contacted the PI and volunteered ($n = 3$) or were recruited by the PI ($n = 2$) to participate. For practical reasons, an individual's agreement to participate in the interview portion of the study meant that the respondent was not anonymous to the PI.

Qualitative Materials and Design

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 special education workers to elaborate on educators' work experiences and perceptions of burnout. Semi-structured interviews were used to keep the general flow of the interview on topic, i.e., experiences of special educators during the pandemic and their impacts, while allowing some flexibility in the conversation to explore novel relevant information that emerged. All interviews began with several demographic-based questions to establish the respondent's role within special education, a brief description of their role and responsibilities, and a general account of what their day-to-day looks like. A full sample of the interview questions referenced during the qualitative part of the study can be found in Appendix B.

The length of the interviews ranged for forty minutes to one hour. The interview was semi-structured and asked participants about their experiences of working in special education during three distinct time periods: pre-pandemic (first half of 2019-2020 school year and prior), early pandemic (mid-March through July 2020, second half of 2019-2020 school year), and late pandemic (August 2020-present, 2020-2021 school year). Specifically, participants were asked to elaborate on experiences of burnout and, if able, to compare their experiences of working in special education during the 2020-2021 school year to their perceptions of working in the early pandemic and/or prior to the pandemic.

Procedure

Quantitative Procedure

Special educators were informed about the burnout surveys via email and word of mouth. Surveys were made available in common school spaces or other centralized locations for special educators. Completed surveys were returned anonymously at a designated drop off spot within the school building. The PI then scored each survey to determine the raw emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA) scores. Raw scores were the sum of the respondents' values for each question in a particular context to determine an emotional exhaustion raw score, a depersonalization raw score, and personal accomplishment raw score. Mean scores were calculated using the respondents' raw scores divided by the number of items in each context, i.e., emotional exhaustion (EE) raw scores were divided by nine, depersonalization (DP) raw scores were divided by five, and personal accomplishment (PA) raw scores were divided by eight.

Qualitative Procedure

Information about the interview portion of the study and the PI's contact information was included with the burnout surveys. Interviewees ($n = 5$) either contacted the PI and volunteered to participate in interviews ($n = 3$) or were recruited by the PI ($n = 2$). Semi-structured interviews were recorded and conducted with special education workers to elaborate on educators' work experiences and perceptions of burnout. Interviews were transcribed from recordings and analyzed to determine any common overarching themes within the data. Once themes were defined, interviews were color-

coded by reference to a unique theme. If interview statements belonged in multiple theme categories, it was coded in multiple colors to account for each theme. The interviews were again reviewed to quantify how many times a statement was made that pertained to a particular theme. Themes were then ranked by frequency in interviews.

Data Analysis Plan

Quantitative Analysis

The MBI was distributed to members ($n = 5$) of the target population. It included 22 questions to which respondents answered on a 7-point frequency scale, 0 being “never” and 6 being “every day”. The questions measured burnout based on 3 contexts: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA).

There were 22 questions in total including nine questions measuring emotional exhaustion (EE), five questions measuring depersonalization (DP), and eight questions measuring personal accomplishment (PA). Raw scores and mean scores (μ) for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment were recorded and mean scores for EE, DP, and PA were calculated. The raw and mean scores were then converted to a table for comparison and categorized as high, moderate, or low based on established limits for each context.

Qualitative Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were evaluated using thematic analysis and a qualitative analysis software called NVivo. Themes were extrapolated from the interviews retroactively with the goal of gaining a fuller, more comprehensive

understanding of this data set- special educators' and their burnout. The combination of inductive, semantic, and realist methodologies was best suited to elicit pertinent themes from the dataset. To achieve this, interviews were first transcribed from recordings and coded by the researcher to organize important and relevant information into categories and subcategories based on interviewees' responses. As stated, the analysis used an inductive approach, so the generation of themes occurred after conducting the interviews and the preliminary analysis of the data. The themes most representative of and relevant to the research question were denoted in the reported findings.

The themes generated were based on the prevalence of a particular theme across the entire data set, looking for patterns across all interviews rather than delving into the specifics of individual responses. Prevalence of themes were also be determined by how closely the patterns that emerged related to the overall research question, are special educators burnt out (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis was used, as the researcher was not operating from an established theoretical framework, to allow for a more data-driven analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, a semantic approach—one that focused on the explicit meaning of participants' interview responses, rather than using responses to interpret underlying motives—was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data collected was analyzed using a realist framework, benefiting the research by allowing for straight-forward analysis based on the preconceived notion that there is a somewhat linear relationship between experience, language, and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Chapter III.

Results

Quantitative Results

The sample population ($n = 15$) consisted of special educators across four different schools within the same large urban public school system. Survey respondents occupied various roles within special education including but not limited to paraprofessionals, behavioral therapists, and teachers. All members of the sample population worked in special education within the same large urban public school district for three or more years, meaning all respondents worked in this setting one year prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

All respondents ($n = 15$) to the Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators (MBI-ES) answered 22 questions in total using a 7-point Likert scale including 0 – Never, 1- A few times a year or less, 2 – Once a month or less, 3 – A few times a month, 4 – Once a week, 5 – A few times a week, and 6 – Every day. The 22 total questions included nine questions measuring emotional exhaustion (EE), five questions measuring depersonalization (DP), and eight questions measuring personal accomplishment (PA). Raw scores and mean scores (μ) for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment were recorded. Raw scores were the sum of the respondents' values for each question in a particular context to determine an emotional exhaustion raw score, a depersonalization raw score, and personal accomplishment raw score. Mean scores were calculated using the respondents' raw scores divided by the number of items in each context, i.e., emotional exhaustion (EE) raw scores were divided by nine,

depersonalization (DP) raw scores were divided by five, and personal accomplishment (PA) raw scores were divided by eight. Raw scores and mean (μ) scores for respondents' emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA) – as well as the calculated standard deviation (SD) for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment – can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 also includes the z-scores calculated for each of the three contexts measured. The z-score for emotional exhaustion (EE) was calculated using the equation $z = \frac{X - \mu}{\sigma}$. The depersonalization (DP) z-score and the personal accomplishment (PA) z-score were calculated by using the equations $z = \frac{X - \mu}{\sigma}$ and $z = \frac{X - \mu}{\sigma}$, respectively.

Table 1. Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators (MBI-ES) Raw and Mean Scores for Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA)

EE		DP		PA	
Raw	σ	Raw	σ	Raw	σ
42 ^{***}	4.67	8 ^{**}	1.6	19 [*]	2.38
27 ^{***}	3	0 [*]	0	27 [*]	3.38
50 ^{***}	5.56 ^{***}	10 ^{**}	2	41 ^{***}	5.13 ^{***}
47 ^{***}	5.22	15 ^{***}	3	26 [*]	3.25
22 ^{**}	1.44	3 [*]	0.6	37 ^{**}	4.63 ^{***}
54 ^{***}	6	15 ^{***}	3	30 [*]	3.75 ^{***}
35 ^{***}	3.89	9 ^{**}	1.8	28 [*]	3.5

29 ^{***}	3.22	15 ^{***}	3	29 [*]	3.63 ^{***}
47 ^{***}	5.22	11 ^{**}	2.2	28 [*]	3.5
45 ^{***}	5	12 ^{**}	2.4	42 ^{***}	5.25 ^{***}
48 ^{***}	5.33 ^{***}	17 ^{***}	3.4	22 [*]	2.75
51 ^{***}	5.67 ^{***}	19 ^{***}	3.8	18 [*]	2.25
46 ^{***}	5.11	16 ^{***}	3.2	20 [*]	2.5
48 ^{***}	5.33 ^{***}	18 ^{***}	3.6	28 [*]	3.5
53 ^{***}	5.89 ^{***}	22 ^{***}	4.4 ^{***}	17 [*]	2.13

Note. Low scores marked with *; moderate scores marked **; high scores marked ***.

Table 1 uses asterisks to indicate high (***), moderate (**), and low (*) raw scores for each respondent on emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA). Based on the calculated z-scores for each of the three contexts, high mean (μ) scores for each context were denoted (***). Based on the raw scores, 14 of the 15 respondents showed high emotional exhaustion and one out of 15 showed moderate emotional exhaustion; eight out of 15 respondents showed high depersonalization, five out of 15 showed moderate depersonalization, and two out of 15 showed low depersonalization; two of the 15 respondents showed high personal accomplishment, one out of 15 showed moderate personal accomplishment, and 12 out of 15 showed low personal accomplishment.

Based on the calculated mean (μ) scores and corresponding z-scores for emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA), five out of 15 respondents scored statistically high emotional exhaustion (EE); one out of 15

respondents scored statistically high depersonalization (DP); and five out of 15 respondents scored statistically high on personal accomplishment (PA) (coded in pinkish purple in Table 1).

Qualitative Results

The sample population ($n = 5$) consisted of special educators across four different schools – including an elementary, elementary/middle, and two high schools – within the same large urban public school system. The interviewees occupied various roles within special education including paraprofessional ($n = 2$), behavioral therapist ($n = 2$), and teacher ($n = 1$) working across grades K-12.

All interviewees were asked the same questions (see appendix 2) concerning their experiences working in special education during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more specifically, during the 2020 – 2021 school year. Interviews were recorded for later transcription. Transcripts were reviewed using inductive coding as part of the thematic analysis framework. Using this method, codes were developed based on what interviewees said and were further developed until common themes were established. The themes were defined as 1. change and the unknown; 2. lack of effective/centralized leadership/support; 3. impacts of widespread sickness; 4. division and isolation; and 5. not meeting the needs of the population served (special education students/families/caretakers).

Change and the unknown refer to the shifts, fluctuations, and disruptions that occurred during the August 2020-June 2021 school year and the uncharted territory – and, therefore, totally unknown – aspect of the change that was occurring. Lack of

effective/centralized leadership/support refers to the breakdown in guidance, direction, management, and control – overarching, individualized, and everything in between – during that same period. Impacts of widespread illness refers to the circumstances of having global sickness including self/loved ones getting sick, fears of self/loved ones getting sick, and COVID regulations and policies (e.g., mask wearing, social distancing, 14-day quarantines). Division and isolation refers to the inequalities and disparities that existed between individuals’ experiences during the 2020-2021 school year. Not meeting the needs of the population served refers to the impacts to special education that occurred during the 2020-2021 school year and the inability to provide effective special education.

Table 2. Frequency Common Themes Appeared Across Interviews

Common theme	Frequency (across interviews)
Change & the unknown	47
Lack of effective leadership	53
Impacts of widespread sickness	28
Division & isolation	48
Unable to meet needs of special education population	47

Statements concerning the impacts of widespread sickness occurred 28 times; statements concerning change and the unknown occurred 47 times; statements concerning not meeting the needs of the population served occurred 47 times; statements concerning division and isolation occurred 48 times; and statements concerning lack of effective/centralized leadership/support occurred 53 times (as shown in Table 2).

The top 3 most frequent themes that appeared in each interview were also quantified as shown in Table 3. Impacts of widespread sickness was in 1 out of 5 interview's top 3 and was ranked 2nd for 1 interview; not meeting the needs of the population served showed up in 2 out of 5 interviews' top 3 and was ranked 1st for 1 interview and 2nd for 1 interview; lack of effective/centralized leadership/support was in 3 out of 5 interviews' top 3 and was ranked 1st for 2 interviews and 2nd for 1 interview; change and the unknown appeared in 4 out of 5 interviews' top 3 and was ranked 1st for 1 interview and 2nd for 3 interviews; and division and isolation showed up in 5 out of 5 interviews' top 3 and was ranked 1st for 1 interview, 2nd for 1 interview, and 3rd for 3 interviews.

Table 3. Ranking of Common Themes by Frequency per Interview

Interview	Lack of effective leadership	Division & isolation	Change & the unknown	Unable to meet needs	Impacts of widespread sickness
1B	1	3	2	4	5
2B	1	3	2	5	4
1P	5	1	3	2	4
2P	5	2	1	4	2
1T	2	3	5	1	4

Chapter IV.

Discussion

Quantitative Discussion

This study was conducted to explore the personal experience of special educators in performing their jobs during the altered working conditions created by the COVID pandemic and to understand the barriers they faced and the impact on their level of stress and burnout.

A self-administered burnout scale called the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was distributed to special educators of a public school system to assess those educators' level of burnout in relation three specific dimensions during the 2020-2021 school year as compared to working in special education prior to the onset of COVID-19.

The MBI required respondents to respond to 22 items across three different scales – emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA) – and takes about 10-15 minutes. The items are chosen specifically to determine how often (the frequency) the respondent experiences the 3 components of burnout. The respondent assigns each item a value from zero – “never”- to six- “every day” – which the researcher then used to quantify the raw score for each of the 3 components. There are 9 items that quantify EE, 5 items that quantify DP, and 8 items that quantify PA. There are also parameters (as shown in Table 1) that define low, moderate, and high frequency in relation to EE, DP, and PA.

Burnout is evidenced in the combination of an individual scoring in the high range for both EE and DP; burnout is also evidenced in an individual score with a combination and high EE and low PA. Out of the fifteen participants that responded to surveys, fourteen showed high EE based on their raw scores (≥ 27) and 1 of them showed moderate EE (17-26); 8 respondents showed high DP (≥ 13), 5 participants showed moderate DP (7-12), and 2 participants showed low DP (0-6); and 2 participants showed high PA (≥ 39), 1 participant showed moderate PA (32-38), and twelve respondents showed low PA (≤ 31).

Of the fifteen respondents, the raw scores indicated that 8 showed high EE coupled with high DP and that twelve showed high EE coupled with low PA. Further, twelve of the fifteen respondents showed some indication of burnout, 8 of the fifteen showed both high EE with high DP as well as high EE with low PA, and 4 of the fifteen exclusively indicated high EE with low PA. These findings would suggest that the special educators surveyed showed a propensity toward burnout ($p = 0.8$).

Individuals' mean scores (μ) were also calculated for each component measured, emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA) (as shown in Table 1). High levels of EE, DP, and PA were calculated using individuals' mean scores to determine sample mean scores and using the following 3 equations: $z = \mu + (\sigma(0.5))$ for EE; $z = \mu + (\sigma(1.25))$ for DP; and $z = \mu + (\sigma(0.1))$ for PA. As shown in Table 1, the z-score for EE was 5.24, the z-score for DP was 4.03, and the z-score for PA is 3.62. The mean data has been color-coded (Table 1) to indicate high scores; 5 out of fifteen scored statistically high on EE; 1 out of fifteen scored statistically

high on DP; and 5 out of fifteen scored statistically high for DP. Based on the statistical data, 1 out of fifteen of the participants would show an indication of burnout.

As outline above, participants' raw scores showed increased burnout among the sample population for each correlation, i.e., high EE, high DP and high EE, low PA. Given that the raw scores showed increased burnout among the sample ($p= 0.75$), the statistical analysis of the quantitative data failed to reflect this high rate of burnout among participants ($p = 0.07$). This was likely due to the small population surveyed. The raw scores, however, are reflective of and more aligned with the qualitative data gathered in the interview portion of the study, as discussed below.

Qualitative Discussion

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide context for and clarification on factors contributing to special educators' burnout. It was hypothesized that given both the preexisting conditions of working in special education pre-pandemic, as well as the mounting and emergent political and public pressures on public special educators in response to the nation's COVID-19 pandemic, special educators were at risk of being negatively psychologically impacted by the complex conditions of working in special education during the 2020-2021 school year.

The themes that emerged from the qualitative data have in common that they are hypothesized to be factors that contributed to burnout in special educators during the 2020-2021 school year. The themes that emerged included: change and the unknown; lack of effective/centralized leadership/support; impacts of widespread sickness; division

and isolation; and not meeting the needs of the population served (special education students/families/caretakers).

Change and the unknown includes changes and uncertainty that existed within special educators' working lives, including but not limited to changes in role responsibilities; continually changing expectations from the district/leadership; changing modes and locations of how/where work was done, i.e., remote, hybrid, in-person learning; and the indefiniteness of shifting COVID regulations and protocols. As interviewee 1T said "...the reason why there was such a huge issue was the constant changing of the plan and therefore we never knew really what we ourselves were doing one week to the next..." The respondent explained "...one week we would be doing hybrid, another week we would be doing partial hybrid, another week we're doing remote mode, then we go back to full in-person, then remote, then hybrid..." (1T). The changes impacted the work "...because each one of these things [hybrid/remote/in-person] was very unique and how you had to plan it – it was impossible to set up a consistent schedule or plan to work with our students. If we had stuck to one [learning mode] or another, I think we could have developed solutions rather than just scramble to try to find what we're doing tomorrow or next week" (1T).

A similar sentiment was shared by respondent 1B, who further explained that in the remote and hybrid learning modes, previous role expectations were rendered useless. The respondent said, "...so somehow, we had to accomplish our job which you need to be sometimes in full physical contact with that student, like prompting them, like assisting them through...and then all of a sudden, our job is, like, to do that but don't tell

parents how to do it, and that was just confusing. There were no answers, people were just like telling us contradicting things” (1B).

Another respondent shared the experience of changing expectations around working roles. Respondent 2B said “...my responsibility is what changed the most because...these were a lot of the things that we were not allowed to do before that [the 2020-2021 school year] and so now I felt I was pushed into more of a leadership role...like, OK, so now I’m having to do things that I’ve never done...without any instruction on how to do it” (2B). The respondent further shared that the changes that were made came with little notice and without instruction or guidance on how to adapt. In response to the question “were you given the tools and resources you needed to effectively do your job?” respondent 2B replied “...my experience with that was ‘hey, so you’re no longer returning to the [school] building but I still need you to do an in-person job from home...”

Respondent 2P spoke to the change and uncertainty around working roles when special education students and staff did return to school buildings for in-person learning. The respondent said “I remember feeling very sad when we went back to school and the kids were in masks and the social distancing, and I hadn’t been able to connect to students much more. You know, a lot of our kids like physical touch, like tickles, like hugs, like to be picked up, so seems a lot – it felt a lot harder to really create that bond and just missing the facial expressions, and the barriers is – it was just a tough time” (2P).

Respondent 1P also spoke to having difficulty building rapport with special education students during the 2020-2021 school year and “not being able to effectively [connect]” (1P). The respondent cited “barriers” as the reason for this including students

having "...freedom to come in and not come in, the schedule was always different, special education students are more reliant on a consistent schedule, we didn't get to leave the classroom...and were dealing with edgier kids because they're not moving around" (1P).

Based on statements made in the interviews, the number of high emotional exhaustion (EE) raw scores on the MBI-ES, and the number of low personal accomplishment (PA) scores on the MBI-ES, it is possible that change and the unknown as described above, could have been a factor in increased emotional exhaustion and/or decreased personal accomplishment.

The lack of effective/centralized leadership or support encapsulates sentiments alluding to a deteriorating top-down structure characterized by poor communications; changing expectations; lack of mental, emotional, or work-related support or guidance; lack of training new skills before staff made to apply them; and unrealistic and out-of-touch demands.

The lack of effective/centralized leadership was evident in various statements made by the interviewees. For example, as respondent 2B said, "I felt like no one, our Superintendent, no one took into consideration our [special educators] mental and social emotional health. Like, we're moving all the problems from a school building, all the problems from a classroom, into our home and we have to deal with it."

Further, as evidenced by respondent 1B, changes dictated by leadership were often confusing, at odds with what they'd previously said, and/or unrealistic given the barriers special education staff were trying to overcome in relation to changing learning settings and modes (remote, hybrid, in-person). Respondent 1B said "...when the

pandemic hit all of a sudden we were not only expected but required to then do the exact opposite of what we were always told.” Changing role expectations were accompanied by unrealistic expectations of performing certain aspects of one’s role to pre-pandemic standards without added resources, tools, or trainings. One respondent said “...when we were home [during remote learning] we were expected to be able to target those goals but also basically find and come up with our own curriculum any way possible. Like, it went from us not expected to have opinions...and then during the pandemic and being home, we were expected to go above and beyond and be able to create your own plans, when previously we were told even if we had ideas we were expected to suppress that” (1B). The lack of trainings or building understanding around why the role changes were necessary or how to successfully adapt added to some special educators’ distress. As one participant stated, “we had to adapt services and one of the reasons why all these adaptations are...such a jarring thing...is the lack of supervision really hindered us, the fact that we had to do all this by ourselves...” (1T). Another respondent shared that sentiment but further elaborated, saying “they [leadership] didn’t put anything in place to, like, facilitate any of the stuff they were talking about. They just wanted to be able to say ‘well, we told them to do X, Y, and Z and because they [staff] didn’t do it, it is not our [leadership’s] fault’ kind of thing, you know? Instead of being like, ‘hey, you need to do X, Y and Z and this is how we’re going to help you’ because it was uncharted territory, right? Like, I don’t know how to do those things that they [leadership] were asking me and I think they very well knew that because when I expressed that I didn’t know how to do something, they– nobody was willing to bridge that gap. They [leadership] would just keep repeating what I was supposed to do” (1B).

For one respondent, individual special educators' ability to support students differed because of a "lack of support for special education" (1P). The respondent elaborated about changes to work role without guidance stating, "I was at an advantage because I knew how to use Google-related [platforms] and am tech-savvy...I had to do individualized instruction with students I knew...but wouldn't usually have worked with; it would have been incredibly difficult...for someone who didn't [know the students previously] that experience- the job would have felt impossible" (1P). When asked how it felt to be able to accomplish what some other educators reportedly could not, the respondent answered "we [special educators] all felt unappreciated, not compensated, our burnout higher than ever" (1P).

Based the qualitative data, the number of high emotional exhaustion (EE) raw scores on the MBI-ES, and the number of low personal accomplishment (PA) scores on the MBI-ES, it is possible that no effective/centralized leadership or support as described above, could have been a factor in increased emotional exhaustion and/or decreased personal accomplishment.

Impacts of widespread sickness encompasses statements pertaining to how respondents' work was affected by the presence of a global pandemic and the conditions that were born out of that. This includes the impacts of getting sick themselves and/or fears of getting sick; loved ones getting sick and/or fears of them getting sick; and the convoluted regulations and policies from various levels (federal, state, district, school), e.g., mask-wearing, social distancing, testing, 14-day quarantines, etc.

The presence of widespread global illness and the policies and regulations developed because of the pandemic impacted the special educators interviewed, as well.

As one respondent said, “people were sick and scared...I was on edge, I still felt COVID was dangerous and...our kids only understand something is happening, maybe a slight understanding, but it wasn’t the best” (1P).

The threat of widespread illness was also apparent from the presence of COVID regulations and policies within special education. As one respondent recounted, “we went back to school and the kids were in masks and the social distancing and I wasn’t able to connect to students much more...and just missing the facial expressions [with mask-wearing] and the barriers is- it was just a tough time” (2P). Another policy impacting the special educators interviewed was mandated quarantine and isolation periods due to illness or exposure to illness. As one interviewee explained during the 2020-2021 school year, “...kids go out for two, three weeks because they’re sick with COVID or some of them might have been exposed...and therefore, they’re out for the maximum 14 days...if that happens, they come back for one or two days and guess what? A different kid had COVID, because it’s not just that one kid gets it, then next person, then everyone; it means one person gets it, then another person gets it within the next week or so, and then another person gets it the next week and it’s just this really weird cycle and...some students were out for months at a time” (1T).

With sickness rates, fear of sickness, and quarantine/isolation protocols, special education staff and students were subjected to much greater absence rates than in previous school years. As one respondent explained, even when learning was in-person, special education classrooms’ daily staffing “...usually went...from five staff down to two...we didn’t have enough staff to manage our classrooms” (1T). The sentiment was shared by other respondents, one stating special education staffing was “...nonexistent

and inconsistent...” due to COVID, and another saying, “there was a lot more absences...” making “...work feel harder and more stressful” (2P).

Based on the qualitative data, the number of high emotional exhaustion (EE) raw scores on the MBI-ES, and the number of low personal accomplishment (PA) scores on the MBI-ES, widespread sickness likely contributed to increased emotional exhaustion and/or decreased personal accomplishment.

Division and isolation were characterized by sentiments of the inequalities and inequities between individuals’ working, personal, and social experiences during the 2020-2021 school year and how that culminated in feelings and/or experiences of being left behind, excluded, and/or neglected.

In this context, participants described being at a different risk for sickness than others – “I am not, you know, at risk...I don’t live with anyone at risk...but, you know, everyone has their own feelings about that so I didn’t want to make anyone else feel uncomfortable...I wouldn’t want to share with anyone, you know? I didn’t feel like I could be as honest about my life” (2P) and “there was a divide, some people...wanted to be in school...and then there was...people like me who were just like, ‘OK, well, I have to worry about my family and [myself] getting COVID and being here [in school buildings]” (1B); to ones about different working conditions for special educators from general education peers – “special education, because we were high priority, required us at times to go [into school buildings] all four days...” (1T) as opposed to the two in-person days general educators were required to report in-person; to sentiments about experiencing different realities depending on the special educator, the student, and/or the student’s family – “I mean, thank God for my husband because we legitimately spent

thousands of dollars on technology just so that I can do my job effectively...not everybody was able to do this...but they sent us home unprepared...that is no information, like we had to sink or swim” (2B) and “I think for me personally, not having, I don’t know, the computer skill set that other people had, like the younger generation that was able to whip up things [educational materials] really quick – it wasn’t like I wasn’t trying” (1B) and students with more independent functioning “...were able to navigate through emails and do assignments independently...out of...a roster of twelve, one or two students were able to do any of that independently” (1T) and “...some of these parents [with special education students]...were trying to figure out where food was coming from, never mind, like- they were just trying to stay afloat” (1B).

Based on data from interviews, the number of high emotional exhaustion (EE) raw scores on the MBI-ES, the number of high depersonalization (DP) scores on the MBI-ES, and the number of low personal accomplishment (PA) scores on the MBI-ES, it appears that division and isolation were likely contributors to increased emotional exhaustion, increased depersonalization, and/or decreased personal accomplishment.

The final theme extracted from the qualitative data reflected participants perception that they were not meeting the needs of the special education population (students, families, and caretakers). Here, interviewees described circumstances and/or conditions during the 2020-2021 school year that impacted respondents’ abilities to effectively serve their students and meet their unique needs. Examples of this included, not having sufficient tools or resources for staff or students, differing learning outcomes based on student’s disability, and failure of the district to consider the unique needs of the

special education population when responding to political and societal pressures during the 2020-2021 school year.

Ineffective tools and/or resources for special education staff and students was evidenced by sentiments like, “they gave us computers that didn’t work” (1B); “we were not given sufficient tools...but we now have to adapt everything to remote learning” (1T); and “a lot of teachers...went out to deliver materials for projects that they were doing...so that they [the students] could follow along and participate because otherwise they [families/students] wouldn’t have the materials to do the projects they were doing with the rest of the class...outside of us doing personal drop offs...I don’t think families would have gotten any more support [from the district]” (1T).

Statements concerning different learning outcomes based on the individual student’s disability included sentiments like “software was better for higher functioning kids” (1P); “we did some breakout rooms, I was able to do some small group pullouts...they were very limited in scope and they were very limited in what you could target...but this was mostly for students with mild to moderate disability” (1T); and “...a lot of children in special education have different sensory needs and...you know, some people feeling not comfortable – I think, personally – dealing with students up close and personal, you know, all of that is concerning [since COVID] I find myself thinking about it more...and [did] not want to put myself in those situations” (2P).

Failure of participants’ school district to consider the unique needs of the special education population in its decision-making and when responding to political and societal pressures was referenced often. Interviewees reported that “they [district leadership] were talking about regulated and very safe environments for general education, maybe even

mild disabilities, but when you're talking about the severe rooms or even the younger students...I think they [district leadership] were doing a lot of lip service but not actually making any exceptions for special education, or even look at them differently. I think they [district leadership] would just be kind of 'we need to get them [special education students] in for political reasons but we're not going to look at what issues they could have in that [remote/hybrid/in-person] setting and come up with special regulations, or even extra precautionary measures.' That gives me a sense that they weren't really looking at special education" (1T).

Based on qualitative data gathered in interviews, the number of high emotional exhaustion (EE) raw scores on the MBI-ES, the number of high depersonalization (DP) scores on the MBI-ES, and the number of low personal accomplishment (PA) scores on the MBI-ES, it is possible that not meeting the needs of the special education population, as described above, could have been a factor in increased emotional exhaustion, increased depersonalization, and/or decreased personal accomplishment.

Limitations & Future Directions

The present research study has several limitations. The first, and arguably most impactful, is the limited sample size. While the data suggested some evidence of burnout in participants' responses, the respondents ($n = 15$ and $n = 5$) represent only a very small fraction of the overall number of special educators within the district studied who were working during the 2020-2021 school year (and had worked in special education ≥ 1 full school year prior to the 2020-2021 school year). Therefore, future studies, therefore, should expand upon or repeat the study with additional participants for both the

quantitative and qualitative portions of the study to examine whether the trends seen in the studied sample are amplified or insignificant.

Another limitation of the study is that participants reported thoughts and feelings about the 2020-2021 school year retroactively and almost 1 year (~7-10 months) after the event. It is possible that respondents' perceptions were not as accurate as they may have been if measured during or directly prior to the 2020-2021 school year. It is further plausible that participants' perceptions of the 2020-2021 school year have been influenced by experiences they have had since the 2020-2021 school year, e.g., continued widespread illness, COVID protocols (mask wearing, quarantining, testing), and societal discord.

Future research might expand the time frame being analyzed, since widespread illness and the impacts of a global pandemic have not disappeared from daily life or from our schools. The longevity of the event may compound problems that existed earlier on in the pandemic or brought to light new ones. Further, studying trends of special educator attrition within the district over the period affected by COVID-19 may shed light on whether the impacts outlined resulted in higher rates of special educators leaving their positions. Another proposed future direction that would be of most value to the special educators would be a study exploring solutions or ways to ameliorate the deficits in tools, resources and leadership support identified by the special educators.

For special educators, the pandemic-related discord impeded their work by displacing them from physical classrooms, then forcing them into unsafe and chaotic in-person working conditions; isolating them from necessary collegial relationships, materials, and structure; and requiring the use of virtual programming without training or

proof of efficacy (Callanan, 2021; Bedford, 2020; Boston Teachers Union, 2020; Jones, 2021; Murray, 2020 & Schwan, 2021). Without further research and appropriate interventions to rectify the issues within public special education, the future looks dire for educators and students, especially students with the highest needs. Without clear, concise, appropriate measures implemented at the district, state, and federal level the U.S. public special education system only stands to get worse. It is important to act quickly as the effects of burnout can compound over time, leaving our special educators incredibly vulnerable. This sentiment was echoed by one special educator (1B) who stated: “My burnout felt like going from scrambling and spiraling and stressing and screaming and venting about it to then just literally doing nothing. Oh, God...”

Appendix 1.

Sample Questions from MBI-ES

On a scale from 0-6, in how often have you felt:

1. Emotionally exhausted or overextended by work?

0 = Never.

1 = A few times a year or less.

2 = Once a month or less

3 = A few times a month.

4 = Once a week.

5 = A few times a week.

6 = Every day.

2. Engaged and connected with your work?

0 = Never.

1 = A few times a year or less.

2 = Once a month or less

3 = A few times a month.

4 = Once a week.

5 = A few times a week.

6 = Every day.

Appendix 2.

Sample Questions from Interview

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you worked in your current role?
3. How long have you worked in special education?
4. Could you tell me about why you chose to work in special education?
5. Could you explain your role's specific duties in special education?
6. The COVID pandemic changed education across the U.S. Did the impacts of the COVID pandemic, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021, change your specific role and/or special education across the district?
7. Were you given the tools and resources you needed to effectively do your job during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021?
8. Did changes because of the COVID-19 pandemic make it more difficult to feel a sense of personal satisfaction in your job, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021?

9. Did changes in your role because of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021, affect other areas of your life? For example, personal well-being, home life, family, social life.
10. Were you able to effectively connect and engage with your students during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021?
11. Were you able to effectively connect and engage with your colleagues during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021?
12. Did the changes you experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021, change your level of job satisfaction?
13. Do you think you experienced burnout at or from work during the 2020-2021 school year?
14. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically prior to March 2020, how would you rate your overall job satisfaction in your role? 1-Very Dissatisfied 2- Mostly dissatisfied 3- Neutral 4- Mostly Satisfied 5-Very Satisfied

15. During the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically Sept 2020 – June 2021, how would you rate your overall job satisfaction in your role? 1-Very Dissatisfied 2- Mostly dissatisfied 3- Neutral 4- Mostly Satisfied 5-Very Satisfied
16. What is your current level of overall job satisfaction in your current role? 1-Very Dissatisfied 2- Mostly dissatisfied 3- Neutral 4- Mostly Satisfied 5-Very Satisfied
17. Were there any positive effects from the changes in your role due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

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