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An Exploratory Qualitative Study On The Lived Experiences of Special Education Teachers' Perceived Burnout In a Midwestern Public School District Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Bethel University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Abstract

There is a serious problem worldwide as a result of the continuing decline in teacher retention rates. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States fell short of the required teaching staff; this decrease perpetuated the national special education teacher shortage. The COVID-19 pandemic brought education to the forefront of many homes and school districts as families and educators shifted to virtual learning formats from their homes. With increased job demands and ever-evolving state and federal special education mandates, COVID-19 likely exacerbated an already bubbling teacher shortage. Although there has been research on special education teachers' burnout, little has been done in the wake of the new post-pandemic world. This exploratory qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of special education teachers in one Midwest public school district in order to identify themes of the effect COVID-19 has had on job-related stress and burnout. Utilizing the Job Demand-Resource model and Maslach's burnout model, this exploratory study revealed 100% of participants had experienced an increase in job demands due to COVID-19 and had reported feelings of job-related stress. While this exploratory study had a limited sample of five educators, it is noteworthy that only two participants reported experiencing burnout over the last three years; however, generalization cannot be determined due to the small sample size. Further research examining the relationship between the increase in job demands since the start of COVID-19 and special education teacher job-related stress could reveal increased levels of burnout and a wider variety of resources that could be duplicated to mitigate burnout and stress.

I want to dedicate this study to the extraordinary and passionate special education teachers of not only this study but across the nation who relentlessly devote their life to empowering and nurturing students with a variety of learning needs. They are an inspiration to everybody with their steadfast dedication to providing inclusive education, fighting for equitable opportunities, and creating a positive learning environment for every student. To those who embrace unique learners and challenges with grace, compassion, and understanding despite the evolving COVID-19 obstacles, you are heroes. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

As I reflect on my journey, I am reminded of a quote by John Dewey, an American scholar: "I believe, finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing."

I would like to acknowledge the following people–my tribe–for their unwavering support and guidance throughout my educational reconstruction. Without their encouragement and resources, I would not have made it through this process. I am forever grateful to each and every one of you.

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My research participants, without your desire to contribute to my research I would not be here. I value your willingness to share your story and give me one of the most precious commodities- your time. I appreciate you.

Lastly, my guiding light and faith have been a constant source of strength and inspiration. I am forever grateful for the generosity and encouragement of my tribe and leave you with one last thought from Proverbs, 11:25: A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The persistent decrease in teachers' retention rates is a significant issue worldwide (Räsänen et al., 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States fell short of the required teaching forces, with an additional 100,000 certified teachers needed to fill positions (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; The White House, 2021). The decrease in teachers perpetuated the national special education teacher shortage (Billingsley, 2004; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Espinoza et al., 2018; Ingersoll, 2001; Katsiyannis et al., 2003; McLeskey et al., 2004; Ortogero et al., 2017). Special education teachers leave the profession at the highest rate compared to other educator groups (Berry, 2012; Espinoza et al., 2018; Payne, 2005); in fact, this rate of special education teachers' attrition is twice as high as general education teachers' attrition (Wong et al., 2017). The United States Department of Education (2020a) reported that 98% of United States' school districts experience teacher shortages within special education. Unfortunately, the number of special education teachers required to provide equitable access and instruction that meet students' needs continues to fall short (Darling-Hammond et al., 2006; Monnin et al., 2021). The special education teacher shortage in the United States is twice as high as the special education teacher shortage in Finland, Singapore, and Canada (Cancio et al., 2018).

The special education teacher shortage is also prevalent in the midwestern region of the United States. According to the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (2021), special education is in the highest demand for licensed teaching staff and one of the most difficult positions to fill. The most identified unfilled teaching positions were all related to the special education field: cross-categorical disability-specific (autism spectrum disorder [ASD], emotional/ behavioral disorder (EBD), and specific learning disability (SLD)), and two special

education-related service providers, speech/language and school psychologist (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021a). Wisconsin has similar difficulties, with two of the top five most difficult to fill positions in the special education field (Goff et al., 2018). The shortage of special education teachers is not a new phenomenon. In 2003, the special education staffing needs were prevalent as there were 33,000 special education teaching positions filled by non-certified staff and another 4,000 simply went unfilled nationwide (Katsiyannis et al., 2003). There is a significant need for special education teachers in the Midwest: between 14-16% (119,000-149,000) of students in kindergarten through 12th grade receive special education services in the Midwest (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020a; U.S. Department of Education, 2020b; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2022a).

These special education teacher shortages negatively influenced education systems, administrations, teachers, and students in many ways (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). For example, high teacher turnover rates cost American school systems over $2.2 billion annually (Donaldson, 2011). In 2022, considering the average 2.55% inflation rate, American school systems could expect an average of over $2.9 billion annually. These monetary impacts do not compare to the price students pay when they have revolving and less qualified teachers supporting their education. Hiring and retaining high-quality teachers is critical to closing students' achievement gaps and ensuring equitable education for all students (Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013), especially the already disadvantaged special education students.

Special educators typically do not choose their profession for salary or notoriety; rather, they feel a calling to contribute or add social value (Ansley et al., 2016; Levine, 2013). National salary averages for special education teachers fall below other professions with the same or similar education and degrees (Ansley et al., 2016; Espinoza et al., 2018; Theoharis &

Fitzpatrick, 2013). In fact, national averages for beginning teachers are 20% less than other professions (Espinoza et al., 2018). These salary inequalities affect the supply and demand of educators in all districts (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Educators are drawn to such a profession that aligns with their values, character, and passion to make a difference in serving others. As with most professionals who work with people in some capacity, special education teachers may experience the emotional depletion of energy, detachment from those they serve, and suffer from a loss of accomplishment (burnout); this is more than an "inconvenience or an occupational hazard, but a devastating attack on their professional identity" (Schaufeli et al., 2008, p. 5).

When school districts and administrations find themselves with vacant teaching positions, they are often forced to hire outside of the special education licensure (Goff et al., 2018; Katsiyannis et al., 2003; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020b; Wanat, 2021) or hire underqualified teachers (Goff et al., 2018; Payne, 2005). In Minnesota during the 2019-2020 school year, over 10,700 teachers held a special education license and taught in the field (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020b). The number of teachers with a special education license fell short of a total of 101 tier three and four licensed positions, which went unfilled during the 2019-2020 school year, resulting in 27% of districts with one or more unfilled positions (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021a). That same school year, 70% of reporting districts stated that their district was *significantly* to *very significantly* impacted by the teacher shortage (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021a).

According to Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (2020), four of the top five licensure fields (emotional/behavioral disorders, academic and behavioral

strategies, specific learning disability, and autism) with the largest number of out-of-field permissions fall under the special education umbrella. In addition, in Minnesota during the 2019-2020 school year, 15% of special education teachers who worked with students ages 6 through 21 who qualify for service under IDEA Part B were not fully certified (OSEP, 2022). Over the last six years the use of emergency credentials in Wisconsin (temporary licensure outside of one's field or working toward licensure) to fill special education vacancies has more than doubled and is often the most utilized route to filling vacancies (Goff, 2018). These students who require the most individualized and specialized instruction are being educated by well-meaning individuals who have no special education training, development, or experience which further widens the education gap (Wanat, 2021). The impact on students is far greater than inadequate learning opportunities or reduced achievement (Billingsley, 2004).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought education to the forefront of many homes and school districts. With increased job demands and ever-evolving special education state and federal mandates, COVID-19 likely exacerbated an already bubbling teacher shortage dilemma resulting in teachers retiring early and leaving the profession (Cancio et al., 2018; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Lech & Johnson, 2021; Sahin & Shelley, 2020; Wanat, 2021). In January of 2020, there were approximately 10.6 million educators in the United States; however, at the start of the 2021-2022 school year, nearly 600,000 had left the profession (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022a). Although there has been research on special education teacher burnout, little has been conducted in the wake of this new pandemic world. It is critical for education systems to continue research to understand and ameliorate the special education teacher shortage and understand how leadership can reduce or lower the burnout rate.

Researchers have identified four common themes related to teachers deciding to leave special education: burnout (job-related stress), low compensation, lack of support (professional development and mentoring opportunities), and poor working conditions (job demands/duties and lack of resources; Billingsley et al., 2020; Monnin et.al, 2021; Van Alstine, 2010; Wanat, 2021). While compensation is reported as the least common factor by special education teachers deciding to leave the field prior to retirement, burnout is transnational and cited as one of the most common variables (De Stasio et al., 2017; Levine, 2013; Wanat, 2021). Special education teachers are required to juggle a variety of different job duties, including differentiated instruction in all content areas, case management, due process paperwork, and student advocating (Youngs et al., 2011). All these demands play a role in special education teachers' mental and physical well-being and can lead to job-related stress or burnout (De Stasio et al., 2017; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019).

What is not known at present is how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted special education teachers' retention, burnout, and job duties. It is therefore important to identify the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on special education teachers' due process workload, burnout, and job satisfaction. Special education teachers were forced to rapidly adapt, change, and adjust all aspects of their practices to ensure all students' needs continued to be met in this new era. Special education teachers are paying the price with increased stress, decreased self-efficacy, and relationships (Phillips, 2021; Pressley, 2021). In addition to job-related stressors, the personal emotional strain that the COVID-19 pandemic brings is leading to a significant increase in special education teachers' burnout rates (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; National Education Association, 2022; Pressley et al., 2021).

While special education teachers are among the most vulnerable populations to burnout (Asbury et al., 2020; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Wong et al., 2017), educators are still in the midst of this new era of COVID-19 pandemic teaching and learning. Research is needed to further explore and understand burnout under these new conditions and parameters. Often systemic resolutions will result in providing additional monetary resources (compensation, curriculum, building remodels/updates, technology, etc.); however, educator needs continue to be unmet, and attrition rates climb (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). Simply directing more material resources at the problem is not effective: the problem is much more complex, and further understanding of the role individuals' mental health and job-related stress plays on their intent to remain in the field is required. In fact, the most important assets that contribute to an organization's performance and are critical to teachers' job satisfaction are human resources (leadership, relationships with colleagues, and students), whereas school improvement and facilities are the lowest contributing factor to teachers' job satisfaction (Don et al., 2021). The results can support districts in implementing special education teacher resources, professional development, and district policies post-pandemic to ensure every student has equitable access to education by a highly qualified teacher.

Although burnout within the education field has previously been examined, focused insight into the lived experiences of one midwestern public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic education era will provide further clarity on the realities experienced by special education teachers and possibly proactive preventative themes aimed at reducing burnout and job-related stressors. This exploratory qualitative study is an examination of a "social unit in order to discover why a situation occurs" (Van Alstine, 2010, p. 20) and explores the factors related to special education teacher burnout and retention in the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers in one midwestern public school district and to examine the effect COVID-19 had on their perceived levels of job-related stress and burnout. The results illuminated and identified themes of special education teachers' perspectives on increased job demands caused by state and federal mandates as a result of COVID-19.

Research Question

COVID-19 has affected many aspects of education and identifying special education teachers' burnout themes could provide districts and leadership with resources to ensure staff well-being and retain quality teachers in the field. With an understanding of job-related stressors one can begin to identify contributing factors in special education burnout. Understanding how special education teachers define and describe their workload and what contributes to job satisfaction provided guidance to deeper essential questions. This essential question was designed to identify themes in special education teachers' burnout in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing interview questions to understand teacher perspectives related to increased job demands, resources, and stress gained insight into what role COVID-19 has played in special education teachers' burnout, retention, and teacher shortages. The researcher developed one guiding question:

RQ1: What have been the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout of special education teachers in one United States midwestern public school district amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study consists in the identification of contributing factors to special education teachers' burnout since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. While research has been conducted related to special education teachers' burnout (Bottiani et al., 2019; Schaufeli et al., 2008), very little has been completed in the wake of this new phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic. By identifying these factors and themes, school districts and special education department leaders can improve teachers' burnout rates and reduce the impact COVID-19 has had on teacher stress and shortages. When leaders can understand and identify themes, they can develop and provide resources, support, professional development, and incentives to retain quality special education teachers within their districts.

President Biden proposed to invest $9 billion in the development and retention of new teachers in the American Families Act (2021). This investment intended to address teacher shortages and improve teacher training and support for all educators across our nation. It intended to raise the caliber of incoming new instructors, boost retention rates, and enhance student results. Despite staff, administration, and families' extensive efforts to provide high-quality education in all learning models (such as hybrid, e-learning, or COVID-19 pandemic restricted in-person classes) the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced educational outcomes. Therefore, it is important to examine the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on teachers' burnout resulting in a decrease in retention. Teachers' burnout is attributed to teachers' perception of job demands and the lack of resources (Fernet et al., 2012). When teachers have supportive working conditions, they are highly likely to remain in the field and reduce the chronic teacher shortages (Billingsley et al., 2020) all while contributing to their personal growth as highly qualified, experienced professionals.

While much research has been completed on lower socioeconomic populations (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015), there is surprisingly little research on the effect on the other side of the continuum, in affluent communities. In a 2019 study, researchers identified special education staff, who were employed in schools serving students of color and from low-income families, as having much higher turnover rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). In another 2015 study, researchers found that especially for those who serve a sizable share of low-income students of color, overall teacher turnover has significantly increased over the past three decades in United States' public schools (Simon & Johnson, 2015). The district in this study is positioned in a higher socioeconomic community with the ability to provide additional material and monetary resources. This study can provide special education departments and leadership information on teacher burnout despite having additional resource avenues to address the retention of high-quality special education teachers. Therefore, this district can set a foundation from which other midwestern districts can learn.

Definition of Terms

The following are operational definitions of domain-specific terms utilized within this study:

Administrators. District and school building administrators are responsible for providing, implementing, and assessing district and school systems and policies, in addition to providing instructional leadership to all staff. Superintendents and other central administrative staff work under the supervision of a school board as district administrators. Principals and assistant principals are the two types of school administrators (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools to the American Institutes for Research, 2023)

Burnout. The emotional exhaustion (depletion of energy), depersonalization (detachment towards the job and/or people), and reduced personal accomplishment (decrease in the perception of competence or contribution) felt by a person (Fernet et al., 2012; Grant, 2017; Maslach, 1998; Schaufeli et al., 2008).

Caseload. The number of students receiving special education services via an Individual Education Program (IEP) that a special education teacher manages (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020).

Direct service. Specially designed individualized instruction provided to students receiving special education services ranging from one-to-one and small group instruction to pushing into general education classrooms (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

Due process paperwork. Due process paperwork is any paperwork required to be completed by the case manager and Individualized Education Program (IEP) team governed by federal and state mandates (Grant, 2017). This includes, but is not limited to, a student's annual IEP, progress reports shared in alignment with general education reporting, communication logs, evaluation and re-evaluation reports, notice and record of team meetings, documentation related to a student's IEP goals, and conciliation/mediation.

Free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Free and appropriate public education is all the special education and related services that are provided at public expense, meet state standards, and are defined and held accountable by the Individual Education Program (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

Highly qualified teacher. A highly qualified teacher is one that possesses at least a bachelor's degree, passed state certification exams, and is fully licensed in the subject and field in which they are teaching (Van Alstine, 2010; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b;

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2022b). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004), special education teachers may also be required to demonstrate core competencies if teaching in specific content areas of English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics, government, economics, arts, history, and geography.

Indirect instruction. All services provided to ensure a student's Individual Education Program is executed including "ongoing progress reviews; cooperative planning; consultation; demonstration teaching; modification and adaptation of the environment, curriculum, materials, or equipment; and direct contact with the student to monitor and observe" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; Minnesota Rule 3525.0200, subp. 8c).

Individualized Education Program (IEP). A document created by a team of professionals, including parents, describing the impact an individual student's disability has on their education and what supports, accommodations, services, and goals the team will provide to ensure a free and appropriate public education (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

Learning models. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the way schools delivered instruction. Schools in Minnesota utilized three learning models: online or eLearning in which all aspects of learning were accessed via online platforms; hybrid in which students were in the building part of the time and eLearning the remainder of the time; and in-person learning with the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions where students were in the building but required to utilize mitigation and safety precautions such as social distancing, masks or face shields, plexiglass barriers, and classroom cohorts.

Paraprofessional. A paraprofessional provides teachers and children with a variety of supports, while working under the direction of a licensed teacher. For instance, a

paraprofessional can help the teacher manage the classroom and support the modeling of lessons or work one-to-one with a student to support their individual learning needs (Illinois State Board of Education, 2022).

Preparation time. Teacher preparation time, often known as prep time, refers to times during the school day when individual educators can plan and prepare for their classes, interact with students, or grade assignments (Educational Reform, 2023). This planning time could include reviewing the curriculum and developing or enhancing upcoming lessons and learning opportunities, assessing student work to determine where they have understood the material and where they are struggling, and adjusting future lessons as necessary.

Special education teacher. Students with a variety of learning, intellectual, emotional, and physical challenges are instructed by special education teachers. They adapt and differentiate general education lessons and curricula, teach a wide variety of subjects, and advocate for students on their caseload (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Transition. Special education services are provided to students with disabilities starting by grade nine or age 14 which focus on skill development activities designed to meet their individual needs in the three transition areas of postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living.

Tiered licensure system. A tiered licensure system is *a* structured pathway for educator advancement within their career. While there are several models and names for each level the essentials remain the same. Each system has a continuum of tiers that progress through educator degrees, content mastery, instructional skills, and effectiveness in the classroom. These tiers begin with entry-level licensure through mastery. For example, in one state, a tier four license is the highest licensure level and an individual must meet the following requirements to obtain this

status: meet all tier three requirements, complete a teacher preparation program, have at least three years of teaching experience in the state, obtain a passing score on all required licensure exams, and have the most recent summative teacher evaluation not resulting in/keeping on an improvement plan process (Tier 4 License, 2021).

Working conditions. Working conditions are the environment and perceptions of roles and responsibilities, supports, co-worker interactions or relationships, and professional development that contributes to helping meet job demands (Billingsley et al., 2020).

Workload. A teacher's workload is all responsibilities and duties that are required (including direct/indirect services, evaluations, Individual Education Program management, travel, communication, and collaboration) by the special education case manager for each student on their caseload (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; Work Load for Special Educators, 2016).

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of the study is organized into five chapters, a reference list, and appendixes. Chapter 2 reviews current and related literature examining factors of special education teachers' burnout, retention rates, and the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on special education. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the study including site selection, variables, data collection procedures, analysis, and hypotheses. Chapter 4 analyzes the data and the findings of the study. The summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations will be discussed in Chapter 5, followed by references and appendices.

Summary

This chapter discussed the purpose of this study, the statement of the problem, the research question, the significance of the study, the definition of the operational terms, and the

organization of the remaining chapters. While expanding on Bakker and Demerouti's (2011) job-demands resource model and Maslach's burnout theory, this study explored the factors related to special education teacher job duties, burnout, and retention during the COVID-19 pandemic era. It investigated a trend that if special education teachers have the right support, professional development, and working conditions, they will experience lower stress levels and thus avoid burnout, increasing retention. With 98% of U.S. school districts reporting teacher shortages within special education (The U.S. Department of Education, 2021), this study hopes to identify contributing factors in special education job-related stress and burnout, understand how special education teachers define their workload and what contributes to job satisfaction, and identify the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has played in special education teachers' burnout, retention, and teacher shortages.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Special Education Background

In 1975, the United States passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which later became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which focuses on protecting the rights and ensuring a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) of individuals with disabilities to improve educational outcomes (Katsiyannis et al., 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2021a). Prior to 1975, only one in five special education students were given access and an opportunity to an education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021a). According to a National Center for Education Statistics report, more than 6.5 million children with disabilities are receiving services and support through federally funded programs with the majority of services in public schools (Williams & Dikes, 2015). In 2019, nearly 10% (6,472,061) of all 50 states' population, ages six through 21, were receiving special education services (Henderson, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2021b).

Despite IDEA being relatively new legislation, special education teachers have been in short supply from the beginning (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Wanat 2021). Special education teachers in the United States historically have high attrition rates (Espinoza et al., 2018; Williams & Dikes, 2015). They play a critical role in educational outcomes for all students, and this shortage must be addressed (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013). Licensed special education teachers have declined in the last decade by 17% while special education student identification in Minnesota has only risen by 1% (McLaughlin, 2020). Since 2010, the percentage of the resident population of students ages 6-21 receiving special education services in the United States has steadily increased each year from 8.4% (6,374,498) to 9.7% (6,705,466; U.S. Department of Education, 2021a). This increase may not seem like a significant

increase; however, it is resulting in disproportionate student-to-teacher growth. This continued decline in teaching staff supply compared to the constant student population demand does not provide special education students with the high-quality teaching and learning opportunities they require. This chronic and severe shortage reflects both the quantity and quality of special education teachers available (Katsiyannis et al., 2003; McLeskey et al., 2004).

Almost 7% of educators in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2021a) and nearly 15% of Minnesota special education teachers (those working with students ages 6-21 who qualify for service under IDEA, Part B) are not fully certified (OSEP, 2022) leaving nearly 4,580,000 students being educated by under-qualified personnel. There simply are not enough highly qualified teachers remaining in the field, and recruitment efforts alone are not enough to solve this critical trend (Carrol & Foster, 2010). With public school teaching being rated one of the most stressful professions in the United States with nearly 46% of teachers reporting high levels of daily stress and only matched by the nursing and physician fields (Bottiani et al., 2019), special education educators are leaving the field at much higher rates than their general education colleagues (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Katsiyannis et al., 2003; Russ et al., 2001; Williams & Dikes, 2015; Wong et al., 2017). The annual attrition rate among special education teachers is nearly 13% (Wong et al., 2017). Teachers leaving the field after their first year has been on a steady rise since 1994 (Berry, 2012; Carrol & Foster, 2010; Collins et al., 2017). This is alarming considering teacher efficacy and skills improve "progressively throughout the first seven years of teaching" (Carroll & Foster, 2010, p. 12). An additional wave of nearly 30-50% of educators leave the profession after five years before they have grown and developed their craft (Ansley et al., 2016; Bottiani et al., 2019; Carrol & Foster, 2010; Collie et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; De Stasio et al., 2017; Dicke et al., 2020; Harmsen et al., 2018; Henderson, 2014;

Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Levine, 2013; Mehrenberg, 2013; Phillips, 2021; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Pressley et al., 2021; Räsänen et al., 2020; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013). This lack of proficiency continues to grow; in 1987-1988, the average years of experience of a teacher was 15 and by 2007-2008, the average years of experience significantly dropped to one to two years (Carrol & Foster, 2010).

In the 1990s, legislation began to open the potential teaching candidate field in all states by allowing variances or waivers, special licenses, and fast-track programs for educators to join the special education field (U.S. Department of Education, 2003b). While this increased the availability of licensed teachers, it did not solve the attrition or retention of the high-quality specialized teaching force; it merely "increased the speed of the revolving door" (Carrol & Foster, 2010, p. 9). In one United States, two-year, federally funded alternative licensure program over 45% of participants left the education field (Newton et al., 2020). Additionally, one in five special education teachers enters the classroom without graduating from a four-year preparation program (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Not only are novice teachers more likely to experience burnout and leave the profession, but those who hold licensure outside of the special education field are not prepared for the complexities of the job, which does not solve the attrition crisis (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Espinoza et al., 2018; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2003b). Teachers' turnover is a result of inexperience, insufficient preparation, and lack of support coupled with stressful working conditions (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003).

COVID-19 Impact on Education Systems

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives in the United States, creating not only a demand shortage but also supply and financial shortages in many systems at the same time (Bauer, 2020; Lech & Johnson, 2021; Sahin & Shelley, 2020). The education system is among

the hardest hit (Bauer, 2020) and has only exacerbated an already existing crisis. The

ramifications of special education teachers leaving the field due to burnout affect all aspects of

the education system and stakeholders (Ansley et al., 2016). Special education teachers'

professional job satisfaction and job duties play a role in the success of novice teachers and the

retention of high-quality educators (Collins et al., 2017). Burnout among special education

teachers is being experienced at much higher levels than their general education counterparts (De

Stasio et al., 2017). The job-demand-resource (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) model and

Maslach's (1998) burnout theory contribute to the understanding of how special education

teachers' experiences and perceptions impact their well-being and organizational outcomes

(Collie et al., 2018). While stress and burnout are often identified as impacting interpersonal and

fiscal components of teachers and administration, stress and burnout also indirectly and directly

influence all stakeholders, including individual students (Wong et al., 2017). Historic staffing

shortages coupled with increased demands and stress are leaving the education systems in dire

conditions.

Cost to Stakeholders

Educational Systems

Education administrators often identify special education teacher attrition as a monetary

impact: the time, effort, and financial resources required to replace quality teachers (Bettini et al.,

2020; Dicke et al., 2020; Henderson, 2014; Hogue & Taylor, 2020). The National Commission of

Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) estimated that school districts spent $7.2 billion a year

on replacing teachers (Carrol & Foster, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2006). In Michigan,

financial burdens are estimated between $10,000-$20,000 per teacher, often draining resources

that could otherwise be used to improve working conditions for those who remain in the field

(Lindsay et al., 2021). While the monetary impact is evident, exiting teachers also take institutional wisdom, experience, and professional development of skills with them, leaving gaps in student educational opportunities (Carrol & Foster, 2010; Lindsay et al., 2021). New teachers require additional resources to familiarize them with systemic and individualized practices and onboarding to build competency (Räsänen et al., 2020). In Minnesota between 1999 and 2002, there was a 74% increase in the number of teachers who were granted special license variances to fill vacant special education teacher positions (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020). While the administrators have attempted to deliver high-quality continuous instruction during dismal recruitment times, out-of-field teachers impact institutional effectiveness and further perpetuate teachers' stress, attrition, and turnover (Du Plessis et al., 2015).

Students' Achievement

The revolving replacement of exiting educators leads to low academic and social/emotional achievement for special education students (Henderson, 2014; Wanat, 2021). These inconsistencies in educators are contributing to the inequalities of the already disenfranchised populations of students, including students with disabilities (Lech & Johnson, 2021). Districts are unable to close students' achievement gaps when they are struggling to close quality staffing gaps and have to continually replace special education teachers who leave the profession (Carrol & Foster, 2010; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013). Often, these continual open positions are filled by underqualified, newer teachers taking some of the most challenging positions with little to no individualized professional development or support to find success (Carrol & Foster, 2010; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Espinoza et al., 2018) while indirectly and directly impacting the quality of education provided (Berry, 2012; Harmsen et al., 2018; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Ortogero et al., 2017; Räsänen et al., 2020).

While newer teachers bring fresh, new ideas and energy into a system, with each year of teaching experience, educators improve their efficiency and effectiveness (Carrol & Foster, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). New teachers require time to familiarize themselves and effectively navigate the curriculum, so curriculum continuity is disrupted and negatively impacts students' achievement and education integrity (Berry, 2012). In addition to the revolving door of inexperienced educators, teachers who experience burnout negatively impact students' Individual Education Plan (IEP) quality, negatively influence students' goal progression, and potentially lead to denial of FAPE (Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Wong et al., 2017). In turn, high teacher attrition rates and educators' burnout decrease overall students' achievement and affect students' motivation (Ansley et al., 2016; Bettini et al., 2020; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Dicke et al., 2020; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Phillips, 2021; Pressley, 2021). Specifically for special education students, components of burnout, directly and indirectly, negatively impact special education students' achievement and progress towards their IEP goals and objectives (Wong et al., 2017).

Additionally, teacher-to-student relationships are an underrepresented but critical component of educational success that can be cultivated and strengthened through the retention of high-quality teachers (Harmsen et al., 2018). Students who have meaningful relationships with their teachers tend to exhibit increased motivation, cooperation, and improved educational outcomes (Ansley et al., 2016). Students with disabilities often thrive in structured environments that provide consistency. With teachers' turnover, these students experience a disruption to their learning and potential achievement (Ansley et al., 2016).

Educators

Teachers are critical factors related to student success (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). The retention of high-quality special education teachers leads to an increase in students'

achievement (Henderson, 2014). When teachers are provided with personal and professional resources, a positive environment is created, performance will increase, and burnout will decrease (De Stasio et al., 2017). Teachers who have higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy possess significant protective factors, thus reducing stress levels that lead to burnout (De Stasio et al., 2017). While the teaching profession is often associated with higher levels of stress leading to high rates of attrition (Collie et al., 2018; Dicke et al., 2020; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Levine, 2013), educators' physical, emotional, and relational well-being are often tested and strained (Räsänen et al., 2020).

Job satisfaction is one of the most identified factors leading to teachers' retention (Dicke et al., 2020). Teachers' job satisfaction can be broken down into relational/personal supports and organizational supports (Collie et al., 2018; Henderson, 2014). The inconsistent certification requirements, work conditions, and the lack of administrative, peer, and parent support all contribute to special education teachers' well-being (Katsiyannis et al., 2003). Unsupported and stressed teachers have reduced teaching quality, self-efficacy, and overall poor engagement (Wong et al., 2017).

The teaching profession continues to evolve and has become more complicated while public teacher appreciation has diminished (Räsänen et al., 2020). With the increased demands and added stressors the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on special education teachers, a mass exodus has begun. An alarming 55% of teachers are contemplating leaving the field since the start of the pandemic (National Educational Association, 2022).

Special Education Teachers' Job Demands

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; previously the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB]) mandates the requirement for a highly qualified teacher in front of every student

(Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2003a; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). A highly qualified teacher is defined as a fully licensed or certified skilled practitioner who demonstrates competency in their subject matter, and without them, it is impossible to close achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). In the United States, attrition rates of highly qualified special education teachers are a prevalent issue (Ansley et al., 2016; Williams & Dikes, 2015). In Minnesota, a highly qualified teacher must obtain a special education tier four teaching license. To gain a tier four licensure, one must have a bachelor's degree, complete a preparation program, pass content and pedagogy assessments, pass board-approved skills exams, have three years of teaching experience in Minnesota, and provide a most recent summative evaluation not resulted in an improvement plan (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012; Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021b).

In addition to such licenses, special education teachers must have knowledge in all general education content areas and grade levels in which they will be working (Hogue & Taylor, 2020). This differs from general education counterparts who operate in a single grade level or content area, resulting in a desire for colleagues to not only understand the dynamics of the role but also share in the education of these students (Henderson, 2014; Youngs et al., 2011), as all special education students are first and foremost general education students. Special education teachers have to possess a high level of flexibility and adaptability to address evolving demands and situations (Collie et al., 2018; Wanat, 2021). With organizational factors cited as highly impactful in teacher burnout (Collie et al., 2018; Maslach 1998; Wanant, 2021), it is critical for administrators to understand special education workloads and work climate in order to create a culture in which special educators are valued and a part of a team, rather than working in silos or isolation (Levine, 2013; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

With constant changes in federal, state regulations, and COVID-19 pandemic amendments, the scope of a special education teachers' job duties has significantly increased (Lindsay et al., 2021; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). District administrators estimate that teachers' workload has more than doubled since the COVID-19 outbreak, and coupled with the personal stressors of the pandemic, educators are leaving the field and burning out at rapid paces (Carver-Thomas, 2021). As teachers navigate unsustainable workloads, they begin to reach higher levels of stress, leading to increased burnout (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Harmsen et al., 2018). Special education teachers are expected to complete all of their work during the typical eight-hour school day; however, special education teachers often need to work outside of school contract hours or during their lunchtime just to be able to stay on top of all aspects of their roles, complete due process, and complete legal paperwork (Ortogero et al., 2017). A 2017 study revealed that 100% of special education teachers stayed late every day, and two-thirds of participants arrived to work 30-55 minutes early (Ortogero et al., 2017). Not only do these job demands impact teachers' stress and burnout levels, they also impact the available minutes in a day left to provide high-quality educational opportunities for students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). When educators' workload becomes unreasonable or too high, students' educational benefits and access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) are compromised (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). An alarming 48% of special education teachers report unmanageable workloads or responsibilities that prevent them from working with students as a critical factor for leaving the field (Albrecht 2007; Russ et al., 2001; Wanat, 2021). In addition to unmanageable workloads, teachers juggle organizational factors such as a lack of time, resources, support, meetings, and stress as factors for leaving the field (Ortogero et al., 2017). An emphasis on quality education for all education systems must not

overlook the role stress and the mental health of individual teachers have on student learning (Wong et al., 2017). By identifying strategies that will encourage reasonable workloads, administrators can ensure quality instruction and education opportunities (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

Since managing a balanced workload and caseload is essential to special educators' jobs (Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Russ et al., 2001; Williams & Dikes, 2015), one must distinguish between caseload and workload. Caseload refers to the number of students each special education teacher is responsible for managing (Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Workload refers to all responsibilities and duties required by the special education case manager for each of the students on their caseload (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Both play a pivotal role in an educator's emotional well-being and work-related stress. Fifty-seven percent of educators contemplating leaving their job reported that high caseloads and the wide range of student needs were a factor in their decision to stay or leave the field (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hogue & Taylor, 2020).

Minnesota caseload rules often neglect the current classroom climate and need, resulting in an unequal representation of the amount of time and effort required to support students (OLA of MN, 2013). A simple headcount of students does not always accurately depict a special education teacher's workload (OLA of MN, 2013). In the United States, a special education teacher's caseload varies greatly, and the policies in determining caseloads are just as varied (Hogue & Taylor, 2020; McLeskey et al., 2004; Russ et al., 2001). In 1995, only 15 states had policies governing a special education caseload (Hogue & Taylor, 2020). Today, only a slight

increase has occurred, with 20 states having guidance and/or policies on special education caseload recommendations (Hogue & Taylor, 2020).

In determining appropriate caseloads, districts range from individual administration setting guidelines for teams to consider to complex formulas that incorporate federal setting, disability category, paperwork required, age/grade, and severity of disability (Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Russ et al., 2001). No two states use the same guidelines and range from one to four factors incorporated in their formulas (Hogue & Taylor, 2020). While average suggested caseloads in several Midwest states range from 16-20 (Michigan Department of Education, 2021; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b), Minnesota is moving away from a caseload model that simply divides the number of students on an IEP by the number of special education teaching staff and utilizing a workload analysis model instead (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). This basic model reflects contact minutes (specially designed instruction and evaluations/re-evaluations) plus the number of IEPs managed (contact minutes + IEPs = Workload; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). For example, if a case manager has 10 students on a caseload but some students require more intense services and supports, the workload number would calculate to 14, which indicates an equivalence to a 14-student caseload (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

While the legislation does not dictate the number a special education teacher should have on their caseload, they do recommend a conscious effort be made to maintain a reasonable workload (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Caseload maximums range from 50 to 15 with North Carolina and Pennsylvania topping the list at 50 and Minnesota with the smallest maximum at 15 (for a specific population of students identified as Specific Learning Disability in federal setting two; Hogue & Taylor, 2020). With the transition to Minnesota's workload model,

there is no recommended average caseload for Minnesota special education teachers; rather, a caseload is determined by the severity of a student's needs and the time required to meet the need (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). However, the Minnesota Department of Education (2021) recommends a target range of 12-16 students for elementary and 17-21 students for middle school/high school level. This recommended target range aligns with a 2015 study utilizing the Maslach Burnout Inventory survey where special education teachers reported lower rates of burnout when they had caseloads between 11-15, while educators with caseloads higher than 26 reported the highest rates of burnout (Williams & Dikes, 2015). While every individual teacher has a different level of tolerable stress, it is important to ensure they have adequate preparation time, a duty-free lunch, additional time to complete due process tasks, and time to collaborate and fulfill IEP and evaluation duties incorporated into their day to reduce the amount of burnout (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

While there is often role ambiguity and job role dissonance reported among teachers (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b), there are six commonly agreed upon general duties of a special education teacher: specially designed instruction, evaluation (initial and re-evaluations), due process procedures and IEP management, preparation, supervision of paraprofessionals, and other duties as assigned (such as- study hall, recess monitor; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). While there has been research highlighting pre-COVID-19 pandemic factors or themes contributing to teacher burnout, several common factors stand out: environmental (student population, leadership, colleague relationships), classroom (supports, resources, behavior), and individual stress and anxiety (workload, limited time, preparation , instruction

delivery; Pressley et al., 2021). These factors are only magnified as one enters a new era of education (Pressley et al., 2021).

Specially Designed Instruction

"The purpose of special education is to meet the student's unique needs by providing specially designed, direct instruction that is highly individualized" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b, p. 14). Specially designed instruction ensures a student's FAPE and is defined as adapting content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to ensure access to the general education curriculum allowing progress towards educational standards (IDEA, 2004; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). In Minnesota, this refers to the direct and indirect services identified in a student's IEP (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Direct service ranges from one-to-one and small group instruction to pushing into a general education classroom (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Indirect service is all the work done to ensure the student's coordination of services and IEP are being executed; this is not face-to-face time with the student (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

Many special education teachers teach multiple subjects and standards across many grade levels every day (Henderson, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022) often with more ambiguous curricular expectations (Youngs et al., 2011). When a special education teacher's caseload has a wide range of ages, they are responsible for a broad range of grade-level direct instructional content and knowledge (direct services) as well as accommodations/modifications within each range (Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Williams & Dikes, 2015). In addition to state standards and the general education curriculum, special education teachers also need to support a student's individual functional, social/emotional, and executive functioning skills (Ansley et al., 2016; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). The pandemic only exacerbated these

social/emotional and mental health needs, illuminating the need for additional support outlined in

Executive Order 20-94 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021a). This Executive Order

identified the impact and increase in trauma and mental health challenges as students and

educators navigated the pandemic and required education systems to prioritize and ensure access

to support (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021a). Between April and October 2020,

mental health-related emergency room visits for children increased by 24% (ages 5-11) and 31%

(ages 12-17) compared to 2019 (Jamieson & Whinnery, 2021). The pandemic left not only

students but educators with additional stressors and limited resources to cope (Scheer &

Laubenstein, 2021).

COVID-19 Impact on Specially Designed Instruction. During the COVID-19

pandemic, schools were forced to deliver services in a variety of non-traditional formats, often in

several formats daily (virtual/remote, hybrid, asynchronous, synchronous) and at times

simultaneously (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Lech & Johnson, 2021). Despite this shift in

learning environments, educators were required to provide equal access to high-quality,

grade-level content to all students (NASP, 2020). Having to prepare and deliver lessons in

multiple new formats every day required additional planning time and led to an increase in

workload (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). A need for curriculum and instructional materials that

could support both in-person and virtual learning was cited as a barrier to instructional success

(Lech & Johnson, 2021). This often left educators spending enormous amounts of time adapting

and creating their materials with little to no training and feeling underprepared (Jenkins &

Walker, 2021). While leadership recognized that this shift impacted how teachers prepare and

deliver instruction, they often only provided reactive support and did not address the stress factor

head-on (Phillips, 2021). Educators needed additional professional development and an increase in the most critical of resources: time (Ansley et al., 2016; Phillips, 2021).

In addition to educators designing instruction in a variety of formats, students had to navigate multiple instructional settings with reduced supports and reported a decrease in student well-being and academic progress (Lech & Johnson, 2021). Two-thirds of teachers reported the majority of their students were facing increased learning loss and progression on their IEP goals at a much slower rate compared to previous academic years (Lech & Johnson, 2021). More than 40% of kindergarten and first-grade students were at risk of not being able to read due to the COVID-19pandemic instructional interruptions (Jamieson & Whinnery, 2021). Families were now seeing first-hand how their child learns and often inadvertently contributing to the student not gaining mastery of the material by providing too much support or giving answers (Lech & Johnson, 2021). Parents were also granted full access into an education environment resulting in interference in the classroom (Lech & Johnson, 2021). Parents were interrupting instruction, requesting changes be made to the delivery or how the teacher should be teaching, and sharing recordings or reviews on social media (Lech & Johnson, 2021). This resulted in damaged school and family relationships as well as increased emotional strain and inefficacy or a reduction in personal accomplishment leading to burnout (Pressley et al., 2021).

Evaluations

Participating to varying extents in initial and re-evaluations is a major duty of a special education teacher and can range from 10-20 hours to complete, not included in their daily preparation time considerations (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Every child who is suspected of having a disability must go through an initial evaluation process to determine if they meet the eligibility criteria (OLA of MN, 2013). The evaluation process determines if a

child has a disability and the extent of services required to meet that individual's identified needs (IDEA, 2004; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). In addition to initial evaluations, a child identified as having a disability and receiving special education services must be re-evaluated at least every three years to determine continued eligibility and identify present levels of needs (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). This particular special education teacher duty may vary from district to district but nonetheless is a time-consuming aspect of the position.

The Minnesota Department of Education (2021b) states that in addition to the special education case manager, there may be additional staff on the evaluation team who each devote varying amounts of time to the evaluation. While this multidisciplinary team may vary among districts and individual student areas of concern, it is a critical component in completing comprehensive evaluations. Additionally, a special education case manager's duty does not stop once the evaluation assessments and report are completed. The results of the evaluation and a student's eligibility outcomes will directly impact the student's IEP. The services, goals and supports are then created based on each student's identified needs and educational performance (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

COVID-19 Impact on Evaluations. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated special education evaluations. Special education evaluations require several face-to-face assessments that were extremely difficult to complete during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures (Jenkins & Walker, 2021; Raiford et al., 2021). Despite returning to in-person instruction, many assessments (particularly those needed for social/emotional and autism assessments) were not standardized for use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other mitigation precautions and were unable to be scored appropriately (NASP, 2020; Raiford et al.,

2021). More than 90% of practitioners reported the use of masks for both examiner and examinee as the most cited implemented safety measure used in assessments, resulting in less than 10% of practitioners reporting no impact on performance-based test results (Raiford et al., 2021). In addition to the safety precautions, many eligibility categorical areas required the team to rule out a lack of appropriate instruction to meet initial eligibility criteria; COVID-19 pandemic disruptions made this determination very difficult (NASP, 2020).

Evaluations were delayed or viewed with heavy caution (Jenkins & Walker, 2021). In a 2021 Virginia study, 65% of stakeholders reported special education evaluations during the initial COVID-19 pandemic closures were ineffective (Jenkins & Walker, 2021). In fact, fewer students were assessed for cognitive and academic achievement through the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT; 47%), the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (KTEA; 33%), and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC; 44%) during the 2020 school year compared to the 2019 school year, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Raiford et al., 2021). Even as schools returned to face-to-face instruction, they were faced with a significant backlog and overall increase of initial referrals for academic and/or social/emotional concerns without any federal or district regulation changes (NASP, 2020).

Due Process and IEP Management

Due process is the documentation required by a case manager for each student on their caseload to be completed to ensure a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; OLA of MN, 2013). Case managers spend more than a day each week completing procedural documentation requirements (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b) and more time than all other non-instructional duties combined (Mehrenberg, 2013). This additional documentation often comes with additional IEP team meetings, data

collection, and documentation writing resulting in a decrease in available instructional time and not directly impacting an individual student's success (OLA of MN, 2013). In addition to these paperwork requirements, a case manager is also the facilitator, collaborator, and general point person for all team members and families to ensure the IEP is being fulfilled and meeting the student's needs (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). It is imperative that case managers be highly collaborative and have secure communication skills to navigate these highly regulated due process tasks while building and managing collaborative partnerships with teams, administration, service providers, and families (Blackwell et al., 2019; Billingsley & Bettini 2019; Wanat, 2021). While these tasks are time-consuming, they are necessary to ensure students' right to FAPE, often leaving special education staff exhausted from the demands of high caseloads (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Not only do these procedural duties leave case managers depleted, but they also decrease the available time they can dedicate to students and reduce instructional effectiveness (Mehrenberg, 2013; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; Youngs et al., 2011). In fact, 87% of special education teachers reported that an increase in caseload will result in an increase in paperwork, meetings, and due process requirements thus reducing available time to spend with individual students (Russ et al., 2001).

While there are considerable differences in job demands (Bettini et al., 2020), special educators often have the same amount of preparation time that their general education counterparts are granted. This small window of time during the day is insufficient to accomplish high-quality instruction preparation, complete due process paperwork, and manage the IEPs of each student on their caseload. While most case managers understand paperwork is a part of their duties, they reported significant amounts of time outside of their workday are required to stay on top of the paperwork burden (OLA of MN, 2013). Antecedents of burnout are the result of an

imbalance in job demands and lack of resources (Maslach, 1998). Schaufeli et al. (2008) described the most prevalent factor that contributed to burnout as an imbalance between work demands and a person's resources especially when there are not enough opportunities to recharge depleted energy (Maslach, 1998). Those overwhelmed by due process paperwork or the ambiguity of their roles are more likely to leave the field (Henderson, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2004; Payne, 2005; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Youngs et al., 2011). In fact, time pressures are one of the top factors reported to lead to burnout risk (De Stasio et al., 2017; Mehrenberg, 2013; Williams & Dikes, 2015).

While many pre-service preparation programs may briefly describe due process demands and highlight their requirements, the descriptions often fall short of the daily demands (Mehrenberg, 2013). There is often a lack of clarity on the due process tasks and expectations as well as the legalities that drive the procedures (Mehrenberg, 2013; Wanat, 2021). Upon graduation, new special education teachers are left with a broad understanding of Minnesota due process requirements and legislation only to learn on the job (Mehrenberg, 2013) without a quality, knowledgeable special education mentor, which only contributes further to burnout (Espinoza et al., 2018; Wanat, 2021; Youngs et al., 2011). In fact, this inconsistent perception of expectation versus reality of workload is the greatest factor challenging novice teachers (Räsänen et al., 2020). With many factors working against special education teachers from ever-changing job demands and legislation coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, these procedural task demands lay the groundwork for a higher rate of burnout and an increase in attrition rates (Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Russ et al., 2001; Wanat, 2021).

COVID-19 Impact Due Process and IEP Management. With the COVID-19 pandemic, case managers were tasked with additional due process paperwork for each student

and there were significant disruptions to typical procedures and practices (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021a; Sahin & Shelley, 2020). While many aspects of education were unknown as the pandemic surged, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) mandated that special education teams were still required to ensure FAPE and adhere to a student's IEP regardless of the modality of instruction (Jenkins & Walker, 2021; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021a). They were not only required to complete typical due process procedural tasks but also to create plans for any potential transitions between instructional models by developing an individualized alternative plan addendum to the IEP describing what special education and related services would look like during each model (in-person, hybrid, or distance learning) as well as identifying learning loss to determine if recovery services related to the COVID-19 pandemic were warranted (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020c; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021a). For example, in Minnesota, these addendums were Contingency Learning Plans (CLPs) and Recovery Services and in Michigan they were Continuity of Learning Plans (CoL Plan). CLPs and CoL Plans were designed to acknowledge how the educational team intended to provide FAPE in all learning models. While educators felt they were helpful during the constant changes from one learning format to another, they did require additional due process tasks and time (Jenkins & Walker, 2021). In July 2021, the Minnesota Department of Education updated its special education guide charging educational teams to address any disruptions to student instruction and access to FAPE related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This required not only additional data collection and progress monitoring but also additional due process procedures and IEP team meetings (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020c).

While procedural task demands increased, so did IEP management demands. In order to meet the COVID-19 pandemic repercussions and support families and team members, case managers were charged with supporting students on a new virtual platform (Sahin & Shelley, 2020). A total of 75% of special education teachers reported a significant increase in their workload during this time (Lech & Johnson, 2021).

Preparation

In addition to the extensive time required to complete due process and manage IEPs, special education staff were also required to devote time to prepare for student instruction and direct service minutes (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Special educators utilize their preparation time not only for the planning of instruction, but also for evaluation tasks such as questionnaires, interviews or observations, IEP and progress report writing, and other procedural requirements (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Special education teachers often are provided the same preparation time as their general education counterparts despite the aforementioned additional requirements and duties (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Even when provided common time to collaborate with colleagues, procedural demands often prevent special education teachers from participating (Youngs et al., 2011). In addition, case managers are frequently called away from or miss entirely their preparation time and lunch to support and manage student behaviors, hold IEP meetings, complete due process paperwork, and communicate with colleagues and families (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; Ortogero et al., 2017). While many special education teachers go into the profession anticipating their job will be to educate children with disabilities, the reality is they spend the vast majority of their day completing paperwork and attending meetings (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006).

Administrators must understand the scope of a special education role and consider extended planning or preparation time and compensations for hours worked outside of the school day to accommodate the additional due process requirements special education teachers have compared to their general education counterparts (Ortogero et al., 2017; Russ et al., 2001; Williams & Dikes, 2015). By acknowledging and providing adequate time in the day for special education teachers to accomplish all their tasks and duties, they will prevent attrition and increase retention (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). In addition, teachers who have time to collaborate and maintain professional relationships build and improve the coping skills and resiliency needed to combat symptoms of burnout and increase student success (Espinoza et al., 2018; Phillips, 2021). While relationships (student and colleague) can contribute to both positive and negative effects on individuals (Harmsen et al., 2018), this positive peer social support system is essential in the retention of novice and experienced teachers alike (Räsänen et al., 2020).

COVID-19 Impact Preparation. The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed the way educators delivered instruction with little time to prepare and even less clarity on execution or resources (Sahin & Shelley, 2020). The added complexities of adapting the delivery of services or learning new skills for unfamiliar technology in a remote format increased the strain on closing achievement gaps (Sahin & Shelley, 2020). The sudden change from traditional face-to-face learning to remote learning resulted in nearly a quarter of the 2020 instructional time lost (Sahin & Shelley, 2020). This left high school seniors with a 33% decrease in expected progress and left them underprepared to enter college (Sahin & Shelley, 2020).

While many teacher preparation programs emphasized the integration of technology, the vast majority did not address virtual learning and how to adapt instruction, online assessments,

curriculum, or legal aspects of special education (Jenkins & Walker, 2021). This left many special education teachers underprepared to face the daunting challenges ahead (Jenkins & Walker, 2021). This sudden shift to virtual learning did not provide educators with resources and time to sufficiently incorporate new technology leaving educators feeling "technostress" resulting in a rapid increase in burnout levels (Phillips, 2021). In addition, 94% of teachers reported a workload increase as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and attributed this increase to adapting lessons and material for a variety of formats, an increase in time spent setting up and learning new technology, and an increase in special education due process paperwork (Lech & Johnson, 2021). In a 2022 National Education Association study, 44% of educators reported not having enough planning time was a very serious problem experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increase in expectations and decrease in available resources (time) created self-doubt or inefficacy in many educators (Phillips, 2021).

Supervision of Paraprofessionals and Other Duties

With over 450,000 paraprofessionals in United States public and charter schools (Layden et al., 2018), paraprofessionals are typically a welcomed component in an overworked educator's classroom. Special education paraprofessionals are a vital component in supporting the delivery and programming of special education students (Da Fonte & Capizzi, 2015; Layden et al., 2018; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; Wright & Prescott, 2018). They are often the ones spending increasingly more one-to-one or small group time with the students and can be of tremendous value when determining progress and program supports for individual students (Mann & Whitworth, 2017). A paraprofessional is defined as an employee that directly interacts with students under the supervision of a special education teacher to support students with instructional activities, behavior management, or other duties (Minnesota Administrative Rule,

2017; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b) and sometimes referenced as educational assistant, student support staff, or classroom assistant.

While these professionals are necessary in providing support to students, they require additional guidance from a special education teacher/case manager through regular communication, instruction preparation, direction, feedback, and training or coaching (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Special education paraprofessionals, under IDEA regulations, are allowed to assist students only if they are properly trained and supervised (Layden et al., 2018; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b) and often have far less certification, education, and experience than a special education teacher (Fisher et al., 2022; Layden et al., 2018). In fact, as little as 46% of paraprofessionals report having some post-secondary education experience (but no degree; Layden et al., 2018). Paraprofessionals are often re-teaching instruction, working with small groups or one-to-one with students, and providing behavioral support. It is estimated that up to 70% of paraprofessionals are regularly making curriculum modifications and instructional decisions in the moment (Fisher et al., 2022). An astounding one-quarter of paraprofessionals report planning instruction for students (Fisher et al., 2022). A well-supported and trained paraprofessional will have a direct, positive impact on student success not only academically but socially (Layden et al., 2018).

This additional supervision and training duty placed on special education case managers is critical, but it is time-consuming and stressful; at times they may have up to six paraprofessionals in various duties under their direction (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Paraprofessionals often only work during student hours leaving very little time for special education teachers to coordinate and collaborate (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). Despite this time constraint, special education teachers and paraprofessionals must

collaboratively work together to ensure necessary skills are developed and effective to provide positive outcomes for the students they work with (Wright & Prescott, 2018).

Often special education teachers are assigned non-special education-related duties such as recess, lunch, bus monitoring, and advisory class hours (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). While special education teachers are able to perform these duties it is further reducing the amount of time available in the working day for them to attend to the numerous other time-consuming special education-specific tasks. This reduction in time is not only evident in the effective completion of due process tasks but also in student direct instruction which can reduce academic outcomes and perpetuate job-related stress.

Burnout in Special Education

The term burnout was first utilized in 1974 by the German-born psychologist Herbert Freudenberger and entailed a variety of factors and descriptions that continue to evolve today (Williams & Dikes, 2015). When stress becomes prolonged and unchecked, individuals face burnout (Levine, 2013; Martínez-Ramón, 2021; Wong et al., 2017). Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy and is caused by ongoing job-related stress (Bottiani et al., 2019; De Stasio et al., 2017; Lee & Eissenstat, 2018; Maslach, 1998; Phillips, 2021). Education is one of the professions most impacted by burnout (Martínez-Ramón, 2021). Nearly 40% of teachers experience burnout symptoms (Wong et al., 2017). Special education professionals are even more vulnerable to professional burnout (Asbury et al., 2020; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Wong et al., 2017). Teacher burnout is leading good educators to exit the profession, not due to lack of skill but lack of support and unrealistic or unclear expectations (Phillips, 2021). Even if teachers are not leaving the profession and remain teaching while

experiencing burnout, they may provide less effective, less committed, and low-quality education (Ansley et al., 2016; Pressley et al., 2021; Räsänen et al., 2020).

In a profession that is heavily submerged in internal motivation to make a difference in students' lives and requires emotional energy, it is no surprise that the special education profession is a high-stress career (Ansley et al., 2016; Levine, 2013). Up to 50% of educators report feeling at least one aspect of burnout, emotional exhaustion (Martínez-Ramón, 2021). Teachers under the age of 30 are more likely to experience burnout; additionally, special education teachers suffer from higher burnout rates compared to their general education peers (De Stasio et al., 2017; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013; Wanat, 202; Williams & Dikes, 2015). Burnout leads to higher rates of job withdrawal (stress, turnover, absenteeism), low levels of personal accomplishment, and emotional exhaustion affecting the quality of service and education students receive (Robinson et al., 2019; Martínez-Ramón, 2021; Maslach, 1998).

While the education field is prone to increase job-related stress, special education teachers have additional burdens placed on them that create an opportunity for increased burnout (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Role conflict, role ambiguity, workload, and leadership support are reported as major contributors to this exhaustion and burnout (Harmsen et al., 2018; Henderson, 2014; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). Special education teachers who can navigate personal and professional domains and are provided with support and resources are more likely to decrease stress levels, have greater job satisfaction, and remain in the profession (Collins et al., 2017). School leaders must understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on processes and adjust their expectations and supports to meet educators' new needs (Phillips, 2021).

Maslach's burnout theory identifies three stress components of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and personal accomplishment or professional inefficacy

(Maslach, 1998; Schaufeli et al., 2008). Burnout is on one end of the job satisfaction continuum whereas job engagement is at the opposite end (Maslach, 1998). A special education teacher's perception of their level of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy may play a vital role in where they fall on this job satisfaction continuum. These perceptions or lived experiences have several noted contributing factors. Special education teachers reported teaching experience, student disability, role conflict, role ambiguity, and lack of administrative support as factors related to their increased burnout levels (De Stasio et al., 2017; Harmsen et al., 2018). While teaching experience and student disability impact are more subjective factors, an educator's role and administrative support can be more observable. Role ambiguity particularly is noted to negatively impact a special education teacher's decision to remain in the field (Berry, 2012; De Stasio et al., 2017). This discrepancy and role ambiguity consists of position or role inconsistencies across schools, districts, and states, internal and relational conflicts, and caseload and workload manageability (Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013).

In addition to role discrepancies, special education teachers experience intrapersonal dissonance. Special education teachers acknowledge that they may never see the rewards of their efforts as many students' growth is at a slower rate, and they often are not a part of their entire educational journey (Levine, 2013). This uncertainty and the unknown outcome often led to emotional strain (Levine, 2013; Schaufeli et al., 2008) and can contribute to burnout and attrition rates (Wong et al., 2017) and increase feelings of inefficacy or job dissatisfaction.

One avenue districts often rely on to provide resources or support to combat the emotional strain and inequalities of job demands is through professional development. While school districts offer professional development, special education teachers could benefit from targeted or additional opportunities to grow in the field of special education (Collins et al., 2017;

Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). Ensuring special education staff have access to field

specific topics and training is a critical component to ensuring professional development

opportunities are applicable and relevant. Teachers who have access to relevant professional

development have higher retention rates (Henderson, 2014). Therefore, this specialized,

high-quality, relevant training has been shown to increase teacher confidence and achievement

while decreasing stress and burnout in this ever-changing field (Henderson, 2014; Minnesota

Department of Education, 2021b). While professional development is important, it can be

time-consuming and takes valuable hours away from other professional duties, often leaving

educators balancing essential job requirements and strengthening their resource toolbox. Even

though teachers report a reduction in the available time, 96% still want relevant professional

development (Lech & Johnson, 2021).

Professional development and job satisfaction are critical factors in individual well-being,

motivation, and high turnover rates within the education field (Dicke et al., 2020). Isolation and

stress are also critical indicators special education teachers report that lead to burnout and

leaving the field (Berry, 2012; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021).

Conversely, educators who report having higher levels of autonomy, feeling valued, and having

administrative support are less likely to report emotional exhaustion and remain in the field

(Collie et al., 2018; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). One way to ensure educators

are feeling less emotional exhaustion is through administrator supports. There are two critical

types of support, emotional and material, that impact the quality of the work environment, and

administrators can attend to those supports to increase retention (Maslach, 1998; Minnesota

Department of Education, 2021). Furthermore, an administrator with a solid understanding of

special education plays a vital role in developing and retaining educators (Minnesota Department

of Education, 2021b; Phillips, 2021). Those with knowledge of the special education field can better support their special education staff. When they are intentional with providing opportunities for growth, mentorship, and systemic procedures, they can ensure special education teachers are set up for success (Espinoza et al., 2018; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b).

In addition, teachers who have supportive work relationships with peers are provided not only emotional and psychological support but also a professional network of support, reducing job-related stress (Levine, 2013; Phillips, 2021). These supportive networks provide necessary preventative systems for educators. There is a direct link to self-efficacy and burnout, and when the administrators, education systems, and individuals understand the positive preventative factors related to stress management, an increase in commitment to the profession will gain momentum (Levine, 2013). When educators who operate collaboratively (not in isolation) are acknowledged, appreciated, and provided with support, they can combat emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Berry, 2012; Levine, 2013). Unfortunately, COVID-19 and social distancing precautions have only further isolated teachers from building supportive networks (Phillips, 2021). However, special education teachers who have opportunities to communicate and collaborate with colleagues report lower levels of stress and higher levels of confidence in their ability to work with special education students (Berry, 2012).

COVID-19 Impact on Burnout

Prior to the COVID-19pandemic, the teaching profession was considered a stressful job with almost 8% of teachers leaving the field (Pressley et al., 2021). The worldwide pandemic sparked a massive shift in how children were educated (Jamieson & Whinnery, 2021; Martínez-Ramón, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). Meticulously developed routines were disrupted,

resources were fractured, and instruction was abruptly interrupted (Asbury et al., 2020). On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic, and an estimated 107 countries began national school closures (Viner et al., 2020). The governors in Ohio and Maryland were the first to announce they would be implementing state-wide mandates to slow the spread of COVID-19 which included closing schools (Bailey & Schurz, 2020). Over the next eight days, all schools across all 50 states were closed, sending over 50 million students into distance/virtual learning from home (Bailey & Schurz, 2020; Raiford et al., 2021) and impacting 124,000 United States public and private schools (Raiford et al., 2021). Education teams were tasked with ensuring and creating equitable programming for all students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021a).

Teachers faced new and challenging job demands, requirements, and classrooms (Pressley, 2021). While teachers were adapting to meet student needs in this new era, they were paying the price with increased stress, decreased self-efficacy, and strained relationships (Phillips, 2021; Pressley, 2021). In addition, as the education systems began to develop a safe return to the classroom, an old dilemma of teacher shortages resurfaced (Pressley, 2021). Schools across America are encountering an alarming increase in their teacher shortages due to a decrease in available educators and an increase in job-related stress and burnout (Phillips, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic amplified job-related and personal stress prevalence among teachers resulting in burnout (Phillips, 2021). In this COVID-19 pandemic era, an astounding 67% of teachers reported burnout as a very serious issue and 90% reported it as a somewhat serious issue (National Education Association, 2022). According to the National Education Association, there was a significant increase in the percentage of teachers who reported the pandemic has increased their likelihood of retiring or who are leaving the profession earlier than planned.

Teaching is an emotionally exhausting profession (Collie et al., 2018). Coupled with the stress and uncharted demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, special education teachers are entering into a new realm of education. The pandemic will continue to impact not only academics and mental health but the overall well-being of everyone (NASP, 2020). The vast majority of special education teachers reported a much heavier workload with less preparation time as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Lech & Johnson, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). While necessary to enforce COVID-19 pandemic safety protocols (e.g., social distancing, masking, aggressive hygiene measures, cleaning procedures, contact tracing), educators were required to learn new instructional formats, adapt and create instructional materials to coincide with each format, increase communication between team members and home, and complete additional due process paperwork, all while navigating the emotionally taxing COVID-19 pandemic field personally and professionally (Pressley et al., 2021). The shift in job demands and new stressors or emotional strain coupled with an increase in workload lead to a significant increase in special education teacher burnout (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; National Education Association, 2022; Pressley et al., 2021).

While there has been research highlighting pre-COVID-19 pandemic factors or themes contributing to teacher burnout, several common factors stand out: environmental (student population, leadership, colleague relationships), classroom (supports, resources, behavior), and individual stress and anxiety (e.g., workload, limited time, preparation, instruction delivery; Pressley et al., 2021). These factors are only magnified as one enters a new way of education (Pressley et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Stress is a "physical and psychological response to perceived demands" (Ansley et al., 2016, p. 2). When an individual experiences a perceived threat or stressful event, the brain sends signals (hormones) to prepare the physical and psychological response system to react to the stress (Ansley et al., 2016; Thompson, 2014). While the typical brain and stress responses subside naturally depending on their severity, duration, and predictability (Thompson, 2014), many stressors of a teacher's environment are persistent, which tends to lead to prolonged stress exposure resulting in physical, mental, and psychological impairments (Ansley et al., 2016). While stress is the result of high demands and insufficient resources to meet those demands, it transforms into burnout when it becomes chronic and unmanageable (Wong et al., 2017).

The job demand-resource model illustrates that although every job has stress, when an employee's mental well-being is tended to and supported with resources (mental and physical), there will be less burnout. Maslach's multidimensional burnout theory identifies three interconnected aspects of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach, 1998; Schaufeli et al., 2008). From this theory, the Maslach Burnout Inventory was created to help standardize burnout and is the leading burnout survey in the field, widely used in 93% of articles and dissertations (Schaufeli et al., 2008).

Job Demand- Resource Model

Bakker and Demerouti's job-demands resource model (JD-R) illustrates that every job has stress, but when an employee's mental well-being is tended to and supported with resources (mental and physical), there will be less burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bottiani et al., 2019; Collie et al., 2018). This theory is used across a wide range of occupations, including the education field, to understand organizational and personal (individual capacity) resources that

impact an individual's workplace experience (burnout or emotional exhaustion) and outcomes (attrition; Collie et al., 2018). The JD-R model highlights the interconnectedness of job-related stress and teacher attrition (Harmsen et al., 2018).

Demands in the teaching profession refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require a person to engage in cognitive or emotional effort to meet those demands or achieve a goal (Harmsen et al., 2018; Lee & Eissenstat, 2018). *Resources* in the teaching profession are the aids utilized to accomplish the demands and fulfill responsibilities (Bettini et al., 2020; Harmsen et al., 2018; Lee & Eissenstat, 2018). This model predicts that when an individual experiences high job demands with low resources, their mental and physical statuses are depleted, leading to strain, stress, and eventually burnout (Bettini et al., 2020; Harmsen et al., 2018). As previously noted, this impact can indirectly and directly impact all levels and stakeholders of the education system when unchecked and unmanaged. This burnout is a "chronic consequence of depletion of resources through the accumulation of stress" (Lee & Eissenstat, 2018, p. 4) and is often associated with absenteeism, intentions to leave the field, attrition, reduced efficiency, and a decrease in overall job satisfaction, all having a negative effect on the individual and the organization (Lee & Eissenstat, 2018). The JD-R model suggests that burnout is a gradual process but if positive job resources and understanding of burnout increase, the trajectory can be altered and mitigated, thus reducing or eliminating burnout and attrition rates (Lee & Eissenstat, 2018).

Bettini et al. (2020) suggested there are three broad types of resources that contribute to an individual's level of stress: social, physical, and internal. Social supports, teacher-to-teacher or administrator relationships, build and increase individuals' ability to cope and manage stress (Phillips, 2021). In particular, novice teachers rely on collegial and leadership relationships in

order to accomplish their duties and cultivate their craft (Bettini et al., 2020). This collaborative relationship gives access to new ideas, moral support, and a positive lens to help one become more effective with students, the classroom, and their instruction in addition to providing emotional resources (Hargreaves, 2001). Additionally, educators who have poor leadership relationships and perceive those relationships to be unsupportive are twice as likely to leave the profession (Räsänen et al., 2020).

Physical supports, such as instructional materials, technology, or training, provide all teachers with adequate resources to ensure high-quality instruction and personal feelings of self-efficacy in their practice (Bettini et al., 2020). Furthermore, a district that incorporates high-quality onboarding, induction, and ongoing professional development processes can provide educators with the required resources and supports essential to meeting demands and reducing burnout (Harmsen et al., 2018).

Lastly, internal supports are the individual's knowledge and skills they have to draw upon to meet demand challenges as well as cope with stress (Bettini et al., 2020). When demands exceed resources the result is emotional exhaustion; which is one of the three components in Maslach's burnout theory and where these two theories intertwine, creating a holistic understanding of special education teachers' burnout.

Maslach Burnout Theory

Maslach's burnout theory identifies three components: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach, 1998; Schaufeli et al., 2008). This multidimensional theory is the perceived experience an individual has in the face of prolonged exposure to job-related stressors. This theory suggests that by looking beyond a single dimension (emotional exhaustion) and identifying the impact on others (cynicism) and the individual (inefficacy), we can improve on

existing theories and understand a broader scope of burnout (Maslach, 1998). Commonly used in conjunction is Maslach's burnout inventory which is considered the standard tool for quantifying burnout and is used in 93% of articles and dissertations on burnout (Maslach, 1998). It identifies the degree (ranging from very mild to severe) to which the rater self-identifies on its three core subscales (Lee & Eissenstat, 2018; Maslach, 1998; Schaufeli et al., 2008; Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Emotional exhaustion is the most commonly reported aspect and is defined as being overworked and depleted of one's emotional resources (Collie et al., 2018; Lee & Eissenstat, 2018; Maslach, 1998). When an individual's workload becomes too high or there is a personal conflict, they can become drained or lack the energy to support others. They may also lack resources to manage their emotional stress, which can contribute to increased emotional exhaustion if left unchecked (Hogue & Taylor, 2020). The special education teacher position can be an emotionally demanding profession, and exhaustion is not uncommon (Ansley et al., 2016; Maslach, 1998; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022).

Cynicism, or depersonalization, is defined as having a negative or detached attitude towards others (Maslach, 1998; Williams & Dikes, 2015). Cynicism can be a coping mechanism for experiencing emotional stress. For those who work in the human service fields and require interpersonal relationships and empathy, this can have long-standing negative effects on not only the individual but all those with whom they interact and work (Maslach, 1998; Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Inefficacy, or a reduction in personal accomplishment, is defined as a decrease in personal feelings of accomplishment or value (Maslach, 1998; Williams & Dikes, 2015). This aspect can arise when emotional exhaustion and cynicism begin to emerge and there is a lack of

relevant resources (Maslach, 1998). This aspect of burnout can be described as a loss of self-worth or feeling ineffective or hopeless (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Maslach's (1998) burnout theory brings focus to interpersonal relationships and their effects on individual stress levels. This theory contributes to both negative and positive impacts on an individual's stress and resources for coping and managing. The three aspects of this theory are interconnected, and Maslach suggested they occur sequentially; emotional exhaustion leads to cynicism and ultimately reduces personal accomplishment perception. There are alternative hypotheses for this model; however, Maslach's sequential theory is the most widely supported (Maslach, 1998). One alternative hypothesis is that these aspects do not occur sequentially but rather simultaneously. Another model hypothesized a different sequential order: cynicism, reduction in personal accomplishment, and emotional exhaustion (Maslach, 1998). When an education system or organization is able to understand the characteristics of burnout and is able to provide resources and strategies to reduce the risk of burnout through meaningful engagement, support, and rewards, they will increase staff's overall well-being and quality of services (Maslach, 1998). Once burnout is identified, organizations can develop interventions to support both the individual and the situation (systemic and organizational) in reducing the risk (Malsach, 1998).

Impact of COVID-19 on Theoretical Frameworks

Special education teachers have one of the most complex and demanding jobs (Collie et al., 2018; Payne, 2005) which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pressley 2021). Increased job demands contribute to their emotional well-being often resulting in burnout that directly impacts all stakeholders (Collie et al., 2018). Both models posit that the educator profession, while rewarding, comes with inherent stressors which, when left unmanaged, result

in burnout and attrition rates which, in turn, have negative effects on the education system, students, and individuals. While no one factor in isolation can remediate this critical and severe shortage, the COVID-19 pandemic may continue to shape the education systems and have a long-standing impact on how teachers educate children. It is imperative for education systems, leaders, and individuals to understand and attend to their stress and stressors to avoid burnout and retain essential high-quality special education teachers (Ansley et al., 2016).

Chapter Three: Methodology

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States needed an additional 100,000 certified teachers to meet student demands (The White House, 2021), a situation only exacerbated by the pandemic and increased teacher shortages. Additionally, the pandemic changed how systems educate children and increased job demands on all educators. Special education teachers often start to experience burnout when the demands of the job outweigh the resources available and chronic job-related stress is not managed, which increases turnover rates. While research on special education teachers' burnout has been conducted, not much of it has been published in the wake of this new COVID-19 pandemic era in education. This exploratory study aimed to further research into job demands, resources, and burnout by examining the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among the special education teachers in one public school district who have all encountered this phenomenon.

Through Bakker and Demerouti's (2011) job-demands resource (JD-R) model and Maslach's (1998) multidimensional burnout theory, a goal of this study was to provide school districts' special education teams with themes that contribute to job-related stress and ideas for how to provide sufficient resources to prevent teachers' burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic era. This study added to previous research on special education teachers' burnout and retention. The present study expanded on current themes regarding special education teacher retention in the face of a new phenomenon and event, the COVID-19 pandemic. The information gathered may provide a deeper understanding and scope of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted special education teachers in the midwestern United States.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this exploratory study was to explore the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers. Further, the purpose was to understand special education teachers' perceptions of their job duties, job-related stress, and COVID-19's impact on their burnout within the Incognito public school district, a pseudonym. By identifying these trends and themes, school districts and special education department leaders could potentially reduce teachers' burnout rates and mitigate the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on teachers' stress and ultimately teacher shortages. With this information, administrators can better understand and identify themes. Additionally, they can develop and provide resources, support, professional development, and incentives to retain quality special education teachers within the district. A single research question guided this study: What have been the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers in one midwestern public school district amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Design

Research has been obtained on special education teachers' burnout and job-related stress related to specific teacher job duties. However, there is little research on the specific effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on this subset of educators. The exploratory study was conducted two and a half years after the initial COVID-19 pandemic disruption hit the United States in March 2020 and changed the education system. This disruption forever altered the way children are educated and continue to evolve as the world moves forward from the pandemic. A basic qualitative study with elements of phenomenology, or lived experiences of participants who have experienced a specific phenomenon, was used to explore the perceptions of job-related stress among special education teachers and their perception of burnout. Within qualitative

methodology, using the participants' perspectives, the researcher attempted to define the significance of a phenomenon (Levitt et al., 2018). In this exploratory study, participants described their experiences related to self-reported burnout factors and experiences. Through individual, virtual interviews (Appendix D), data were gathered to formulate themes required to answer the research question in this dissertation.

Research Site and Participant Selection

The sample of this study were licensed special education teachers who had been teaching in the field for a minimum of three years and were currently employed within the Incognito public school district. This participant criteria was intentional to maximize the representativeness of participants who have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon. This district has 13 total school sites. This study focused on kindergarten through transition and included six elementary buildings, two middle school buildings, one high school building, one transition building, and one online/virtual site. Transition included students receiving post high school special education services through the age of 21. The district had a student enrollment of over 11,000 and a special education population of 11% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Site Selection

The researcher selected the site with purposeful selection, which is defined as sampling that has been carefully chosen to present information that is pertinent to the research question and objectives (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher was employed in the school district and was granted access to this specific subgroup of educators by the Executive Director of Human Resources. The researcher excluded a single middle school building and staff in which they were employed to avoid any ethical or vested interest bias. By eliminating that particular site, the

researcher aimed to achieve objectivity in the results. The exclusion of this building did not impact the depth of the potential participants as there was another middle school site within the district with the same demographics to provide rich data. Since the researcher had more than 12 years of experience in the field of special education and they used member checking, this triangulation ensured objectivity within the population. These techniques are frequently used by qualitative researchers to validate their methods and data. Thus, the researcher was able to ensure that their data was reported objectively by asking for and receiving feedback from participants and subject-matter specialists.

While other districts had struggled to locate licensed educators for open positions, Incognito attracts and retains educators with higher teacher compensation and students' achievement accolades. In fact, Incognito's annual teacher salary is over $20,700 higher than the state average of $58,242 (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021d). Subsequently, this district adhered to a rigorous hiring process that entails multiple interviewing sessions, including a role-specific structured interview, thus increasing the potential number of tier three and four licensed applicants and reducing the need to hire outside of licensure areas to fill positions. In fact, 89% of Incognito's teachers held a tier four licensure (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021c), which is the highest tier of licensure in the state. With a high percentage of tier four licensed teaching staff, the researcher gained insight into the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on teachers with a greater teaching background or at least three years in the field.

With nearly 3,600 open-enrolled students, the research site had committed to being an open enrollment district, enrolling students to attend who reside outside of their district boundaries. Open enrollment allows students to apply for enrollment in a public school district

outside of their resident district. With open enrollment comes additional student funding from the student's resident district. This funding that follows one additional open-enrolled student results in a net gain, as the additional cost to educate that one additional student is close to zero (Babington and Welsch, 2017), resulting in the receiving district increasing its revenue and being able to cover more expenses than just its essential costs. The additional revenue was used to fund signature programs, lower class sizes, and improve teachers' compensation. While compensation was not specifically examined in this study, it is important to highlight as this is an aspect that may appeal to applicants who are applying to open positions within the district. The average annual salary is higher than the national average of $61,820 and higher than neighboring states (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). For example, North Dakota has an average annual base wage for educators of $55,377 (North Dakota State Government, 2022), Minnesota averages $66,006 annually (NEA Research, 2021), and Iowa averages $62,007 (Economic Research Institute, 2022).

Additionally, the research site has successfully minimized both the math and reading achievement gaps when compared to state averages. In fact, according to the Minnesota Report Card (2021), Incognito's math achievement gap was 2%, compared to the state gap of 26%, and Incognito's reading achievement gap was 5%, compared to the state gap of 22%. This educational outcome, in addition to the open-enrollment funding improvements and compensation, had the potential to draw applicants, making it an ideal site selection for research of a population with a higher socioeconomic status in an urban area—a population that has been underreported in the literature.

Lastly, Incognito was situated in a higher socioeconomic community where over 40% of its revenue came from local funding (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Furthermore, less than 6% of the student population received free or reduced-priced meals and was considered a *low-poverty* district (Minnesota Report Card, 2021). Thus this site selection granted the researcher perspectives of special education teachers within a population and district not typically studied.

Participant Selection

Participants were purposefully selected to yield results that specifically addressed the research question relating to licensed special education teachers in one midwest district who had been teaching in the field prior to the COVID-19 pandemic through the current school year (Maxwell, 2013). The time limit of at least three years of teaching in the special education field was intentional to not only capture recent data but also to provide comparative perspectives on pre-pandemic teaching systems and experiences. The list of special education teachers was provided by the school district's director of human resources; to ensure that the information gathered came from those wanting to share their experiences, potential participants were sent an email asking for their voluntary participation. While Marshall et al. (2013) recommended six to 10 interviews in a qualitative phenomenological study, Rijnsoever (2017) suggested no formal sample size is required; rather it is recommended that smaller sample sizes (under 25) must obtain sufficient participants to reach theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurs when the depth and breadth of information are exhausted and there are no new emergent themes, concepts, or codes.

Researcher Positionality

Olukotun et al. (2021) determined that research positionality cannot be ignored and is a fundamental aspect of a qualitative study. The lens through which the researcher approaches the process has implications for all aspects of the study (for example, the design of the study,

methodology, data collection and analysis, how questions are framed, or the way the researcher interacts with participants). When one engages in reflexivity, or self-reflective practices, the researcher can attempt to identify potential biases and attempt to eliminate them.

The researcher has experience in the special education field due to their career and educational history. They are familiar with the special education profession and have a thorough understanding of the demands placed on special educators. For more than twelve years, the researcher has held a variety of roles in several districts within the special education field. They have held positions as special education paraprofessionals, special education teachers in federal special education settings one through three, and special education coordinator/facilitator. In addition, the researcher taught and supported peers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the researcher has continually pursued higher education in the field of special education. The researcher holds a master's degree in education with a focus on special education and trauma, is pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership, and holds a teaching license in special education in the areas of Emotional/Behavioral Disorder and Specific Learning Disability, as well as a special education director license. Throughout these educational and career experiences, the researcher's position allowed a deeper perspective on the job demands of special education teachers. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher further contemplated the impact the pandemic had on an already stressed education system and subset of educators.

Additionally, while the researcher was employed in the selected district, it was a large district with 8,000-11,000 students enrolled; the researcher did not have any relationship with the final pool of participants as they were housed in a single middle school building that was not used in the final site selection. The researcher's role within the district is not a leadership

position and is a part of the teacher bargaining unit. The researcher's position allowed for convenience sampling, and the researcher was mindful of any bias in the process.

Field Testing

Upon review and approval of the initial interview questions by the researcher's advisor, a field test interview was conducted with non-population individuals with knowledge of the special education field in order to establish reliability and validity. The field test participants provided feedback regarding the clarity of the questions, the number of questions asked, and the length of time required to participate in the interview. Results from the field tests indicated interview questions could be condensed and grouped into sections and overall reworded for better clarity and flow. The field tests ranged from 15-45 minutes, thus providing an average commitment time frame for participants of 30-45 minutes.

Data Collection Procedures

In the fall of the 2022-2023 school year, the researcher obtained permission (Appendix A) from the district Executive Director of Human Resources within one midwestern public school district, Incognito Public Schools, to contact and conduct interviews with current special education teachers, kindergarten through transition, who have been teaching in the district since the 2019-2020, pre-COVID-19 pandemic , school year. A staff list, including emails, was provided by the special education assistant director. After frequent advisor debriefing sessions, peer reviews, and final approval from Bethel University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher contacted all staff within the search criteria with an initial invitation via email to participate (Appendix B).

Participants were required to meet all four search criteria: a minimum of three years of teaching in the field; being currently employed in the district; a current teaching assignment in

the special education field; and hold a tier three or tier four teaching license. According to the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (2021c), over 88% of Minnesota licensed staff hold a tier four license in the special education field. A tier four license is the highest level in the state of Minnesota. An individual must meet the following requirements to obtain this status: meet all tier three requirements, complete a teacher preparation program, have at least three years of teaching experience in the state, obtain a passing score on all required licensure exams, and have the most recent summative teacher evaluation not resulting in/keeping on an improvement plan process (Tier 4 License, 2021).

There were 74 kindergarten through transition special education teachers within this district. Of the initial 74 staff, 64 candidates met all four search criteria. From this pool of potential participants, five volunteered to participate. To solicit more transferability, the researcher ensured there were potential participants from all four settings (elementary, middle school, high school, and transition) and invited the final pool to sign up for a voluntary virtual 45-60 minute interview time slot (Appendix E). Participants were given the opportunity to opt out of the process at any time and were informed of their consent through the invitation email (Appendix B), the consent form (Appendix F), and the participation form (Appendix D).

After the initial email invitation, three participants volunteered to participate, however, two did not complete the registration form completely missing many critical components (their name, email address, and time slot) and could not be identified or scheduled despite several additional email attempts. A second invitation email (Appendix C) was sent which resulted in an additional two participants. Through the first three interviews, the researcher determined that the initially proposed 45-60 minute interview was ranging between 15-30 minutes and adjusted the subsequent invitation to highlight a reduction in time commitment. A third invitation email was

sent resulting in an additional two participants (totaling five). There were three invitee replies that indicated similar regrets relating to time restraints or other commitments outside of the school day preventing individuals from participating. A fourth, and final, invitation was sent resulting in no additional participants or replies. Despite many attempts to solicit responses, the researcher was unable to obtain their participation goal of 15-20 participants resulting in an 8% participation rate. With the small sample size generalization was not achieved in this exploratory study. While recommendations for sample size in a qualitative study range from one to 50 or more (Sims et al., 2018), saturation is often used to determine sufficient participation. Saturation is achieved when data collection and/or analysis forms informational redundancy or theoretical insights begin to emerge (Sims et al., 2018).

Utilizing the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the researcher conducted interviews or "conversations with a purpose" (Alase et al., 2017) to explore and analyze participants' experiences. This specific approach was chosen to ensure a rich set of data was collected while remaining participant-oriented and flexible in light of participant responses (Alase et al., 2017). Interviews were composed of semi-structured, open-ended questions (Appendix E). Participants were provided a digital copy of the interview questions and mental health-related resources prior to the interview session. Each interview conducted was recorded and transcribed via Zoom. The audio was recorded throughout however, the video feature was turned off. In addition to recording, the researcher took notes on observations and follow-up questions or comments for further triangulation. Transcription errors such as speaker delineation, word errors, or spelling mistakes were edited, and final copies were saved.

Member checking was conducted via email; all participants were sent their individual final transcripts to ensure accuracy and intention. This further ensured the data was free of

researcher bias and confirmability. From the verified transcripts, raw data was generated and de-identified, and each participant was given a pseudonym. Both raw data and de-identified data were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. Data will be deleted after three years of the final dissertation defense.

As an incentive for volunteering to participate in the study, each participant who completed the interview process was entered into a drawing to receive one of two $20.00 Amazon gift cards.

Data Analysis

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary data collection tool (Shaw, 2022) where the participants' words and perceptions are the raw data to be analyzed. The study utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. According to Alase (2017), this methodological process is essential and is regarded as the most *participant-oriented* qualitative research approach which focuses on the participants and examines how they make sense of their experiences; the researcher makes sense of participant interpretation of their experiences. A content data analysis was conducted to identify emergent patterns and insights from the data. Interviews were transcribed, de-identified, and thematically analyzed using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program. With a limited sample size, adjustments to data analysis were made. The researcher generated preliminary codes and categories aligning with the JD-R and Maslach's burnout theories. Several codes were identified and then further aggregated into preliminary categories: job demands–specially designed instruction, evaluation (initial and re-evaluations), due process procedures, Individual Education Plan (IEP) management, preparation, supervision of paraprofessionals, and other duties as assigned; resources–mental and

physical; and burnout–exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Emergent in vivo codes, or codes derived from the words of the participants, were later identified during further analysis.

Alase (2017) recommended three generic coding cycles in quality qualitative research to "meticulously and methodologically break down of participant response without diminishing or misrepresenting the core meaning of their responses" (p.16): sentences, the gist, and core essence. The researcher initially read through all the transcripts. No coding was done at this level of review. Next, the researcher read through each transcript again and applied a broad level of thematic coding in vivo, or the spoken words of participants, preliminary coding, or the sentences phase of the generic coding cycle. Once this coding was completed, the researcher was supported by two research peers in the field of special education who read through the transcripts (void of coding) to identify codes and reduce the first generic coding into a few words or the gist phase in the cycle. Subsequently, each coded transcript was compared, and researchers developed agreed-upon codes. Utilizing this inter-rater reliability, the researcher was able to identify common, clear, and exhaustive codes. These codes were then employed when the researcher again read through each interview transcription identifying additional codes as they arose and finally reduced them into categories or the core essence phase of the coding cycle. Several representative quotes from participants were used to demonstrate the categories and codes, and, in turn, the participants' interpretations of themes. Additionally, the researcher's lens aided in a deeper interpretation of the participants' lived experiences thus amplifying and narrating how the phenomenon had impacted this population.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness ensures that strategic planning and intentional design choices maximize reliable and accurate results of qualitative research (Flynn et al., 2019). Additionally, according

to Alase (2017), trustworthiness is a critical aspect for navigating any phenomenological study. Cope (2014) described five qualitative trustworthiness criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity. Methodological integrity can be achieved through the fidelity and utility of the study (Levitt et al., 2018). The intentionality with which the researcher designed, planned, and executed the study strived to mitigate any potential biases so the results drew meaning from the data and identified commonalities across participant experiences.

Credibility

Credibility determines whether the study's results are a valid interpretation of the participants' perspectives (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To address credibility, the researcher used site and participant triangulation, as well as member-checking methods to analyze the results, allowing for the data to emerge from authentic participant representation. Additionally, the researcher determined codes and themes through peer review to ensure congruency and accuracy. One form of triangulation occurs by using a number of techniques to gather data from a wide range of sources, including people and settings (Maxwell, 2013). Data triangulation enhances the research with multiple approaches and was accomplished through the collection phase, participants were selected from a variety of settings and included a representative from each of the three educational levels. During analysis, the data was coded and noted for emerging themes. Investigator triangulation and inter-rater reliability were accomplished by employing another researcher with experience in qualitative methodology and the special education field to discover and code distinct themes for comparison and to recode for congruency. All raw data shared was de-identified, and the researcher adhered to all confidentiality requirements. Upon triangulation completion, the researcher's access to the raw digital data was removed. Furthermore, by

identifying the researcher's positionality and limiting the influence through acknowledgement and design intentionality they ensured the data supported the findings. Additionally, the researcher engaged in reflexivity practices via research memos to address thoughts on decisions, findings, and analysis throughout the study to limit the impact or influence the researcher's background may have to reduce bias and subjectivity. Furthermore, this audit trail enhanced the credibility of the study. Lastly, the aforementioned methodological choices, research design, site and participant selection, positionality, data collection, and analysis reinforced the trustworthiness of the study.

Member checking or respondent validation was also used. Individual transcribed interviews were sent to each participant for review and feedback. The possibility of misinterpretation of the participants' actions and statements, as well as their perspectives on what is happening, can be eliminated through member checking (Maxwell, 2013).

Dependability

Dependability addresses consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability was achieved through extensive and rich descriptions of special education teachers' job-related stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic and the perceptions of the participants who had experienced this phenomenon. The researcher utilized in vivo and respondent direct quotes to determine emerging codes and themes. Additionally, an audit trail or memos were utilized to establish transparency and clarity on the intentional decisions made throughout the research.

Confirmability

Confirmability addresses neutrality (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To achieve confirmability the researcher purposefully selected design choices to guarantee that the findings were drawn from the data and not their own assumptions. Member checking or respondent validation was

used to ensure the participant's words were not misinterpreted and were validated. Additionally, in vivo codes, or codes derived from the words of the participants, were used to code and identify themes among the data.

Transferability

Transferability is the process of providing rich descriptions of not only participants and the site but also the research process in its entirety so that readers can determine whether the findings are transferable to their own setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transferability was achieved with theoretical generalizations and participant selection design. The study was intended to examine the perceptions of one sub-population of educators in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon and determine theoretical generalizations related to job-related stress and burnout. While generalization can be made, broad transferability can be determined independently by those not associated with the study. To solicit further transferability, the researcher ensured there were participants from all four settings (elementary, middle school, high school, and transition) and there was a broad representation of grade levels in the final pool of participants.

Authenticity

In addition to the aforementioned methods of member checking, in vivo responses and codes, and triangulation, the researcher used open-ended interview questions, allowing for authentic participant responses as opposed to a selected set of responses. While the researcher brought a unique lens to the research, they were intentional, self-aware, and reflexive allowing for limited impact or biases to any stage of the study. Reflexivity is a critical component of quality qualitative research in ensuring transparency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Limitations

The world is still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it continues to evolve and impact aspects of one's daily life; research has just begun to emerge on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our educators (Pressley et al., 2021). This exploratory study intended to examine the perspectives of special education teachers within a single Midwest school district. There is a need for further exploration of this new era of education as it emerged across additional districts, not only in the Midwest but across the United States.

One cannot eliminate a researcher's lens; rather, one must identify potential consequences and explain influences in order to avoid researcher bias and obtain validity in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher has been in the special education field for over 12 years, three of which were within the research site district. This special education and district lens may have had negative and positive effects on the conclusion of this study. The researcher reduced the potential negative effects by excluding the building in which they were currently employed from the potential sampling while ensuring equal participation across all settings (elementary, middle, high school, and transition). With a special education background, the researcher is afforded an understanding of the field, which can potentially lead to more robust interview discussions and follow-up questions with participants. In addition to this positive potential influence, the researcher mitigated any negative effect by asking general interview questions before probing further, employed member checking to ensure the validity of data, and solicited feedback from professionals within the field.

Another limitation was the researcher's site selection was a single district and was not a generalized representation of all midwestern school districts or special education teachers and could not provide suggestive trends and themes. With participant and site selection being

purposeful and convenient, ultimately relying on volunteer participants, the study innately had

bias and limited generalizability or transferability. Maxwell (2013) suggested that internal

generalization is most appropriate for qualitative studies, similar to this one using a single site

with a smaller number of participants. When a conclusion is said to be internally generalizable, it

means that it may be applied to the identified context as a whole, and not externally or in other

settings, thus resulting in the validity of the individual study.

In this exploratory qualitative study, the small sample size from which data was gathered

was the biggest limitation. The initial intention of the study was to examine the impact the

COVID-19 pandemic had on special education teacher burnout. However, this study was

conducted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as educational systems were beginning to

return to pre-pandemic practices. As educators were focusing on surviving this unprecedented

educational event, they were positive and looking toward the future. Additionally, requesting a

commitment of time outside of their work day was deemed futile, as this study had a

participation rate of 8%. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, generalization of the results

was not possible. The completed five interviews did not yield enough information to allow for

the drawing of definitive conclusions, and further exploration with larger sample sizes would be

recommended.

Lastly, the study was limited to licensed kindergarten through transition special education

teachers within one midwestern public school district. The study utilized semi-structured

interviews, which allowed the researcher to ask follow-up or additional, in-depth questions when

the participant's responses were incomplete. Participants were purposely selected based on their

current area of teaching—special education—and job assignment within the district and special

education licensure. The research did not include early childhood special education (ECSE) sites

and staff to control variables related to special education teacher licensures and case manager job duties. ECSE case managers have different licensure requirements that focus on their specific age range of birth to six, thus holding a different standard license–*B-Age 6* (Teachers of Special Education: Early Childhood, 2013). ECSE classroom settings are structured differently where instruction from a special education teacher is more than 60 percent of the instructional day, but less than a full school day; additionally, their caseload limits are higher than their K-12 counterparts in similar settings (Case Loads, 2015). Since the focus was on identifying themes contributing to both teachers' burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the retention of quality educators to reduce teacher shortages, the researcher aimed to examine the lived experiences of staff in similar environments with comparable job expectations.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher participated in Bethel University lectures and coursework regarding ethical research practices as well as successfully completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification training. The researcher gained approval for the study via Bethel University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), met all requirements, and was granted permission to proceed with the research study.

Qualitative research often entails data collection from people about people (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010), and the researcher was aware of potential issues and proactively addressed them to ensure the protection of the study, participants, and institutions. This research was ethically guided in all stages of research (prior to the study, beginning, collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting/storing data) by the three major components of the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons was addressed through the purpose and procedures of the study; potential participants were informed that this was voluntary, and they

could opt out at any time. The initial participation email (Appendix B) and the consent form (Appendix E) established clear language of participation rights, volunteer status, and the benefits and risks of participation in this study. Furthermore, it provided local mental health resources for participants if partaking in the study resulted in an exacerbation of burnout-related stress and preexisting mental health concerns.

The researcher has been an employee of Incognito Public Schools and has operated out of a single building for the three years prior to the study. While the researcher was an employee of the district, this was disclosed to all potential participants and excluded special education teachers within the one building in which they worked to avoid unconscious bias and inadvertent power dynamics or coercion.

Beneficence was addressed through the overall intent of the study: to support special education teachers during this new era of COVID-19 pandemic education, provide appropriate resources to help mitigate burnout, and thus decrease attrition rates in the field. Participants were given the researcher's and the dissertation advisor/Bethel University's contact information, and through member checking or respondent verification, were given access to clarify or ask questions regarding the data collected.

Lastly, justice was ensured through a purposeful convenience sampling of participants. Permission was granted from the district's Executive Director of Human Services to conduct research in the district and emails for staff that currently held a special education licensure and were assigned to a special education position were shared, with the exclusion of the single building. From the initial email, potential participants voluntarily signed up for a virtual interview time slot. Therefore, those who volunteered for the study were selected to participate in the interview process and the burden was distributed fairly. All data were de-identified and

stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. The researcher is not affiliated with any grant or foundation and, therefore, is void of outside obligations. Participants were entered into a drawing to receive one of two $20.00 Amazon gift cards, which were purchased with the researcher's personal funds.

The intent of this study was to explore the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers and their perceptions of their job duties, job-related stress, and COVID-19's impact on burnout within the Incognito public school district. By identifying and analyzing these trends and themes, school districts and special education department leaders can retain quality special education teachers within a pandemic-changed system. The following chapters will discuss the results of the interviews (Chapter Four) and a final discussion, implications, and recommendations (Chapter Five).

Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers. Further, the purpose was to understand special education teachers' perceptions of their job duties, job-related stress, and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on their burnout within one midwestern public school district. The perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers were investigated using a qualitative study with components of phenomenology, or the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a specific occurrence. The researcher attempted to explore the significance of a phenomenon using qualitative methodology and the perspectives of the participants. In this exploratory study, participants described their experiences related to self-reported burnout factors and experiences. Through individual, virtual interviews, data was gathered to formulate themes required to answer a single research question: What were the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers in one midwestern public school district amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

Despite four attempts to solicit participants, the researcher was unable to obtain their participation goal of 15-20 participants resulting in a final total of five volunteers. With the final participant pool, the researcher utilized the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to conduct the interviews or "conversations with a purpose" (Alase et al., 2017) to explore and analyze participants' experiences. To further ensure the trustworthiness or reliable and accurate results of this qualitative research (Flynn et al., 2019), member checking was conducted via email, and all participants were sent their individual final transcripts to ensure accuracy and intention. This ensured the data was free of researcher bias and confirmability while gathering an accurate perception of the participant's experiences in order to identify

commonalities across interviews. None of the participants commented or changed their transcripts. Finally, preliminary themes were shared with participants, and all agreed with emergent themes and codes.

Description of Participants

Participants who had been teaching in the field prior to the COVID-19 pandemic through the 2022-2023 school year in one midwestern district were purposefully selected to address the research question relating to licensed special education teacher perceptions. Participants were required to meet four criteria: a minimum of three years of experience in the field; were employed in the district; had a teaching assignment in the special education field; and held a tier three or tier four teaching license. A total of five participants (8% participation rate) volunteered to participate in this exploratory study. Interviews began with a disclosure statement, and then an audio recording was initiated.

The first set of interview questions included logistical and background information found in Table 1. All participants were female and ranged across three of the five potential teaching settings (elementary, middle school, high school, transition, and online/virtual): three from elementary (grades K–5), one from middle school (grades 6-8), and one from high school (grades 9–12). Four teachers reported being in the education field for more than 10 years, ranging from 13 to 21 years. One teacher reported being in the education field for less than 10 years, seven years. No teachers reported teaching in the field of special education between three to five years, two reported teaching in the field of special education between 6-10 years, and three reported teaching in the field of special education for more than 10 years. Four of the five participants held more than one licensure area; one was licensed in Academic Behavioral Strategist (ABS) licensure; two were licensed in Emotional Behavioral Disability (EBD) and Specific Learning

Disability (SLD); one was licensed in three areas: Emotional Behavioral Disability (EBD),

Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); and one was

licensed in Academic Behavioral Strategist (ABS) and Elementary Education.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Building level	Years teaching	Years in special education	Licensure
Teacher 1	F	Elementary	21	12	ABS, Elementary Education
Teacher 2	F	High School	7	7	ABS
Teacher 3	F	Middle School	13	13	EBD, SLD, ASD
Teacher 4	F	Elementary	14	10	EBD/SLD
Teacher 5	F	Elementary	18	18	EBD, SLD

Note. The following are licensure abbreviations used above: Academic Behavioral Strategist

(ABS), Emotional/Behavior Disorder (EBD), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Learning

Disability (LD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Thematic Analysis and Emerging Themes

This exploratory study was conducted utilizing Zoom meeting audio recording and

transcription features. A standard interview questionnaire was used to collect all participant data.

Once all the data were collected, content data analysis was conducted to identify emergent

patterns and insights from the data. Interviews were transcribed, de-identified, and thematically

analyzed using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program. With a limited sample

size, adjustments to the data analysis were made to ensure the words of participants were

accurately captured. The researcher utilized three thematic coding rounds, resulting in emergent

in vivo codes, or codes derived from the words of the participants, which were later identified

during further analysis.

The first round of coding resulted in two themes, the experience of job-related stress and burnout; this was the foundation of all subsequent codes. Interview questions five and six generated demand coding, seven and eight generated resource coding, and 9-20 addressed the three characteristics of burnout coding, emotional exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism. During the second round of coding the researcher used in vivo codes to establish preliminary sub-codes within each main code. Some of the codes fit in more than one category; the final placement of codes was determined based on exact participator quotes, member checking, and researcher memos. The third and final coding round revealed preliminary theoretical insights which provided further categorical redundancy and response placement; seven sub-codes emerged and represented the experiences of the five participants: colleague relationships, family understanding, self-care routine, due process, supervision of paraprofessionals, specialized instruction, and IEP management.

While recommendations for sample size in a qualitative study range from one to 50 or more (Sims et al., 2018), saturation is often used to determine sufficient participation. Saturation is achieved when data collection and/or analysis form informational redundancy or theoretical insights begin to emerge (Sims et al., 2018). Complete saturation was not obtained; however, exploratory themes emerged (Table 2). Utilizing Maslach's burnout theory and Bakker and Demerouti's job-demands resource model (JD-R) the researcher was able to establish the five general categories: resources, demands, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. While participant responses fell into these general categories minimal redundancy was formulated within emergent sub-categories. The researcher utilized in vivo and respondent-direct quotes to determine emerging sub-codes and themes. While these sub-codes fell into one of the five

general categories they lacked repetition, often being the only response. A larger sample size may provide further insight into the validity of those singular emergent codes.

Table 2

Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes	Sub-codes
Theme One: Job-related stress	Demands	Due process
		Supervision of paraprofessionals
		Specialized instruction
		IEP management
	Resources	Colleague relationships
		Family understanding
		Self-care routine
Theme Two: Burnout	Emotional exhaustion	
	Cynicism	
	Inefficacy	

Theme One: Experienced Job-Related Stress

Burnout can be defined as the result of prolonged and unchecked stress. Participants reported a variety of experiences that included specific situations as well as generalized stressors. When asked if they experienced job-related stress, all five of the participants reported experiencing stress over the last three years. Two educators (Teacher 3 and Teacher 5) shared the same response, "stress yes, burnout, no." Two of the five participants reported having experienced burnout. One educator (Teacher 1) explained her burnout experience, "Probably not as much as now. I mean, yes, I would say it was more impacting like three years ago." Preseley

et al. (2021) described several pre-COVID-19 pandemic factors to have contributed to teacher

burnout or job-related stress: environmental (student population, leadership, colleague

relationships), classroom (supports, resources, behavior), and personal stress and anxiety

(workload, limited time, preparation, instruction delivery). In this study, when asked what

barriers impacted their teaching, the majority (three out of five) of teachers reported mental

barriers (relational or individual) to have had the most impact on their practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted everyone differently. When asked what barriers

impacted their teaching, one participant (Teacher 2) described many barriers, collaboration, time,

student behavior support, and curriculum. To provide background and context to this response, it

is important to know during this time period the district was in a hybrid (half of the students were

face-to-face while the other half were virtual) learning model in which a small portion of

elementary teachers and classrooms (fifth grade only) was relocated to the high school due to

spacing concerns in order to increase social distancing. She noted,

> I think it was actually the lack of collaboration or access to teachers that you may need to
>
> talk to, or you know, another like, you know. For me, I was the only one doing Wilson at
>
> the high school in my school from my elementary, and then the other person was at
>
> [Elementary Building Name]. So like it's not we could just, I could run things by or like,
>
> student behaviors, not having enough planning time, not having enough due process time,
>
> access to curriculum sometimes can impact that as well.

Another (Teacher 1) highlighted a single barrier, collaboration, by saying, "I think it was

actually the lack of collaboration or access to teachers that you may need to talk to." Ultimately,

with this small population, limited participation rate, and brief interview responses made themes

difficult to integrate; however, it is noteworthy to highlight that the most commonly reported

barrier identified by three of the five participants was collaboration and/or relationships.

Additionally, this emerging theme of relationships and collaboration as protective factors to

mitigate stress and ultimately burnout in educators arises in several areas of this exploratory

study. Participants not only reported the lack of these factors as barriers impeding the quality of

their performance and overall job satisfaction but also the opportunities to engage and grow these

relationships as beneficial resources.

Demands. Of the six commonly agreed upon general duties of a special education

teacher, specially designed instruction, evaluation (initial and re-evaluations), due process

procedures and IEP management, preparation, supervision of paraprofessionals, and other duties

as assigned (such as study hall, recess monitor; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b;

Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), due process, the

supervision of paraprofessionals, and Individual Education Program (IEP) management and

preparation were the top three most stressful job duties reported in this study. Four of the five

educators reported due process tasks as the most stressful job duty. One educator (Teacher 1)

reported, "I would say probably the due process procedures [are the most stressful]." Another

educator (Teacher 3) reported, "I feel like it's not that much as the IEPs, but I feel like it's all the

legality, the due process things." Another educator (Teacher 4) reported specialized instruction:

> Probably the specially designed instruction, just the time it takes to be good at it and the
> time it takes to plan and be prepared for it, you know, it's hard to do all that with all the
> other things.

Lastly, Teacher 2 reported three tasks, including due process tasks: the supervision of

paraprofessionals, due process tasks, and IEP management.

I would say, the supervision of paraprofessionals and probably due process procedures

and into IEP management and preparation. I, I would say all three of them take away

your duties from the actual teaching aspects, specifically supervising paraprofessionals.

When a paraprofessional is absent without a sub. It was, you know, kind of very stressful,

and took away from, you know, your time to do due process [tasks], or anything like that,

because you had to find quick resolutions and quickly.

When the pandemic began, educators had to learn new systems and processes very

quickly. As teachers approached year three of the COVID-19 pandemic era of education,

educators reported that they had modified, adjusted, and were now beginning to see practices

evolve or return to pre-pandemic states. One educator (Teacher 2) explained how their practices

have evolved:

I think we've adjusted and adapted to where we can do that more virtually, which has

been really nice. It's just easier access if someone's out, they can join virtually. So it's nice

being able to connect and have flexibility.

Instruction and team collaboration were the most reported aspects to be impacted by the

pandemic shift. At the onset of the pandemic, classroom instruction shifted to a virtual

environment; three of the five teachers reported that instruction was the biggest change. One

educator (Teacher 5) explains the shifts between in-person and virtual learning: "I think, like

planning instruction, I feel like it hasn't changed a ton except for the fact that, like now, it's

in-person and not virtual." Another educator (Teacher 3) described their shift in instruction and

planning, "So right when the pandemic happened. I think that [Incognito] did a pretty good job

giving us time to get up to speed." Another educator (Teacher 4) explained how they saw a need

to teach students how to be in an in-person setting again:

I think instruction has changed, because there's a lot more things that I feel like I have to teach kids when it comes to like being ready for school or being kind to your classmates, or, you know, abiding to expectations in the hallway. So there's a lot more teaching of what I used to assume kids already knew.

Another barrier that impacted their teaching was collaboration; three of the five educators reported a reduction in colleague collaboration as the biggest hurdle. The availability of team members, their frequency, and social distancing contributed to the reduced collaboration among colleagues. One educator (Teacher 1) reported:

There wasn't as much collaboration, because everyone's like staying so far apart and I think everyone was like Google Meeted out, like we were kind of done with that, Where I feel like now, the collaboration is back because we can catch each other in the hall when we're talking about a student or trying to plan for something. So I'm hopeful that that's coming back a little bit more.

Another (Teacher 2) explained, "I didn't feel like we had great, and it's, it's not anybody's fault, but I didn't feel like we had a lot of collaboration."

Resources. When asked what professional and/or personal resources or supports helped alleviate their stress levels, family understanding, having a self-care routine, such as exercise or not working after contracted hours, and colleague relationships were the top three individual and environmental supports. Two of the five educators reported having a family that was understanding alleviated their stress levels. One educator reported (Teacher 3) with:

It really helped that my husband and I got pretty fast about setting up where everybody was gonna work as far as where the kids were. Gonna be where he was, gonna be, where I was gonna be. And I do feel like my family understood what I needed, and prioritize it.

You know, working behind a closed door. The door closed, you know, understanding that

I really wasn't truly even though I was at home, I was not available. So that was what

helped a lot.

Another educator (Teacher 2) explained their resources:

My husband is extremely supportive and we share [tasks]. You know, we have three kids,

and we shared the duties of pick up and drop off and he also has boundaries at work, too.

So I think that's really helpful.

Two of the five educators reported having a self-care routine that alleviated their stress. One

educator (Teacher 4) explained:

I never work past 4:15, and I don't know if that's just like a boundary. But I feel very

supported by it. My administrators, when you know I show up at 8:15 [AM], and I leave

at 4:15 [P.M.], and I don't work in the evening, or stay late, hardly at all.

Another educator (Teacher 5) explained, "Exercise, so that's the biggest thing I do. It is my

outlet. I exercise after work and that just really helps." Lastly, two of the five educators reported

colleague relationships as their professional and/or personal resource that alleviated their stress

levels. One educator (Teacher 5) said:

We have a really strong team here. And just like we all have each other's back and be

available to like collaborate and work together like that's just been like an experience that

I have experienced at this building where like everyone is just like so committed to like

the team rather than just like their person.

Another educator (Teacher 1) explained, "I mean, not so much, COVID related, but I knew that I,

I knew who to ask for things."

Additionally when asked how they felt their administrators fully understood the day-to-day impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on their job duties, all five of the teachers reported feeling supported. One educator (Teacher 1) explained their administrator support, "I have an administrator who was previously a special education teacher. So she understands, she understands like what is what like the role of a special teacher and what's needed." Three of the five participants reported access or administration availability as the most valuable support offered by the administration. One educator (Teacher 3) explained her administrator's support:

I feel like they understood; obviously we were all just trying to figure it out. I feel like the administration was very responsive and very understanding. And just, you know, when the students weren't engaging, if I did reach out I feel like there was a lot of problem-solving with it with administration. Yeah, so I feel [they were] pretty responsive.

Another (Teacher 2) described their experience:

I would say, my administrators, my direct administrators, during the COVID-19 pandemic had, I feel they had good knowledge about our responsibilities and the day-to-day impact, and they were grinding with us during that time. An example would be, you know, when I was having an extreme [student] behavior, and I was up at the high school, I was able to call my principal and you know I was able to get some support up at the high school. Kinda more regularly, on a weekly basis, which was very beneficial to me and my students.

While another educator (Teacher 4) described their administration access:

I think they fully understood. [Administrator's Name] was our principal then, and they were more than supportive. When I reach out with ideas or questions or concerns or like angry parents, you know they were, I, I just felt very, very supported.

Finally, over the past two to three years, a large number of special education teachers have left the field. When asked what variables have impacted their decision to remain in special education, all educators reported more than one variable. Three of the five educators reported the top four factors: the love of teaching, the students, colleague relationships, and the teaching schedule. One educator (Teacher 1) explained her reason for remaining in the field:

> I love it, I still enjoy teaching. I really do. I still love teaching, but on the one side also like on a whole other level, I have children, and I still like being off with them when there are breaks in the summer. I'm not gonna lie, that's still a very high perk for me to have that time with them.

Another educator (Teacher 2) explained:

> This is my second career. I did marketing for four years, and I did not feel fulfilled. So for me, this job is significantly more stressful, much harder, but it's also much more rewarding. And I honestly, really do enjoy what I do. It is hard at times, but having summer break, and those winter breaks are really, rejuvenating, and honestly, just my colleagues and the students are what keep me there.

A third educator (Teacher 3) reported their reasons for remaining in the field:

> That's a great question, and I think it's kind of exciting to talk about, because, with this [student behavior] regulation piece, I feel like that's my strength. I feel like that's what students are needing more and more now that we've gone through the pandemic and the effects of the pandemic. So I, I feel like special ed is a really good fit for me, and I feel like increasingly so. So, yeah, that's to me, that's really it, you know, I need to feel needed, and I really do.

Teacher 4 explained:

The students. I thought I would hate middle school. I, I love it. So first of all the students.

I think my work-life balance in my schedule. It works really, really well for my family.

And the money that I get paid. There's not another job that I'd wanna work that would

pay me this amount of money. So I kind of like, I don't know. I feel like that sounds kind

of just bad, but yeah. I think they compensate well, the kids, the conversation, and the

work-life balance is what keeps me here.

Lastly, one educator (Teacher 5) described her decision to remain in the field as their strong

colleague relationships and love of teaching:

I would say that I really, truly enjoy my job, and also just like the team members that I

have at [school building] are just like, incredible. And I really enjoy working with them.

And like I said, it's just like this team feeling where, just like you, just, I feel really

supported.

Theme Two: Burnout

When stress becomes prolonged and unchecked, individuals face burnout (Levine, 2013;

Martínez-Ramón, 2021; Wong et al., 2017). Maslach's burnout theory identifies three

components: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach, 1998; Schaufeli et al., 2008). This

portion of the interview contained three questions within each of the three components of

burnout in order to examine the overall frequency of the teachers' perspective of prolonged

stress. Each question asked the frequency of having the following thoughts or feelings on a

Likert scale: never, a few times a year, once a month, a few times a month, once a week, a few

times a week, and daily. Participants' responses were brief in this portion of the interview, often

not expanding on their answer that best represented the frequency of their feelings within the

Likert scale.

Emotional Exhaustion. In the emotional exhaustion component (Table 3), two of the five educators reported feeling emotionally drained from their work once a week, two once a month, and one a few times a year. One educator (Teacher 1) described her weekly experience:

> Once a week, and I would say. It is typically when I feel like, like our, you know, our team has just been thrown under the bus or we weren't a part of something. And now we're having to crawl back out to prove what you know or prove a decision that we made.

Two of the five educators reported feeling frustrated by their work a few times a month, two once a week, and one a few times a week. One educator (Teacher 1) described their frustration:

> Every hour. No. Yeah. Maybe. Haha, no I don't know. I don't feel like, I don't think I don't get frustrated too often. I would say maybe a couple of times a month, or I'm just like, like, I feel mostly drained, more because I'm like, Oh, what could we have done or did I do, like, we've could have done this different. I feel frustrated maybe once or twice a month. So a few times a month maybe I'd say.

Additionally, two of the five educators reported working beyond their contracted hours every day in order to complete all obligations of their job; two reported working a few times a week; and one reported never working outside of contracted hours. Teacher 5, who reported having hard boundaries for work hours and never working past their contracted day, commented: "I feel bad for my co-workers who can't get there [working outside of their contracted hours] because I know there are people who cannot." Teacher 3 reported, "Yup. I feel like that daily, and I don't mind that. I like to get to work at 7:00. So that's not a complaint. That's just how I am."

Table 3

Burnout Component: Emotional Exhaustion

	Number of participants indicated the frequency of thoughts or feelings						
	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Daily
I feel emotionally drained from my work.	0	1	2	0	2	0	0
I feel frustrated by my work.	0	0	0	2	2	1	0
I feel that I work beyond my contracted hours regularly in order to complete all obligations of my job.	1	0	0	0	0	2	2

Inefficacy. In the inefficacy component (Table 4), two of the five educators reported feeling they have accomplished many worthwhile things in their job a few times a week, one a few times a month, one once a month, and one a few times a year. One educator (Teacher 5) explained, "I would say yes all the time. It's hard to like, define. But yeah. Yeah, I mean, few times a week, probably." While another (Teacher 1) described, "I think it's a little bit easier to feel that with little, with younger elementary students, because I'm teaching them to read."

Two of the five educators reported feeling tired in the morning when they have to face another day at work once a month, one reported feeling this way daily, one reported feeling this a few times a year, and one reported never feeling this. One educator (Teacher 1) reported,

Probably a few times a month. Yeah, I don't think it, yeah I don't think I mean… I think there's a few times where I'm like, *ugh*, but like, there's probably a few times, like, [I feel] just get me through, like, just one more day.

Three of the five educators reported feeling that they do not have enough time to do many of the things that are important to do a quality job once a week, one reported feeling this a few times a week, and one reported feeling this once a month. One educator (Teacher 3) reported, "Yeah, probably. Once a week. I feel like, oh, my gosh! It's all piling up that I have to cut corners." Another (Teacher 2) explained:

You understand, for a teacher, that your to-do list is never completely done, I guess no one's probably is, but that's kind of the thing with the quality of instruction that definitely gets like left on the table when I go home at night. There's just room for improvement there with planning.

Another educator (Teacher 2) described her inefficacy experiences further, "Examples: lesson planning, don't have enough time. Don't have enough time for due process, and having to work outside my workday to ensure that I'm you know, within the guided timelines."

Table 4

Burnout Component: Inefficacy

	Number of participants indicated the frequency of thoughts or feelings						
	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Daily
I have accomplished many worthwhile	0	1	1	1	0	2	0

things in my job.							
I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at work.	1	0	2	1	0	0	1
I feel that I do not have enough time to do many of the things that are important to doing a quality job.	0	0	1	0	3	1	0

Cynicism. In the cynicism component (Table 5), all five of the educators reported they never felt like they did not care about building relationships or rapport with every student. One educator (Teacher 5) explained, "I don't agree with that at all, like I do really care about building relationships and rapport with every student." Another (Teacher 1) reported, "No, never. Yeah, I always. I always want to build rapport."

Two of the five educators reported they never feel like their job is making them uncaring, one reported feeling afraid their job is making them uncaring once a month and one reported feeling this a few times a month. One educator (Teacher 1) explained:

Gosh! Sometimes I do feel a little bitter. Like, I would say, it's never with a student, though, but I do see it like sometimes [with parents]. I have to remind myself all these parents, they just want what's best for their child, so just advocating. And sometimes I forget that.

Three of the five educators reported never feeling like they dealt with colleagues impersonally, one reported feeling impersonal with colleagues a few times a year, and one reported feeling this once a month. One educator (Teacher 1) reported:

I think, I guess I'm just a person who's about human connection. So I would say, that's more my personality than maybe necessarily has to do with my job responsibilities. It's really important for me to make human connections daily.

Table 5

Burnout Component: Cynicism

		Number of participants indicated the frequency of thoughts or feelings					
	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Daily
I don't really care about building relationships or rapport with every student.	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
I am afraid my job is making me uncaring.	2	0	1	1	0	0	0
I feel like I deal with colleagues impersonally.	3	1	1	0	0	0	0

While educators reported a variety of ranges in the frequency of feelings in all three components of burnout, when asked what their intent was to remain in the field of education and more specifically in special education for the next five years, four of the five reported they plan

on remaining in special education, while one reported they planned to remain in education but not in special education. One educator (Teacher 1) explained her intent further:

I think my intent is to continue in education for the next five years. That was, that's the plan. But I always like am cautious. So to make sure that I don't ever stay in it too long, just to stay in it because that's the field that I know. Yeah, like, I don't ever want to be one of those teachers, where they're like, oh, you should have retired five years ago, and you didn't, you know. So I do feel like right now, my intent is to remain.

Another (Teacher 2) explained, "I will be staying in special education. I would like to expand and continue to learn to grow, so I don't know if I will continue staying in my building, but I will be in special education." Another educator (Teacher 4) discussed her reasoning further:

There are days when I would like to be out of the classroom, maybe doing other things so honestly, like helping [a colleague] on her maternity leave has been really like… I've loved the variety and the flexibility. So beyond five years, I know I still want to be in education. I just don't know what I want to be doing, and I don't want to be a principal. I don't want to go back and get like an advanced degree. I, you know, I have my masters, and I've finished all that stuff, but I don't. That's where it's kind of great for me. I don't know.

One educator (Teacher 4) further explained their overall concern for the future generations of educators to be prepared and avoid burnout from a new era of education and different teaching demands:

You know on the whole burnout thing. I, I mentor two of our new teachers, and one is, you know, a second-year teacher, 25 years old, awesome. Another one is like in year five and young, too, like maybe just turn, I mean, just under 30. I do worry about the burnout

for them because I feel like education has shifted and is different than when you know, when we started, and I think there's a higher demand from parents and for test scores right. Like, it's no longer, it's just not okay to be average. So as much as I feel like I can still like, I struggle sometimes with like responding to parents and like how to do it accurately, and not take offense to it and personalize it. I worry about new teachers having to learn how to do that. As I see what it does to them, and I'm like, Gosh! This is where we need to provide so much more support cause they, they don't really, you know, when you're student teaching, you don't really ever respond back to parents. Your teacher does that. So you're just then, you're like, kind of thrown into the fire.

Summary

Overall, the purpose of this chapter was to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers. The results of this exploratory study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted these five special education teachers, and their job demands. Two major themes, five codes, and seven sub-codes were identified that further explored the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout in one midwestern public school district. Due to the small sample size, synthesis could not be made from this study. With an 8% participation rate, the five interviews did not yield enough information to allow for the drawing of definitive conclusions, and further exploration with larger sample sizes would be recommended. However, of the five participants that responded, two indicated experiencing burnout over the last three years of the COVID-19 pandemic era of teaching, and it is noteworthy that all five reported experiencing job-related stress. Based on the results of completed interviews, there were higher percentages of educators reporting thoughts or feelings of emotional exhaustion and inefficacy, ranging from once a

month to daily. However, the majority of participants reported never having thoughts or feelings related to cynicism during the last three years of the COVID-19 pandemic education era.

Despite these reported stressful feelings and thoughts, four of the five special education teachers planned to remain in the field for the next five years. The most common variables that have impacted their decision to remain in special education were their love of teaching, the students, colleague relationships, and the teaching schedule. For example, the teaching schedule and having winter and summer breaks could not only coincide with an educator's child's school year to alleviate childcare costs and provide additional family time, and/or also provide individuals ten days up to two full weeks off at the end of December and early January and two months or more off between June and August annually. Furthermore, participants reported several resources that alleviated their job-related stress and demands. They indicated three common environmental resources that impacted their ability to manage job-related stress: family understanding, having a self-care routine, such as exercise or not working after contracted hours, and colleague relationships, with all five of the participants feeling supported by their administration colleagues.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

This exploratory study aimed to examine the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers. Furthermore, the purpose of this study was to understand special education teachers' perceptions of their job duties and job-related stress as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their burnout within one midwestern public school district. Gaining insight by using a basic qualitative study with components of phenomenology, or the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a specific occurrence. This chapter provides an overview of the findings, themes, implications, and recommendations to answer the single research question.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives around the world and brought the education system to the forefront of many homes and school districts, creating an educational supply and demand shortage, and magnifying an already existing crisis. With increased job demands and ever-evolving special education state and federal mandates, the COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated teacher attrition rates (Bauer, 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Lech & Johnson, 2021; Sahin & Shelley, 2020; Wanat, 2021). Educators often enter the field for altruistic motives, with a desire to influence children's lives and trajectories. In a profession that is heavily submerged in internal motivation that demands emotional energy, it is no surprise that the special education profession is a high-stress career (Ansley et al., 2016; Levine, 2013). Special education teachers in the United States historically have had high attrition rates (Espinoza et al., 2018; König & Rothland, 2012; Williams & Dikes, 2015) and much higher levels of attrition than their general education colleagues (De Stasio et al., 2017). The job-demand-resource (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) model and Maslach's (1998) burnout theory provided the framework for

examining the experiences and perceptions of special education teachers within the Incognito school district. While all five of the participants reported that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their day-to-day job duties and demands (oftentimes resulting in job-related stress), the experiences of these five special education teachers should not be generalized; however, this study may provide a preliminary exploration into special education teacher job-related stress and burnout amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Demographics and Years of Service

All participants were required to meet four criteria: a minimum of three years experience in the field, were employed in the district, had a teaching assignment in the special education field, and held a tier three or tier four teaching license. It is important to note all five participants were females who have been teaching for more than seven years and the majority (four of the five) of participants have been teaching for over 13 years. Four of the five educators held multiple licenses with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (three of the five) and Specific Learning Disability (three of the five) being the most common.

Furthermore, considering these demographics and the notion that improvements in teacher effectiveness and skills occur increasingly over the first seven years of teaching (Carroll & Foster, 2010), it is noteworthy that all five participants in this study have been teaching in education for more than seven years (ranging from 7 to 21 years) and specifically in the field of special education for more than seven years (ranging from 7 to 18 years). When taking into account that special education teacher retention rates are almost 13% every year (Wong et al., 2017), with a wave of teachers leaving the field after their first year (Berry, 2012; Carrol & Foster, 2010; Collins et al., 2017) and another wave of nearly 30%-50% leaving the profession after five years, the early attrition rates do not allow high-quality special education teachers to

grow and develop their craft (Bottiani et al., 2019; Dicke et al., 2020; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Phillips, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021; Räsänen et al., 2020). Despite the small sample size and an 8% participation rate, participants averaged 9.6 years of teaching, which is well above the 7-year skill development period of effectiveness and growth. However, general conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the relationship between the number of years of teaching and a reduction in job-related stress or burnout due to the low sample size. Regardless, it is noteworthy that all participants have surpassed not only the 5-year attrition mark but also the 7-year growth potential threshold.

Additinallly, while not empirically mentioned, salary may be a factor for this particular district's special education teachers remaining in the district and surpassing critical years of service benchmarks. The Incognito district's annual salary is higher than the national average of $61,820 and higher than neighboring districts and states (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). Compensation was not specifically examined in this study but it is important to highlight as this is an aspect that may play a role in individuals' decisions to remain in a particular field and district. However, with a limited sample size generalizations and transferability of data may not be obtainable for all midwestern districts.

Job Demands, Resources, and Job-Related Stress

Special education teachers are required to juggle a variety of different job duties, including specialized instruction in all content areas (such as English language, mathematics, science, and social studies), due process paperwork, Individual Education Program (IEP) management and collaboration, supervision of paraprofessionals, and student advocacy. All these demands play a role in special education teachers' mental and physical well-being and can lead to job-related stress or burnout (De Stasio et al., 2017; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Robinson et al.,

2019). Teachers' burnout is attributed to their perception of job demands and the lack of resources (Fernet et al., 2012). The JD-R model highlights the interconnectedness of job-related stress and teacher attrition (Harmsen et al., 2018). When teachers have supportive working conditions, they are more likely to remain in the field and reduce chronic teacher shortages (Billingsley et al., 2020), while contributing to their personal growth as highly qualified, experienced professionals.

Demands. This exploratory study examined how special education teachers perceived job demands or job-related duties and identified resources that alleviated accrued stress. Of the six commonly agreed upon duties of a special education teacher–specially designed instruction, evaluation (initial and re-evaluations), due process procedures and IEP management, preparation, supervision of paraprofessionals, and other duties as assigned (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022)–the number one reported most stressful duty within this study was due process tasks. The supervision of paraprofessionals and Individual Education Program (IEP) management and preparation were tied for the second and third most stressful job duties reported.

In a related study, 75% of special education teachers reported a significant increase in their workload during the time the COVID-19 pandemic began (Lech & Johnson, 2021). In 2021, another scholar reported that since the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' duties have become increasingly stressful (Friesen, 2021). Similarly, all five participants in this exploratory study reported the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their job duties, requiring modification, adjustments, or learning new systems completely. These results are comparable to those in previously mentioned literature; those overwhelmed by due process paperwork are more likely to leave the field (Henderson, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2004; Payne, 2005; Plash & Piotrowski,

2006; Youngs et al., 2011). In fact, one of the main factors linked to a higher risk of burnout is time commitments related to due process tasks (De Stasio et al., 2017; Mehrenberg, 2013; Williams & Dikes, 2015). While four of the five participants in this exploratory study reported the intent to remain in the field of special education for at least the next five years, all reported job-related stress over the last three years as a result of an increase in demands.

Most Stressful Job Duty: Due Process. A case manager must complete due process tasks such as evaluations, IEP, progress reports, data collection, and parent and team communication for each student on their caseload in order to guarantee a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b; OLA of MN, 2013). Case managers spend more than eight hours each week completing procedural documentation requirements (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b) and more time than all other non-instructional duties combined (Mehrenberg, 2013). Special education teachers are expected to complete all of their work during the typical 8-hour school day; however, they often need to work outside of school contract hours, during their allotted instructional preparation time, or during personal lunchtime to be able to stay on top of all aspects of their roles, complete due process, and complete the necessary paperwork (for example, every student eligible for special education services requires regular, consistent progress monitoring and data collection for every service and goal, as well as a triennial comprehensive evaluation to determine continued eligibility).

Specifically, a 2017 study revealed that 100% of special education teachers stayed late every day, and two-thirds of participants arrived at work 30-55 minutes early (Ortogero et al., 2017). Not only do these due process job demands influence teachers' stress and burnout levels, but they also impact the available minutes in a day left to provide high-quality educational opportunities for students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). This exploratory study

was consistent with previous studies, with all five participants reporting they felt they did not have enough time in the day to do many of the things that are important to performing their job well. Additionally, four of the five participants felt that they worked beyond their contracted hours, from a few times a week to daily, in order to complete all obligations of their job, resulting in every participant feeling emotionally drained and frustrated by their work. In particular, these results were consistent with previous literature, which reported that the majority of special education teachers had a heavier workload with less preparation time as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Lech & Johnson, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). One example of this heavier workload would be that in conjunction with having to complete typical due process procedural tasks case managers were also required to develop plans for any potential transitions between instructional models. This would encompass creating a contingency learning plan or developing an individualized plan addendum to the IEP outlining what special education and associated services would be required for each model (in-person, hybrid, or distance learning) along with evaluating learning loss to determine whether or not recovery services related to the COVID-19 pandemic were necessary.

Resources. Previous scholars have suggested that teachers' job satisfaction can be broken down into relational or personal resources (mental) and organizational resources (physical; Collie et al., 2018; Henderson, 2014), with work conditions and the lack of administrative or peer support being the most commonly reported to contribute to special education teachers' wellbeing or overall satisfaction (Katsiyannis et al., 2003). Additionally, job satisfaction is one of the most identified factors leading to teachers' retention rates (Dicke et al., 2020). Consequently, as Bakker and Demerouti's JD-R illustrated, every job comes with inherent stress, but when an employee's well-being is tended to and supported with sufficient resources (mental and

physical), there will be a reduction in burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bottiani et al., 2019; Collie et al., 2018). Therefore it is critical to further understand special education teachers' perceptions of adequate resources and support.

Participants in this study reported several resources that alleviated their job-related stress and demands, resulting in higher levels of job satisfaction. While this exploratory study had a small sample size, it is noteworthy to mention that four of the five participants reported a desire to remain in the field of special education for the next 5 years. This, coupled with the fact that all five of the participants met not only the 5-year retention threshold but also the seven-year growth mark, may indicate their years of service and reported resources alleviated sufficient amounts of stress to reduce burnout risk and attrition rates. They indicated three common resources that impacted their ability to manage job-related stress: family understanding, having a self-care routine, such as exercise or not working after contracted hours, and collegial relationships.

Participants in this study described family understanding as their immediate family (e.g., partners and children) unit being aware and supportive of not only the changes in their education and work practices (e.g.,, switching from brick and mortar to online at-home and hybrid models), but also having had a partnership that can keep the family unit running smoothly (for example, helping children with their school instruction, preparing meals, and maintaining household tasks) while providing space for independence. When the pandemic first started and all families were forced to learn and work from home very quickly, many households had to learn new systems to effectively and efficiently complete tasks and maintain a balanced work-life all within the same home.

Furthermore, while some pre-COVID parents supplemented their child's learning by practicing for a spelling test or assisting on a math assignment, they were often not the primary

driver of learning and were thrown into this role quickly. Many parents became full-time teachers supplementing virtual instruction, and supporting their child's social and behavioral regulation and learning environment, while managing all the other roles they must fulfill, including holding full-time jobs that may have shifted to remote as well. Families had to navigate and restructure their home life in significant ways as a result of their profession (whether in-person, hybrid, or remote work settings). This left educators often struggling to find a balance between supporting their families and instructing their students. A recent study suggested that it is this work-life balance that is critical to individual satisfaction and increases teacher performance and well-being while navigating the new education era of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gusta et al., 2022). In fact, another study described these drastic shifts in how we educate our children as discouraging and upsetting to realize how little they could do about student motivation and commitment, parental support abilities, administrative expectations, and state and federal obligations (Friesen, 2021). Despite these struggles, educators in this study revealed this factor, having an understanding and supportive family, as one of the top resources they accessed to alleviate stress and build new practices to support their well-being and work-life balance.

Another resource participants identified was having a self-care routine. Examples from the educators in this study were exercising and maintaining a work-life balance by not working outside of their contracted day. Boogren (2018) defined self-care as a daily process that involves being conscious of and listening to one's primary physiological and emotional needs, as well as cultivating routines, relationships, and the environment. This notion also contributes to the previously mentioned resource by setting firm guidelines or boundaries for their work day and having a supportive family that not only has similar work boundaries but also can share household duties. However, self-care routines can include many additional practices, such as

creating a healthy diet or ensuring adequate sleep (Boogren, 2018). When an individual's basic

needs are unmet, it is difficult to give attention to other demands or tasks. Therefore, self-care is

a valuable resource to mitigate stress and promote educators' resilience (Miller & Flint-Stipp,

2019). Two of the five educators reported that having incorporated an integrative self-care

routine into their daily practices alleviated their stress levels; this study parallels previous

research and further highlights the benefits of integrating self-care routines to combat burnout.

When considering types of resources (social, physical, and internal characteristics) that

contribute to an individual's level of stress, it is the social supports or the colleagues and

administration relationships that are most impactful in building and increasing an individual's

ability to cope and manage stress (Phillips, 2021). In order to carry out their responsibilities and

advance their trade, new teachers in particular depend on peer and leadership relationships.

(Bettini et al., 2020). According to three of the five participants in this study, mental barriers

(relational or personal) had the greatest influence on their practices, and all five of the

participants felt supported by their administration. While all participants reported feeling

supported, the most common resource provided by the administration was access and

availability. In particular, all five educators cited the administration as being approachable during

times of need and providing support, brainstorming ideas, and discovering solutions for their

struggles. Furthermore, three of the five participants reported positive relationships with

colleagues as a contributing factor to remaining in the field of special education.

Additionally, educators with poor leadership relationships or who perceive them to be

unsupportive are twice as likely to leave the profession (Räsänen et al., 2020). These social

resources paralleled educators' experiences within this exploratory study as well. The majority of

participants reported not only the importance of having positive relationships in influencing their

desire to remain in the field of education but that not having these relationships was the most impactful barrier. Each participant indicated that some level of collaboration among peers to solve problems, learn, or empathize alleviated their job-related stress. These social or mental supports, such as peer or administrative relationships, work-life balance, and family support, build and increase an individual's ability to cope with and manage stress (Phillips, 2021).

Further, three of the five participants reported three common factors that have impacted their decision to remain in special education: the love of teaching, the students, and the teaching schedule. These factors align with the nature of the profession; the education profession is a social career and is often chosen for the desire to contribute to greater humankind or social value. Additionally, many educators in this study reference social reasons and opportunities for increased family time for choosing the teaching schedule as one of their protective factors. All of these reported supports and factors suggested the participant's mental well-being is tended to and supported with resources (mental and physical), resulting in less burnout, which further supports the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bottiani et al., 2019; Collie et al., 2018).

When special education teachers understand their job responsibilities and have access to professional and personal resources, they can successfully mitigate the effects of job-related stress and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This study further highlights that the demands of special education jobs have exceeded thresholds of manageable workloads, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased and shifted expectations further. This study indicated that while all five of the special education teachers within the Incognito school district experienced job-demand shifts during the pandemic resulting in an increase in job-related stress, they each identified professional and/or personal resources or supports that alleviated some of their stress. Along with this, participants revealed feelings within two of the three components of

burnout: emotional exhaustion and inefficacy, which further supports previous research discussed in the JD-R model. When job demands have adequate resources to support individuals physically and mentally, they will experience less stress and contribute to lower rates of burnout.

Burnout and Maslach

District administrators estimate that teachers' workload has more than doubled since the COVID-19 outbreak and, coupled with the personal stressors of the pandemic, educators are leaving the field and burning out at rapid paces (Carver-Thomas, 2021). As teachers navigate unsustainable workloads, they begin to reach higher levels of stress, leading to increased burnout (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Harmsen et al., 2018). All participants in this study indicated that they have experienced an increase in job-related stress over the last three years, and one educator reported experiencing feelings of burnout. This parallels the previously mentioned literature, which indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted special education teachers' job-related stress and burnout. Furthermore, all five of the participants reported at least one aspect of burnout, which was higher than a 2021 study (Martínez-Ramón), where nearly 50% of educators reported feeling at least one aspect of burnout, emotional exhaustion. It is noteworthy considering the small participant pool.

This increase in prolonged, unchecked job-related stress contributed to feelings of burnout (Levine, 2013; Martínez-Ramón, 2021; Wong et al., 2017). Maslach's burnout theory identifies three components: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach, 1998; Schaufeli et al., 2008). This exploratory study examined each component, which indicated every one of the participants had experienced some level of burnout in at least two of the three areas—emotional exhaustion and inefficacy—over the last three years.

Emotional exhaustion is the most commonly reported aspect of burnout and is defined as being overworked and depleted of one's psychological resources (Collie et al., 2018; Lee & Eissenstat, 2018; Maslach, 1998). Ozturk (2020) further defined emotional exhaustion as the lack of sufficient energy for another day or other people's needs, tiredness, and depletion of energy. When individuals' workload becomes too high or there is a personal conflict, they can become drained or lack the energy to complete their job. This is where one's lower-level, physiological needs (such as sleep, food, or general homeostasis) may go unmet, making it difficult to regulate and give attention to other areas of life, leaving individuals feeling perpetually emotionally and physically drained of energy. In fact, this study paralleled the Martínez-Ramón's (2021) study and revealed emotional exhaustion in all participants, where 80% of educators reported feeling emotionally drained at least once a month and frustrated by their work at least a few times a month.

Furthermore, every participant reported working beyond their contracted hours, ranging from a few times a week to daily. This extended work time continues to contribute to an unbalanced work-life resulting in a decrease in individual well-being and satisfaction (Gusta et al., 2022). In contrast, a recent study suggested that having a well-balanced work-life had a positive effect on teacher performance and contributed to a reduction in feelings of emotional exhaustion during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gusta et al., 2022). Overall, this study suggested that teachers experienced frequent levels of emotional exhaustion and increased workload demands related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to stress levels.

The second component of Maslach's burnout theory is inefficacy, or a reduction in personal accomplishment, which is further defined as a decrease in personal feelings of accomplishment or value (Maslach, 1998; Williams & Dikes, 2015). For example, one can come

to believe that their work performance falls short of their own expectations, which would lead to a poor opinion of oneself or a decline in one's sense of competence and productivity in their line of work. This aspect can arise when emotional exhaustion and cynicism begin to emerge and there is a lack of relevant resources (Maslach, 1998). This study revealed inefficacy in all participants, where three of the five educators indicated weekly feelings of not having enough time in the day to do many of the things that are important to do a quality job, and only two educators indicated weekly feelings of worthwhile career accomplishments. A similar study suggested 100% of participants regularly worked outside of their contract hours to complete all required demands (Ortogero et al., 2017). This pressure for additional time is one of the top factors reported to have led to burnout risk (De Stasio et al., 2017; Mehrenberg, 2013; Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Furthermore, educators had indicated lower levels of self-worth or a feeling of ineffectiveness in their daily jobs. In fact, three of the five participants in this study indicated monthly feelings of physical exhaustion or being tired when they woke up in the morning knowing they had to face another day of work. These aspects of inefficacy may lead to higher rates of job withdrawal (stress, turnover, and absenteeism) and low levels of personal accomplishment, affecting the quality of service and education students receive (Robinson et al., 2019; Martínez-Ramón, 2021; Maslach, 1998). Additionally, according to the National Educational Association (2022), 44% of educators reported not having enough time as a very serious problem experienced, and 55% of teachers were contemplating leaving the field altogether since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third component of Maslach's burnout theory is cynicism or depersonalization, which is the attitude one has toward others that is maladaptive or disconnected (Maslach, 1998;

Williams & Dikes, 2015). Ozturk (2020) further defined this component as an effort to detach oneself or cultivate a negative attitude or feelings towards the people they serve, frequently displaying cold, rigid, or indifferent attitudes. This may serve as a coping mechanism for emotional stress. This study revealed the cynicism component as having the lowest reported frequency compared to the emotional exhaustion and efficacy components. Special education teachers often do not choose their profession for salary or notoriety. Rather, they feel a calling to contribute or add social value (Ansley et al., 2016; Levine, 2013). It is not surprising that all five of the participants reported the desire to build relationships and rapport with every single student. Furthermore, education, by nature, is a social career that relies heavily on these relationships. It is these relationships that provide protective factors in combating stress and burnout in educators.

This study illustrated the positive impact of resources on educators' perspectives and cynicism. Participants reported higher levels of never feeling uncaring or impersonal towards others within their jobs than any other burnout category. This insight, in conjunction with a recent study that revealed this component was strongly related to teacher turnover rates and had a larger effect on individuals compared to the other two components (Madigan & Kim, 2021), suggested a lower level of depersonalization reduced burnout levels among participants in this particular study. Overall, this exploratory study suggested that these educators have experienced some aspects of burnout, but at the lowest levels within the area of cynicism, which coincided with previous literature that reported that up to 50% of educators report feeling at least one aspect of burnout, namely emotional exhaustion (Martínez-Ramón, 2021). Consequently, not having experienced all three components could have led to a lower percentage of participants reporting burnout.

While all five participants (100%) reported experiencing job-related stress over the last three years and an increase in job demands or shifts in their duties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, only two educators reported experiencing burnout. Maslach's multidimensional burnout theory suggests the three aspects are interconnected and occur sequentially; emotional exhaustion leads to cynicism and ultimately reduces personal accomplishment perception (Maslach, 1998). However, this study is more closely aligned with an alternative hypothesis of components occurring simultaneously or in different orders. All five participants reported higher frequencies of emotional exhaustion and inefficacy and lower frequencies of cynicism, thus suggesting emotional exhaustion and inefficacy are prevalent and have only begun to lead to cynicism in this small participant group.

Implications and Recommendations

Special education teachers have one of the most complex and demanding jobs (Collie et al., 2018; Payne, 2005), which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pressley, 2021). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an alarming 48% of special education teachers reported unmanageable workloads or responsibilities that prevent them from working with students as a critical factor in leaving the field (Albrecht, 2007; Russ et al., 2001; Wanat, 2021). When educators' workload becomes unreasonable or too high, students' educational success and access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) are compromised (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). FAPE is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as special education and related services that are provided without payment, at taxpayer expense, and under the control of the state. This involves executing in accordance with the IEP and meeting the requirements of the state educational agency, which include receiving adequate education from preschool through secondary school (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1400).

Failure to completely implement an IEP can lead to a denial of FAPE and result in students' learning loss and/or possible costly, time-consuming dispute resolution processes. In fact, special education is the most frequent area of litigation (National School Boards Association, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic placed additional strain on special education teams and IEP implementation; teachers and administrators had to balance providing students with disabilities with FAPE in accordance with their IEPs while maintaining the health and safety of everyone. Many schools tried to quickly adjust, but unfortunately, this posed a difficult challenge as many services within a student's IEP were not structured for virtual formats. This resulted in abbreviated, delayed, or missed services for some students. For example, students with mobility needs, which required in-person instruction and physical support with an occupational therapist, or students with social goals that required participation in small peer groups, were challenging, and on some occasions virtually impossible to deliver. Despite these obvious challenges, special education teams were not granted waivers in service delivery (Yell & Bateman, 2022), resulting in education losses for some students.

The loss of learning or reduction in services concerned parents and triggered an increase in FAPE complaints and litigation in the United States. For instance, in one midwestern state, parents have several progressive alternatives to dispute resolutions: additional IEP meetings, conciliation, mediation, facilitated IEP meetings, and/or filing formal complaints with the state department of education (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). Often, the first step to address parent questions or concerns is to conduct an additional IEP team meeting(s) whereby the team can work together to find a resolution before advancing to more formal procedures. Another option could be a conciliation meeting, which might involve alternative team members. An alternative option is if resolutions could not be obtained, or if parents feel there is no way to

move towards an agreement, they could request a mediation or facilitated IEP meeting. This form of dispute resolution would be a collaborative, structured conversation to provide a way to settle disputes with the facilitation of a trained and experienced impartial party. Also, parents have the option to file a complaint with the state department of education. This is a formal process in which one would request the state to investigate concerns and determine if a school violated special education law (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). While it is encouraged for parents and districts to use facilitated team meetings, mediation, conciliation, and/or other mutually agreed-upon alternative methods to settle disputes prior to going through due process hearings, they provide an additional options (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). Moreover, if disputes remain unresolved despite prior attempts at resolution, due process hearings may serve as the next recourse or may take place independent of the other dispute resolution procedures outlined.

Due process hearings are frequently the initial step in special education cases before moving on to federal district courts, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and even the U.S. Supreme Court if they go unresolved (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, one midwestern state reported 15 independent school districts, one charter school, one education district, and two special education cooperatives reported total special education litigation costs of $199,999.75 for the fiscal year (FY) 2018 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). As schools began to enter the 2020-2021 school year after the initial COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, the National School Boards Association and the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AASA) reported that 9% of reporting schools had already received special education due process complaints related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another 30% of school districts were anticipating complaints related to special education service delivery

during the pandemic (Brown, 2020). Considering a due process hearing could cost a district at least $50,000 per hearing (National School Boards Association, 2020), the monetary impact is significant and has only continued to increase since the date of this research.

However, not only do these dispute resolution procedures have a monetary impact, legal and court fees, but they also influence staff emotionally and professionally, as well as create a reduction in time and energy diverted from instruction and educating students as litigation procedures often take more than a year to find resolution (Osborne & Russo, 2021). This preparation could include any documentation (for example, previous evaluations, IEPs, and student testing) and/or information that is crucial to the case (for example, email collecting and reviewing). Generally, this information is gathered and shared prior to trials, and all possible evidence is shared in order to ensure the appropriateness of the IEPs (Osborne & Russo, 2021).

As a result, special education teachers who were involved in the aforementioned situations may be impacted emotionally, which could, in turn, affect them personally and professionally. In fact, one study reported that 95% of respondents expressed high or very high-stress levels when involved in litigation; after being involved in a due process hearing or legal action, 12% of administration indicated that more than half of their district's special education staff either left the district or asked to be transferred out of special education (Pudelski, 2013). This emotional toll could lead to damaged home-school relationships and future collaboration, resulting in feelings of resentment, negative or cautious attitudes, and hostility. When adults responsible for a child's education cannot work together, ultimately, students feel the impact (Pudelski, 2013). Luckily, for many districts, staff and families were able to collaborate and communicate necessary adjustments to ensure FAPE and address any learning

loss and this increase was less than predicted considering the severity of the disruption the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the nation (Arundel, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all of the participants in this study and altered their job demands, resulting in all five of the educators experiencing an increase in job-related stress. While this increase in stress paralleled previously mentioned studies, the special education teachers within the Incognito school district reported several resources that alleviated their stress, supported the increase in job demands, and factors that impacted the decision to remain in the field. Identifying and providing educators with these resources and opportunities to meet job demands may diminish emotional exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism. It is these preliminary themes that leaders must consider and acknowledge: demands (due process tasks), resources (family support, work-life balance, and colleague relationships), and factors impacting their desire to remain in special education (love of teaching, the students, and the teaching calendar).

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the perceptions of job-related stress and burnout among special education teachers, including their perceptions of their job duties, job-related stress, and COVID-19 pandemic's effect on their burnout within a single school district, Incognito Public School District. By identifying these trends and themes, school districts and special education department leaders can reduce teacher burnout rates and mitigate the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on teachers' stress and, ultimately, teacher shortages. While this study was exploratory in nature, it provided a starting point to better understand and identify themes to guide leaders in the development process and provide resources, support, professional training, and incentives to retain quality special education teachers within the district. Through the perspectives and experiences of the five educators in this study, the researcher was able to identify three major recommendation areas for not only school leaders and

the educational system as a whole but also individual teachers to alleviate stress levels: increase available time, cultivate and nourish relationships, and foster and develop self-care routines.

Time

While educators need relevant professional development, more evident is the need for an increase in the most critical of resources: time (Ansley et al., 2016; Phillips, 2021). Districts often rely on professional development to provide adequate resources to support and combat the emotional strain and inequalities of the ever-changing job demands (Henderson, 2014; Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). This study paralleled previous research which indicated higher levels of reported stress due to insufficient time to complete and do a quality job. Furthermore, special education teachers within this study revealed that their most stressful job demands are tasks related to due process requirements, and four of the five educators reported feeling they do not have enough time in their day to complete many of the things that are important to do a quality job, which resulted in two of the five needing to work every day beyond their contracted hours daily in order to complete all obligations of their job. While there are considerable differences in job demands (Bettini et al., 2020), special educators often have the same amount of preparation time that their general education counterparts are granted. This small window of time during the day is insufficient, and professional development may not be enough to support teachers.

In order to discuss the importance of time provided to special education teachers to complete due process tasks and its current deficiency, one must also understand the parameters and timelines associated with such tasks. For example, one due process task is the evaluation of students. This comprehensive evaluation consists of an interdisciplinary team of professionals, each testing, observing, and collecting data in order to contribute to the final report and analysis.

Students who are found eligible for special education services or are suspected of having needs are initially evaluated and re-evaluated at least triennially. This comprehensive evaluation must be completed within a strict timeline of 30 school days. This is a single example of the time-consuming, yet firm timeline of tasks that encompass due process duties.

In fact, according to the Minnesota Department of Education (2021b), case managers spend more time each week fulfilling procedural paperwork requirements than all other non-instructional responsibilities put together (Mehrenberg, 2013). IEPs must be written and revisited annually and entail meticulous data collection on individualized goals and objectives, progress monitoring assessments (such as state and local standardized testing, curriculum-based measurements, and/or present levels of performance), and observations, as well as identification of any gaps in grade-level expectations. Similarly, all are within strict timelines ranging from 10 to 14 days prior to the end of the previous IEP service dates so that there is no lapse in special education services provided. Due to the added documentation, IEP team meetings, data collection, and documentation drafting, the amount of instructional time that may be used for instruction is typically limited (OLA of MN, 2013). This left special education teachers to creatively balance quality instruction and a work-life balance, often working outside of the contracted day to complete lesson planning tasks in order to prioritize student contact time.

Further considering this element of time and the additional COVID-19 pandemic implications, educators are in desperate need of additional resources to ease their increase in demands. For example, in the upcoming school year, the Incognito school district will be implementing a one-year trial schedule where special education teachers will have an increase in non-instructional time, which has been agreed upon and integrated into the collective bargaining agreement through a memorandum of understanding (MOU). This one-year change to the special

education schedule will provide additional time daily for special educators to complete due process paperwork (for example, write IEPs, conduct progress monitoring, and/or assess student achievement). This change will increase the non-instructional time from a single preparation time to two preparation periods, which includes an additional five minutes of due process time for every 25 minutes of classroom instructional time (for example, at the middle school level, that equates to roughly 50 minutes). This is intended to provide more time within the contracted school day for collaboration among peers and increased time for due process tasks, ensuring educators have opportunities to build collegial relationships and have enough time in the contracted school day to complete all required duties needed to perform their jobs to the highest standards. While the results of this adjustment in the procedure are unknown, it may be a consideration for other districts to incorporate.

Considering some school districts may already have similar practices, and there is no federal mandate in place to ensure it is a common practice in the United States, further implementation can solidify the necessity of additional time for all educators. Meanwhile, several states have bills that relinquish the dictation of preparation time to individual districts' collective bargaining agreements. For instance, Minnesota considered a revision of State Statute 122A.50 (Preparation Time, 2020) to incorporate as part of all bargaining agreements, when parties cannot agree or do not cite specific time allotments, to incorporate the following: "Within the student day, for every 17 minutes of classroom instructional time, a minimum of five additional minutes of preparation time shall be provided to each licensed teachers" (MN State Statute: Preparation Time, 122A.50 §1). This would not only decrease the required instructional time before preparation time is granted from every 25 minutes to every 17 minutes but also provide a minimum standard for school districts to adhere to when generating their teacher

agreements. Additionally, there is deliberation within the House Education Finance Committee to further amend this bill to include uninterrupted blocks of preparation time during the student day and additional preparation time for special education paperwork.

While not specifically mentioned in this study, other resources and support leadership could contribute include providing additional compensation for working past contract hours, hosting due process nights, and offering additional due process training. Another beneficiary of these recommendations could be the less-qualified teachers entering the field in order to ameliorate the growing teacher shortage and the feeling of being underprepared for special education due process tasks. One midwestern state struggled significantly with a teacher shortage, particularly in special education, and had a recent surge of over 400 educators needing to be hired who had a bachelor's degree but no formal teacher training or a short-term limited licensure status (Dernbach, 2023). Proving this intentional, job-specific training and guidance for these individuals is valuable time spent and can continue to decrease teacher attrition and increase skill growth.

Relationships

Humans are social creatures and thrive in relationships with others. Thus, it is the lack of colleague relationships that has been cited as a contributing factor to teacher burnout or job-related stress (Preseley et al., 2021). Throughout this exploratory study, the notion of colleague relationships and collaboration was also a common response; participants reported them as both a protective element or resource as well as the decline in relationships as a barrier to overcoming stress and burnout. Not only does educator collaboration generate more meaningful instruction, it also provides individuals with social/emotional support and the lens to address everyday problems in a way that fosters engagement, well-being, and work satisfaction

(Fiorilli et al., 2019). One way education systems and leaders can support the cultivation of collaboration and colleague relationships is to provide novice teachers with mentor teachers. By creating this common induction practice and providing dedicated time and structure, individuals will gain the desired social support. At the individual level, educators can participate in professional learning communities (PLCs) to further connect with colleagues in similar roles and build positive, supportive relationships. While this study did not reveal specific recommendations for building these relationships, each participant indicated at least one colleague relationship that had impacted their job satisfaction.

In addition to organizations providing sufficient time within the workday to collaborate and ensure novice teachers have mentors, school leaders can influence educators' decisions to remain in the field simply by understanding the special education field and being available or accessible. For example, when a principal knows the intricacies and time commitments required for special education case managers to collect, document, and write progress monitoring on students' IEP goals and provides additional time during the grading window to complete these tasks, they are able to better support their special education staff. All five of the educators in this study felt supported by the administration and further reported this understanding and access as factors that contributed to mitigating their stress levels when the COVID-19 pandemic initially impacted their teaching practices. Similarly, no specific recommendations or practices were identified through this exploratory study; however, each participant referenced leadership as having had a positive influence on their practices simply by understanding the nuances and differences special education staff were required to perform. This simple notion of recognizing and understanding the day-to-day aspects of any position is an implication any organization can implement. Leaders can achieve this through open communication and active listening to their

staff in order to gain knowledge of each position and broaden the lens through which they lead and make decisions.

Like many other aspects of education, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered administration practices as well, and educators are leaning more on their leadership to navigate unprecedented times. Therefore, it is not only critical for the administration to recognize and understand special education staff and procedures but also to cultivate positive relationships with students and families in order to fully engage and support them. To address the challenges of educating children during the pandemic, school leaders are now expected to not only draw on their existing skills and knowledge but also create new ones while shifting some of their typical tasks (Pollock, 2020). An example during the COVID-19 pandemic included the return to in-person instruction, which required staff and students to wear personal protective equipment (PPE), a face mask or a face shield. The administration had to support special education case managers in navigating the face-to-face delivery of service for a student who could not wear any form of PPE. This would have been a new protocol and a new expectation that leadership needed to embark on while continuing to build positive home-to-school collaboration and communication and ensure the health and well-being of staff, students, parents, and themselves.

A school's leadership is a critical component to fostering a positive school culture, ensuring student success, and promoting teacher job satisfaction (Ansley et al., 2016). They may find prioritizing this collaboration and communication with special education teams as an additional recommendation to employ in order to increase their access and availability through the cultivation of relationships. Some strategies for this could be open lines of communication, demonstrating a sincere interest in teachers, students, and families, being visible and involved in school events, and prioritizing a teacher's well-being (Pollock, 2020). In fact, a recent study

suggested that principals strategically devoted their time based on the time of day and time of year; the beginning of the year was dedicated to building and community events, while the end of the year was utilized for evaluating teacher performance. Before student hours were spent more on day-to-day operations, cultivating student relationships during the day, and completing paperwork tasks outside of the traditional (one hour before and after student hours) school day. Finally, principals in the study also expressed a desire to use email and social media during non-traditional work hours and to physically attend school and community evening events so they could be both online and physically visible at night (Reid & Creed, 2021).

Self-Care

Self-care and attending to one's basic needs are foundational to thriving educators (Boogren, 2018). Leadership can acknowledge the critical components of staff well-being by intentionally providing not only opportunities to engage in self-care but also modeling positive behaviors and practices. By building and encouraging self-care practices within the school environment, such as using common language to encourage a positive mindset or making gratitude a common practice, staff could begin to develop routines that promote a healthy community. Additionally, creating a dedicated workspace, healthy communication among colleagues, setting reasonable expectations, carving out time for self-care, and getting your body moving are several strategies recommended for the work environment (McClintock, 2023). For example, the Incognito district had a Wellness Committee that promoted, engaged, and provided monthly healthy eating or exercise tips, resources for programs or discounts, and staff engagement opportunities, such as step challenges or bike-to-school days, to ensure a variety of self-care and the overall well-being of the staff are being tended to. This type of committee or

similar resources could be beneficial to bringing self-care to the forefront of our education systems and combating stress levels.

Likewise, when burnout elements are recognized, organizations can create interventions to help both the individual and the system (systemic and organizational) in order to reduce the risk (Malsach, 1998). It is critical for education systems, leaders, and individuals to build personal practices to recognize and attend to their stress to avoid burnout (Ansley et al., 2016). However, this exploratory study did not result in specific practices or systems that reduced levels of burnout, but it did identify common personal (family support) and organizational (work-life balance and colleague relationships) resources that leaders could foster. While it may have been difficult for an organization to cultivate personal relationships or family support, providing space and opportunities for individuals and teams to collaborate and build relationships, ensure administration access or availability, and honor and respect a work-life balance could further establish the required resources individuals need to combat stress and burnout.

Moreover, the results of this study suggested a correlation between Bakker and Demerouti's job-demand resource model (JD-R) and Maslach's burnout theory (Maslach, 1998). While these increased job demands contributed to educators' emotional well-being, resulting in stress (Collie et al., 2018), two of the five educators had hit the threshold of burnout or the imbalance between occupational expectations and available resources, which was an early indication of burnout (Maslach, 1998). Conversely, when special education teachers had resources to meet their job demands, they were more likely to feel prepared to combat job-related stressors and experience less burnout. Employing the JD-R model and Maslach's burnout theory, this exploratory study revealed that all participants had experienced an increase or shift in job demands due to the COVID-19 pandemic and reported feelings of job-related stress. While this

study had a limited participation rate (8%) with a total of five educators, it is noteworthy that only two participants reported experiencing burnout over the last three years.

Furthermore, the implications that emerged from this exploratory study yield several recommendations and general practices for school districts and special education leaders on how they can improve teachers' burnout rates and reduce the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on teacher stress and shortages. Educational leaders could provide systematic shifts and procedures to help mitigate these demands, such as self-care practices, providing additional compensation for working past contract hours, hosting due process nights, providing due process training, or incorporating due process blocks within the work day or extended planning/preparation time. Additionally, administrators who understand the scope of a special education role and accommodate the additional due process requirements special education teachers had compared to their general education counterparts (Ortogero et al., 2017; Russ et al., 2001; Williams & Dikes, 2015) by acknowledging and providing adequate resources for special education teachers to accomplish all their tasks, duties, and time for collaboration, could prevent attrition and decrease burnout rates (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). While these results were specific to tier three and tier four licensed special education teachers in one midwestern public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic teaching era, other special education populations could benefit from the recommendations highlighted above; leaders can deliver relevant professional development, make systemic shifts, be accessible, and provide incentives to retain quality special education teachers within their districts.

Lastly, this exploratory study examined the trend that when special education teachers had the right support and working conditions, they had lower stress levels and thus avoided burnout, even in the wake of the new era of COVID-19 pandemic education. Special education

teachers are among the most vulnerable populations to burnout (Asbury et al., 2020; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Wong et al., 2017) and are still in the midst of this new era of education. Often, systemic resolutions will result in providing additional monetary incentives (compensation, curriculum, building remodels/updates, technology, etc.); however, educators' needs continue to be unmet and attrition rates climb (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). Simply providing material resources is not effective. The problem is much more complex, and continued understanding of the role individual mental health and job-related stress play in an educator's intent to remain in the field is required. Similarly, previous literature identified the most important assets in an organization as human resources (leadership, relationships with colleagues, and students), whereas school improvement and facilities are the lowest contributing factor to teachers' job satisfaction (Don et al., 2021). This study aligned with this notion and further revealed all five of the educators felt supported by their leadership and cited colleague collaboration or relationships as contributing factors to their well-being and overall desire to remain in the field of education. Leadership access, availability, and understanding were cited as the most frequent supports that alleviate stress levels; therefore, ensuring the time and space to foster relationships, provide mental health support, and provide access to collaboration should be a critical component of any leadership agenda.

Future Research and Conclusion

According to one midwestern educator licensing board, there is a nationwide shortage of educators, with nearly 27% of districts reporting one or more unfilled educator positions (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021a). Despite this shortage, four of the five participants in this study planned to stay in the field of special education for the ensuing five years. When further considering the JD-R model and Maslach's burnout theory, this

study suggested that these participants experienced an increase in job demand caused by state and federal mandates as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paralleled previously mentioned literature indicating the COVID-19 pandemic impacted educators nationwide (Carver-Thomas, 2021).

While participants reported that due process tasks are the most stressful job demand, instruction and team collaboration were most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and all three of these job demands resulted in all five participants reporting increased levels of job-related stress. In comparison, an understanding family, a self-care routine, and good colleague relationships were among the top resources these educators relied on to combat their stress. Additionally, their love for teaching, the work calendar coordinating with family commitments and enhancing leisure time, and the students were factors in their decision to remain in the special education field. These job demand increases, coupled with the susceptibility of the educational field to stress, would have indicated higher levels of burnout. However, participants reported higher frequencies in only two of Maslach's three burnout components: emotional exhaustion and efficacy. This indicated these educators have experienced many factors of job-related stress and were approaching burnout levels, which could lead to a higher attrition rate but have not reached this level yet. Furthermore, this study indicated these educators have at least one resource available to mitigate their job-related stress, which may have contributed to their lower burnout rate and higher retention rate. Overall, when educators understood the demands of their job and the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on them and had at least one resource (physical or mental) available to combat job-related stress, they reported lower levels of cynicism and overall indicated lower levels of burnout.

A significant limitation of this study was the small sample size, and it is recommended that future research be conducted with a larger participant population, as well as multiple school districts to gain better insight and generalization of results. Furthermore, the Incognito School District represents a particular group of school employees in that they pursue and uphold a stringent hiring procedure that includes multiple interviewing sessions, including a role-specific structured interview. This increased the likelihood that tier three and four licensed candidates, who are considered more qualified and prepared, would have applied and lessened the need to fill positions by hiring people with unrelated or limited licensures. Another aspect specific to the Incognito school district was its socioeconomic positioning and open enrollment, which increased revenue for signature programs, lowered class sizes, and improved teachers' compensation, all of which have had the potential to attract qualified applicants to apply within the district. The research site had committed to being an open enrollment district, enrolling children to attend who reside outside of their district limits, and now has almost 3,600 open-enrolled pupils. Students who wish to attend a public school district other than their home district may do so through open enrollment. This open enrollment status is where additional student funding from the student's resident district generates. Furthermore, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) report, Incognito was located in a higher socioeconomic area and received more than 40% of its funding locally. Less than 6% of its student body received free or reduced-price meals, making it a low-poverty district (Minnesota Report Card, 2021) which may further attract candidates.

This study was the beginning of an exploration leading to continued research examining the relationship between the increase in job demands since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and special education teacher job-related stress and burnout. The continuation of research could

reveal higher levels of burnout and a wider variety of resources that could be duplicated to mitigate burnout and stress. Understanding educators' perceptions of their job demands, the reality of their workday, and the contributing factors to burnout are critical to improving working conditions and reducing the effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on teacher stress and educator shortages across the nation. Furthermore, this study highlighted the burden and stress the COVID-19 pandemic placed on educators, leaving many to feel deficient in time and energy to accomplish any additional responsibilities outside of their school day, which may have impacted the small participation rate. In fact, several potential participants declined participation, expressing a similar lack of ability to make additional commitments. Furthermore, during the first invitation, a single participant volunteered. Subsequently, when the time commitment was reduced from a 45-60 minute interview to a 15-30 minute interview, based on the actual time to complete the first interview, follow-up emails resulted in an additional wave of volunteers. In an era where time is a valuable and limited resource, people are becoming more conservative about where to spend their time and focus their attention.

Also, educator workloads and job demands are estimated to have doubled since the COVID-19 outbreak, leaving teachers to navigate unmanageable workloads, resulting in higher levels of stress and increased burnout and attrition rates (Carver-Thomas, 2021). This exploratory study further expanded previous literature, the JD-R model and Maslach's theory that when individuals have sufficient resources to meet job demands, they can mitigate levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism or burnout. Participants in this study indicated that they have experienced an increase in job-related stress and demands over the last three years of the shift to a COVID-19 pandemic education era, and two of the five educators reported experiencing feelings of burnout. This paralleled the previously mentioned literature,

which indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted special education teachers'
job-related stress and burnout.

Finally, the United States is experiencing quality educators leaving the field because of
teacher burnout, not due to a lack of ability but rather a lack of resources and unrealistic or
unclear expectations (Phillips, 2021). Even if teachers are not leaving the profession and remain
teaching while experiencing burnout, they may provide less effective, less devoted, and
low-quality education (Ansley et al., 2016; Pressley et al., 2021; Räsänen et al., 2020). While no
one factor in isolation can remediate this critical and severe shortage, the COVID-19 pandemic
may continue to influence our educational systems and have a long-lasting effect on how we
educate our children. Special education teachers who can navigate personal and professional
domains, and are provided with support and resources are more likely to decrease stress levels,
have greater job satisfaction and remain in the profession (Collins et al., 2017). School leaders
must understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on systems and procedures and
adjust expectations or supports to meet educators' new needs (Phillips, 2021).

Overall, this exploratory study revealed that this small sampling of special education
teachers had experienced job-related stress as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; however,
armed with resources and years of experience within the field of special education, they have
mitigated the effects of burnout. Their perspectives and experiences may be considered a
preliminary roadmap for individuals and leaders to emulate. The suggestions and insights
highlighted in this exploratory study can act as a catalyst for ongoing research and the
development of a special education teaching community that is resilient and supportive, ensuring
that children who are eligible for special education services receive a high-quality education both

during times of crisis and beyond. To obtain in-depth insights, additional research with a larger,

more diverse population is advised.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Email to Executive Director of Human Resources for Permission to Conduct

Study in the District

Hello,

My name is Andrea Becker, and I am a doctoral candidate at Bethel University, currently writing my dissertation. I am also a special education facilitator in the district. As a part of the dissertation process, I will conduct a research study. My study is related to exploring the effect COVID-19 has had on special education teachers' perceptions of job-related stress and potential burnout. Burnout is characterized as prolonged and unchecked stress characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, leading to teacher attrition rates to climb (Bottiani et al., 2019; De Stasio et al., 2017; Lee & Eissenstat, 2018; Maslach, 1998; Phillips, 2021). The goal is to examine trends in order to provide better support systems and preventative measures to retain high-quality educators and mitigate burnout in the field of special education.

The purpose of this email is to request permission to conduct my research within the district, specifically to contact all special education teachers in order to solicit potential volunteer participants and complete individual interviews.

Any information obtained in this study will be securely stored on a password-protected computer. In the written reports or publications, no individual or district will be identified as all information will be presented with pseudonyms and void of specific identifiable information, and only aggregate data will be presented.

This research project has been reviewed by Bethel professors, my dissertation advisor, as well as several colleagues in the field of education, and has been aligned in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans. Upon your approval and the approval of

my dissertation committee, I will submit my formal proposal to Bethel's Institutional Review

Board (IRB) for approval. Upon their final approval, I will begin collecting data. Any

information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you, or the district

will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. In any written reports

or publications, no individual will be identified or identifiable, and pseudonyms will be used, and

only aggregate data will be presented. All information and data will be securely stored on a

password-protected computer. If you have any questions about the research and/or research

participant's rights or wish to report a research-related complaint, please contact my Bethel

faculty advisor, Dr. Judith Nagel, at j-nagel@bethel.edu and/or myself, Andrea Becker, at

anb59968@bethel.edu.

Thank you for your consideration and support in my research,

Andrea Becker

Bethel University

Appendix B: Email for Potential Participants

Hello,

My name is Andrea Becker, and I am a doctoral candidate at Bethel University, currently writing my dissertation. As a part of the dissertation process, I will conduct a research study. You are invited to participate in a study of special education teachers' experiences during COVID-19. My study is related to exploring the effect COVID-19 has had on special education teachers' perception of their job demands and potential burnout. The goal is to examine trends in order to provide better support systems and preventative measures to retain high-quality educators and mitigate burnout in the field of special education.

I am reaching out to you today to ask if you would be willing to participate in this study. The District's Executive Director of Human Resources has given permission to conduct this research. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you work as a licensed special education teacher in the district. Your contact information was provided by the Special Education Assistant Director.

If you decide to participate, please read the Consent Form attached to this email, sign, and complete the Interview Participation Google Form (Click <u>HERE</u> to complete) to confirm your interest in being a part of this study and register for an interview time slot.

Volunteer Participation and Next Steps

- I will contact you to set up a 45-60 minute virtual interview session containing 22 questions regarding your teaching experience during COVID-19 and potential burnout.

- These questions will be shared with you prior to the interview session.

- The interview will be audio recorded, and your individual transcript will be shared with you in order to accurately capture your responses.

Risks and Benefits

- Interview questions and the nature of this study are related to COVID-19 and potential job-related stressors and burnout. We may discuss sensitive or stressful information. As a precautionary measure, you will receive a copy of the interview questions, along with local mental health support resources that are available to manage this potential risk where you may choose to access them. Additionally, participants may opt out of the study at any time.

- Your participation will help provide information on how COVID-19 has affected special education teacher burnout.

Data

- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher has access to and will be deleted after three years of the final dissertation defense.

- Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

- In any written reports or publications, no individual will be identified, or identifiable, and only aggregate data will be presented.

- All information and data will be securely stored on a password-protected computer.

Your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the District or Bethel University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting these relationships.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans, the Bethel Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the District's Executive Director of Human Resources. If you have any questions about the research and/or research participant's rights or wish to report a research-related complaint, please contact my Bethel faculty advisor, Dr. Judith Nagel, at j-nagel@bethel.edu and/or myself, Andrea Becker, at anb59968@bethel.edu.

COVID-19 is a relatively new phenomenon, and it is important to study the effects it has had on special education teachers. I appreciate you giving me one of your most valuable resources, your time. In appreciation of your participation, I would like to enter you into a drawing for a chance to receive a small gift to say thank you for your time. All participants will be entered into the drawing for one of two $20 Amazon gift cards.

Please keep a copy of this email for your records if you plan to participate in the research project described.

Thank you for your consideration and time,

Andrea Becker

Bethel University

Appendix C: Reminder/Follow-up Email for Potential Participants

Good Afternoon,

You may have already seen this email as I have had several [Incognito] Special Education

teachers join already and may have recently connected with you further, please disregard if you

have already registered or replied to me. In addition, the initial time commitment is reduced and

averaging 15- 30 minutes.

My name is Andrea Becker, and I am a doctoral candidate at Bethel University, currently

writing my dissertation. As a part of the dissertation process, I will conduct a research study. You

are invited to participate in a study of special education teachers' experiences during COVID-19.

My study is related to exploring the effect COVID-19 has had on special education teachers'

perception of their job demands and potential burnout. The goal is to examine trends in order to

provide better support systems and preventative measures to retain high-quality educators and

mitigate burnout in the field of special education.

I am reaching out to you today to ask if you would be willing to participate in this study.

The District's Executive Director of Human Resources has given permission to conduct this

research. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you work as a licensed

special education teacher in the district. Your contact information was provided by the Special

Education Assistant Director.

If you decide to participate, please read the Consent Form attached to this email, sign,

and complete the Interview Participation Google Form (Click HERE to complete) to confirm

your interest in being a part of this study and register for an interview time slot.

Volunteer Participation and Next Steps

- I will contact you to set up a 15-30 minute virtual interview session containing 22 questions regarding your teaching experience during COVID-19 and potential burnout.

- These questions will be shared with you prior to the interview session.

- The interview will be audio recorded, and your individual transcript will be shared with you in order to accurately capture your responses.

Risks and Benefits

- Interview questions and the nature of this study are related to COVID-19 and potential job-related stressors and burnout. We may discuss sensitive or stressful information. As a precautionary measure, you will receive a copy of the interview questions, along with local mental health support resources that are available to manage this potential risk where you may choose to access them. Additionally, participants may opt out of the study at any time.

- Your participation will help provide information on how COVID-19 has affected special education teacher burnout.

Data

- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher has access to and will be deleted after three years of the final dissertation defense.

- Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

- In any written reports or publications, no individual will be identified, or identifiable, and only aggregate data will be presented.

- All information and data will be securely stored on a password-protected computer.

Your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the District or Bethel University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting these relationships.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans, the Bethel Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the District's Executive Director of Human Resources. If you have any questions about the research and/or research participant's rights or wish to report a research-related complaint, please contact my Bethel faculty advisor, Dr. Judith Nagel, at j-nagel@bethel.edu and/or myself, Andrea Becker, at anb59968@bethel.edu.

COVID-19 is a relatively new phenomenon, and it is important to study the effects it has had on special education teachers. I appreciate you giving me one of your most valuable resources, your time. In appreciation of your participation, I would like to enter you into a drawing for a chance to receive a small gift to say thank you for your time. All participants will be entered into the drawing for one of two $20 Amazon gift cards.

Please keep a copy of this email for your records if you plan to participate in the research project described.

Thank you for your consideration and time,

Andrea Becker

Bethel University

Appendix D: Participant Interview Google Form

*this form is given to potential participants via a Google Form

Interview Participation

Thank you for participating in this study.

Please choose your top **three** preferred time slot choices. A confirmation digital invite will be sent to you within the next two to three days.

* Required

1. Frist choice *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Weds 1/11/23 @ 6:00 PM
- ◯ Weds 1/18/23 @ 6:00 PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 9:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 10:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 11:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ Weds 1/25/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/1/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/8/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 9:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 10:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 11:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/15/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/22/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/1/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/8/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/22/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 9:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 10:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 11:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ None of these days/times work for me but I would like to participate. Ple set up an alternative time.

2. Second choice *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Weds 1/11/23 @ 6:00 PM
- ◯ Weds 1/18/23 @ 6:00 PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 9:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 10:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 11:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ Weds 1/25/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/1/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/8/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 9:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 10:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 11:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/15/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/22/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/1/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/8/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/22/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 9:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 10:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 11:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ None of these days/times work for me but I would like to participate. Please email me to set up an alternative time.

3. Third choice *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Weds 1/11/23 @ 6:00 PM
- ◯ Weds 1/18/23 @ 6:00 PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 9:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 10:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 11:00 AM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 1/22/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ Weds 1/25/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/1/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/8/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 9:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 10:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 11:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 2/12/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/15/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 2/22/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/1/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/8/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Weds 3/22/23 @ 6:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 9:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 10:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 11:00AM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 1:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 2:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 3:00PM
- ◯ Sunday 3/26/23 @ 4:00PM
- ◯ None of these days/times work for me but I would like to participate. Please email me to set up an alternative time.

Appendix E: Interview for Special Education Teachers

Disclosure (*Prior to starting the interview*): *For the purpose of data collection this interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Copies of your interview will be emailed to you, and you will have the opportunity to review, comment, and ask questions about your individual transcription. You have the option to opt out of this study at any time. Zoom is being used for audio recording only; the recording will be downloaded for transcription purposes and deleted as soon as the transcriptions have been generated. Transcriptions will be saved on the researcher's password-protected computer and saved for three years after the final dissertation defense. Additionally, Zoom is not HIPPA compliant and may have access to recordings, therefore we will not be discussing individually identifiable health information (e.g., past, present, or future physical or mental health or condition of an individual).*

You have the option to opt-out of this study at any time, do you agree to continue?

Logistic and Background Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. How long have you been teaching in the special education field?

3. What is your area(s) of licensure?

Job-Related Stress and Burnout Questions

4. Burnout can be defined as a result of prolonged and unchecked stress. Have you experienced job-related stress or burnout in the last year? Three years?

   a. If the participant indicates that he/she experienced some degree of job-related stress and burnout: Please describe your experience and/or share a specific example.

Demands

5. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) suggests six job-related duties. Of the

   six duties listed below, which would you rate the most stressful, and what makes it the

   most difficult for you?

1	Specially designed instruction
2	Evaluation (initial and re-evaluations)
3	Due process procedures
4	Individual Education Plan (IEP) management and preparation
5	Supervision of paraprofessionals
6	Other duties as assigned(study hall, recess monitor, etc.)

6. When the pandemic began educators had to learn new systems and processes very

   quickly. Now that teachers are approaching year three of the COVID-19 pandemic era of

   education, how have your experiences changed or remained the same this school year as

   compared to when the initial changes were implemented at the onset of the pandemic?

   a. Describe your experiences in the following areas:

      i. Planning

      ii. Instruction

      iii. Due process

      iv. Collaboration

Resources

     b.   What were some of the barriers that impact your teaching?

     c.   How do you feel your administrators fully understood the day-to-day impact COVID-19 had on your job duties? Can you explain or provide an example?

7. In your experience, what professional and/or personal resources or supports have you received that alleviate your stress levels?

8. Over the past two to three years, a large number of special education teachers have left the field. What variables have impacted your decision to remain in special education?

Emotional Exhaustion

Please indicate the frequency you have had the following thoughts or feelings.

9. I feel emotionally drained from my work.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

10. I feel frustrated by my work.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

11. I feel that I work beyond my contracted hours regularly in order to complete all obligations of my job.

Never	A few	Once a	A few	Once a	A few	Daily

	times/year	month	times/ month	week	times/ week	

12. Would you like to tell me more about your choices or give me an example?

Inefficacy

Please indicate the frequency you have had the following thoughts or feelings.

13. I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my job.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

14. I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at work.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

15. I feel that I do not have enough time to do many of the things that are important to doing a quality job.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

16. Would you like to tell me more about your choices or give me an example?

Cynicism

Please indicate the frequency you have had the following thoughts or feelings.

17. I don't really care about building relationships or rapport with every student.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

18. I am afraid my job is making me uncaring.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

19. I feel like I deal with colleagues impersonally.

Never	A few times/year	Once a month	A few times/ month	Once a week	A few times/ week	Daily

20. Would you like to tell me more about your choices or give me an example?

Closing Questions

21. What is your intent to remain in the field of education, and more specifically in special education for the next five years?

22. Is there anything else you would like to share?

As a reminder, you have the option to opt-out of this study at any time. I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in my study.

Stress, Burnout, and Mental Health Resources

- Crisis Call Center: www.crisiscallcenter.org OR 1-800-273-8255 Text ANSWER to 839863

- Crisis Text Line: www.crisistextline.org OR Text MN to 741741

- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):

  https://namimn.org/support/information-and-resources/crisis-resources/

- Mental Illness: www.ok2talk.org/gethelp OR 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) (M-F 9 am-5 pm)

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline call 988

- Hennepin County Mental Health Crisis Team: 612-596-1223

- Behavioral Health Services: https://www.bhsiclinics.com

Appendix F: Participation Consent

You are invited to participate in a study of special education teachers' experiences during COVID-19. This study is related to exploring the effect COVID-19 has had on special education teachers' perception of their job demands and potential burnout or prolonged and unchecked stress (Levine, 2013; Martínez-Ramón, 2021; Wong et al., 2017). The goal is to examine trends in order to provide better support systems and preventative measures to retain high-quality educators and mitigate burnout in the field of special education.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you work as a licensed special education teacher in the district. If you decide to participate, I will contact you to set up a 45-60 minute virtual interview session containing 22 questions regarding your teaching experience during COVID-19 and potential burnout. These questions will be shared with you prior to the interview session. The interview will be audio recorded, and your individual transcript will be shared with you in order to accurately capture your responses. The recordings will be deleted once the transcription is verified and the de-identified transcriptions will be saved. All data will be stored on a password-protected computer only the researcher has access to and deleted after three years of the final dissertation defense

Your participation will help provide information on how COVID-19 has affected special education teacher burnout. Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. In any written reports or publications, no individual will be identified or identifiable, and only aggregate data will be presented. All information and data will be securely stored in a password-protected computer.

Interview questions and the nature of this study are related to COVID-19 and potential job-related stressors and burnout. We may discuss sensitive or stressful information. As a precautionary measure, you will receive a copy of the interview questions, along with local mental health support resources that are available to manage this potential risk where you may choose to access them. There may be psychological/emotional risks related to experiencing anxiety about meeting with the researcher and/or answering questions related to your lived experience. You can choose to not answer any questions, and you can also end the interview at any time without any negative consequences. Your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the school district or Bethel University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation in the study at any time without affecting these relationships.

There are no tangible personal benefits to participating. However, the intent of this study is to expand knowledge on the effect COVID-19 has had on special education teachers' perception of their job demands and potential burnout. Your experiences can assist special education teams and leadership in providing support to teachers and increasing special education teacher retention rates.

COVID-19 is a relatively new phenomenon, and it is important to study the effects it has had on special education teachers. I appreciate you giving me one of your most valuable resources, your time. In appreciation of your participation, I will enter you into a drawing for a chance to receive a small gift to say thank you for your time. All participants will be entered into the drawing for one of two $20 Amazon gift cards.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans, Bethel Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the District's Executive Director of Human Resources. If you have any questions about the research, or research participant's rights, and/or wish to report a research-related complaint, please contact my Bethel faculty advisor, Dr. Judith Nagel at j-nagel@bethel.edu and/or myself, Andrea Becker at anb59968@bethel.edu.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records. Your digital signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time after signing this form, should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____

Name (first and last)

_____   _____

Signature   Date