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# SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' WELLBEING AND BURNOUT

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The promotion of well-being—or the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as meeting life's challenges, resulting in physical and mental health—has not only received increased attention across social sciences research efforts, but also has garnered greater visibility in the public eye (Dodge et al., 2012; National Educational Association, 2022). For instance, almost-daily news and social media stories discuss how to prioritize well-being, engage deeply with others, and ameliorate burnout associated with work stress. Generally, this attention is positive in increasing awareness and reducing stigma associated with experiencing burnout; however, it is often also accompanied by the subtle implication that the person experiencing burnout can pull themselves up by their bootstraps to better experience work well-being. Posts with "10 ways to cure burnout" provide self-care advice such as sleeping eight hours a day, getting exercise, and eating healthy, among others (Waterford.org, 2021). However, if burnout occurs in the interaction between an individual and their work environment, focusing solely on what the individual *should* do outside of their work environment is incomplete and misguided. Indeed, the idea that well-being is solely individually determined is losing credence in organizational psychology (Alarcon, 2011), as research steadily increases on how contextual factors (e.g., administrator support, adequate planning time) matter and shape well-being.


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Just as individual well-being has garnered greater attention, so too should the well-being of special education teachers (SETs). SETs are tasked with the responsibility of educating and meeting the complex needs of students with disabilities, while navigating the competing demands that exist within school settings (e.g., policies, funding, parents; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Thus, it is unsurprising that SETs experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion than other educators (Brunsting et al., 2022). As such, school leaders need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to better support SETs, as teacher well-being, burnout, and affective engagement have been linked with mental and physical health, retention rates, and student outcomes. For example, teachers with burnout experience more frequent musculoskeletal pain and recurring flu (Armon et al., 2010; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993), lower well-being (Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2016), and higher job attrition (Billingsley et al., 2020). In turn, students of teachers with high burnout experience lower academic outcomes and have less goal attainment in their individualized education programs (IEPs; Irvin et al., 2013; Madigan & Curran, 2021; Wong et al., 2017). Specifically, teacher burnout can perpetuate a cycle of poor student outcomes by moderating intervention efficacy, further reducing student access to evidence-based practices to support their learning and development (Cumming et al., 2021; Lane et al., 2021). Given that students receiving special education services are mandated (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004) to receive high-quality instruction and supports to meet their needs, and that SETs with high burnout may be less equipped to meet student needs, understanding and enhancing SETs' well-being at work is a critical responsibility for scholars and educational leaders.

In this chapter, we discuss SET well-being and burnout in the context of their work. Because there are minor differences between well-being and burnout, we are intentional in our use of each term. However, as a general framing, the reader can consider special educators' work well-being and burnout as being at opposite ends of a continuum. We first provide a definition of key constructs associated with well-being and burnout. We then offer an overview of the conceptual foundations, historical research, and current lines of inquiry. Last, we discuss implications and future directions for special educator well-being, with a minimal focus on strategies SETs can use to support their own well-being and greater focus on needed changes in larger educational systems (e.g., federal, district, school, universities researchers). We argue that educational systems collectively hold the primary responsibility for providing teachers healthy working environments, strong pre- and in-service training, and effective practices (Billingsley et al., 2020), aligning with Nakita Valerio (2019, p. 1) in positing that "shouting 'self-care' at people who actually need community care is how we fail people."

## Definitions of Key Constructs

Although well-being is a broadly used term, scholars are still generating an encompassing definition (Dodge et al., 2012). We draw from Scaria et al. (2020) who propose that well-being is "the ability to appropriately respond to expected and unexpected stresses in order to be healthy, happy, and prosperous in work and life" (p. 8). For our purposes, we focus on well-being within the work context—in this case the school—for SETs, and we define well-being to be the positive mental and physical health associated with perceiving one is doing well at work.

In contrast to well-being, burnout occurs when, after prolonged periods of stress within a specific context, an individual experiences one or more of the three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). Emotional exhaustion encompasses the sensation of feeling tired all the time and associated mental fatigue. Depersonalization is when individuals disengage emotionally. Teachers may depersonalize from students—disengage emotionally—to protect their emotional resources or reserves from being depleted (Hakanen et al., 2006). Lastly, lack of personal accomplishment involves perspectives of work importance or

achievement. For example, teachers may feel their work is not meaningful or accomplishing what they entered the profession to do. We note that burnout is conceptually different from stress or fleeting negative thoughts about work—indeed, individuals may experience stress at work but also experience a supportive and resourced environment enhancing their ability to work effectively and maintain personal boundaries such that they do not become burned out. Similarly, burnout is not job dissatisfaction. Teachers may be dissatisfied with aspects of their job (e.g., salary, hours) without experiencing one or more dimensions of burnout (Farber, 2000). It is important to remember that burnout is context-specific; in this manuscript, we focus specifically on burnout associated with individuals' roles as teachers within a school. Thus, while there are slight differences between teacher well-being and teacher burnout (Demerouti et al., 2012; Scaria et al., 2020), we generally conceptualize these as on a continuum. In general, well-being occurs when more work challenges are met and burnout happens when fewer are met.

## Theoretical Approaches

Much of the work on SET well-being and burnout is based on multiple theoretical approaches applied to frame special educator affective experiences at work. The primary theories include role theory, job demands-resources model, conservation of resources theory, and the dual-factor model of mental health. In the following sections, we describe each theory and highlight their unique contribution to SET well-being and burnout research.

### *Contextually Oriented Models*

#### *Role Theory*

Extending broad sociological examinations of peoples' roles within society, role theorists focus on individuals' roles, or the expected and recurring actions and responsibilities that interact with others' actions to produce expected outcomes (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Through exploration of the interaction of individuals, their roles, and the roles of others, theorists identified a series of challenges which have been applied to a range of careers and jobs, including SETs. These challenges primarily include role conflict and role ambiguity. Role conflict occurs when two or more responsibilities conflict, making it difficult or impossible for the teacher to meet both. For example, an SET may be expected to use planning time to generate high-quality lesson plans; however, the SET's planning time may be taken up with behavioral emergencies or IEP meeting preparation. Role ambiguity occurs when responsibilities are not clearly defined, leading to confusion about expectations. For example, during co-teaching, a general education teacher may attempt to relegate an SET to a paraprofessional-like role rather than collaborating to enhance co-instruction.

Although individuals' personality and prior experience can influence how they perceive their roles (Johnson & Stinson, 1975), for special educators, lived experience within their organizational roles and interactions with others can further impact the alignment or misalignment of their resources to support their role responsibilities (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2022). For instance, to be able to fulfill their role, SETs may take on additional responsibilities (e.g., paraprofessional training) that are not outlined in their job and are invisible to others (Bettini et al., 2019). An additional role challenge is role dissonance, which occurs when expectations of job responsibilities do not match experience (Gersten et al., 2001). Role dissonance is often referred to as expectation-reality mismatch or the expectation-reality gap. Researchers found that role dissonance can be a particular challenge for SETs, especially novice SETs' (Wasburn-Moses, 2009) and SETs serving students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; Bettini et al., 2019) whose expectations

of demands and supports available often do not match their teaching experience reality. Thus, role theory advanced knowledge that special educators' understanding of their roles and the resources to support them in fulfilling their role responsibilities matter, shaping their ability to do their work and, likely, their sense of well-being and burnout.

### *Job Demands-Resources Model*

Seeking an accessible way to understand complex relationships between employee stress and motivation, theorists Bakker and Demerouti (2007) developed the job demands-resources model. Building on extant research across a range of disciplines and moving beyond job roles, they developed a 2 × 2 matrix model with job demands on the one axis and job resources on the other (Figure 15.1).

When job demands are high and resources to meet those demands are low, employees become demotivated and experience high strain leading to burnout; conversely, when demands are low and resources are high, employees are well supported and more likely to be highly motivated (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The job demands-resources model provides a clear, simple, and effective approach for understanding outcomes of unbalanced job requirements and supports, and it has been used effectively by researchers to understand the mismatch between high workload and often-low resources for SETs (Murangi et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). However, the job demands-resources model may need to be expanded for complex jobs, like those of SETs, in which high emotional exhaustion is common. In a recent survey study, researchers revealed that SETs serving students with EBD reported high emotional exhaustion, but they also reported low depersonalization and high personal accomplishment (Brunsting et al., 2022). Thus, the ways in which researchers apply the model may need to be more nuanced and examine how strain and motivation are related to specific dimensions of burnout. In addition, although the job demands-resources model sagely focuses on the responsibility for change at the system/job level, it places less consideration on the individual as an active and strategic agent. Although Bakker and Demerouti recognize the importance of motivation and autonomy, a more seamless integration of the individual as a strategic decision maker needs to be considered; conservation of resources theory captures this component.

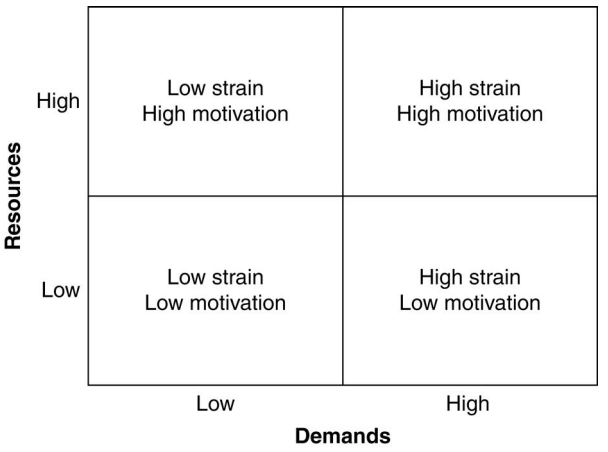


*Figure 15.1* Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) Job Demands-Resources Model

### *Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory*

In conservation of resources theory, theorists build on job demands-resources model in positing that people are motivated to both maintain and protect current resources and acquire additional resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Resources typically include personal characteristics (e.g., positivity, teaching self-efficacy), objects (e.g., computer, internet access), conditions (e.g., administrator support, adequate curricular resources), and energy (e.g., money) that support people to acquire and solidify resources (Alarcon, 2011). Researchers have recently drawn on COR theory to examine and review specific demands and resources that are salient to SETs, often referred to as working conditions. Specifically, researchers found that SETs' demands (e.g., classroom heterogeneity), social resources (e.g., administrator support), and logistical resources (e.g., planning time) are implicated in key SET outcomes: burnout, instructional practice use, and intent to leave/stay (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020; Brunsting et al., 2023; Cumming et al., 2021). Further, interviews of current SETs serving students with EBD in the Northeast revealed that SETs were—to various degrees—strategically advocating for and marshaling resources to best support their students, underscoring the tenet of individual agency within systems posited by COR theory (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2022). Much of the recent research on teacher well-being discussed in detail below has been informed by COR theory.

Overall, role theory, job demands-resources model, and conservation of resources theory have advanced knowledge regarding the importance of SETs' roles, the need to balance demands and resources, and the salience of working conditions in shaping SET well-being and burnout. Yet, these theories are limited with respect to their incorporation of individual SETs' identities and characteristics that may influence their experiences of working conditions leading to well-being and burnout, such as racial, ethnic, and gender identities (Scott et al., 2023), mental health (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), and self-efficacy for teaching (Garwood, 2022). As such, we encourage scholars to develop theory and conceptual frameworks (Scott et al., 2022) that consider both external (e.g., working conditions) and individual factors (e.g., race, mental health), which can enhance SET well-being and burnout research and improve intervention/prevention efforts. One promising avenue to understand the SET identity-working conditions interaction longitudinally is via longitudinal growth curve modeling, wherein researchers can map individuals along trajectories of burnout (Gilmour et al., 2022).

## ***Dual-Factor Model of Mental Health***

Beyond contextually oriented theories, an additional theory to apply to SET well-being and burnout is the dual-factor model of mental health (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), which takes into consideration individual characteristics. Recently, researchers investigating youth and adolescent functioning have explored a different approach to well-being that challenges the traditional notion that mental health is an unidimensional construct with subjective well-being on the one end of the spectrum and mental illness on the other end (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Through a series of studies, they noted that individuals may exhibit one or more traditionally negative indicators of mental health such as depression, anxiety, or oppositional defiant disorder; yet, they may also consider themselves happy and satisfied with their lives (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Thus, researchers have proposed the dual-factor model of mental health, which is a $2 \times 2$ matrix with subjective well-being on the one axis and mental illness on the other. Based on their mental illness and subjective well-being, individuals can be grouped into four areas: complete mental health (high well-being, low mental illness), symptomatic but content (high well-being, high mental illness), vulnerable (low well-being, low mental illness), and troubled (low well-being and high mental illness; Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). This model not only may be

important for providing supports for students served in special education (Lazarus et al., 2022), but also may provide a promising explanation for why some teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion or role overload still consider themselves to be healthy, have high personal accomplishment, and be affectively engaged with other (Fox et al., 2020). Thus, when considering SET well-being and burnout, researchers may also need to consider the dual-factor model of mental health.

## Research on Special Educator Burnout and Well-Being

Initial references to teacher burnout in research literature began in the 1970s, with case studies of individual teachers (Fossey et al., 1975). As theorists Maslach, Leiter, Lazarus, and others formalized the construct of burnout and developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1979), their work catalyzed a flurry of research on SET burnout in the 1980s. In 1983–84, three research teams published five studies examining delivery model, class size, category of special education service provided, teacher age, teacher experience, teacher training, and locus of control (Beck & Gargiulo, 1983; McIntyre, 1984; Zabel et al., 1984). More teacher experience and higher degree levels were associated with less burnout, while class size was not linked with burnout. SETs in self-contained settings, those supporting students with hearing impairments and emotional disturbance, and those teaching at the high school level reported the highest burnout.

Among the studies published in the late 1980s–2000s, several common themes emerged: working with older students, supporting students with EBD, and working in self-contained settings were linked with higher burnout (Banks & Necco, 1990; Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002; Weber & Toffler, 1989; Zabel et al., 1984). Conversely, clarity in role and support from administrators and colleagues was linked with lower burnout and better well-being (Cherniss, 1988; Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Embich, 2001; Fimian & Blanton, 1986). Researchers at the time also considered the broader impact of burnout by investigating burnout over time, exploring outcomes of SET burnout, and developing interventions. The sole longitudinal study of special educator burnout prior to 2022 revealed that burnout increased over time and was highest for SETs serving students with behavioral disorders (Frank & McKenzie, 1993). This finding, paired with the finding that SETs' emotional exhaustion predicted their leaving the profession (Carlson & Thompson, 1995), illuminated how burnout can impact the supply of SETs.

With increased identification and prevalence of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the 2000s and 2010s (Sheldrick & Carter, 2018), researchers focused on understanding how SETs serving students with ASD experienced burnout, and, in turn, how SETs' burnout impacted their teaching behaviors and students' outcomes. For SETs serving students with ASD, self-efficacy for classroom management was inversely associated with burnout (Ruble et al., 2011), and higher number of students with ASD in class was linked with higher burnout (Coman et al., 2013). In turn, SETs' levels of burnout were inversely associated with IEP goal attainment, IEP quality, teacher adherence to conducting an intervention for students with ASD, and the number of words spoken to students with ASD (Irvin et al., 2013; Ruble & McGrew, 2013). Subsequently, many other studies demonstrated associations between burnout and teachers' effective implementation of interventions, tiered systems of support, instructional quality, and evidence-based practices (Buckman et al., 2021; Cumming et al., 2021; Domitrovich et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2021; Oakes et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2012). In essence, researchers have already identified a range of evidence-based instruction for students receiving special education services, but this research indicates that districts cannot implement them with high success if teachers are experiencing burnout.

As such, researchers currently understand the pressing need to support SET well-being both for the sake of teachers' health and for the outcomes of their students (Bettini et al., 2016;

Brunsting et al., 2014; Garwood, 2022). Given the need to better understand burnout and support teacher well-being, researchers have developed a range of lines of inquiry into SET well-being. We detail four of most actively researched at present: (a) working conditions, (b) roles and collegial relationships, (c) teacher-student relationships and self-efficacy, and (d) stress management and burnout awareness interventions. We also investigate the direct and indirect pathways by which SET well-being and burnout are linked with student outcomes.

## Working Conditions and Special Educator Burnout, Use of Instructional Practices, and Attrition

According to COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), when demands of work are balanced with available resources, individuals can manage their responsibilities; yet, when demands exceed resources, individuals are more likely to experience stress and burnout across fields (Halbesleben, 2006; Hobfoll et al., 2018), including in special education (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020). SETs depend on working conditions—that is, their perceptions of their work context and organization that shapes their work experiences and outcomes (Billingsley et al., 2020)—to provide ample resources to support their ability to fulfill work demands aimed at successfully educating students with disabilities (Cumming et al., 2021). Prior research and reviews (Bettini et al., 2016; Bettini, Cumming et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2020) have highlighted specific demands and resources that are salient to SETs and are implicated in key SET outcomes, including burnout, instructional practice use, and intent to leave/stay in teaching.

### *Demands*

SETs' often experience demands (i.e., work responsibilities) that are unique to their role and distinct from other educators. These demands typically include academic/behavioral instructional responsibilities, instructional grouping (e.g., number of students and diversity of student needs), paraprofessional management (e.g., supervising, training), paperwork, and additional responsibilities (e.g., administrative tasks, lunch duty). Compared to general educators, although SETs tend to teach smaller groups of students (e.g., ten students on average; Giangreco et al., 2013), they often teach multiple grade levels and subject areas. For example, O'Brien et al. (2019) found SETs teaching students with EBD in self-contained settings reported teaching an average of three grade levels and nine subject lessons. Thus, SETs are often tasked with planning instruction across multiple grade levels and subject areas simultaneously, which may also require collaboration with other colleagues (Leko et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2019). The result is that SETs often work far beyond their contractual hours (e.g., greater than 50 hours per week; Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020).

SETs who experience demands that are unmanageable are more likely to experience burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014), have less self-efficacy for instruction and engage in less effective instructional practices (Cumming et al., 2021), and plan to leave their positions (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019)—underscoring the importance of working conditions in shaping SET well-being. For instance, SETs who teach multiple subject areas and grade levels report experiencing difficulty planning for and providing effective instruction to students (Bettini et al., 2019). This is compounded when needing to coordinate with multiple general education teachers related to including students with disabilities (Scruggs et al., 2007). Though paraprofessionals can provide needed support, SETs who are responsible for training and supervising multiple paraprofessionals tend to view their workloads as less manageable (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020), and the addition of untrained paraprofessionals to a classroom can bring demands and stress for SETs (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2022). Beyond training and managing paraprofessionals, SETs who have

extra responsibilities (e.g., coordinating bus schedules) indicate that these take time away from planning and instruction (Bettini et al., 2019; DeMik, 2008; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). SETs who spend a significant amount of time completing paperwork report that it interferes with their ability to do their work and contributes to their intent to leave (Billingsley, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Conversely, SETs who teach smaller groups of students with more homogeneous learning needs tend to report (a) having sufficient planning time, (b) viewing workloads as manageable, (c) experiencing less emotional exhaustion (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020; Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005), (d) having instructional self-efficacy, (e) using effective instruction practices (Cumming et al., 2021) and interventions (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007), and (f) intending to stay in their position (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020). Thus, SETs' demands are a crucial aspect of their working conditions.

### *Resources*

Salient resources that SETs actively pursue and protect to be able to meet the demands of their work include social resources, informational resources, and logistical resources. We exclude other key resources, such as teacher salaries (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), as these are not a result of the school organization and are less malleable. Further, we acknowledge that these resources are further shaped by school poverty and student levels (Fall & Billingsley, 2011; Mason-Williams et al., 2023), whether schools are located in rural or urban districts (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020), and the sociocultural identities of students (Mason-Williams et al., 2022).

Social resources broadly refer to supports SETs receive from other educators and the school's collective culture. Social resources include administrative support (i.e., actions administrators engage in to support SETs), collegial support (i.e., actions colleagues take to support SETs, such as co-planning), paraprofessional support (i.e., extent to which paraprofessionals support SETs' work), school culture (i.e., shared norms and values within the school, especially related to students with disabilities), and autonomy (i.e., extent to which SETs can make decisions independently; Bettini et al., 2016). Overall, SETs tend to report experiencing moderate to high levels of support from administrators, colleagues, and paraprofessionals (Albrecht et al., 2009; Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2019) and teach within schools where they perceive that at least half of teachers are committed to helping students, including students with disabilities (O'Brien et al., 2019). Yet, SETs often note variability within these supports. For instance, although O'Brien et al. (2019) found SETs educating students with EBD indicated administrators provided support for classroom management and discipline, and cared about them as a person, they provided less support related to academic instruction and protected instructional time. Another example of support and demand variability can be seen in relation to paraprofessionals. SETs generally provide better instruction when they have the support of well-trained paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al., 2010); however, Bettini et al. (2019) found that having multiple paraprofessionals was perceived as a demand rather than a support by SETs serving students with EBD in self-contained settings. More research is needed to understand the complex and important role that paraprofessionals play in the workload of SETs and student learning, as well as the impact of frequent paraprofessional turnover (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007).

Informational resources are the formal learning opportunities (e.g., professional development [PD], mentoring; Kennedy, 2016) SETs receive to guide and develop their instructional skills. Overall, SETs tend to see the value of PD, yet report variability in its quality and helpfulness to their work. For instance, SETs have reported that received PD did not necessarily help them to improve their academic instruction nor classroom/behavior management skills (O'Brien et al., 2019). Also, PD is not always sufficiently geared toward needed areas of instruction. For instance, Leko et al. (2018) found PD rarely focused on adolescents with disabilities (less than three hours) and even

less time was devoted to crucial content/subject areas (e.g., literacy). The current state of SET formal mentoring is less researched; yet, there is some indication of differences in access in low- and high-poverty schools (Fall & Billingsley, 2011) and differences based on SET or general educator role (Wasburn-Moses, 2010). Additional insight is warranted into the current state of SET formal mentoring.

Logistical resources are the practical supports SETs access to instruct and support their students. Logistical resources include planning time (e.g., time to plan instruction, complete paperwork), collaborative planning time (i.e., time to plan with colleagues), and curricular resources (i.e., materials used for instruction, such as textbooks and technology; Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020; Billingsley et al., 2020; Siuty et al., 2018). Recent research has found that SETs' access to adequate logistical resources is limited. For instance, SETs tend to report that their time for planning is inadequate (Albrecht et al., 2009; O'Brien et al., 2019), resulting in SETs spending well over nine hours outside their school day on planning/preparation (O'Brien et al., 2019). Longitudinal analyses across a school year revealed that SETs serving students with EBD who had sufficient planning time reported more manageable workloads and, in turn, experienced less emotional exhaustion and higher personal accomplishment later in the year (Brunsting et al., 2022). Further, access to sufficient curricular resources is limited, with SETs in a nationally representative survey indicating that they "somewhat agree" they have necessary resources to do their work (Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020). Instead, SETs often report having to seek out curricular resources (e.g., Pinterest) during limited planning time (O'Brien et al., 2019).

When SETs have adequate access to social, information, and logistical resources to be able to meet the demands of their work, they are less likely to experience burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014), are better equipped to provide effective instruction (Cumming et al., 2021), and are more likely to stay in the profession (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Consistently, social supports (e.g., positive collegial interactions, positive school culture, administrative support) have been positively associated with SETs' ability to implement newly learned practices (Klingner et al., 2003), intent to stay (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), reduced burnout (Brunsting et al., 2022), and retention in the profession (Miller et al., 1999). Further, informational resources, such as quality and targeted PD, has been found to be related to SETs' reported use of learned skills with students (Leko et al., 2018) and intent to stay (Albrecht et al., 2009; Gersten et al., 2001). Last, logistical resources, such as access to adequate curricular resources and planning time, appear to be particularly important to SETs' emotional exhaustion, self-efficacy, and use of instructional practices (Cumming et al., 2021), as well as intent to stay (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020). Conversely, when SETs have limited resources to meet the demands of their work, they are more likely to experience negative outcomes, including burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014).

### *Roles*

The roles teachers are asked to play in schools can both (a) define the demands of their daily work life and (b) determine the ways in which they expend their limited resources. SETs consistently perform a job more challenging than that of their general education colleagues (Ansley et al., 2016; Garwood, 2022; Williams & Dikes, 2015). Research has shown novice special educators rate their workloads as more demanding than general education peers, and these workloads, in turn, predict higher rates of burnout (Bettini, Jones et al., 2017). Workloads are conceptualized as both the tangible tasks required for the job and the responsibility taken on in performance of duties (Alarcon, 2011). When teachers take on too many tasks, they may experience role conflict; likewise, when they are uncertain of where their responsibilities begin and end, they can experience role ambiguity. Nearly 40 years ago, Crane and Iwanicki (1986) found that SETs who rated higher on role conflict and role ambiguity

reported greater feelings of burnout. These findings were aligned with those in a recent study of rural SETs (Garwood et al., 2018). Indeed, additional research has identified role dissonance and other role-related challenges for novice SETs working in inclusive schools (Bettini, Morris-Mathews et al., 2021). These findings are important because, according to COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), when workers (e.g., SETs) experience role stressors, they are forced to make strategic choices about which parts of the job they must do versus those they can but are not required to perform. Ultimately, this may lead to educators adopting a triage approach to the education of students with disabilities, which is detrimental to students and SETs themselves.

### *Special Educators' Intersectional Identities*

As detailed succinctly by Mason-Williams et al. (2022), clear race/ethnicity-based disparities exist in the U.S. for access to resources and social assets (e.g., strong collegial relationships) within schools—underscoring distinct working experiences for SETs from diverse backgrounds. For example, within schools with White principals, African American teachers garnered less supplemental compensation compared to their White counterparts (Grissom & Keiser, 2011). Similarly, Latina and Asian American general educators reported outright resentment for language use and microaggressions, respectively (Amos, 2020; Endo, 2015). SETs of color have expressed that the racial and disability battle fatigue in garnering resources for themselves to serve their students was a key stress factor in their daily work (Kulkarni et al., 2022). Teachers in schools serving greater percentages of students of color have reported less social support (Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2012). Additional demands may also be placed upon teachers of color. For instance, a qualitative study of black male SETs revealed that they were expected to engage in noninstructional roles, especially with respect to discipline for students of color outside of their caseloads (Cormier et al., 2022). Thus, considerations of how working conditions vary based on SETs' intersecting identities are critical (Bettini, Cormier et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2023), as well as understanding how to better support them is essential to their well-being and student outcomes. Taken together, the evidence for working conditions as a key lever for enhancing SETs' well-being is strong, highlighting the immediacy need for intervention work.

## Student-Teacher Relationships and Classroom Management Efficacy

Another avenue for supporting SET well-being is through the quality of their relationships with students and their efficacy in managing classrooms. Building high-quality relationships with students is not only a key factor in being able to deliver content effectively; it is also a way for teachers to maintain longevity in the field (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019) and reduce their levels of stress (Yoon, 2002). Some researchers have even suggested that relationships between teachers and their students with EBD provide the foundation from which all positive behavior intervention supports can build and produce positive outcomes for students (Mihalas et al., 2009). As such, a teacher's ability to build relationships with students is a key factor in their ability to manage student behavior, especially when done so with considerations of culturally sustainable pedagogy (Hunter et al., 2021). In studies seeking students' opinions on what makes a teacher an effective classroom manager, students routinely identify relationship-building as critical (Capern & Hamond, 2014; Sellman, 2009). Although strong teacher-student relationships are often beneficial—as discussed further below—there is a risk to teachers of secondary traumatic stress (i.e., stress arising from hearing about the trauma of their students) leading to burnout for in-service and pre-service teachers (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). It is also important to note that the directionality of the relationship is not yet clear (i.e., relationship quality may predict burnout or burnout may predict relationship quality; Poling et al., 2022).

Teachers with strong relationships with their students also experience a greater sense of teaching self-efficacy (i.e., a belief in their ability to effectively lead student learning; Hajovsky et al., 2020). Efficacy for managing student behavior is a key variable in preventing teacher burnout. For example, among general education teachers, research has shown that teachers' behavior management skills mediate the relationship between student misbehavior and burnout (Tsouloupas et al., 2010). Among SETs, two studies have found that classroom management efficacy is negatively correlated with feelings of burnout (Garwood et al., 2018; Ruble et al., 2011). Ruble et al. (2011) found that for SETs serving students with ASD, classroom management self-efficacy was correlated with significantly less emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and significantly higher personal accomplishment; self-efficacy for obtaining colleague or principal support was not significantly correlated with any dimension of burnout. Similarly, Garwood et al. (2018) found that classroom management efficacy predicted significantly lower depersonalization and higher personal accomplishment, even accounting for role conflict and role ambiguity for a sample of rural special educators. Finally, Gilmour et al. (2022) examined a sample of 102 K-6 general education teachers and SETs working with students with EBD in inclusive classrooms and found that both types of teachers did not vary significantly in their levels of burnout. Yet, teachers rating higher on burnout in both groups had students who exhibited greater levels of problem behaviors in the classroom (i.e., teachers were less effective at managing classroom behavior).

## Intervention

Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) conducted the initial—and to date only—published intervention research study focused on ameliorating burnout specifically for special educators. Their intervention included two parts: (a) a stress management workshop across ten weeks that included situational coping skills, physiological coping skills, and cognitive coping skills, and (b) a peer collaboration program to enhance collegial support and collaboratively develop solutions for student-related challenges. SETs receiving the intervention experienced significant decreases in emotional exhaustion and increases in personal accomplishment relative to the control group. A recent Institute of Education Sciences-funded project led by Lisa Ruble is developing a comprehensive intervention to target special educators' well-being and burnout based on cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques found efficacious for mental health workers and for general educators in Iran (Ghasemi et al., 2022). In attempting to provide scalable and easily accessible intervention, Ansley and colleagues developed an online stress management and mindfulness intervention which has reduced burnout in studies with both a combined sample of general educators and special educators (Ansley, 2018) and pre-service teachers (Ansley & Wander, 2022). Similar to mindfulness interventions, awareness interventions have demonstrated some efficacy for reducing burnout for general educators, specifically via enhancing personal accomplishment (Jennings et al., 2013). Taken together, the intervention research provides support for self-care interventions; however, as we discuss in next steps, there is no research yet examining systems-level interventions that might target working conditions for SETs.

## Next Steps for the Field

As we consider the research underpinning SETs' work well-being, some next steps are particularly important to support SETs and their students as soon as possible. Specifically, we provide research recommendations pertaining to (a) participant sociocultural identities, (b) measurement, (c) longitudinal research, (d) intervention development, and (e) challenges for researchers to consider. Next, we discuss implications for teacher preparation program faculty, administrators, and SETs.

### *Participant Sociocultural Identities*

Exploring and understanding the experiences and outcomes (e.g., well-being, burnout) of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RELD) SETs are needed within a field where study participants are predominantly White. This is particularly important for retention and recruitment efforts, given the underrepresentation of RELD SETs (Bettini et al., 2018), and the need for schools to have teachers who reflect the characteristics, culture, identities, and backgrounds of their students (Mason-Williams et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2022). Although prior studies have examined age as a factor for burnout, with mixed results, researchers have begun to explore SETs' working conditions by SET racial demographics. For instance, Bettini, Brunsting et al. (2022) found that while RELD SETs (i.e., Asian, Black, Latinx, Native American) experienced strong administrator support, they reported lower school cultures of collaboration and collective responsibility than their White counterparts. Mason-Williams et al. (2022) identified disparities among teacher access to social resources based on race and teacher role: teachers of color and SETs were less likely to have access to social resources than their White and general education counterparts. In a similar vein, Bettini, Meyer et al. (2023, p. 2) identified a range of ways in which gender impacts SETs' work environment. They center the social viewpoint that teaching—like other "care work"—is predominantly women's work and therefore "absolves society of the responsibility of eliminating [inequitable working conditions and student outcomes], instead devolving that responsibility onto individual teachers who are expected to sacrifice their own well-being to compensate for social disinvestment in their students' lives." As noted by Scott et al. (2023), more research is needed to consider and understand how the dynamic interplay of factors discussed in this chapter may be experienced differently by individuals of varied intersecting identities, and the extent to which these impact their working conditions and work well-being.

Much of the research on SET well-being focuses on educators serving students with EBD or ASD (Brunsting et al., 2014; Park & Shin, 2020), which has provided meaningful insight into factors that contribute to or hinder their well-being. Yet, additional insight is needed into whether SETs serving students with EBD and ASD shoulder additional emotional and interpersonal labor when collaborating with general educators, given that their colleagues may not recognize EBD and ASD as disabilities. For example, SETs serving students with EBD have reported that some general educators in their schools do not believe EBD to be a disability; thus, they expect students with EBD to be able to regulate their emotions and behaviors as frequently and efficiently as their peers served in general education (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2022). Furthermore, additional research is needed on SETs serving students with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities as well as lower incidence disabilities (e.g., developmental delays, visual impairment, deafness), given the current paucity of research.

### *Measurement*

Given the interlinking aspects of working conditions, teacher well-being, and student outcomes, it is imperative we enhance the quality and applicability of research related to SET well-being and burnout. Researchers as well as district and school administrators require strong measurement and means to more effectively identify SETs with unmanageable working conditions and low well-being. First, there is a need for a well-validated and comprehensive measure of SET working conditions. Stark et al. (2022) conducted a systematic literature review of quantitative measures assessing SETs' working conditions in the U.S. schools and identified 44 studies from 1983 to 2020. They determined that only five measures (e.g., National Teacher and Principal Survey) existed that gauged multiple aspects of working conditions simultaneously and several that assessed specific conditions. Yet, none were developed for nor validated with SETs working in different service delivery models. As such, to

inform prevention and intervention efforts, scholars should actively develop and validate a comprehensive measure of SET working conditions.

Second, measures used to account for the roles teachers play in school may also need further development. The Role Questionnaire (Rizzo et al., 1970) has been used in research examining special educator burnout, but it was developed over 50 years ago and the measure was not specific to teachers; rather, it was a generic questionnaire for many work settings. Given the changes in the educational landscape during that period, it may be time to generate additional metrics for assessing teachers' roles in school. What is the best way to measure caseload, given the need to not only often teach content across multiple grades and subject areas but also the need to individualize for students based on needs and accommodations? When we also consider the increased prevalence of multi-tiered systems of support as well as SETs working with students not involved in special education, the caseload variable may be somewhat inaccurate and in need of updating (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Measuring SET school density—calculated as the total number full-time SETs in a school per the total number of students—may be a promising alternative, as it is linked with special educators' ratings of their working conditions (Giangreco et al., 2013).

Third, researchers should carefully consider measures of SET classroom management self-efficacy. For instance, the Teacher Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) is one of the most commonly used measures to assess teacher efficacy related to classroom management. Although the psychometrics are strong and there is a specific subscale for behavior management, there are other measures of classroom management efficacy available for researchers' use (see O'Neill & Stephenson, 2011, for a review) that may be better aligned with targeted study participants. For example, the Autism Self-Efficacy Scale for Teachers (Ruble & McGrew, 2013) and the Behavior Management Self-Efficacy Scale (Main & Hammond, 2008) were developed with the intention of measuring efficacy of teachers of students with ASD and EBD, respectively. Thus, we urge researchers to consider how teachers interact with students with various identities and behavioral profiles in measurement development and selection.

### *Longitudinal Research*

As the field has matured in recent years, the amount of evidence supporting associations among roles, working conditions, self-efficacy, and burnout is relatively well established. Additional exploration of new potential variables and novel intersections of variables is critical; yet, research is needed to explore and solidify temporal precedence for key malleable factors and levers to enhance support for causal relationships. More nuanced understandings of how working conditions, self-efficacy, roles, and well-being/burnout interact over time and potentially become reinforcing in nature are needed. Extant research examining such relationships has only tracked burnout across one school year (Brunsting et al., 2022, 2023); additional research on a longer timeframe is warranted.

### *Intervention Development*

Although the research literature on interventions for special educator well-being and burnout is nascent, studies provide strong evidence, via randomized control trials, for the effects of stress management, mindfulness, and cognitive-behavioral therapy interventions on burnout and well-being for general education teachers (Ghasemi et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2013). And while it is important for SETs to have access to evidence-based self-care, it is critical that researchers identify avenues to intervene within the systems (e.g., state, district, school) that are catalyzing burnout and are—at best—tenuously supporting SETs' well-being. Given the consistently high rates of emotional exhaustion for SETs countrywide, the imperative to support SETs' well-being needs to be addressed systematically

at the causes rather than treating the symptoms solely through self-care. Potential entry points for intervention include research-practice partnerships and multi-tiered systems of supports in which schools have already developed cultures of systematic screening and data-informed decision-making for PD (e.g., Comprehensive Integrated Three-Tiered Models of Prevention; Lane et al., 2021). Thus, we recommend that grant funding agencies prioritize—and researchers pilot—projects designed to intervene at the systems level (e.g., state, district, school) to improve SET well-being rather than devolving the responsibility to the teachers.

### *Administrator Preparation*

Given administrators' role in shaping aspects of SETs' working conditions (Bettini, Cumming, Brunsting et al., 2020) and burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014), we encourage institutes of higher education to develop comprehensive, personnel preparation programming that builds administrators' knowledge and competencies related to special education and SETs. Currently, many programs focus primarily on special education laws, without providing comprehensive instruction in special education specific topics (e.g., IEPs, curriculum, evaluation techniques; McHatton et al., 2010; Sun & Xin, 2020). As a result, many administrators report feeling unprepared for aspects of their job related to special education (Roderick & Jung, 2012). For instance, Rodl et al. (2018) found approximately 80% of school administrators reported that they had no special education background and felt ill-equipped to evaluate, lead, and support SETs. As such, we encourage administrator preparation program and PD personnel to intervene by providing pre-service administrators learning opportunities focused on building a robust knowledge about special education (e.g., multi-tiered systems of support; working conditions) and skills to support SETs in their work, such as providing adequate planning time, access to curricular resources, and meaningful PD.

### *Teacher Preparation*

We believe teacher preparation programs to be an ideal setting for interventions—and indeed, many informal interventions are likely already taking place through individual faculty members' teaching on teacher well-being, professional roles and expectations, and teacher advocacy. Given both that many teachers enter the profession through teacher preparation programs and given the potential ease of access to participants for research purposes, teacher preparation programs may be a high leverage opportunity to support SETs' well-being and promote their affective engagement throughout their careers. Potential intervention may include course content focused on (a) increasing self-efficacy for classroom management and culturally sustaining pedagogy; (b) interviewing for open positions to clarify role ambiguity and role conflict prior to entering the position; (c) reducing expectation-reality gap and role dissonance; (d) understanding which working conditions demands and resources are most important based on personal needs; (e) enhancing skills and preparation to advocate for students' needs; (f) building professional boundaries; (g) enhancing stress coping skills; (h) developing skills related to training and supervising paraprofessionals; and (i) interpersonal conflict management (Bettini, Lillis, et al., 2022; Brunsting et al., 2022; Conroy et al., 2014; Garwood et al., 2018).

### *Additional Considerations*

There are a range of challenges in researching SET well-being and burnout and providing interventions to consider in development of future studies. First, there is a relative dearth of research focused on strengthening well-being—the large majority of extant literature examines burnout. Second, given the potential of enhancing working conditions to support SET well-being, interventions targeting

administration may be particularly well aimed (Bettini, Cumming, Brunsting et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2022). However, due to the frequency of both administrator and SET turnover within districts (Billingsley et al., 2020), interventions would need to either account for frequent turnover by being adopted at the district level or working with schools with low likelihood of administrator turnover. Similarly, given the strength of administrative support, interventions targeting principals and assistant principals may need to be done at the district level to ensure researchers can track effects over time while accounting for turnover. Third, another challenge is in ensuring interventions focused on training or PD for administrators or SETs accounts for individuals' perceived knowledge of what to do, their perceived confidence (or self-efficacy) in using the knowledge, and the usefulness of the knowledge. These three factors are linked in promotion of individuals' use of new skills (Lane et al., 2015). Lastly, given that researchers have been examining working conditions-related factors since the 1970s, there is need for researchers and other education experts to contribute complexity to the current narrative on teacher and special educator burnout to enhance the dialogue from one focused on self-care to one that not only notes the need for personal boundaries and stress coping skills, but also brings focus on challenges in working conditions within the educational system. Below, we discuss avenues for intervention-related administrator preparation, district/school administrators, teacher preparation, and in-service teacher PD.

## *Implications for Teacher Educators, District and School Administrators, and Special Educators*

### *Administrators*

We encourage school leaders to actively build their SETs' well-being and enact steps to prevent burnout. Administrators can proactively prevent SET burnout at the start of each school year by targeting areas commonly associated with burnout (e.g., role and responsibility ambiguity, access to curricular resources; Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien et al., 2020; Bettini et al., 2019). For example, administrators can ensure SETs have access to grade level curricula for all students they teach, schedule planning and collaborative planning time into the school's master schedule, and develop PD focused on skills SETs need to address their students' needs. However, we caution that administrators will need to work closely with SETs throughout the school year to meaningfully support them in their work. For instance, SETs may feel particularly overwhelmed with instructional responsibilities due to lack of access to remediated materials to address the varied needs of taught students (O'Brien et al., 2019). Administrators may determine that they need to provide these materials, but they may be unaware that SETs may lack training on how to use some of these materials. Therefore, actively engaging and collaborating with SETs is essential. Last, we acknowledge that some actions that can enhance SET well-being may be limited by district level funding limitations and policies. As such, we encourage administrators to work closely with district leaders to obtain needed supports, perhaps noting SET retention needs.

### *Teacher Educators*

Teacher education program directors and faculty have a unique opportunity and responsibility to enhance pre-service SETs' effective practices both for student-oriented skills (e.g., classroom management, relationship-building) and for role-oriented skills (e.g., interacting with colleagues, managing paraprofessionals, advocating for resources; Billingsley et al., 2020), which, in turn, can support teacher well-being. We encourage teacher educators to ensure pre-service SETs have exposure to multiple delivery models and school contexts throughout training to reduce possible

role dissonance. This will help prepare SETs in the cases where their future positions do not match the culture or delivery model of their student teaching (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). While teacher educator programs include classroom and behavior management, there may be an opportunity to better demonstrate linkages between classroom management and teacher longevity to increase the immediacy of the content and learning. Partnerships with nearby school districts can increase opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience and contribute to the classroom to further strengthen their skills, reduce the likelihood of expectation-reality mismatch, and prepare them for available roles in the school. Last, we encourage teacher educators to draw on their networks in schools to provide pre-service SETs with practical advice on best ways to advocate for their resources and needs. Initial research has revealed that data collection can lead to successful advocacy (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2022), but not only is more research needed in this area, but there are often state, regional, and district policies and norms that will influence successful routes for advocacy.

### *Special Educators*

The responsibility for enhancing SET well-being is at the systems level, with policy-makers, administrators, researchers, and teacher educators. However, for those SETs in pre-service or currently working, research and experience undergird the following recommendations. First, with respect to conceptualizing the work, we encourage SETs to ask themselves the following question: How does your school support you to strengthen your well-being while meeting the needs of your students? Of course, some situations dictate that SETs will lose planning time or lunch time to support student needs; however, these should be rare and not the result of insufficient planning or resource allocation. We encourage SETs to advocate for resources to support their work and their physical and mental health needs. Not only is it important for SETs to thrive as much as possible as an individual, but their well-being also supports *both* (a) work longevity and expertise *and* (b) supports students, as teachers with lower burnout are better able to meet students' needs. In essence, SET well-being and meeting students' needs should not be an *either-or*; rather, it is a *both-and*. By prioritizing well-being, SETs will be better equipped to both meet their own needs and students' needs in the long run.

We encourage SETs to pursue mindfulness strategies and other self-care supports for mental health (see Ansley et al., 2016), with the caveat that self-care should not replace a focus on making one's workload manageable. With respect to the potential influence of collegial relationships on well-being, we ask SETs to consider this question: What is helping and what is hindering your well-being? Are your social interactions supporting you to build connections and manage challenging conditions, or are they exacerbating frustrations? If it is the latter, we encourage SETs to consider finding better sources of support to avoid burnout contagion, which occurs when an individual experiences higher burnout via emotionally attending to burned out coworkers (Meredith et al., 2020).

Another recommendation is for SETs to hone advocacy skills to receive more resources to meet the large demands of their role. Although more research is required, some SETs have succeeded in documenting their needs by collecting data. For instance, collecting data on the number of planning periods skipped to deal with student need and lunches uninterrupted can be a powerful means to highlight need. Administrators are more apt to allocate resources when relevant data is available. Every school and district work differently; thus, we encourage SETs to be attentive to ways in which others have successfully advocated for resources. In a similar vein, we encourage SETs to consider framing any job searches not solely on finding a job, but in identifying the school working conditions and culture that will best support them in meeting students' needs while pursuing their own well-being.

## Conclusion

SETs serve students with some of the highest needs; however, they do not always receive the resources and school supports needed to meet their students' needs. These challenging working conditions contribute to lower well-being and higher burnout for SETs; in turn, these impact teacher health, teacher attrition, and efficacy of interventions and student outcomes. Thus, providing SETs needed supports to make their workload manageable is an imperative for administrators at the district and school levels. The research base is developed to the point that intervention development is needed to better identify SETs at risk of burnout and provide supports efficiently and systematically. Potential entry points for intervention development at the systems level include administrator preparation, multi-tiered systems of supports with systematic screening and data-informed decision-making and PD. While the needed work is in progress to strengthen systemic support, we recommend enhancing SET-focused interventions, including mindfulness, stress management, and advocacy.

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