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EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

Special Education Teachers' Conceptualizations of Burnout: An Iterative Thematic Inquiry Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, researchers have viewed burnout as having three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. However, recent work has identified occupational depression as another viable way to measure and conceptualize one's challenges coping with consistent work stress. We conducted an

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iterative thematic inquiry analysis of two focus groups of special education teachers (SETs; n = 15) to illuminate SETs' descriptions and perceptions of burnout. Results supported the three traditional dimensions of burnout as relevant for SETs, while also promoting two additional key constructs: frustration and feeling undervalued. Further, SETs described burnout as a process, from *not burned out,* to *burning out*, to *being done,* to *gone,* with different routes based on experience level. We discuss findings, limitations, and next steps for research.

Keywords: burnout; iterative thematic inquiry; special education; teacher; wellbeing

Teacher burnout, or the degree to which teachers' work responsibilities and challenges overcomes their ability to cope (Maslach, 2003), has garnered increased focus due in large part to its association with the ongoing teacher shortages and intent to leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Nguyen & Kremer, 2022). Beyond teacher attrition and retention, teacher burnout is also linked with reduced physical health and wellbeing as well as students' learning outcomes. For example, teachers experiencing burnout also experienced nine out of 10 symptoms of depression (Bianchi et al., 2014; Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2016), and a recent systematic review found that burnout was associated with increased headaches, illnesses, inflammation, and biomarkers such as cortisol across 21 studies totalling over 5,000 teachers (Madigan et al., 2023). Teacher burnout is also associated with negative student outcomes, including lower academic achievement, motivation, and student wellbeing (Madigan & Curran, 2021).

Unfortunately, special education teachers (SETs) appear to be at especially high risk for burnout (Garwood, 2023; Ruble et al., 2024), in part because of challenging working conditions such as additional work responsibilities (e.g., adapting curriculum, training paraeducators) and inconsistent supports (e.g., protected planning time; Bettini et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2022). Indeed, SETs' working conditions predicted all three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (e.g., constant fatigue, brain fog), depersonalization (e.g., disconnecting emotionally from others at work), and lack of personal accomplishment (i.e., feeling one is not making a difference; Brunsting, Stark, et al., 2024). Teacher characteristics and interpersonal resources can play a role in burnout as well, including threat appraisals, mindfulness, and coping self-efficacy (McGrew et al., 2023; Ruble, Love, et al., 2023). The impacts of SET burnout extend to the classroom: emotionally exhausted SETs reported implementing evidence-based practices less frequently (Cumming et al., 2021), and students of SETs with higher personal accomplishment experienced higher IEP goal attainment (Wong et al., 2017). Thus, reducing burnout and enhancing wellbeing offers an important opportunity to reduce attrition, support SETs' physical health, and improve students' outcomes in one go (Brunsting, Cumming, et al., 2024).

However, researchers have illuminated challenges with burnout as a construct, including its conceptualization, its measurement, and its applicability in research (Bianchi et al., 2024). Bianchi et al. (2024) propose occupational depression as a stronger alternative measure to burnout. Given burnout's ubiquity in national conversations around work and teaching as well as the unique context in which SETs work, we wanted to (a) examine how SETs in the United States conceptualize burnout and (b) examine whether their perceptions align with the traditional characterization of burnout as having three dimensions or support a different view.

ISSUES WITH BURNOUT AS A CONSTRUCT

Traditionally, researchers using burnout theory posited that burnout includes three dimensions—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment—of which emotional exhaustion is the core dimension (Maslach, 2003). Schonfeld and Bianchi (2022) noted the inherent problem of conceptualizing a construct in which individuals

may experience one dimension of burnout, but not all. For instance, SETs may experience emotional exhaustion but still be connected to students and feel they are making a difference (Brunsting et al., 2022). Or, conversely, teachers may disconnect and withdraw from students in order to protect themselves from reaching emotional exhaustion. Given that the three dimensions of burnout, as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1997), do not load onto a single-order factor, Bianchi et al. (2024) argued that burnout is not a unified construct. Further, the MBI has typically yielded low reliability (e.g., $\alpha < .70$) for the depersonalization subconstruct, and some items on the emotional exhaustion subscale cross-load with items on the lack of personal accomplishment (Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2022). These issues have borne out in studies of SETs. Low reliability of the depersonalization construct has been documented consistently in samples of SETs (Brunsting et al., 2022; McGrew et al., 2023; Ruble et al., 2024). In a recent national sample of SETs, Ruble et al. (2024) identified measurement challenges for the MBI including poor fit in the configural measurement model and item cross-loadings.

With respect to applicability, none of the measures of burnout have validated cutoff scores such that an individual can be considered "burned out" or "experiencing high burnout." Schonfeld and Bianchi (2022), noting that the core burnout dimension—emotional exhaustion—is highly correlated with depression, suggested we approach burnout as occupational depression and generated a measure contextualizing symptoms of depression in the work setting. Further, although the dimensions of burnout on the MBI have demonstrated test-retest reliability over varying lengths of time (Cece et al., 2022), their strong stability as currently measured and conceptualized may be part of the reason burnout appears resistant to intervention (Ruble et al., 2024). Indeed, multiple intervention studies reveal few, small, or no effects on burnout as measured by the MBI or items closely adapted from it (Fraiman et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2023; Kestian, 2020). Results from a recent study revealed that the Burnout Reduction: Enhanced Awareness, Tools, Handouts, and Education: Evidence-based Activities for Stress for Educators (BREATHE-EASE; Ruble, Love, et al., 2023) intervention, with an 8-hr dosage, was associated with increased goal attainment and decreased emotional exhaustion for SETs (Ruble et al., 2025). It may be that burnout, which occurs when consistent stress over a long period of time overwhelms one's capacity to cope, requires longer or higher-dosed interventions than those examined in pilot studies (Hirsch et al., 2023), or that emotional exhaustion is a more fluid dimension of burnout compared with depersonalization and personal accomplishment.

SET BURNOUT

Despite the challenges with conceptualization, measurement, and applicability, recent findings provide empirical support for the salience of the three dimensions of burnout for SETs. Researchers examining SET burnout identified three different common profiles for SETs: flourishing (low emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, high personal accomplishment), buffered (high emotional exhaustion, but low depersonalization and personal accomplishment), and struggling (high emotional exhaustion, middle or high depersonalization, middle or low personal accomplishment; Gilmour et al., 2022), demonstrating the utility of multiple dimensions for identifying burnout levels and entry points for support and intervention. Individual and contextual factors loaded onto different burnout dimensions in a national sample of SETs (Ruble, McGrew, et al., 2023). Further, different burnout dimensions predict outcomes for SETs and students: higher personal accomplishment for SETs of autistic students predicted better student IEP outcomes; emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were not significant predictors (Wong et al., 2017). In another study with a sample of SETs of students with emotional-behavioral disorders, all three dimensions of burnout independently predicted increased intent to leave the profession (Brunsting, Stark, et al., 2024). In a follow-up multi-year analysis of SETs of students with emotional-behavioral disorders, only depersonalization had a significant indirect effect on SET retention at three levels: school, district, and in education (Brunsting et al., 2025).

These findings complicate the argument that burnout can potentially be reduced to emotional exhaustion—at least for SETs. Instead, the findings support the importance of the three dimensions of burnout. It may be that the conceptualization of burnout as multidimensional is especially relevant for SETs, as they experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion than the national average (Brunsting et al., 2022), and teachers serving higher percentages of students with disabilities are at increased odds of attrition (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). However, as the extant research is largely quantitative, the conceptualization of burnout has rarely incorporated SETs' perspectives. Given both the salience of the three burnout dimensions for SETs and current challenges in burnout theory and measurement broadly, there is need to update our understanding of how SETs perceive and conceptualize burnout. To date, no studies are available that asked SETs about their views of burnout—a significant gap in research.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the current study is to understand how SETs conceptualize burnout. Such information is critical not only to further measurement and conceptualization of burnout or a similar construct for SETs, but also to support design and implementation efforts of interventions to enhance special educator wellbeing and attenuate burnout. To do so, the current study extends a recent analysis of focus group data collected as part of a larger study for the development of the Burnout Reduction: Enhanced Awareness, Tools, Handouts, and Education: Evidence-based Activities for Stress for Educators (BREATHE-EASE; Ruble, Love, et al., 2023) intervention to ameliorate burnout. Initial analysis of the data focused on understanding SETs' and administrators' perspectives on the BREATHE-EASE intervention's content and feasibility (Ruble, Love, et al., 2023); the current study is designed to elicit SETs' understanding of burnout and perceived factors that impact it in order to understand how SETs experience burnout. The research question guiding this study is: how do SETs perceive and conceptualize burnout?

METHOD

To understand how SETs and administrators conceptualized burnout, we conducted a case study using an iterative thematic analysis (Morgan & Nica, 2020) of data from two focus groups of SETs (n = 15) in two states completed in 2018 as part of a larger research study. In this section, we overview participant recruitment and demographics, focus group questions and procedure, analysis, and research team positionality. Additional detail on the participant recruitment and focus group procedure can be found in Ruble, Love, et al. (2023).

Participants and Procedure

The BREATHE-EASE research team contacted special education directors in two states (one in the Midwest, one in the South). Agreeing directors forwarded study information to relevant SETs in their districts, who were invited to contact study personnel to learn more, consent, and participate. The inclusion criterion was that participants be SETs in schools within participating districts. The 15 SETs were mostly female (12 female, three male) and represented grade levels from pre-school, elementary school, middle school, and high school (see Table 1). Researchers led two in-person focus groups with SETs—one for SETs in each state—lasting about an hour each. The semi-structured interviews had the same ten questions for each group (see Appendix S1) and were designed to explore (a) SETs' perceptions of pressing challenges of burnout, (b) what school factors and personal characteristics shape burnout, and (c) SETs' reactions to the initial plans for BREATHE-EASE. The current analysis focuses on SETs' conceptualizations of burnout. The 10 focus group questions covered multiple topics; the questions that were most helpful were: "How do you define teacher burnout?" "What are your experiences with teacher burnout?" and "How can you tell when a teacher is burned out?"

FOCUS GROUP	PSEUDONYM	GENDER	TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Midwest	Mike	Male	16–20 years
	María	Female	>20 years
	Marcus	Male	>20 years
	Magda	Female	>20 years
	Mia	Female	16–20 years
	Molly	Female	16–20 years
Southeast	Sarah	Female	11–15 years
	Stephen	Male	4–6 years
	Selena	Female	16–20 years
	Sofia	Female	>20 years
	Sienna	Female	11–15 years
	Stella	Female	11–15 years
	Sydney	Female	1–3 years
	Sylvia	Female	>20 years
	Sasha	Female	11–15 years

Table 1: Participant Descriptions.

Analysis

To analyze the data, we used iterative thematic inquiry (ITI; Morgan & Nica, 2020). ITI provides a novel approach to thematic inquiry; in ITI, instead of attempting to bracket their biases (i.e., to hold their biases and presuppositions at bay; Drew, 2004) when analyzing data, researchers list their prior beliefs and expectations for the data as well as how analysis of collected data will answer the research questions. Akin to hypotheses, expectations serve as both (a) statements of researchers' anticipated themes from the analysis such that their biases and interpretations are transparent and can be understood and/or challenged by readers and reviewers to reduce confirmation bias and (b) clear ideas against which the data can be compared to determine the degree to which they support the expectations, expand the expectations, conflict with or counter the expectations, or provide new insight (Morgan & Nica, 2020). We selected ITI as the best method to make transparent and reduce the potential impact of our biases, given (a) the amount of extant research published on burnout that informed our beliefs and (b) our lived experience with burnout as special education teachers. Additionally, because the focus group data had already been collected and it was not possible to follow up with participants, ITI provides a clearly delineated approach to answer research questions when gathering additional data is not feasible. ITI includes four phases: (a) assess beliefs, (b) build new beliefs through encounters with the data, (c) list preliminary themes, and (d) evaluating themes through coding the data. Appendix S2 provides a visual overview of the ITI process.

Phase 1: Assessing Beliefs

The first phase of ITI takes place prior to viewing the data. The purpose of this phase is to bring researchers' knowledge of the literature and personal experience to bear on the research questions, without reflecting on the collected data. Our team first discussed our positionality. The analytic team consisted of three members, two women and one man, whose ethnoracial identities included Black, Hispanic, and White, two of whom were doctoral students and one a faculty member. The team had served different roles in K–12 education, including as district-level special education behavior and curriculum specialists, taught as general and special educators in general education and self-contained classrooms, worked at a wilderness school for students with significant behavioral challenges, and continue to substitute teach. In our

experiences and roles, we have seen and experienced the challenges of attempting to maintain mental and physical health while supporting students and handling a large workload. We deeply value the work of special educators, understanding that their roles are complex and nuanced, and seek systemic solutions to better supporting their work.

To reduce power differential, the analytic team (a) alternated the order of who spoke first in discussion, (b) ensured everyone provided input during decision-making, (c) discussed the unique contribution that each person's experience and knowledge brought to the team, and (d) used consensus decision making. Following ITI, the team independently generated expected themes for the data, then met to discuss, debrief, question, and expand on each other's expectations based on knowledge of the research literature as well as experience. For example, while all authors posited that participants would describe burnout with descriptions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment based on both experience and prior research, the second and third authors also expected to see frustration to be a consistent emotion in SETs' descriptions of burnout based on experience. Additionally, based in part on prior research (e.g., Bettini, Lillis, et al., 2022), the first author expected that the descriptions of lack of personal accomplishment to be centered in feeling unable to find a solution to the large workload or to others' lack of support for students with disabilities rather than feeling unable to meet students' needs directly. The product for Phase 1 is a detailed outline of the results section consisting of expected themes (see Table 2 for expected themes).

EXPECTATION	DESCRIPTION
Burnout as emotional exhaustion	Participants will describe burnout as being overwhelmed by their workloads, as being mentally exhausted, and physically tired.
Burnout as depersonalization	Participants will describe burnout as emotionally distancing themselves from the students they serve. Examples include no longer preparing for class, going through the motions, and taking frequent sick days or being absent for extended periods.
Burnout as lack of personal accomplishment	Participants will describe burnout as feeling unable to support students effectively. Although lack of personal accomplishment often includes lack of self-efficacy for the job, we did not expect to see participants noting lack of ability to help the students grow and learn; rather, we expected them to feel that the high workload and low supports provided them would, over time, make them feel as though they could not make a positive difference in students' lives as consistently as they would like.
Burnout as combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment	Participants will describe burnout as a combination of multiple factors rather than just one.
Burnout as frustration	Participants will describe frustration as the emotion most saliently attributed to burnout.
Burnout as a job requirement	Participants will describe burnout as to be expected and something that is part of the job. Some, but not necessarily all, participants will consider burnout to be similar to a badge of honor and an indicator of their care for students.

Table 2: Research Team Expectations for the Data, Prior to Memoing and Coding.

Phase 2: Building New Beliefs Through Encounters with the Data

We generated a form (see Appendix S3) for each team member to use for memoing to identify where focus group data supported, expanded, or challenged expectations as well as where expectations were absent from the data. We used a parallel-serial memoing analysis procedure (Patel et al., 2016), in which team members read a focus group transcript individually and consecutively, such that (a) one team member would read the focus group transcript and memo, (b) then a second team member would read the transcript, read the first team member's memo, and add their own memo; and (c) the third team member would read the focus group, read both other team members' memos, and add their own memo. The team met to discuss findings, ask clarifying questions, and generate additional memos prior to conducting a

second parallel-serial memoing analysis procedure on the second focus group transcript. Using parallel-serial memoing also reduced the likelihood of an individual's confirmation bias clouding the analysis. For example, the second author completed a second memo of the Midwestern focus group of burnout, noting that participants were describing a concept of *being done*—of not just being depersonalized, but of being depersonalized to the point of no return—that was not captured in the initial memo by the first author. Phase 2 products include the initial memos and a document with updated themes.

Phase 3: Listing Preliminary Themes

After we completed initial memoing, we listed preliminary themes, using the core themes from transcript memoing and discussion to focus on identifying settled themes aligned with the research questions. Through discussing potential themes, the team came to two key conclusions: (a) the deductive expectations were largely supported by the data with the exception that SETs would view burnout as part of the job; and (b) the inductive, unexpected themes that were generated through memoing the data were more salient to answering research questions. These unexpected themes coalesced around the idea of burnout as consistent—though not permanent—stages, including survival, struggling to cope with the emotional load, being done, and being gone. We continued to memo to solidify understanding of the non-expected themes until we reached saturation and fresh reviewing of the data revealed nothing new in memos. At this point, we completed the products for Phase 3 by listing preliminary themes and producing the codebook. Preliminary primary codes included burnout as (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) depersonalization, (c) lack of personal accomplishment, (d) frustration, (e) burning out as survival, (f) burning out as struggling to cope with emotional load, (g) being done, and (h) gone.

Phase 4: Evaluating Themes Through Coding

We applied the codebook to the data to assess the accuracy of themes generated both deductively and inductively via prior phases. As is expected with ITI, themes aggregated and shifted via coding, with detailed coding of data providing an additional opportunity to assess alignment of themes. High level themes were (a) burnout as traditional burnout, (b) burnout as frustration, (c) burnout as a combination of dimensions, and (d) burnout stages and process. For example, we generated a theme of burnout as a combination of dimensions due to participants describing burnout in multiple ways simultaneously (e.g., as both emotional exhaustion and lack of personal accomplishment). As we coded the themes related to what we termed stages and process of burnout, we noticed that participants appeared to be describing two tracks for burnout. One was via struggling to cope with the emotional load, which participants used to describe novice teachers as well as pre-service teachers in field placements. Participants used the second track, burning out as survival, to describe veteran teachers and those who had developed systems or had supports to manage the emotional load. The products for Phase 4 include the final codebook, memos, and the final results section. See Appendices S4, S5 and S6, for excerpts from memos demonstrating how we progressed through each ITI phase for three themes.

Peer Debriefing

To enhance trustworthiness the analytic team composed an initial draft of the findings and shared with the fourth author, a peer debriefer who was not involved in the analysis but had read all data. This peer debriefer read the initial findings, noting questions and memoing points in need of clarification, interrogation, or elaboration. She then reviewed each focus group transcript again with these questions in mind. She shared initial thoughts in written form with the whole team, then met with the first author to discuss her memo. For example, she raised questions about burnout as a process and how the team generated those themes. The team then met, discussed feedback, and clarified text. For

instance, the team finalized the term "stages" as opposed to "steady states" and better integrated the movement between stages into the results.

RESULTS

Participants' perspectives confirmed most of our expectations; they conceptualized burnout as encompassing the three traditional dimensions (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, lack of personal accomplishment) as well as frustration. As hypothesized, lack of personal accomplishment was rooted in frustration with systemic issues (e.g., work overload, lack of support) and lack of understanding and appreciation for their work that made it difficult for SETs to meet students' needs. Largely absent was our expectation that SETs would position burnout as an acceptable part of the job to be worn as a badge of honor.

Yet, the focus group conversations provided a description of burnout that was more nuanced and dynamic than expected. Participants' descriptions extended beyond the traditional dimensions to conceptualize burnout as occurring in a continuum of stages. Although SETs did not overtly mention an encompassing process, we began to see in the data SETs' experience of burnout as an ongoing process—a progression across stages ranging from (a) *not burned out* to (b) *burning out* (either *surviving* or *struggling to cope with the emotional load*) to (c) *being done* to (d) *gone*. Participants' experiences of the stages were not fleeting by the moment or day, yet they were mutable. For example, participants might be *surviving* for months or years before gaining respite or transferring to a new role or school and feeling not burned out or succumbing to the ongoing work overload and transitioning to *being done*. We also found that the participants described different initial burnout stages for novice SETs (who often experienced *struggling to cope with the emotional load* first) and experienced SETs. In the following section, we briefly provide findings related to our expectations before focusing on our novel findings regarding burnout as a process comprised of multiple stages differentiated by SET level of experience.

Burnout as Emotional Exhaustion

When prompted to provide a short description of burnout, participants used words like "exhaustion" (Molly), "overwhelmed" (Sofia), and "stressful" (Marcus). One SET shared that if she could use one word, "it would be overwhelmed" (Sofia). Sofia continued by sharing how her heavy workload and lack of planning periods were making her feel overwhelmed, to which Sienna responded: "sounds like a regular day," which drew knowing laughter from other focus group participants. Similarly, participants in the Midwest focus group described burnout as the feeling of being overwhelmed or exhausted. One teacher (Mia) highlighted how stressful accountability checks were, noting that "a lot of teachers just get totally overwhelmed" by it. Her colleague, Molly shared that "when [she] thinks of burnout, [she] thinks of exhaustion …there's nothing left." Sydney described the feeling of exhaustion as stemming from her not being able to maintain the large workload needed to support students, sharing: "the word that comes to mind to me is exhaustion, cuz I just feel exhausted all the time. Can't keep up." Participants also described the physical toll of emotional exhaustion, as Sarah mentioned feeling "haggard, like you feel like your face," while Magda shared about getting an ulcer her first year.

Burnout as Depersonalization

In describing indicators of burnout, Sofia shared an example of how other teachers were disengaging: "they don't seem to be interested in the children or the program or what they are doing." For Magda, this presented as "doing the minimum they have to do to get by," while Marcus described how "there's just days that you don't enjoy your job." Mia and María elaborated on how work "stops being so much fun" (Mia) and gets "to the point where you're like, 'gosh, this is not fun'"

(María). These teachers highlighted how losing interest in their work or lack of enjoyment and connection with students captured burnout as depersonalization.

In a similar vein, SETs provided examples of how positive relationships with students were critical to their purpose, a component of wellbeing. Sylvia summarized, "I mean I love my kids, even when they are being...I mean, we've had bad kids." This was echoed with comments like, "I love those kids, even when they are having a bad day...this is why I teach" (Sarah). When asked the most difficult time of year for burnout, one teacher shared that it was during the lead up to school starting, with all the preparation, to which Sydney added "there's no kids to make you happy," signifying the importance of connection with students for one's wellbeing. Across both focus groups, teachers expressed that actions and feelings aligned with depersonalization were indicators of burnout. Similarly, our analysis of the data captured the inverse—that a positive relationship with students served as a reason why some teachers continued in their work.

Burnout as Lack of Personal Accomplishment

As the findings confirmed, teachers expressed they felt unable to meet goals and expectations due to a myriad of systemic barriers. Across focus groups, SETs shared their experiences of feeling stretched thin, and unable to effectively accomplish their goals while trying to meet increasing demands in an under-resourced system. In her initial response to the question of defining burnout, Sasha shared "I think of when you reach a point of not feeling like you're making a difference" to which the rest of the participants audibly agreed. Participants shared that not making a difference left them feeling "defeated" (Sylvia), as if they were not in control of their situation. As one teacher (Sienna) stated, "I kinda think of it as really powerless. Like, it's like you just can't do what you want to do, and you can't figure out the way to get everything done or to be able to implement the things you want." Participants' reduced ability to meet students' complex needs in the face of systemic resource constraints and misunderstanding of their work left them questioning if they were effective teachers, and if they should just "give up" if they were not making a difference (Sarah).

Teachers from both focus groups felt that their students' needs were not supported by outside demands, school schedules, or availability of materials, and that district priorities for compliance superseded their ability to provide instruction to students, putting the teacher and the administration at cross purposes. For one participant, burnout stemmed from her administration miscommunicating with her and a student's parent, such that the SET felt she and the administrators were "not working together at this point" (Sarah). For another participant, the "district's demands exacerbate [the issues]" as she was given two days to complete graduation forms for students that included pulling each student's transcript (Molly). A participant in the other focus group noted challenges to "getting stuff done" for students due to her being "responsible for all the papers and all the data" while her "classroom and schedule is actually the last thing that matters," which coalesced in students not receiving what they need (Sylvia). As Sarah stated, "we're not servicing the kids, we're servicing the district." Given the time and attention required by outside pressures and challenges, SETs felt they were teaching students "the same thing over and over again" and "not seeing results" (Stephen), which contributed to a feeling of "not making a difference" (Sasha)—a lack of personal accomplishment.

Burnout as Frustration (and Feeling Undervalued and Unappreciated)

The initial expectation of burnout as frustration was well supported by the participants. Sylvia shared: "I get more burned out and frustrated with the amount of paperwork that we do that seems like it's more to justify what our job is than it actually is to do something for the kids." Stella identified frustration from when she was a novice teacher: "I almost like straight up walked out the door. I was so frustrated, you know, and had had a kid melt down … whose mom wouldn't go and get his medicine … he couldn't really help his meltdown … two hours before dad finally showed up … that was the closest I ever came to walking out of the door being so frustrated." Sofia honed in on frustration when explicating the

challenge of being responsible for students whom they do not have in class and are not able to connect with them due to schedules: "it's just very frustrating because we have to try to get to know the student … if they are available during your planning … but if they are out of the building … it's just very frustrating and a little scary to be responsible, legally … it's just very frustrating." When discussing the best time to support teachers with burnout, Magda shared that the best time was "towards the beginning" of the school year so that teachers might be able to "work something out before they get to the point that they are so frustrated they are ready to walk out the door" (Magda).

The Midwest focus group added a dimension to burnout as frustration, as the frustration often coincided with or stemmed from feeling undervalued and unappreciated. When asked for a word to describe burnout, Molly offered "I think of frustration and not being appreciated also." Marcus added: "teacher burnout to me, I guess, is just the picture of frustration." When prompted to expand upon these and other definitions offered (e.g., anxiety, people leaving, exhaustion), Marcus continued by linking his frustration with feeling misunderstood and unappreciated: "So it's frustrating, but then [general education teachers] say what did you guys get done in resource today? Not a whole lot (laughs). Dealing with this, this, and this." Mia agreed: "It's just very frustrating, because I just feel like we need more staff to help meet those needs." Similarly, in the Southeast focus group, Sasha identified frustration from feeling like not being "treated like a professional or that you can't accomplish things." Here, the expectation of frustration was met and expanded to encompass teachers feeling devalued and unappreciated.

Burnout as Combinations of Dimensions

Given the interrelation of dimensions of burnout in prior research with special education teachers (Brunsting et al., 2022), we expected that participants' perceptions of burnout would include multiple dimensions of burnout in conjunction. This expectation was also well supported by the data. Indeed, one participant's response to the opening question, "what is the image or word that comes to mind when you think of burnout?" encompassed all three dimensions of burnout. Molly answered, "I think teacher burnout is the definition of when you just don't feel like you're being effective. And you don't have the desire to go any further, you know. Or as I said, the exhaustion, or the, you know, there's not a rosy picture." Here, exhaustion is stated directly and the lack of desire to continue is a distinctive sign of depersonalization. Lastly, feeling like not being effective is a clear example of lack of personal accomplishment. Similarly, Sienna explained how being exhausted coincided with being unable to create positive outcomes: "I think the word would be defeated cuz when I start feeling that burnout feeling, it's like you are just defeated. Everything you tried or wanted or planned." Sofia built on being exhausted and overwhelmed due to being unable to meet student needs with the resources available:

> I'm providing the modifications and accommodations for and keeping track of that and knowing who gets what during what class period. And it's a, it's a lot, and I think that's just where so much of the overwhelmed, which leads to burnout […] like you said, nobody knows what we do.

We sought counterexamples and conflicting evidence to the expectation that participants would describe burnout as a combination of dimensions, but did not encounter any. Although participants described burnout in different ways, at no time did one try to correct another or argue that a certain aspect of burnout was more salient. Rather, they typically agreed, empathized, and joked. For example, Stephen, shared about how general education teachers often demonstrate a lack of understanding of his role, giving him the "what do you do?" look, but they don't see him working late into the night "on school work and stuff like that (Mmm hmms and agreement in the group)" but then they want him to "just take the kid" who is having challenges out of the general education classroom. Selena shared that they "have a long-running joke" at their school that the SETs "are all gonna call in sick one day (Laughs in the room)".

Burnout as a Job Expectation

We anticipated participants would express acceptance of burnout as part and parcel of the job and be willing to sacrifice their free time and wellbeing for students. Participants did laugh and empathize with each other, noting that the heavy workload is, unfortunately, a reality of the job. For example, when Sofia shared about being overwhelmed in part because she didn't get either of her planning periods the last two days, Sienna chimed in "Sounds like a regular day" to which everyone laughed. In this way, they did acknowledge that the high workload is typical.

However, they pushed back on the idea that SETs should be willing to burn out and sacrifice themselves and their mental health for the students. Stella recalled when a colleague intervened: "This is awful and I can't do this, and I go home every night and think about it ... and she was like you got leave it at work. She was like you can't take this home with you every day; you got leave it here." Magda shared her experience mentoring younger SETs and even general education teachers who needed to protect themselves: "you've got to learn to leave it at the door. I know that sounds bad, but you've got to do it." Thus, the expectation that one should sacrifice continuously to serve student needs and that being exhausted might be a badge of honor was not only absent in the data but was contradicted in both focus groups.

Burnout as a Process Occurring Among a Series of Stages

As we memoed, we found that the most salient descriptions of burnout were distinct from our prior expectations. In this way, while our focal expectations above were supported by the data, they were not the whole story. For instance, in memoing on the expectation of depersonalization and discussing our memos as a team, the description of *being done*—being present but having had enough of the challenges of the school, system, administrators, parents, or other teachers—became salient as it encompassed and extended depersonalization. We found that *being done* and other descriptions reflected a conceptualization of burnout as stages with consistent qualities that one progresses through as one becomes more burned out. The stages are (a) *not burned out*, (b) *burning out* (two variations: *struggling to cope with the emotional load [novice teachers]* and *surviving/triaging to attempt to keep up [experienced teachers]*), (c) *being done* (i.e., burned out), and (d) *gone* (see Table 3 for brief descriptions and example quotes for each stage). In the next sections, we provide analysis of each stage and detail the ways in which they interrelate to form a multiple-path system (see Figure 1).

THEME	SUBTHEME	DESCRIPTION
Not Burned Out		Having mental health, emotional and cognitive reserves, and strong connections with students
Burning Out		Continuous feeling of exhaustion, being overwhelmed, or unable to make a positive difference for students
	Struggling to Cope with the Emotional Load (Novice Teachers)	Overwhelmed by the emotionality of the job, having a difficult time leaving students' traumas or needs at the door
	Surviving in an Attempt to Keep up with Workload (Experienced Teachers)	Actively straining against exhaustion to try to keep on pace with the heavy workload, leading to feelings of being in a constant state of survival or triage.
Being Done/Burned Out		Being fully burned out, no longer finding joy in their work. Evidenced by coasting to retirement, disengaging from students, or being about to quit.
Gone		The endpoint of burnout; a teacher who is burned out finally leaves.

Table 3: Coding structure and definitions for burnout process and stages.

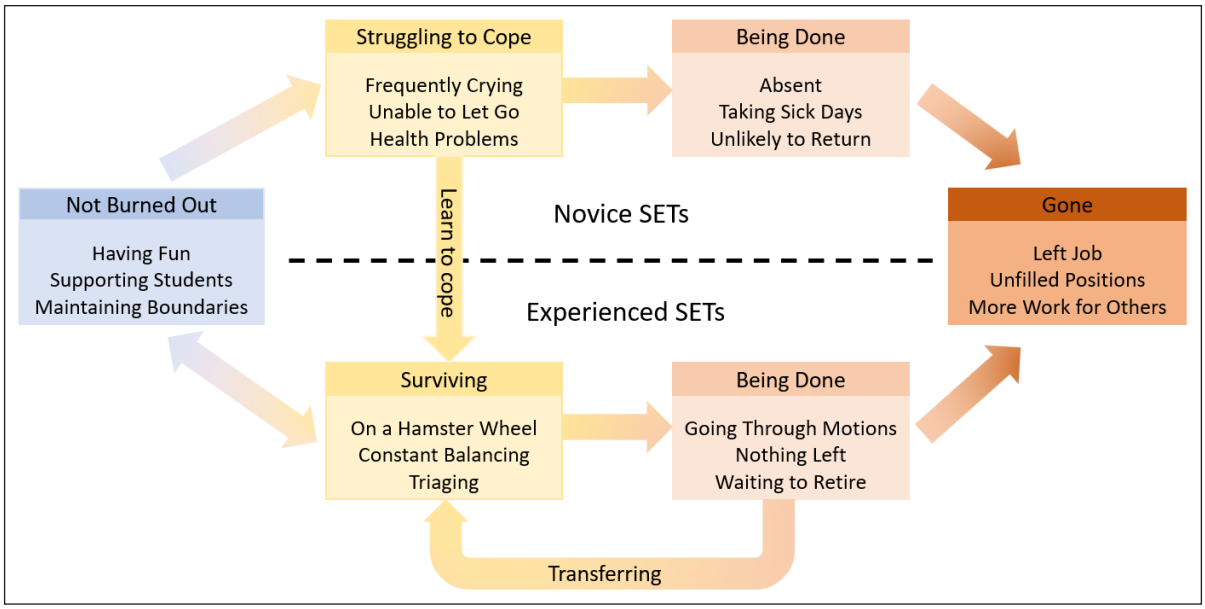

Figure 1: Burnout Process and Stages.

Not Burned Out

Although not a commonly discussed or described stage, the participating SETs did mention the potential to be not burned out. Not burned out was represented as one end of the spectrum of burnout, opposite of burnout. Participants described being not burned out as having "mental health" (Marcus) and enjoying their time working with students and seeing them grow. Molly shared: "I'm not burned out on teaching, I still love it." SETs in both focus groups contrasted the lost joy during burnout with the fun of the job when it is going well. One participant noted that burnout was getting to the point when one thinks "gosh, this is not fun" (María), while Marcus highlighted that "we're supposed to enjoy our job." This enjoyment stemmed from personal accomplishment in seeing students learn and have success:

> I feel the same way…if I could shut my door…I love those kids, even when they're having a bad day, it's like, but so fun to see when they get it…you did something and they got it (agreement in the room; Stephen: mm hmm; Sylvia: yeah). Like, this is why I teach. You know, you have those moments. That's why we're all here. That's what we're doing. (Sarah)

Similarly, when describing successful teamwork in class, Mike and a colleague were able to set up a "fine little shell" in which they were able to "work together well and click," fusing their individual knowledge bases in subject areas—"she was really good with the English part, and I'm good on the math and sciences"—to reduce workload, serve students, and not burn out.

Although participants described the experience of not being burned out, it was considered a rare and more temporally fleeting stage. Generally, participants considered themselves and their colleagues to be experiencing more consistent stages of burnout—either struggling to cope with the emotional load of the job or being in survival mode, "unable to get ahead" trying to keep "above water at all times" (Sarah).

Burning Out

The main theme of burning out, or experiencing intermittent or continuous feelings of exhaustion, being overwhelmed, and/or being unable to make a frequent positive difference for students was described by participants as occurring in

two different but interrelated states. Participants described burnout, particularly for novice teachers or teacher trainee interns, as struggling to cope with the emotional load of the job. For those who learned how to leave "the emotional load" at the door (e.g., experienced special educators), the experience of burning out was described as survival, constantly triaging and problem-solving in an attempt to keep up with the high workload.

Burning Out: Struggling to Cope with the Emotional Load (Novice Teachers). As teachers shared their conceptualizations of burnout, it became clear to the research team that, as one teacher stated: "the whole emotional factor is a lot" (Mia), especially for novice teachers who may not have developed the emotional strategies to buffer burnout. Teachers who were struggling to cope were overwhelmed by the emotionality of the job, having a difficult time leaving students' traumas or needs at the door, and being unable to let go and focus on other things. For instance, Stella shared that during her first year she worked with under-resourced students who "just had some absolutely heartbreaking home stories, and the bleeding heart—24 years old—in me, it was just really hard not to take it home every day." She went on to share that one day she "almost straight up walked out the door" before a facilitator intervened and helped her learn that she couldn't "take it home with [her] every day." Just as Stella noted the emotional load hit hardest in her first year, the participants continuously centered susceptibility to emotional overload as a challenge for novice teachers or teacher trainees. Four participants in the Midwest focus group had a rapid-fire exchange to the prompt "how can you tell when a teacher is burned out":

> Marcus: They start taking all their sick days.
> [Everyone chimes in laughing and saying *yeah, taking all their sick days*]
> Mia: Those mental health days start going up…
> Magda: And it's easy to tell.
> Mia: They cry. I've seen some crying teachers.
> Magda: Yeah, lots of crying.
> Mike: Mm. hmm.
> Mia: They quit eating lunch
> Mike: Most of 'em are usually the young ones though.
> María: And they leave
> Mia: That cry?
> Mike: Yeah. Mostly first- and second-year teachers.
> Mia: After a while they just…
> Mike: I've been around long enough…think I've seen it all.
> Magda: Those are the ones you know probably aren't going to make it. I've even had student teachers … I was like "you're doing a great job" … she didn't even try to get a teaching job … she was overwhelmed by everything. She goes "they didn't teach me this in school." I said "well, that's why you're here" (laughs).

And while the participants laughed and jested, they did so with empathy, as they had similar challenges coping emotionally during their first years. For example, Magda shared that in her first year, she, like other "newer teachers [wasn't] quite prepared for the students." She taught a "boy who was on the [Mothers Against Drunk Driving] poster, because he had gotten hit by a drunk driver" in her class, and it was so emotionally heavy for her that she "gave [herself] an ulcer because she'd go home and worry about the kids." María, who "was a classroom teacher before [she] became a special education teacher" added perspective, sharing that the additional paperwork in special education "was very overwhelming" and that she could "imagine that someone who has never taught a classroom" and learned to "multitask" would have difficulty meeting students' needs. Similarly, when Stella shared that "one of [their] new teachers cries about once a week," Sydney interrupted to acknowledge "That's me!" while others in the room gently laughed in acknowledgement.

Thus, participants highlighted that the combination of the high workload, the lack of experience and preparation, and the high emotional load were indicative of novice teachers struggling to cope and beginning to burn out.

Participants in both focus groups did not blame the novice teachers, rather they identified lack of appropriate training and expectation-setting as a reason for novice teachers' coping challenges. Magda noted that student teachers and novice teachers "are not taught how to leave it at the door...they take it home with them and they're worried about these kids." Sylvia recommended that "new teachers starting out need to be told" to protect their time out of school. Those struggling to cope with the emotional demands of the job who did not have collegial support or for whom the emotional demands were exceptionally intense were described as moving quickly into the next stage—being done. When sharing about newer teachers struggling with the emotionality of the job, one participant (Magda) shared: "we have a teacher … this is only her second year … she's already missed 3 weeks."

However, participants described how many novice SETs could learn to cope (as indicated by the *learn to cope* arrow in Figure 1), often through mentorship by their experienced colleagues. Sylvia modeled protecting time to support emotional coping, telling novice teacher coworkers "set a time limit that you are going home today, and I would go home and I would call her on it. It's five o'clock and I told you [that] you need to be gone, you know…put your boyfriend on the phone." Similarly, Stella was overwhelmed emotionally in her first year "bleeding heart" when the school counselor intervened: "she was like, you can't take this home with you every day; you've got to leave it here." María, who had transitioned to special education after over a decade as a general educator provided additional insight: "all I had to learn was the paperwork…but that was very overwhelming…I can imagine that someone whose never taught a classroom… [wouldn't] be able to do that." Through learning emotional coping skills and other initial skills needed (e.g., paperwork, multitasking), novice teachers could grow into experienced teachers and transition from *struggling to cope* to *surviving*.

Burning Out: Surviving in Attempt to Keep Up with Workload (Experienced Teachers). Although the emotional exhaustion aspect of burnout was clearly related to overwork as previously described, the research team noted nuance in how participants were describing burnout. They described burnout as not just as experiencing exhaustion but actively straining against the exhaustion in trying to keep up with their workload. As one teacher described, burnout felt like being "on this hamster wheel that just keeps rolling" (Sarah). Participants similarly described their experience of overwork as a special educator as "drowning" (Sarah) or "being asked to run a race and then they blindfold you and tie your shoes together" (Stella). Teachers across both focus groups shared they felt as if their burnout was exacerbated by the feeling of not being able to keep up with their work, leading them to feel as though they were in a constant state of survival, treading water, and having to triage (i.e., sacrificing one's needs to meet another's).

Educators described how they felt overwhelmed while trying to meet students' diverse needs without support. Marcus shared the challenge in figuring out ways to support students when "the things you need for your kids to be successful [are] not there," providing an example of an 18-student class with a range of academic levels and significant behavioral needs. Supporting students often required additional tasks beyond classroom instruction that further exacerbated workload. For instance, Mia described not only creating and providing materials to fellow general education teachers but also teaching them how to use and implement the materials. When students were pulled from class for therapies or assessments, SETs noted being expected to triage by sacrificing a planning period or otherwise to meet with students. All Midwestern participants agreed with Marcus, who explained that, in his experience, administrators often placed a special educator to substitute in a general education classroom due to the substitute-teacher shortage, which would require him to "pull the kids out of lunch to come up and eat their lunch with me, so we can catch up on what we missed in class." Thus, participants' descriptions suggested they triaged by sacrificing their lunch or planning in order to instruct their students. This struggle to keep up with an ever-changing workload left SETs two poor choices: reduce ability to

meet students' needs or do more planning and work outside of school hours. Each option either increased emotional exhaustion or reduced personal accomplishment regarding their ability to successfully support students' needs.

In an effort to mitigate the ongoing "balancing act" of the *survival* stage (Stephen), teachers explained how they worked outside of contractual hours well into the evenings and on weekends. To address this, teachers emphasized a need for prioritizing "mental health" (Marcus) and setting boundaries (Sylvia). With support, some teachers described experiencing temporary struggles, but ultimately being able to continue to work effectively:

> I mean, all of us get burned out. I mean I've done this...this is 26 years, and ...I'm burned out for a day, or a week or... but I think it's the people, like you said, it's just, you don't ever see them ever switch back over to...I'm back in it. (Selena)

Stephen shared: "everybody has their days. Wake up, like, I just don't got it today, then the next day you got it…you see that [other] teacher, it's weekly, every week … [Interviewer: "chronic"] … Yeah." For others though, such struggles were more pervasive and sustained. "People who are about to burn out… are so overwhelmed and all they can do is try to get all that little stuff…before they leave" (Sienna). In this way, SETs often viewed survival as *burning out*, whereas being done, disengaging, and depersonalizing were indicative of being *burned out*.

Being Done/Burned Out

Perceptions of *being done*, of being fully burned out, manifested as SETs no longer finding joy in their work and either (a) coasting to retirement, (b) disengaging from students, and/or (c) about to quit. Stephen shared how an SET colleague of his grew tired of the constant school reassignment at the start of the year based on student numbers stated, "I'm done. I'm gonna go do real estate." Magda related a time when another teacher "gets up in these kids' faces and you know, she's pointing her finger at 'em" to which both Mike and Molly respond with "She's done." Participants gave an account of peers deciding not to continue in their roles, sometimes transferring to different positions or schools, or "counting it down" until they can be done (Sylvia). Burnout in this manner was described as a desire to "give up" (Sienna, Sarah). SETs stated that the "balancing act" (Stephen) they experience when trying to navigate multiple challenging responsibilities leads to being "done" (Mike, Molly). In this state, more than just *surviving*, teachers are fully overloaded and can become ineffective in their work. Burnout for these teachers meant "there's nothing left" (Molly). For example, one participant described teachers who were done as "They show up at the time to work and they are gone out of the door when the kids are gone out the door" (Mia), to which other participants agreed. Another shared that her experience observing other teachers' classrooms illuminated the degree of their being done to the point where she thought "oh my, you need to retire, because you're miserable and it directly impacts the students" (Molly); examples of direct impacts on students were provided: "when teachers get burned out, they tend to give Ds and Fs" (Magda), "their words are sharp and curt in tone" (Molly), and "they might single out kids" (Mia). For other teachers, *being done* transitioned to quitting: "Second week of school, [the new math teacher] decides she's done, this is not what she signed up for […] so guess what? I become the gen-ed teacher with, with still SpEd responsibilities […] and I did that for the rest of the quarter" (Mike). Similarly, Magda shares about how the second-year teacher who "already missed three weeks" was done and not returning: "she hasn't been back since fall break."

Although *being done* is similar to depersonalization in that SETs distance themselves from students' needs, participants' perception of *being done* is conceptually distinct due to degree. While depersonalization ranges in frequency and intensity, participants described SETs *being done* as fully checked out, often coasting to retirement, rather than oscillating between sometimes engaging students and not engaging them at all. Participants provided many examples of *done* SETs who

stayed checked out or left, and provided only one instance of an SET who was *done* who eventually returned to stages of surviving/triaging and not burned out after transferring schools.

Gone

Beyond *being done*, teacher burnout was described by participants across both focus groups as *gone*. *Gone* represented the telos—the endpoint—of teachers' burnout experiences and was described as a teacher who has left the school with finality; not just as *being done* and taking sick days but deciding to quit and leave the profession. In his response to the initial prompt to describe burnout, Mike responded "when you say teacher burnout, I just think of teachers leaving," which Magda built upon, sharing: "I see a lot of younger people leaving special ed quickly because the training's not there." Selena described burnout as being gone: "if a teacher gets burned out and they are a really good teacher, you are gonna lose that good teacher and they are gonna be replaced by a first-year teacher," with the idea that it takes a few years for a novice teacher to learn to cope and also be effective in instruction. Participants emphasized, however, that it is not just novice teachers that leave: "we have...two life-skills teachers that are both... both retiring in December. You know, they've had enough" (Molly).

The theme of *gone* wove through both conversations, particularly the impact of vacancies on the students, teachers, and even future pipeline of teachers. Magda summed up the challenge of burned-out teachers being gone: "The other teachers who have to cover for the teachers that aren't there. The administration has got to explain to the parents why your children aren't learning today, because we don't have anybody." In instances such as these, the remaining SETs are pulled from their own instruction to cover in other classrooms, thus furthering their own burnout. Teachers being gone was particularly acute for one participant: "we had 17 vacancies four years ago in the school that I'm at" (Mike). For Selena, the turnover of teachers in their building was continuous: "[a special education] teacher took medical leave, and they hired somebody and then they quit." Mia pointed to the vacancies and the national context as impacting the pipeline and longevity of the profession: "They can't find teachers. I mean when you look in school, in job openings, there are special ed openings all over the place … people aren't going into it." Wryly summing up teacher burnout, when asked what teachers needed from the school or district to reduce burnout, Marcus joked: "not going into the profession." Thus, although *gone* represented the endpoint of burnout, it also contributed to the understaffed and under-resourced contexts in which other teachers experienced different stages of burnout.

DISCUSSION

Broadly, the ITI analysis supported our expectations that burnout would encompass the three key dimensions as proposed by Maslach (2003): emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. Additionally, the expectation that frustration would be a central emotion used to describe burnout was supported as well. However, as we analyzed the focus group transcripts, we noticed that the participants perceived burnout as a dynamic process in which SETs experienced burnout in stages that were consistent but not permanent, and that there were two common pathways through burnout: one for novice teachers and one for experienced teachers. Although burnout has been conceptualized as a process in prior work (Leiter, 2018; Maslach, 2003), the current findings have implications both (a) for the arguments of Bianchi, Schonfeld, and colleagues of burnout as occupational depression (Bianchi et al., 2024), and (b) for our understanding of SETs' experiences of burnout.

Burnout as Three Interrelated Dimensions and Frustration

SETs' descriptions provided strong support for Maslach's approach to burnout including the dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion was omnipresent and co-

occurred with physical symptoms of participants looking haggard and having an ulcer. Depersonalization was present as well, in two different forms: one that appeared more internalized (e.g., distancing themselves from students, being checked out emotionally) and one that was more externalized (e.g., yelling at students, snapping, giving students worse grades than they earned). And, as expected, lack of personal accomplishment was present. Participants did describe some novice students as unprepared for the job; however, the focal descriptions of personal accomplishment focused not on a lack of skills or efficacy, but on feeling unable to properly serve students given a high workload and limited resources. Indeed, when the workload was manageable and they could focus on teaching, SETs reported the job to be enjoyable. In these ways, Maslach's (2003) three-dimensional burnout model was supported.

However, two other frequent descriptions of burnout warrant additional attention in future studies: frustration and feeling undervalued or unappreciated. SETs frequently described their and their colleagues' burnout as frustration, whether due to an unmanageable workload, pressure from the district for paperwork compliance over serving students' needs, feeling looked down on by general education teachers who they felt did not understand their role, or generally undervalued and unappreciated within their schools. Although studies have noted both societal undervaluing of teachers' work and teachers feeling undervalued as a factor of burnout, it has largely been on the periphery of the discussion (Bedir, 2023), as has frustration (Chang, 2009), though Friedman (1993) described frustration as one of the key indicators of the apex of burnout. These two feelings appear to be aligned with but separate from emotional exhaustion and lack of personal accomplishment, which may explain some of the item cross-loading issues for emotional exhaustion and lack of personal accomplishment documented by Ruble et al. (2024) with a sample of SETs. If these findings are extended in future studies such that participants consistently view frustration and feeling undervalued as burnout rather than causes of burnout, there may be need to expand Maslach's tripartite model of burnout to either add dimensions or expand emotional exhaustion and lack of personal accomplishment to include items that capture frustration, misunderstanding, and feeling underappreciated.

While the current study provided support for Maslach's approach to burnout as well as need for extension for frustration and feeling undervalued for SETs, it yielded inconsistent support for Bianchi and colleagues' (2020, 2024) approach to burnout as being better captured via occupational depression. Although depression and burnout are linked empirically and participants did describe some indicators (e.g., exhaustion, cognitive impairment), participants did not mention depression in either focus group, nor did they describe other key indicators such as sleep alterations, psychomotor alterations, or suicidal ideations. There are potential explanations for the absence of mention of depression, including social desirability bias—however, participants were willing to share other non-socially desirable actions of burned-out coworkers including yelling at students. Although the focus group protocol did not probe for depression, participants did not generate its indicators when describing burnout. Further research is needed to more closely examine the degree to which special education teachers conceptualize occupational depression.

Burnout as a Process

A salient finding was that SETs described burnout as a nuanced and dynamic process (Figure 1). Burning out—both struggling to cope and trying to survive—was rooted in overwhelming tasks for SETs. Struggling to cope was emotional, where novice SETs had difficulty coping with students' trauma and daily life challenges; whereas trying to survive was more cognitive and SETs had to figure out how to triage and allocate limited resources among students and themselves. For teachers overwhelmed by the emotional load, many were described as *being done*, taking their sick days, being absent, and not coming back. For those who had more resources or were mentored in how to "leave [work] at the door" when they went home, they stayed in the profession, became experienced teachers, and experienced burnout as survival. When surviving, SETs shared glimpses of times when they felt they were not burned out, but generally they

were surviving. SETs shared that, when their colleagues became frustrated with surviving for long periods of time or the workload became too high, their colleagues would also experience *being done*, where they would become more distant from students and students' needs, and go through the motions until they could retire or find a new job. In this way, *being done* was similar to depersonalization in that SETs were not fully accessible to students, whether because they were absent or they were disconnected emotionally from their needs and relationships and going through the motions. And, once in the stage of *being done*, many SETs subsequently left the profession, or were *gone*. When teachers left, SETs felt their workload increased either (a) temporarily while another SET was hired or (b) permanently as they reported many districts struggled in hiring SETs to replace those who were *gone.*

While previous research has examined different models for burnout as a process, much of it is within other professions or relatively dated. For instance, Friedman (1993) identified emotional exhaustion and depersonalization both as salient factors for what he termed the *climax* of burnout. For SETs, depersonalization may be the strongest burnout factor for SET turnover, as a recent study of 230 SETs serving students with significant behavioral needs found depersonalization was the only burnout dimension to predict attrition of SETs longitudinally over the course of four years (Brunsting et al., 2025). These findings align with the results of the current study—given the similarities between depersonalization and *being done*—such that depersonalization/*being done* may be the salient proximal indicator of future attrition for SETs.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERVENTION RESEARCH

Understanding variables associated with SET burnout is only useful to the degree that the knowledge generated can be translated into effective interventions. Many recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews have focused on predictors of burnout (e.g., Park & Shin, 2020). Less is known about intervention effectiveness. Beames et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of intervention studies that indicated teacher-directed interventions are effective for decreasing burnout and increasing wellbeing. But intervention research is generally limited for SETs. As an example, Beames et al.'s review of 88 studies identified only six studies with SETs.

The findings from this study on SET perceptions highlight specific areas for burnout and wellness interventions that could be tailored to different stages of burnout specific for a group of teachers, and therefore potentially more impactful. For novice SETs, the understanding of burnout as a progression suggests that early-stage interventions may be especially effective. Given novice SETs' challenges coping with the emotional load, interventions focused on building coping self-efficacy could be beneficial. For veteran teachers, who may experience more advanced stages of burnout characterized by emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (*surviving* and *being done* stages), reactive interventions need to be potent enough to head off attrition. In this case, promoting active problem-solving skills (as opposed to passive or avoidant strategies) may be especially important. Organization-level interventions that support school leaders in their direct support to SETs would also be crucial. One key gap in the research is the lack of interventions to support building administrators, who should be assessing—whether formally or informally—teachers' experience of work overload. Addressing this could enhance the effectiveness of burnout interventions at both the individual and organizational levels. School-wide and organizational-level interventions may take more time to initiate and test for effectiveness, but they are also critically important for novice and veteran teachers.

In a recent study, Ruble et al. (2024) applied an effectiveness-implementation approach to adapting and testing the BREATHE-EASE Goals SET burnout intervention (Ruble, McGrew, et al., 2023). Effectiveness research concerns intervention outcomes while in the real-world; implementation research concerns how to move best practice findings into routine settings, which aligns with Beames et al.'s (2023) call for interventions that translate into school settings to ensure feasibility amid lack of resources. BREATHE-EASE Goals combines applying contemplative practices

with identifying meaning and values in one's work, using cognitive-behavioral strategies, reclaiming time, setting compassionate boundaries, scheduling, having difficult conversation, building social support, using individual goal setting, and addressing potential barriers and strategies for overcoming challenges. Initial results suggest that BREATHE-EASE goals for SETs are effective for reducing emotional exhaustion and improving mindfulness and coping self-efficacy skills. Ruble et al.'s (2024) findings support the initial efficacy of the content in BREATHE-EASE. Further, the results of the current study highlight the importance of SETs learning coping and problem-solving skills (e.g., conversations with supervisors on workload and work-life balance) that may help reduce the frustration SETs experience before they are *done*.

LIMITATIONS AND NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH

Though the two focus groups provided valuable insight into their experiences and perspectives of burnout, relying on solely two focus groups constrains our analysis. Our results are further limited by the distinctions in local policies within the contexts of the participants' work. As policies guiding educator's work varies by district and state, the responses provided across the two groups may reflect local differences in nuanced ways our analysis did not capture. For instance, while the Midwest focus group spoke about being misunderstood or undervalued, the Southeast group did not, thus leading to questions as to the understanding and shaping of the SET role in one context versus the other. Further research is needed to understand whether participants' understanding of burnout is accurate to the broader population of special educators.

Another limitation was that the focus groups were part of an intervention development study and focus group questions centered on understanding burnout and factors for burnout most relevant for intervention; thus, although the participants' descriptions of burnout were rich and applicable, the focus group protocol was not designed to probe for all expected themes. It may be that participants would have described symptoms of occupational burnout (e.g., trouble sleeping, loss of appetite), if more directly asked about the health impacts of burnout. Thus, although participants' descriptions broadly supported Maslach's (2003) conceptualization of burnout, future research is needed to qualitatively explore their experiences of occupational depression to understand the degree to which they may overlap. Additionally, focus groups occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we recommend researchers extend this analysis with new focus groups and questions designed to probe conceptions of burnout. Participant sampling could include SETs in all stages of burnout—or with a range of scores on the MBI.

Another area for future research is in extrapolating the degree to which occupational wellbeing intersects with burnout and occupational depression. Recent reviews of teacher wellbeing (Fox et al., 2023) and SET burnout and wellbeing (Brunsting et al., 2025) have noted the opportunity and need for researchers to delineate where these constructs overlap, how they interact, and the degree to which they intersect. Given the salience of SETs feeling misunderstood and undervalued by some of their general education counterparts, as well as SETs' interdependence on general educators for access to curricular materials and facilitation of students' inclusion (Bettini et al., 2022), further understanding of these dynamics is needed.

CONCLUSION

As researchers continue to update conceptual frameworks and measurement for burnout, it is important to consider the degree to which the experience of feeling overwhelmed by consistent work stress may be qualitatively and quantitatively different based on profession. The current study sought to understand SETs' conceptualizations of burnout, yielding broad support for the Maslach (2003) three-dimensional model (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of

personal accomplishment); however, additional key descriptions included frustration and feeling undervalued, suggesting the model may need to be extended for SETs if future studies yield similar findings. Finally, the participants described a dynamic process of burnout, in which SETs generally progressed through stages from *not burned out* to *burning out* to *being done* to *gone*, with the experience of *burning out* and *being done* differing for novice and experienced teachers. Although examples were few, there were instances of going from *burning out* to *not burned out* and from *being done* to *burning out*, indicating potential opportunities for school-level or individual-level interventions.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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