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Special Education Due Process and Workload Issues

Laura Berens

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Special Education Due Process and Workload Issues

by

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A Starred Paper

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Chapter I: Introduction

This starred paper is written to shed light on the system of processes and procedures special education teachers must adhere to as part of their roles and responsibilities. Special education teachers are required by law to complete the appropriate paperwork for each student served. However, the documentation and procedures not only vary by state, but also from district to district (such as in the state of Minnesota). Therefore, this paper will address the issue of documentation and the impact this has on the workload and stress of special education teachers.

My experience in the special educational field makes this topic especially relevant to me. I have felt the pressure of not only completing legal paperwork correctly but learning new systems and new ways to use those systems year after year. It feels like the learning curve along with the high amount of paperwork in general is a high stressor throughout any teaching placement. This, alongside other stressors, has caused me to consider leaving the field, as many special educators do. I wanted to know more about how others in the field were feeling and dig further into the topic of teacher stress.

Background of the Study

President Ford signed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act into law on November 29, 1975. “The hallmark of this legislation in the eyes of parents and handicapped individuals was the provision relating to the I.E.P.-the individualized educational plan” (Gerardi et al., 1984, p. 39). Since the inception of this first act and subsequent legislation, several concerns emerged regarding excessive paperwork for special educators in this nation’s schools. Due to legislation and compliance issues, forms and paperwork are mandatory; however, there are certainly ways to streamline the work. The retention of special education instructors is a

major challenge in many schools across the country, in addition to the fact that there is a teacher shortage in many areas of education (Fore III, Martin, & Carter, 2002).

Special education is a high burnout field of teaching, and it comes from several stressors related to the workload they have that includes lesson planning, student behavior, meetings, due process paperwork and more. It is imperative that paperwork is completed correctly, as it is a legal record of the plan implemented to address a student's needs. Additional stress can arise from the fact that these documents can result in legal action if completed incorrectly. An unfortunate reality in our country is that anything and everything can and has been litigated before. All staff want to complete the paperwork correctly to avoid even the hint of this possibility.

In addition to completing the necessary paperwork, teachers need to then implement the IEP. Seventy-nine percent of teachers feel there is insufficient (67%) or no (12%) time to plan lessons to achieve implementation of practice. In addition, 86 percent of teachers feel there is insufficient (59%) or no (27%) time to plan with their partners and 89 percent feel there is insufficient (48%) or no (41%) time to work with other IEP team members (Fowler et al., 2019). This lack of support and planning time adds to the overall stress load carried by special educators.

Many factors go into teacher workload, which adds to their stress. To even begin to address these issues, understanding of what goes into a special educator's day is a must. Vannest and Hagen-Burke (2010) note that "the first step to efficiently study teacher time use in SPED is to obtain a valid, reliable measure of SPED teachers' activities across an instructional day" (p. 2). They continue, telling us that there are difficulties measuring time like this and at current no such picture exists.

The state of Minnesota does not utilize a state mandated system for completing the necessary and significant amount of special education paperwork that teachers are faced with. Because of this, special educators are not able to learn about the specifics of completing the paperwork in their coursework during college training. Districts are not able to share information easily; if a statewide computerized system able to interface between schools was used this could be done more efficiently. I personally believe that if I had even heard of the system the school district was using before I had to sink or swim in my first year teaching special education I would have been much more successful. Through these experiences and more this topic emerged and these research questions were developed.

Research Questions

These are the questions that will guide this starred paper:

1. What are the components of a teacher's workload that impact a teacher's stress levels?
2. To what extent does the paperwork and workload impact special education teacher wellbeing and stress?
3. What are options to reduce special education teacher stress/burnout?

Literature Review Organization

The literature review is arranged to flow from what stresses teachers to how it impacts attrition and finally ways to reduce teacher stress and burnout. Google Scholar provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature and is a tool used in this review. In addition, Lib Search, the St. Cloud State University library search tool, is one unified search engine to search the library's articles, books and e-books, videos, digital media, and more. In addition, it provided access to articles behind paywalls on Google Scholar. Key search terms include special education, history, teacher, paperwork, due process, workload, and burnout. These keywords,

utilized in different combinations, produced different articles for various topics of the literature review. Table 1.1 summarizes a few of the key studies which will be used in developing chapter two.

Table 1

Key Studies in Literature Review

| Authors, Date, Title | Study Design | Participants | Procedure(s) | Findings |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| Gartin, B. C., & Murdick, N. L. 2005 <i>IDEA:2004</i> | Examination of IDEA, both from 2004 and previously | N/A, review of literature | Review changes, both major and minor, to IDEA in 2004 | There have been both significant and minor changes in IDEA 2004's requirements for the development, review, and revision of the IEP. These changes were included because of the concerns raised by parents and educators about the increasing paperwork load and the need to align the IEP with the requirements of NCLB. Although the intent of the legislation to reduce paperwork while bringing the IEP in alignment with NCLB appears to have been accomplished, the actual implementation may result in an increase in paperwork. |
| Gerardi, R. J., Grohe, B., Benedict, G. C., & Coolidge, P. 1984 <i>I.E.P.-More Paperwork and Wasted Time</i> | Review Education for All Handicap Children Act | N/A, review of law | State changes in documentation brought on by new law. | Valuable time has been diverted from instruction to paperwork to meet the substantial procedural demands of the law. Today's handicapped children have more rights, but we find in retrospect that the price they pay is less education. Something must be done, and soon, for we are presently spending as much time talking about the program we intend to implement as we are in its implementation. |
| Mehrenberg, R. L. 2013 <i>Red Tape and Green Teachers: The Impact of Paperwork on Novice Special Education Teachers</i> | Semi-structured phone interviews (qualitative) | 18 novice special education teachers | Ask the teachers 3 questions with preapproved probing questions | (1) Participants had a negative opinion of paperwork based on its lengthiness and perceived irrelevancy to instruction. (2) Participants cited mentors, peers, and practice as the best ways to learn about paperwork. (3) Recommended paperwork advice for new teachers were to understand expectation, ask for help, and get organized. |
| Whitaker, S. D. 2003 <i>Needs of Beginning Special Education Teachers: Implications for Teacher Education</i> | Survey | 156 teachers in S. Carolina after their first year teaching special education | Surveyed at the beginning of year 1 and partway into year 2 | The beginning special education teachers reported that they needed the most assistance in (a) learning special education policies, procedures, and paperwork, (b) receiving emotional support, (c) learning system information related to the school, and (d) learning about available materials and resources. To a lesser extent they needed assistance with curriculum and instruction, discipline, management issues, and interactions with others. |
| Vannest, K. J., Soares, D. A., Harrison, J. R., Brown, L., & Parker, R. I. 2009 <i>Changing Teacher Time</i> | Interviews | 4 teachers | -Baseline -Intervention with self-monitoring -Post intervention tests | Although more work needs to be accomplished on identifying the barriers to change and the relations between those barriers and time use, this study presents data from 4 teachers to show that changing time use can occur, but not without accounting for the structures of the environment. |
| Fowler, S. A., Coleman, M. R. B., & Bogdan, W. K. 2019 <i>The state of the special education profession survey report.</i> | Surveys | Survey | CEC contracted with the University of Illinois Survey Lab to assist with data analysis. | The respondents' identification of what they needed affirmed and supported many of the issues identified by their responses in the survey. Again, many respondents identified the importance of the IEP in their instruction and the need for resources to address IEP goals as well as the need to have general education administrators who support the IEP. This is consistent with findings from Section I and IV. The importance of smaller caseloads or class sizes speaks to many of the concerns raised by respondents over having adequate time to meet and plan with colleagues and families. |

| Authors, Date, Title | Study Design | Participants | Procedure(s) | Findings |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Vannest, K. J., & Hagan-Burke, S. 2010 <i>Teacher time use in special education.</i> | Direct Observation | Descriptive observation study | This study employs direct observation of several SPED teachers across a number of settings and on multiple school days | SPED teachers electronically recorded their time use across the day in the spring of 2006 reflecting on their activities across 12 categories: academic instruction, nonacademic instruction, instructional support, discipline, supervision, assessment, IEP meetings, paperwork, consulting and collaboration, other assigned responsibilities, planning and preparing, and personal time. |
| Fore III, C., Martin, C., & Carter, J. 2002 <i>Why do special education teachers leave the field? Possible methods to increase retention.</i> | Review of literature | N/A, review of literature | Describe the burnout/ teacher retention problem in the field of special education, within the context of today's classrooms. | We have presented data to document the critical shortage of teachers in special education, as well as numerous suggestions for enhancing retention and decreasing burnout of special education teachers. While the options discussed in the literature present a variety of choices for school district administrators, we have also offered several politically risky options, which may need to be considered if we, as a profession, are to address critical shortage area. Clearly, all professionals are the most effective instructional options for special needs students which we can provide, and it may be time to consider several risky solutions to this growing problem. |

Definition of Terms

Burnout: According to the World Health Organization, “Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- reduced professional efficacy” (“Burn-out,” 2019).

Due Process: A requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that sets forth regulations for a formal set of policies and procedures implemented by schools for children with special education needs. Due process is intended to ensure that children with learning disabilities and other types of disabilities receive a free appropriate public education. These policies and procedures are typically described in a school district's procedural safeguards statement and local policies. Due process requirements set forth in IDEA intended that, when followed, would help to facilitate appropriate decision making and services for children with disabilities.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): The educational right of students who are identified as having a disability that ensures they receive special education and related services. This is provided at public expense. This emphasizes equal access to education for all, regardless of disability status.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A legal document for each public-school child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with state and federal laws.

Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP): A legal document specifically for infants and toddlers and their families with developmental delays. Development of this document involves identifying the child's needs and how to support the family in the child's development.

Chapter II: Literature Review

There is much research into stress factors for teachers in the United States. Additionally, there is separate research regarding the unique stressors faced by special educators. All teachers experience and manage these stressors in different ways. Research has shown several theoretical and practical ways to manage teacher stress and aid in well-being. This paper explores the challenges faced by special education teachers due to varying documentation requirements, impacting their workload and stress levels, and ways to reduce stress and burnout.

Stress in the Field of Education

All teachers manage a variety of responsibilities throughout their workday. A teachers workload arises from many sources, including lesson preparation, instructional time, student behavior, other paperwork, and administrative tasks. Special educators face unique challenges in each of these areas differently than their general education peers. Another workload issue that arises is the legislatively mandated nature of special education due process and service. The first topic is the broadest, looking at stressors common to most teachers.

Stressors Faced by Teachers

General education teachers in the United States experience multiple stressors daily (Steiner & Woo, 2021). In Peyton et al. (2021) we learn that the level of stress can vary from person to person, position to position, district to district and state to state. One of the major stressors is the workload that teachers encounter as they have many responsibilities, like lesson planning, grading and other duties as assigned (Riyanto & Sayer, 2022). Teachers often find that they are dealing with insufficient resources, including funding, materials, and support staff (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). According to Lazarides et al. (2020), teachers also bear the brunt of the burden when managing classroom behavior. Lazarides et al. (2020) further notes that a

source of stress is dealing with disruptive behavior from students, especially if a teacher does not feel supported. Teachers are also feeling the pressure of preparing their students for all standardized testing given through the year (Stauffer & Mason, 2013). Establishing and maintaining relationships with parents or guardians, especially in challenging situations, can add to a teacher's mental load (Farmer, 2020). When reading Garcia and Weiss (2020) they mention the pressure to attend professional development workshops and keep up with the latest teaching methods or new ideas for classrooms as another stress factor. Some teachers feel as though there is a lack of autonomy if when teachers are micromanaged as well.

Teaching also exerts an emotional toll on educators, as they are deeply invested in the growth and success of their students (Farmer, 2020). In Wink et al. (2021), the authors discuss how becoming a teacher requires high levels of compassion and empathy. Mahoney et al. (2021) explores how educators are often supporting students through their own social or emotional issues, trauma, etc. Farmer (2020) notes that "teachers are experiencing compassion fatigue at a level that is unprecedented" (p. 41). Many teachers report struggling to balance their work and life responsibilities given the demands of the job. It is a juggling act to manage both professional and personal lives (Silva & Fischer, 2020).

Stressors Specific to Special Educators

Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) note that special education teachers face unique challenges and stressors given the specialized nature of their roles. Special educators are meeting the diverse needs of a wide range of students on their caseloads. It is time-consuming to differentiate for each student's specific needs, then develop and implement tailored instruction (Vannest et al., 2009). Special educators also have additional demands when it comes to collaborating with team members. Not only do they need to work with parents and general

education teachers, but there are also often specialized members of a child's team such as a speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and/or school psychologists (Whitaker, 2003). Special education teachers often work in a separate classroom or area from general education teachers, which can lead to a feeling of isolation (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Finding ways to coordinate with and build a supportive network is challenging (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017). Special education teachers deal with an additional level of lack of resources. Often, they are finding creative ways to meet their students' needs with less than necessary resources (Park & Shin, 2020). Special education teachers serve as strong advocates for their students within the school community. Many times, "special education teachers did not feel they received sufficient support from their principals and resources in schools to manage their academic responsibilities" (Park & Shin, 2020, p. 2).

Vannest et al. (2009) discovered that in addition to other aspects of special educator's job descriptions, they also manage legal and compliance requirements. Special education teachers must follow a complex set of special education laws and regulations set by both the state and federal governments (Apling & Jones, 2008). Mason-Williams et al. (2020) emphasize that these are put in place to ensure that they are providing the appropriate services and accommodations tailored to a student's specific disability needs. According to Hester et al. (2020), staying up to date with ever-changing legal requirements can pose difficulties for teachers. They are required to write Individual Family Service Programs (IFSP) or Individualized Education Programs (IEP) for the students they work with, and then are responsible for implementing and monitoring progress for each student (Park & Shin, 2020). This process is often time-consuming and complex (Mehrenberg, 2013). According to Gilmour et al. (2023), educators can feel like

timelines keep them constantly working on paperwork. This leads to insufficient support and direct instruction for students.

Legislation Governing Documentation

“The legal requirement that public schools serve all children with disabilities is a recent one. Prior to the 1970s, millions of children with disabilities were either refused enrollment or inadequately served by public schools” (Martin et al., 1996, p. 25). Throughout the years since 1975, Congress has revised and reauthorized this legislation numerous times. Federal legislation has also been passed that governs the education of all students that has specific implications for special educators. Firstly, we will look at the introduction of mandated special education services.

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142)

The first major legislation that specifically targeted special education was the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142). In the United States prior to the mid 1970’s school districts could choose not to educate children whose needs proved unique (Itkonen, 2007). Zettel and Ballard (1979) say:

In November of 1975 the Congress of the United States passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94–1 42) and thereby mandated that all school-aged handicapped children in United States were to have available to them a “free, appropriate public education” by September 1, 1978. To accomplish this the Congress also prescribed a set of minimum standards that were to be followed by state and local education agencies to ensure that such an education was indeed being provided (p. 5).

Gerardi et al. (1984) note that many see the most significant component of this legislation as the IEP (Individualized Education Plan). Martin et al. (1996) note that:

Public Law 94–142 was prescriptive of certain procedures: to receive funds, the state department of education and local school districts had to put in place system of “child find” to locate all students with disabilities; perform evaluations to determine the effect of the disability on educational performance; conduct annual meetings which produced an individualized education program (IEP) for each student with disabilities; and ensure that the plan was carried out in the least restrictive environment. Decisions about curricula, the elements of the IEP, and other instructional matters were left to local and state authorities. Only the broad protections of the law were federally prescribed. (p.30)

This also brought on a growth of colleges and universities offering specialized training for teachers to work with students with varied needs (Keogh, 2007). Martin et al. (1996) reminds us that the title of the act was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act when it was amended in 1990.

The IDEA Amendments of 1997

The next major legislation was the IDEA Amendments of 1997. On June 4, 1997, President Clinton signed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, (PL 105–17) into law. This law included several amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), as well as reauthorization of the act. The 1997 amendments added several major provisions that changed the education of students with special needs. It also included adjustments to the roles of other key team members such as administrators, general educators, special educators, and parents (Yell & Shriner, 1997). Furthermore, Yell and Shriner (1997) tell us that:

Congress viewed the reauthorization process as an opportunity to strengthen and improve the IDEA by: strengthening the role of parents; ensuring access to the general education curriculum and reforms; focusing on teaching and learning while reducing

unnecessary paperwork requirements; assisting education agencies in addressing the cost of improving special education and related services to children with disabilities; giving increased attention to racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity to prevent inappropriate identification and mislabeling; ensuring that schools are safe and conducive to learning; and encouraging parents and educators to work out their differences using non-adversarial means. (p.1)

According to Telzrow (1999) there are an extensive set of rights and procedures defined within these amendments that became known as procedural safeguards. Knoblauch (1998) tells us that:

IDEA is organized in four parts: Part A, General Provisions; Part B, Assistance for the Education of All Children with Disabilities (school age/preschool programs); Part C, Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities; and Part D, National Activities to Improve the Education of Children with Disabilities (support programs). P.L. 105-17 retains the major provisions of earlier federal laws in this area, including the assurance of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and the guarantee of due process procedures. It also includes modifications to the law. Some of the changes that affect special education practice nationwide include:

- Participation of students with disabilities in state and district wide assessments (testing) programs (including alternative assessment).
- Development and review of the individualized education program (IEP), including increased emphasis on participation of children and youth with disabilities in the general education curriculum and the involvement of general education teachers in developing the IEP.
- Enhanced parent participation in eligibility and placement decisions.

- Streamlined student evaluation/reevaluation requirements.
- Identification of transition service needs within a child's course of study beginning at age 14, the age at which transition services should begin.
- The availability of mediation services as a means of more easily resolving parent-school differences.
- Disciplinary procedures for students with disabilities, including allowance for an appropriate interim alternative educational setting.
- Allowing children ages 3–9 to be identified as developmentally delayed; previously, it was ages 3–5. (p. 2)

Telzrow (1999) tells us that the IDEA Amendments of 1997 contained some of the most wide-ranging changes in the federal law since the enactment of P.L. 94-142 in 1975. Many see the 1997 amendments as attempting to improve the quality of education for students with disabilities after the initial 1975 act mandated the education of these students (Annino, 1999).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004)

Smith (2005) tells us that when Congress reauthorized IDEA in 2004, they included a change to the name. They added the word improvement, making the new title of the legislation the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act; however, the law is still mostly referred to as IDEA.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is an essential component in providing a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) to individuals with disabilities. The 2004 amendments of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have attempted to reduce the paperwork requirements of the IEP, while simultaneously ensuring that the goal of FAPE is met. (Gartin & Murdick, 2005, p. 327)

Additionally, Smith (2005) tells us that:

There were numerous changes, but some of the notable ones include (a) adding NCLB language related to highly qualified special education teachers; (b) increasing funding to the authorized 40% level over a period of years through 2011; (c) changing eligibility for classification as having LD; (d) adding flexibility to attendance at IEP meetings; (e) creating a pilot demonstration for multiyear IEPs; (f) deleting the requirement for short-term objectives on the IEP; and (g) modifying suspension and expulsion requirements. (p. 318)

No Child Left Behind

Part of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA was to bring the Act into alignment with the newly passed legislation, No Child Left Behind, which was enacted in 2002 (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). Yell et al. (2006) tell us:

No Child Left Behind was intended to improve the academic achievement of students across the United States. The law has focused national attention on improving the academic achievement of the nation's 48 million students by establishing the 2013–14 school year as the deadline for public schools to ensure that all students will be proficient in reading and math. The law also established a rigorous accountability system for states and public schools that involves rewards and sanctions based on students' performance. In addition, NCLB requires that by the 2005–06 school year, all students have to be taught by highly qualified teachers in environments that are safe, drug-free, and conducive to learning, and all students will graduate from high school. Finally, NCLB requires that schools must implement evidence-based practices. No Child Left Behind has resulted in more pervasive involvement of the federal government and educational

matters and will have a profound effect on the education of students with disabilities. (p. 1)

Yell and Drasgow (2007) remind us that teachers and administrators will need to continuously monitor federal as well as state laws, regulations, and guidelines to understand and appropriately implement IDEA.

Every Student Succeeds Act

President Barack Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) on December 10, 2015 (Sharp, 2016). Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) note that this replaces No Child Left Behind.

The ESSA has shifted a great deal of education authority from the federal government back to states and local education agencies. The ESSA: (a) ensures that each state has set high college and career standards, (b) enable states to maintain accountability by directing resources towards schools that require improvement, (c) empower states and local education agencies to use appropriate evidence based interventions that foster school improvement, (d) encourages states to preserve annual assessments as an informing mechanism that does not overshadow teaching and learning, (e) increases access to quality preschool programs for more children, and (f) secures new resources to identify and investigate promising educational practices and to replicate proven strategies that advanced students educational outcomes. (Sharp, 2016, p. 9)

According to Nagro et al. (2020) “ESSA contains a number of provisions meant to improve the academic performance and outcomes of all students and to close achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers” (p. 182). Nagro et al. (2020) lays out five hallmark areas as well as how they have and will continue to impact special education students:

- (a) Required coordination, or the requirement that the team creating a states' accountability plan contain input from advocates focused on meeting the needs of students with disabilities.
- (b) Disciplinary practices, as related to policies and procedures that will reduce the incidences of bullying and harassment as well as decrease the use of restraint and seclusion.
- (c) Diploma options, which allows states to award an alternate diploma for the highest needs students for whom meeting the standards necessary to award a regular high school diploma is not appropriate.
- (d) Assessments and accountability, regarding a decision-making shift back to the states regarding assessments, curriculum and instruction.
- (e) Proficiency versus progress or allowing special education student progress to be measured by more equitable comparisons.

Many teachers struggle to keep up with the paperwork requirements under the law (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In a survey conducted by Kaff (2004), "one teacher stated 'I want to teach the children, instead of spending hours doing paperwork. I feel we cheat the children. They come after the paperwork' " (p. 12). In a survey conducted by Whitaker (2003) it was reported that:

the beginning special education teachers reported that they needed the most assistance with system information related to special education (information about policies, paperwork, procedures, guidelines, and expectations related to the district special education program). This was also the area in which they reported the greatest discrepancy between the amount of assistance needed and the amount of assistance actually received. (p. 110)

Reducing Teacher Stress/Burnout

Teachers experiencing stress and burnout can have adverse effects on their daily duties. This includes tasks expressed in their job descriptions as well as building relationships with students and coworkers (Agyapong et al., 2023). Agyapong et al. (2022) tell us that “stress and burnout continue to be a problem among teachers, leading to anxiety and depression. Burnout may adversely affect teachers’ health and is a risk factor for poor physical and mental well-being” (p.1). Addressing special education teacher wellbeing requires a comprehensive approach that includes providing resources, training, mentorship, and support to help teachers effectively manage their workload and emotional demands (Fowler et al., 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Agyapong et al., 2023). “Policy makers need to use comprehensive measures to address teachers’ needs and concerns in order to keep them in the teaching profession” (Liu & Ramsey, 2008, p. 1182). Supporting teachers starts with their initial education before they even step into the classroom.

Teacher Preparation and Ongoing Learning

Traditionally, the first step in a teachers’ career is their college or university training. “Teacher education and training programs that consider the significant variables, especially self-efficacy, might be effective in reducing special education teachers’ burnout levels” (Park & Shin, 2020, p. 14). Fowler et al. (2019) reminds us that “effective instruction [of special education students] . . . depends on the preparation of educators at the university-level and continued in-service professional development” (p. 19). Many teachers note that meaningful and relevant continued professional development is a necessary mitigation factor for stress (Stauffer & Mason, 2013; Hester et al., 2020). See et al. (2020) speak about emerging studies that examine the impact of specific mentoring, new teacher induction or teacher preparation as it relates to

new teachers. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) note that leaders should specifically focus on supporting novice teachers by assigning them to positions they are qualified for and then supporting their induction training while maintaining manageable working conditions. Likewise, Fore III, Martin, and Bender (2002) recommends smaller class sizes/caseloads and reductions in paperwork. Districts need to improve and expand on collaborative instructional approaches, teacher to teacher partnerships and mentorships/coaching (Shepherd et al., 2016; Fowler et al., 2019). As curriculum and legislation change constantly, districts can ease this stressful burden (Smith, 2005; Yell et al., 2006; Nagro et al., 2020). Stauffer & Mason (2013) say “school administrators may help teachers mediate the stress of curriculum changes by providing a clear rationale for the changes, data to support the changes, as well as multiple resources and professional development opportunities to assist with implementation” (p. 827). Additionally, Przekwas (2021) notes that “by providing time to work with others, and become organized or efficient in the process, teachers feel more supported and at ease in their job role” (p. 45).

Autonomy and Input

“Administrators may be in the best position to address political and educational structures, as they serve as liaisons between their local schools and the district offices” (Stauffer & Mason, 2013, p. 826). Many special educators express concern that general education administrators, who often lacking knowledge or understanding of the uniqueness of the position, are nonetheless making policy and day-to-day decisions that impact them (Fowler et al., 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Schools can utilize a shared decision-making process, which elevates the voices of the teachers doing the work (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Stauffer and Mason (2013) highlight that research had demonstrated that when teachers feel their perspectives are acknowledged and they possess a degree of influence in important decisions that directly affect

them, it lowers stress levels and increases morale. Administrators can also support educators by creating instructional conditions (time for collaboration, workload, scheduling, resources, etc.) that assist teachers' ability to do their job effectively (Billingsly & Bettini, 2019).

Teacher Compensation

Mason-Williams et al. (2020) “believe that special education suffers from a shortage of teachers willing to work for the wages we pay and under the working conditions provided in schools” (p.56). They continue, “we believe we need to pay teachers more generally, pay teachers in shortage areas more than other teachers, and improve working conditions for teachers in all of our schools” (p. 56). Garcia and Weiss (2020) concur with the idea that raising teacher wages will attract and keep educators. Fore III, Martin, and Carter (2002) acknowledges that a recommendation to give higher salaries as an incentive to increase special education teacher retention is politically risky. Despite the perilousness of the idea, many studies indicate that raising teacher salaries is universally seen as a necessity (Billingsly & Bettini, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021; Przekwas, 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Sun et al., 2024).

Health Factors

Stauffer and Mason (2013) consider how acknowledging that stress, in its many varied forms, is a shared experience amongst teachers in schools can foster a sense of relief. Hester et al. (2020) suggests that “district-level and school-level administration should consider facilitating trainings that allow teachers to identify significant stressors of their positions and develop an action plan to reduce this overall stress level” (p. 361). “Many school districts, states, and teacher professional associations already provide mental health supports to teachers, but the extent to which teacher are aware of these supports, take advantage of them, or experience

barrier to access is not clear” (Steiner & Woo, 2021, p. 19). Hester et al. (2020) notes that in their findings they confirmed previous research that link sustained levels of high stress to teachers poor physical and emotional health.

Special Education Teacher Attrition

Special education teacher attrition is a significant concern within the education system, as the turnover rate for special education teachers is often higher than that of general education teachers (Farmer, 2020). The demanding nature of the job, including the complex needs of students with disabilities, heavy workloads, limited resources, and emotional challenges, contributes to burnout and turnover among special education teachers (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020). The constant pressure to meet individualized student needs, navigate legal requirements, and collaborate with various professionals can lead to feelings of stress, frustration, and isolation (Park & Shin, 2020). High levels of job stress, coupled with inadequate support and professional development opportunities, can ultimately drive special education teachers to leave the field (Hester et al., 2020). According to Park and Shin (2020) “the problem of teacher burnout has been the steady subject of research” (p.1).

Literature Review Summary

There is a substantial amount of research available regarding teacher stress and attrition, both in general and special education. Research also exists regarding the legislation of special education services and paperwork; however, less research exists regarding how this affects a teacher’s workload. Teachers cite all the above and more as reasons to leave the profession. The research reviewed for this paper showed that special education teachers are leaving the field at a higher rate than general education teachers. Special education is a high stress position, which can

lead to burnout. High levels of job stress coupled with inadequate support and professional development opportunities can ultimately drive special education teachers to leave employment in schools.

Chapter III: Results

This research is both timely and important as the nation continues to experience teacher shortages (Steiner & Woo, 2021) and persistently high attrition rates of special education teachers (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Stauffer and Mason (2013) categorize the stressors that lead to this in five ways: political and educational structures, and structural factors, student factors, parent and family factors, and school climate. Firstly, the political and educational structures category includes things like lack of support and resources dealing with administrators on many levels and the expectations and demands that a school district places upon teachers. Instructional factors include things like lesson planning, lesson differentiation, due process paperwork, and other administrative tasks as assigned, which leads to time pressures. Student factors include everything from student achievement to student behavior and discipline. Parent and family factors range from lack of parents support to high parent expectations. Lastly, school climate involves staff relationships and other personnel matters that may lead to additional burdens on educators. Research and recommendations do exist to mitigate these factors, but as much of this would include needing support at the federal and state level, changes have been slow to come (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

Conclusions

This section will address and answer each research question posed in chapter one separately.

1. *What are the components of a teacher's workload that impact a teacher's stress levels?*

Both general and special education teachers all over the country experience many stressors throughout their day. All teachers spend time lesson planning, grading, and doing other duties as assigned outside of the time they spend with their students. Educators deal with

insufficient resources, both by way of material and support staff. All staff support student behavior and emotional needs. Teachers are expected to build relationships with students, families, colleagues, and various administrators. Almost every study that looked at teacher stress in this literature review noted that teachers are struggling to balance their work and personal life to some degree. Additionally, as mandated by law, special educators are obligated to complete due process paperwork withing strict timelines.

2. *To what extent does the paperwork and workload impact special education teacher wellbeing and stress?*

Legislation specifically relating to children with special needs was first passed in 1975. This legislation, initially called the Education for All Handicapped Children act was the beginning of due process paperwork requirements in the field of special education. Over the years the act was amended and reauthorize several times with major changes in 1983 and again in 1990, when it was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In 1997 IDEA was amended to broaden the scope of how students were served and strengthening the role of parents. In 2004, Congress re-authorized the act while changing the name to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. One of the goals of this set of amendments was to attempt to reduce the paperwork requirements of the IEP, while still ensuring that the goal of a free and appropriate education.

Two laws passed in the last 20 years addressing the education of all students impacted special education as well. In 2002, No Child Left Behind was passed with the intent to improve the academic achievement of all students. In 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds act. One purpose of this act was to shift more educational authority from the federal government back to state and local agencies. It hopes to still maintain accountability for

states while empowering them, along with their local educators, to use whatever evidence-based interventions it deemed appropriate for school improvement.

Legislation, rules, and regulations are constantly changing at the federal and state levels. Currently, there is no system for supporting teachers in understanding changes to the regulations. In addition, the time afforded to special educators to complete these requirements is not mandated, although the completion of these documents is.

3. What are options to reduce special education teacher stress/burnout?

There is some research into reducing teacher stress and burnout. Many recommendations start at the beginning of a teacher's career with teacher preparation programs and continue with ongoing learning through mentorship, professional development, and collaboration. Many studies emphasize the importance of teachers having autonomy in making some choices for themselves and their students. Special educators also struggle with administrators who are not well-versed in the field of special education. Special educators benefit from the ability to give input and have their voice heard regarding the decision-making process for things that affect them and their students. Every study mentioned in some way the low wages that teachers are paid and the suggestion of paying higher wages, especially in the special education field or positions that are hard to fill.

It is suggested that acknowledging the high stress nature of this position is a necessity in supporting school staff. Schools can show an awareness of this by offering mental health support to teachers. This can range from trainings to one-on-one sessions, as well as ensuring that teachers are aware of these options and taking advantage of them.

It will take a multi-level approach from federal state and local governments as well as district leaders to ensure that teachers have adequate support. As teachers are the ones

experiencing the stress and burnout, their voice is an important part of this conversation. A through line in all the research suggests that bold action is needed to address teacher burnout as well as teacher shortages.

Discussion and Reflection

I have known since my early teenage years that I wanted to teach. I completed my early childhood degree in 2011, but during my student teaching realized that I needed a special education degree. I took one semester off before going back to school and getting my early childhood special education license, which I started teaching November 2013. I personally have experienced every one of the stressors that I read about in my literature review.

When I started my career, I learned that the system I knew from my student teaching was not the system used to complete due process paperwork in my first position. In my 10 years of teaching since then I have learned and utilized six different due process systems. Many of these came alongside learning a new school district as well. This led to me attempting to remain in compliance with the law while also struggling to figure out how to do it in a new system within a new district. Many times, I have wished that a uniform system existed in this state allowing me to focus simply on learning a new district and staying compliant.

The issue of special education teacher stress and burnout is also a particular relevance to me. Each year it feels we as educators are asked to do more with less. For me personally, each year the stressors seem to have grown. I experienced an administrator not well versed in special education and struggled alongside my colleagues to have our voices heard. I have taught in a school building for an entire year where the principal still did not know my name in May. I, like many others, experienced a global pandemic, and the stress of not only health concerns, but the

perception of the public. I have experienced several different ways that administrators will juggle caseload to avoid the caseload caps. Not once during my career did I not hold second job.

Personally, I also have experienced many mental and physical health struggles in my tenure as a teacher. I directly relate them to my experiences as a teacher because on my summers off I do not experience these issues. I recognize a variety of anxiety and depression symptoms in myself that worsen throughout every school year. I struggle with sleepless nights and being unmotivated to get out of bed in the morning. I gain weight every school year and struggle to lose it in my time off. I leave school at the end of most days exhausted to the point I can hardly walk my dog much less exercise or eat well. My personal relationships suffer due to my work struggles. In the last five years, I have barely made it to the end of the school year. During the pandemic I did miss the last several weeks of a school calendar.

It is my genuine hope that special that teachers in general and special educators in specific continue to speak out about workplace issues, including stress. I believe it is an issue that should be more forward in conversations with our unions. While I do genuinely want these things to happen, I am unsure if I will continue in the field to be a part of these changes.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Research Focused on Due Process Systems State and Nationwide

One recommendation for additional research is regarding due process reporting systems. It is not federally mandated that all states utilize the same system, nor even that all districts in a state have a uniform system. Some states have chosen to have one system statewide, but I found it difficult to ascertain the number that do. Through my practice I know that the state Minnesota does not utilize a uniform system, and the state of Iowa does. Further research can be pursued in two steps: (1) how many states operate with uniform due process systems, and (2) in states that

do not utilize a statewide system, how many different systems are used and what training is available for special educators. This directly relates to teacher stressors in relation to paperwork load.

2. Targeted Research on Impacts of Teacher Shortages on Employed Teacher Workload and Stress

Further research is also necessary in relation to the prevalence of teacher shortages and how that impacts teacher workload, stress, and burnout. Research does exist that looks at why there are teacher shortages and provides suggestions for recruitment and retention. The research that I could not find is how the current shortages our nation faces impact the teachers who are in the schools already. Additionally, due to these shortages, administrators often get creative when it comes to workarounds regarding the caseload caps put into place by IDEA. While possibly difficult to measure, this issue warrants further consideration as it certainly adds to teacher's workload and stress.

3. Research on Tiered Licensure System

One special consideration for Minnesota is the impact of the implementation of a tiered license system to allow for teachers who do not have a degree from a teacher preparation program in a college or university. "Following extensive legislative changes in 2017, a new tiered licensure system went into effect on July 1, 2018, which created four different tiered licenses for teachers in Minnesota. Notably a teacher must complete a teacher preparation via portfolio process to be eligible for a Tier 3 or Tier 4 license. To receive a Tier 1 or Tier 2 license a teacher must have a job offer from a public school or charter school" (PELSB, 2023, p. 29). This gave districts permission to hire staff that are not fully accredited teachers. Logically (and in my lived experience) this would seem to create additional burdens for fully licensed teachers.

Additional research is necessary to understand the additional workload burdens and stress this causes special education teachers.

Recommendations for Practice

There are many recommendations regarding ways to mitigate special education teacher stress, burnout, and attrition. Starting from new teachers, having strategies in place to assist with taking their theoretical knowledge into practice is recommended. This is true for all aspects of a teacher's day, from working in the classroom to all the requirements of the job description that fall outside the classroom like collaboration, due process paperwork, etc. In furtherance of this, districts can implement ongoing professional development and emotional support for its staff. Steiner and Woo (2021) leave us two thoughts: "District and school leaders also should consider working in partnership with teachers, school leaders, and their professional associations, where applicable, to tailor teachers' job descriptions and roles to suit individual needs and preferences as a means of reducing stress and promoting wellness. In addition, districts or schools might consider hiring assistants or substitutes for the purpose of providing teachers with short break throughout the day" (pp. 18-19). Valuing the necessity of collaboration and mentorship seems key. It is helpful to provide teachers with positive feedback and support. Having principles and other administrators who are well-versed in special educators' unique job descriptions also seems an integral part of a good support system. Hester et al. (2020) tells us that "if administration fails to provide a supportive work environment and meaningful professional development opportunities, then teachers will continue to experience disempowerment and, ultimately, choose to leave the field" (p. 362). Billingsley and Bettini (2019) said it best: "Such efforts require key stakeholders at multiple levels, as we are unlikely to improve retention without systematic and coordinated efforts across federal, state, and local institutions" (p. 737).

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