

A Study of the Relationship between Burnout and Social Support among Special Education Teachers in China

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Abstract

The comprehensive promotion of high-quality development in special education relies on the key factor of teacher construction. This study aims to systematically gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing burnout in special education teachers and explore the relationship between social support and special education teachers' burnout. Through a survey of 357 special education teachers, the study found that 1) there are significant differences in the degree of burnout among special education teachers with different ages, teaching ages, titles, and professional backgrounds; 2) there are significant differences in the Cynicism dimension of burnout among special education teachers with different academic qualifications; and 3) social support negatively predicted burnout among special education teachers, with a significant negative correlation between the two dimensions.

Keywords

Special Education Teacher, Burnout, Social Support

1. Introduction

Burnout, first proposed by [Freudenberger \(1974\)](#), characterizes the state of exhaustion experienced by practitioners due to prolonged working hours, excessive workload, and high work intensity. Maslach further classified burnout into high emotional burnout, depersonalization, and a low sense of personal achievement ([Maslach & Jackson, 1981](#)). According to the 2022 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin, there are 2314 special education schools (including Pui Zhi Schools, Deaf Schools, Blind Schools, and Comprehensive Schools), employing 72,700 full-time teachers and serving approximately 918,500 students.

The persistent imbalanced teacher-student ratios in special education schools contribute to long-term work overload for special education teachers (Xie et al., 2021), resulting in persistent fatigue and burnout. Several studies have found that special education teachers have higher levels of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Squillaci, 2020). Special education teachers contend with significant challenges, including highly demanding tasks, a greater frequency of unexpected events, less positive teaching feedback, and difficulty in experiencing a sense of accomplishment (Xu et al., 2019a). Some studies have found that special education teachers experience higher levels of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Squillaci, 2020). Burnout affects the physical and mental health of special education teachers and the improvement of their professionalization level (Heidi, 2020). It becomes a major factor in the massive turnover of special education teachers (Hester et al., 2020), which restricts the high-quality development of special education in China.

Based on existing studies, it was found that the burnout factors affecting special education teachers unfolded broadly from internal individual and external environmental factors (both at the work level and the organizational level) (Iancu et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2019). At the individual level, this includes demographic factors (Zhang & Zhang, 2011), occupational stress (Xie et al., 2021), personality traits (Zhao & Huang, 2017), and career satisfaction (Xu et al., 2019b). The external environment level is developed mainly from the characteristics of special education work itself and the collective characteristics of special education teachers, including work overload, work resources, work feedback, work requirements, role conflict and ambiguity (Guo, 2008), and organizational support (Chen et al., 2023). It is important to note that individual and external environmental factors are not independent of each other but work together to influence an individual's cognitive appraisal and emotional experience. Therefore, this study examines the impact of social support on burnout. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides a theoretical basis for the impact of social support on burnout. The model proposes that job resources are benign factors that promote individual growth and development and that a lack of job resources will lead to negative consequences such as burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001; Lambert et al., 2009). Second, the role model of social support provides a theoretical basis. The role model of social support is divided into main and buffer effects (Cohen & Willis, 1985). The main effect model suggests that social support directly affects individual work and health, which is consistent with the theoretical claims of the JD-R model. The buffer effect model suggests that social support is associated with an individual's physical and mental health under stressful conditions and can buffer the negative effects of stressful events on an individual's physical and mental condition (Qiu et al., 2022).

In summary, this study hypothesizes that there would be a significant negative correlation between social support and burnout among special education teachers. The purpose of this study is mainly to verify the correlation between burnout and social support of special education teachers in the new situation, which is

helpful for the improvement of social support to reduce burnout among special education teachers and help the high-quality development of special education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

In this study, 379 special education teachers were randomly selected for the questionnaire survey, and 357 valid questionnaires were received, resulting in a validity rate of 94.2%. Among the participants, 62 were male (17.4%), 295 were female (82.6%), 231 (64.7%) were aged 20 - 30 years, 69 (19.3%) were aged 31 - 40 years, 46 (12.9%) were aged 41 - 50 years, and 11 (3.1%) were over 50 years old. Regarding years of teaching experience, 218 participants (61.1%) had 0 - 5 years, 53 (14.8%) had 6 - 10 years, 22 (6.2%) had 11 - 15 years, and 64 (17.9%) had 16 or more years of experience. Academic Qualifications were 51 (14.3%) for Associate Bachelor and below, 279 (78.2%) for undergraduate, 27 (7.5%) for Master's Degree and more. Professional Rank: Senior 23 (6.4%), Middle 87 (24.4%), Associate 97 (27.2%), No-ranking 150 (42%). Professional background: Special education major 273 (76.5%), Education and rehabilitation major 22 (6.2%), other teacher majors 47 (13.1%), Non-teacher major 15 (4.2%) (See **Table 1**).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Burnout

The Chinese version of the Maslach Burnout Universal Scale, compiled by [Schaufeli et al. \(1996\)](#) and revised by [Li and Shi \(2003\)](#), includes 15 items that measure emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. The sample item from this subscale is "I became less and less concerned about whether the work I was doing was contributing." The scale uses a 7-point scale ranging from 0 to 6, where 0 = never and 6 = very often, and the low-achievement dimension is scored inversely. The higher the total score, the more burnout experienced by the surveyed individuals. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total scale was 0.90, and the internal consistency coefficients for the three dimensions of Emotional Exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment were 0.95, 0.96, and 0.96, respectively. Informed consent was obtained from students, parents, and/or school officials.

2.2.2. Inventory of Social Support Behavior

Social support refers to the emotional support, communication, comfort, and assistance provided by family members, relatives, friends, co-workers, groups, organizations, and the community to give individuals emotional and material satisfaction. The present study explored the Inventory of Social Support Behavior (ISSB), which was modified by [Luo \(2001\)](#). The ISSB has 10 questions and four types of social support: Emotional Support (three questions), Informational Support (two questions), Substantive Support (two questions), and Social Integration (three questions). The ISSB adopts a three-tier scoring system, where a score of 1 indicates unsatisfactory, 2 indicates average, and 3 indicates

Table 1. Background characteristics of participants (n = 357).

	variables	N	%
Gender	male	62	17.4%
	female	295	82.6%
Age(years)	20 - 30	231	64.7%
	31 - 40	69	19.3%
	41 - 50	46	12.9%
	50 and more	11	3.1%
Teaching years	0 - 5	218	61.1%
	6 - 10	53	14.8%
	11 - 15	22	6.2%
	16 and more	64	17.9%
Academic Qualifications	Associate Bachelor and below	51	14.3%
	Under-graduate	279	78.2%
	Master's degree and more	27	7.5%
Professional Rank	Senior	23	6.4%
	Middle	87	24.4%
	Associate	97	27.2%
	No-ranking	150	42.0%
Professional background	Special education major	273	76.5%
	Education and rehabilitation major	22	6.2%
	Other teacher majors	47	13.1%
	Non-teacher major	15	4.2%

satisfactory, with higher scores indicating higher social support. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total scale was 0.92, and the internal consistency coefficients for the four dimensions of emotional support, social integration, substantive support, and message support were 0.87, 0.89, 0.87, and 0.87, respectively. Informed consent was obtained from the students, parents, and/or school officials.

2.3. Data Processing

Invalid questionnaires were excluded based on the following criteria: 1) suspicious data (e.g., regularity of responses), 2) the number of unanswered items exceeding 10%, and 3) the total score of the scale exceeding 3 standard deviations. A total of 22 invalid questionnaires were excluded.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS software (Version 27.0). Expectation Maximization was used to replace missing values (0.2%). By exploring the relationship between six demographic variables (Gender, Age, Teaching years, Aca-

demographic Qualifications\Professional Rank and Professional background) and social support with burnout among special education teachers.

2.4. Common Method Bias Test

Harman's one-way test was conducted to address common method bias. This analysis resulted in the identification of three common factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1. The first common factor accounted for 24.79% of the total variance, fulfilling the requirement of falling below 40%. Based on these findings, it was determined that there was no significant common method bias.

3. Result

3.1. The Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive results for each variable. The results showed that special education teachers scored the highest on the Message Support dimension, indicating that they received the most message support, followed by Social Integration, Emotional Support, and Substantive Support. Regarding burnout, special education teachers scored the highest on the Emotional Exhaustion dimension, followed by cynicism. Reduced Personal Accomplishment scored the lowest, indicating that special education teachers experienced the most Emotional Exhaustion and Emotional Stress at work (**Table 2**).

A correlation analysis between burnout and demographic variables for special education teachers showed that gender was not significantly correlated with burnout or any of the dimensions; age was significantly correlated with burnout or any of the dimensions; teaching years were significantly correlated with Emotional Exhaustion and Cynicism dimensions and total burnout scores; Academic Qualifications were significantly correlated with the Cynicism dimension; and Professional Rank and Professional background were significantly correlated with the Cynicism dimension and total burnout scores (**Table 3**). Academic

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (n = 357).

	M	SD
Emotional support	2.58	0.48
Social Integration	2.62	0.47
Message Support	2.65	0.48
Substantive Support	2.58	0.51
social support	2.61	0.45
Emotional Exhaustion	2.55	1.49
Cynicism	1.86	1.60
Reduced Personal Accomplishment	1.55	1.25
Burnout	1.96	1.02

Note: M = mean, SD = standard deviation.

Table 3. Correlation coefficient between burnout and each demographic variable.

	Gender	Age (years)	Teaching years	Academic Qualifications	Professional Rank	Professional background
Emotional Exhaustion	-0.04	-0.17**	-0.19***	0.07	0.07	-0.09
Cynicism	-0.02	-0.22***	-0.25***	0.13*	0.13*	-0.18**
Reduced Personal Accomplishment	-0.01	-0.13***	-0.08	-0.04	0.05	0.00
Burnout	-0.03	-0.24***	-0.23***	0.07	0.11*	-0.12*

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Qualifications were significantly correlated with the Cynicism dimension, and Professional Rank and Professional background were significantly correlated with the Cynicism dimension and total burnout score (Table 3).

3.2. Analysis of Demographic Differences in Burnout among Special Education Teachers

This study examined the differences in burnout among special education teachers using a one-way ANOVA with both the homogeneity of variance test and multiple comparisons. The results are shown in Table 4. Age, Teaching years, Academic Qualifications, Professional Rank, and Professional background showed significant differences on burnout.

3.3. Correlation Analysis between Social Support and Burnout

Through analyzing the correlation between burnout and social support of special education teachers, the results showed that there was a significant negative correlation between social support and all dimensions of burnout (Table 5), indicating that adequate social support can help reduce burnout among special education teachers.

4. Discussion

4.1. Differences in Special Education Teacher Burnout on Demographic Variables

Teaching age is an important factor that affects burnout. Coman et al. (2013) studied the relationship between burnout and the teaching age of special education teachers and found that the teaching age of teachers significantly negatively correlated with burnout, and the longer the teaching age of special education teachers, the less likely they are to develop burnout. Deng et al. (2023) found that teaching age had a significant effect on special education teachers' burnout, which is consistent with the results of this study. The degree of burnout varies among special education teachers with different teaching ages. Teachers with 0 - 5 years and 11 - 15 years of teaching age scored significantly higher on the Emotional Exhaustion dimension than those with 16 or more years of teaching age.

Table 4. An analysis of demographic differences in burnout among special education teachers (n = 357).

		Emotional Exhaustion		Cynicism		Reduced Personal Accomplishment		Burnout	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age (years)	1. 20 - 30	2.70	1.49	2.08	1.62	1.61	1.21	2.10	1.00
	2. 31 - 40	2.46	1.45	1.76	1.54	1.75	1.44	1.99	1.01
	3. 41 - 50	2.16	1.43	1.05	1.30	1.04	0.89	1.42	0.87
	4. 50 and more	1.51	1.34	1.14	1.48	1.14	1.67	1.26	1.04
	F	3.83*		6.44***		3.85*		8.01***	
multiple comparisons		1 > 3, 4;		1 > 3		1 > 3, 2 > 3		1 > 3, 4; 2 > 3, 4	
Teaching years	1. 0 - 5	2.73	1.52	2.09	1.65	1.57	1.19	2.10	1.00
	2. 6 - 10	2.45	1.21	1.98	1.49	1.79	1.34	2.06	1.02
	3. 11 - 15	2.77	1.57	1.95	1.72	1.55	1.39	2.06	1.14
	4. 16 and more	1.93	1.40	0.93	1.10	1.28	1.29	1.40	0.83
	F	5.26**		9.47***		1.66		8.44***	
multiple comparisons		1 > 4, 3 > 4		1 > 4; 2 > 4				1 > 4; 2 > 4; 3 > 4	
Academic Qualifications	1. Associate Bachelor and below	2.27	1.58	1.32	1.58	1.65	1.48	1.77	0.99
	2. Under-graduate	2.59	1.49	1.93	1.61	1.54	1.24	1.99	1.03
	3. Master's Degree and more	2.65	1.33	2.12	1.40	1.48	0.81	2.04	0.88
	F	1.03		3.60		0.23		1.10	
multiple comparisons				1 < 2, 1 < 3					
Professional Rank	1. Senior	2.18	1.53	0.97	1.21	1.21	1.45	1.47	.83
	2. Middle	2.33	1.43	1.71	1.59	1.47	1.15	1.82	1.05
	3. Associate	2.87	1.37	2.05	1.54	1.72	1.28	2.19	.90
	4. No-ranking	2.53	1.57	1.96	1.65	1.54	1.25	1.98	1.06
	F	2.62*		3.33*		1.29		4.10**	
multiple comparisons		1 < 3, 2 < 3		1 < 3				1 < 3, 4; 2 < 3	
Professional background	1. Special education major	2.59	1.51	1.98	1.61	1.54	1.23	2.01	1.03
	2. Education and rehabilitation major	3.13	1.24	2.32	1.69	1.83	1.34	2.39	.79
	3. Other teacher majors	2.09	1.46	1.12	1.30	1.44	1.39	1.57	1.01
	4. Non-teacher major	2.29	1.23	1.17	1.27	1.68	1.13	1.75	0.79
	F	2.84*		5.70**		0.56		4.18**	
multiple comparisons		1 > 3, 2 > 3		1 > 3, 4; 2 > 3, 4				1 > 3, 2 > 3	

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Table 5. Spearman's correlation matrix.

	Emotional support	Social Integration	Message Support	Substantive Support	social support
Emotional Exhaustion	-0.18**	-0.18**	-0.15**	-0.16**	-0.18**
Cynicism	-0.16***	-0.20***	-0.17***	-0.17***	-0.19***
Reduced Personal Accomplishment	-0.27***	-0.30***	-0.30***	-0.3***	-0.31***
Burnout	-0.29***	-0.32***	-0.29***	-0.28***	-0.32***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Teachers with 0 - 5 years and 6 - 10 years of teaching age scored significantly higher on the Cynicism dimension than those with 16 years or more, and special education teachers with 16 years or more of teaching experience scored significantly lower on burnout than teachers in the other three groups. The degree of burnout among special education teachers decreases with increasing teaching age. Teachers with 0 - 5 years of teaching experience are generally novice teachers and pay more attention to the development of their students; however, they have higher scores on the Emotional Exhaustion and dehumanization dimensions because of their lack of experience in facing various problems of their students, classroom problems, classroom teaching, and administrative work, which results in more emotional exhaustion.

There are significant differences in the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, reduced personal accomplishment, and the total burnout scores of special education teachers of different ages: Special education teachers in the stage of 20 - 30 years old have the highest total burnout scores, and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment dimensions were the highest scores, which is consistent with the results of existing studies (Yang & Li, 2016; Hanson, 2006; Kong, 2022). Special education teachers aged 20 - 30 years old scored significantly higher on the Emotional Exhaustion dimension scored significantly higher than those aged 41 - 50 and 50+; special education teachers aged 20 - 30 scored significantly higher on the Cynicism dimension than those aged 41 - 50, and special education teachers aged 20 - 30 and 31 - 40 scored significantly higher on the reduced personal accomplishment dimension scored significantly higher than teachers aged 41 - 50, and special education teachers aged 20 - 30 and 31 - 40 scored significantly higher on burnout than special education teachers aged 41 - 50 and 50+.

There was a significant difference in the scores of special education teachers with different Academic Qualifications on the Cynicism dimension, which is consistent with the results of a previous study (Yao, 2017). Special education teachers with Academic Qualifications of associate bachelors and below scored significantly lower than those with undergraduate and master's degrees and more.

Some studies have shown that special education teachers scored significantly

higher than non-specialized graduate teachers on overall levels of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and burnout (Liu & Fang, 2015). The present study is consistent with the findings of a previous study that found a significant difference in burnout among special education teachers with different professional backgrounds. Teachers with special education majors scored significantly higher on the Emotional Exhaustion dimension than teachers with education and rehabilitation majors, and other teachers in special education majors and education and rehabilitation majors scored significantly higher on the Cynicism dimension than teachers in other teacher majors and non-teacher majors. Teachers in special education majors and education and rehabilitation majors scored significantly higher on the burnout dimension than teachers in other teacher majors. The main reasons for this difference may be: first, the number of samples and teachers from other teacher majors who came to work in special education was low; second, teachers from other teacher majors tended to take up some simple subjects, while teachers from special education majors and education and rehabilitation majors tended to take on skill development and practical life classes that require students to be flexible in real life, which is difficult for children with special needs and requires more time and effort in teaching; thus, the level of burnout is higher.

Teachers' Professional Rank is associated with a significant impact on teachers' work, and the data from this study indicate that there are significant differences in burnout among special education teachers of different Professional Ranks, which is consistent with the results of existing research (Kong, 2022). Senior professional rank and middle professional rank special education teachers scored significantly lower on the Emotional Exhaustion dimension than associate professional rank teachers, Senior professional rank special education teachers scored significantly lower on the Cynicism dimension than associate professional rank teachers, Senior professional rank teachers scored significantly lower on burnout than associate professional rank and no-ranking teachers, middle professional rank special education teachers scored significantly lower on burnout than teachers of associate professional rank.

4.2. The Effect of Social Support on Burnout in Special Education Teachers

This study validates the negative predictions of social support for burnout among special education teachers (Lambert et al., 2010; Xie et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). The negative prediction of burnout by social support is consistent with the main effect model of social support, which states that social support has a generalized gainful effect and that social support has an important beneficial effect on the good physical and mental health of an individual, regardless of whether the individual is under stress or not (Cohen & Willis, 1985). When individuals feel burned out, they will reduce interpersonal interactions, which in turn will result in less outside help and resources, and the fatigue and stress generated at work cannot be relieved, which in turn will result in more serious bur-

nout. Some studies have found that seeking social support is the most effective way for special education teachers to prevent burnout (Wang et al., 2012) because burnout is closely related to work pressure: when special education teachers cannot cope with work pressure or distress, seeking social support and obtaining outside care and help can alleviate the negative emotions and pressures arising from their work and alleviate burnout (Bottiani et al., 2019). The social support buffer model suggests that social support can help individuals reevaluate stress when they are in the midst of stress, thus effectively buffering the impact of stressful events on physical and mental health and preventing burnout (Qiu et al., 2022). The Job Demands-Resources model can also explain the effect of social support on burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model hypothesis, when the job demands exceed the individual's coping ability, it will lead to an increase in teachers' negative emotions and the depletion of physical and mental energy. Adequate job resources can effectively alleviate the occupational stress caused by job demands. Resource conservation theory suggests that individuals acquire, conserve, and increase their individual resources and acquire new resources through resources to cope with job demands (Hobfoll, 1989). These resources include personal and external environmental resources. Social support is an important resource in the external environment that can help teachers cope with stress (Halbesleben, 2006), and special education teachers who receive sufficient social support have sufficient external resources to cope with job demands (Lorenzo et al., 2018). The two stages of the transactional stress model can also explain the mitigating effect of social support on burnout. The first stage is the stage of perceived stress, also known as the primary assessment stage, which is the individual's assessment of the environment in terms of losses, threats, and challenges, through which a positive or negative emotional state is created (Emilie et al., 2021); The second stage is the individual's assessment of the individual and societal resources that are available to combat the stress. Perceived social support is an individual's assessment of the social resources that they have and are available to them in a given situation. This stage is divided into two parts: availability, which is the individual's perception of the support that they are most able to obtain when they are in need; and satisfaction, which is the individual's perception of the quality of the support that they are receiving (Emilie et al., 2021). With access to effective social support, teachers can cope with job stress, thereby protecting individuals from professional burnout (Laugaa et al., 2008; Emilie et al., 2021). Therefore, social support plays an important role in reducing burnout among special education teachers (Emilie et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2022).

In this study, emotional support, social integration, message support, and substantive support in social support were all significantly negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment in burnout and emotional support. Although it did not bring about an actual physical increase, emotional understanding and empathy were significant in reducing

emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment in special education teachers (Xie et al., 2021). Social integration, message support, and substantive support allow special education teachers to receive information, companionship, and material help. Different contents and degrees of social support, as well as the degree of teachers' perception of social support, can help special education teachers alleviate their burnout (Qiu et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

First, there was a significant difference in the degree of burnout among special education teachers of different ages, teaching experiences, titles, and professional backgrounds.

Second, there were significant differences in the Cynicism dimension of burnout between special education teachers from different educational backgrounds.

Third, social support negatively predicted burnout among special education teachers, with a significant negative correlation between the two dimensions.

The correlation between burnout and social support of special education teachers was confirmed by the findings of this study. These results provide guidance for the prevention of burnout among special education instructors

6. Suggestions

Exploring the relationship between social support and burnout can help further the understanding of burnout and further minimize the negative impact of burnout on special education teachers' teaching, teacher-student relationships, and physical and mental health. Some studies have found that the most important of the work resources related to mental health is social support, and teachers with stronger social support systems are physically and mentally healthier (Ma & Deng, 2019). To improve the social support network of special education teachers, high quality objective support can be given to special education teachers from the following aspects to create a favorable supportive environment. Firstly, schools can start from paying attention to the emotional and affective state of special education teachers, the current status of their work and work pressure, broaden their development paths, and establish a perfect evaluation mechanism. Secondly, families, schools and society should pay attention to teachers' positive emotional experiences, help special education teachers to enhance their sense of occupational well-being, and encourage them to emphasize the construction of positive mental health. In addition, special education teachers should positively perceive social support, obtain information that is favorable to them, and improve the utilization of social support, so as to reduce burnout.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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