



# Perceptions of Burnout and Coping Strategies among Special Education Professionals: A Qualitative Approach

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## Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of burnout and coping strategies among special education professionals working with children with special needs in Tirana, Albania. Using a qualitative design, written responses were collected through open-ended questions in Google Forms to explore experiences of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and coping. Although not equivalent to traditional semi-structured interviews, these written responses provided participants with reflective space to express their experiences in detail. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key categories, similarities, and variations in responses. Findings reveal that burnout remains a serious challenge for professionals in special education, influenced by workload, limited support, and emotional demands. Participants reported various coping strategies, such as self-regulation, collaboration, and time management. The study highlights the importance of organisational and policy-level interventions to promote well-being, reduce professional stress, and enhance retention among special education professionals.

**Keywords:** Burnout, Special Education, Coping Strategies, Emotional Exhaustion, Qualitative Study

## 1. Introduction

Professionals working with children with special needs often face emotionally demanding environments, where empathy, patience, and adaptability are essential. The continuous exposure to children's behavioural and developmental challenges, combined with administrative responsibilities and parental expectations, contributes to a high risk of burnout. Burnout represents a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress and excessive demands, particularly prevalent in helping professions such as teaching and special education. In Albania, the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education has increased the responsibilities of special education professionals. However, institutional support and working conditions have not always developed at the same pace. This creates pressure that affects both the professional and personal lives of teachers, therapists, and

other specialists involved. Despite this, little empirical research has explored burnout and coping strategies among these professionals in the Albanian context, leaving a significant gap in national literature. The purpose of this study is to explore how special education professionals in Tirana experience burnout and what coping mechanisms they use to manage its effects. It focuses on identifying both personal and organisational factors influencing their well-being. The study also aims to contribute practical recommendations for improving work environments, policies, and support systems in the field of special education.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

- How do special education professionals perceive and experience the different dimensions of burnout, such as fatigue, interpersonal strain, and depersonalization, in their professional and personal lives?
- What coping strategies do special education professionals identify and employ in managing the challenges of working with students with special needs, and to what extent are these strategies proactive or reactive?

## **2. Literature Review**

Burnout is widely recognized as a work-related syndrome that disproportionately affects professionals in roles requiring direct and sustained interaction with service recipients. It is commonly defined by three interrelated dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1996; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). These dimensions interact to create a cycle of depletion, detachment, and diminished professional efficacy, making burnout both a personal and organizational challenge in professions such as teaching, health care, and social services.

Emotional exhaustion is considered the central and most significant manifestation of burnout. Rooted in emotionally demanding work, it captures feelings of being drained of one's emotional resources and unable to give further of oneself (Maslach, 1996). Although central, emotional exhaustion cannot be understood in isolation; it is embedded in a broader relationship with depersonalization and reduced accomplishment. Contemporary research continues to support this centrality. For instance, Brunsting et al. (2025), note that exhaustion remains the most predictive element of burnout trajectories across professional settings, including education.

Depersonalization, the second dimension, reflects the interpersonal context of burnout. It is expressed as negative, cynical, or indifferent attitudes toward clients or service recipients. Professionals may distance themselves by ignoring the unique qualities of those they serve and treating them impersonally. Initially, this distancing may function as a self-protective coping mechanism intended to maintain objectivity (Leiter et al., 2001). However, over time, this response can become entrenched and counterproductive, contributing to diminished professional satisfaction and effectiveness. Recent studies have emphasized that depersonalization not only undermines service quality but also exacerbates emotional exhaustion by reducing the perceived meaning of work (Hidajat et al., 2023).

Reduced personal accomplishment, the third dimension, represents a self-evaluative component of burnout. It is characterized by feelings of inefficacy, low productivity, and lack of fulfillment. This can be especially problematic in professions like teaching, where effectiveness and success are perceived as having a direct and profound impact on others' lives (Ryan & Lielkalns, 2011). The persistence of such feelings can erode motivation and weaken

professional identity. Newer research suggests that perceptions of achievement are strongly mediated by contextual factors such as organizational support, workload balance, and recognition (Hofmann et al., 2023).

Recent literature in the field of education provides important nuance to these dimensions. A synthesis of 29 studies on special education teachers' well-being emphasized that burnout is strongly linked to work conditions such as workload, role clarity, and institutional support (Brunsting et al., 2025). Similarly, a structural equation modeling study with special education teachers highlighted that teacher self-efficacy in inclusive practices significantly influences emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, with concerns about inclusive teaching mediating this relationship (Buzzai et al., 2024). These findings underscore that burnout is not merely an individual issue but a systemic one, shaped by contextual demands and supports.

Coping is generally understood as the set of cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals use to manage stressors perceived as exceeding their resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the context of professional burnout, coping strategies can act either as protective factors buffering stress and sustaining engagement or as risk factors when they are maladaptive or insufficient. Proactive coping has emerged as particularly relevant in professions requiring continuous problem-solving and emotional labor. Proactive strategies involve anticipating potential challenges, setting goals, and planning ahead rather than reacting after difficulties arise. Research has shown that proactive coping enhances individuals' sense of control and reduces the risk of stress escalation (Ryan & Lielkalns, 2011). In the case of special education professionals, planning and organizing daily activities, setting realistic goals, and framing challenges as opportunities are strategies that can help mitigate the emotional demands of the job. However, as highlighted in recent qualitative studies, many educators admit their responses are often reactive, addressing problems only after they occur, which limits their effectiveness in preventing stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017b).

Social support is another consistent protective factor. Support from colleagues, supervisors, and family members has been found to buffer the negative effects of job stress and reduce the likelihood of burnout. Family support, in particular, helps professionals recover from work-related exhaustion, while collegial relationships foster resilience by normalizing challenges and offering practical solutions (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Adaptive coping strategies such as problem-focused approaches (planning, problem-solving, seeking help) are generally associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher job satisfaction. By contrast, avoidant coping strategies such as disengagement or denial tend to predict higher levels of burnout (Baka & Basińska, 2016).

More recent studies have expanded this perspective by examining resilience-building interventions. For example, mindfulness-based programs, resilience training, and professional learning communities have been shown to enhance teachers' proactive coping, strengthen self-efficacy, and reduce burnout symptoms (Buzzai et al., 2024; Hidajat et al., 2023). These interventions highlight that coping is not only an individual responsibility but also a skill set that can be cultivated through targeted professional development and supportive organizational environments.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

A qualitative design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences of burnout. The study relied on open-ended written responses

collected through Google Forms. Although written responses are not equivalent to traditional semi-structured interviews, they provided participants with time to reflect and respond thoughtfully, reducing interviewer bias and enabling them to express their feelings freely and confidentially. This approach was particularly useful in contexts where professionals may have limited availability for live interviews but are willing to contribute through written narratives.

### **3.2 Participants and Sampling**

The participants were professionals working in special education institutions in Tirana, including special education teachers, psychologists, and speech therapists. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants who met specific inclusion criteria: they were required to be actively working with children with special needs and to have at least one year of professional experience. The recruitment process was initiated through professional networks and social media, where a link to the Google Form was distributed. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity. In total, 15 participants completed the written questionnaire. This sampling approach was chosen because it allowed access to professionals with relevant experience and knowledge of the subject, while also accommodating their busy schedules. Although the sample size was modest, it provided sufficient depth and variation in responses for qualitative interpretation.

### **3.3 Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected over a four-week period through an online Google Form that contained open-ended questions designed to elicit reflective written responses. The questions addressed participants' experiences of burnout, perceptions of its causes, and the coping strategies they used in their daily work. Participants were also invited to share examples or personal reflections illustrating their experiences. This method provided a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to collect descriptive and interpretive data efficiently while ensuring confidentiality.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The process followed several steps: reading and re-reading the written responses to become familiar with the data; generating initial codes to capture significant features; grouping codes into potential themes; and reviewing, refining, and naming themes. The analysis aimed to identify patterns across participants' experiences while also attending to individual differences and negative cases that offered alternative perspectives. Coding was carried out manually, and recurrent patterns were reviewed multiple times to ensure consistency. To enhance analytic rigour, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the process, noting preconceptions, emotional responses, and analytic decisions. Themes were refined through repeated comparison until conceptual saturation was reached the point where no new insights emerged from the data. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme, ensuring that the participants' voices were authentically reflected in the findings.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained before data collection. Each participant received a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of responses. Informed consent was obtained electronically before beginning the questionnaire. No names, institutions, or other identifying details were collected, and participants were assured that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. All

data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. The research design adhered to international ethical standards for studies involving human participants.

### **3.6 Trustworthiness and Credibility**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied several qualitative validation strategies. Credibility was supported through clear documentation of data collection and analysis steps. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the context and participant characteristics, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was maintained through consistent coding and the use of reflexive notes to track analytical reasoning. Confirmability was strengthened by grounding all interpretations in direct participant quotes, ensuring that conclusions were supported by evidence from the data. Together, these strategies enhance the overall rigour and transparency of the study.

## **4. Results**

This section presents the key themes that emerged from the analysis of participants' written responses. The findings are discussed according to the main thematic areas identified: (1) perceptions of burnout, (2) coping strategies, and (3) institutional and organisational influences. The analysis integrates illustrative quotes to provide authentic representation of participants' voices and to highlight variations and contrasts among responses.

### **4.1 Perceptions of Burnout**

Participants described burnout as a complex and exhausting experience resulting from both emotional and physical strain. Many expressed feelings of constant fatigue, emotional depletion, and a lack of motivation after prolonged exposure to challenging work situations. One participant shared, *"Sometimes I go home feeling empty. It's not that I don't love my job, but it drains all my energy."* Another noted, *"I feel that I give so much to the children that there is nothing left for myself at the end of the day."*

While the majority emphasised exhaustion, a few participants also reported emotional detachment, describing it as a form of protection against stress. *"You learn not to get too attached, otherwise you burn out faster,"* one professional explained. However, this coping approach also led to feelings of guilt and professional dissatisfaction. These differences show that burnout is experienced not as a uniform process, but as a dynamic condition shaped by personal, emotional, and contextual factors.

The findings correspond with theories of emotional labour and role overload, where constant empathy and responsibility for others' well-being contribute to exhaustion. In this context, the absence of structured organisational support, such as supervision or regular peer reflection, exacerbates emotional strain.

### **4.2 Coping Strategies**

Participants identified several coping strategies they use to manage the stress associated with their work. Most responses reflected a mixture of proactive and reactive approaches. Common strategies included sharing experiences with colleagues, maintaining personal routines, seeking social support, and setting emotional boundaries. *"Talking with colleagues helps me realise I'm not alone,"* said one respondent. Others emphasised the role of humour and teamwork as emotional buffers: *"Sometimes we laugh about the hardest days; it helps us breathe."*

Self-care practices, such as spending time with family, exercise, or relaxation, were also frequently mentioned. However, a few participants admitted that they struggled to maintain consistency in these activities: *“I know what helps me, but when I’m tired, I don’t always do it.”* This illustrates both the awareness of coping resources and the difficulty of sustaining them under chronic stress. A minority of participants reported adopting avoidant or short-term coping mechanisms, such as emotional withdrawal or overworking to distract themselves. These negative cases indicate that not all coping strategies are effective and that some may even intensify burnout in the long term. Overall, the results confirm that coping is a multidimensional process influenced by personality, workload, and institutional culture.

### **4.3 Organisational and Institutional Factors**

A recurring theme in the data was the role of organisational conditions in shaping both burnout and coping. Participants frequently pointed to insufficient institutional support, high student–teacher ratios, and lack of recognition as major sources of stress. *“We do our best, but we are understaffed and often overlooked,”* one respondent explained. Another added, *“There are days when I feel the system doesn’t value our work, and that makes it harder to stay motivated.”*

These accounts underline the importance of organisational climate and management practices in either mitigating or intensifying burnout. Institutions that provide supportive supervision, clear communication, and opportunities for professional development were perceived as less stressful and more motivating. This finding aligns with the job demands–resources model, which emphasises the balance between job pressures and available support mechanisms.

The findings are consistent with existing literature, which identifies emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment as the main dimensions of burnout. Similar to previous research, this study found that support from colleagues and administrators plays a protective role, while excessive workload and limited resources increase vulnerability. However, in the Albanian context, institutional limitations and cultural expectations appear to magnify the emotional burden of special education work. Unlike in better-resourced systems, where burnout interventions are often formalised, participants in this study largely relied on personal coping mechanisms.

This study therefore reinforces the need to interpret burnout not only as an individual psychological process but as an organisational and policy issue. Effective prevention requires systemic action such as establishing support networks, ensuring fair workload distribution, and promoting mental health awareness within schools and rehabilitation centres.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study explored the perceptions of burnout and the coping strategies used by special education professionals working with children with special needs in Tirana. The findings confirmed that burnout is a significant issue in this professional field, shaped by emotional demands, workload intensity, and limited institutional resources. While many participants showed strong commitment to their work and dedication to their students, they also expressed feelings of exhaustion and reduced motivation.

Coping strategies were diverse and reflected both personal and contextual factors. Professionals described relying on peer support, reflection, and self-care to manage stress, although maintaining these strategies consistently was often difficult. The results also indicated that organisational culture plays a crucial role in influencing both the risk of burnout and the effectiveness of coping mechanisms. Supportive management, opportunities for collaboration, and recognition of effort were associated with more positive experiences and lower emotional

strain. Overall, the study highlights that burnout among special education professionals should not be viewed as an individual problem alone, but as a systemic issue requiring institutional and policy-level attention. Schools and educational authorities must acknowledge that the well-being of professionals directly affects the quality of services provided to children with special needs.

### **5.1 Practical Implications**

The results of this study suggest several evidence-based actions that can be implemented at different levels:

At the individual level, professionals should be encouraged to adopt regular self-care routines, maintain boundaries between personal and professional life, and seek peer support. Access to professional counselling or supervision can also help in developing emotional resilience.

At the organisational level, school leaders and administrators should promote a supportive climate through open communication, recognition, and reduced workload demands where possible. Providing regular supervision sessions and professional development opportunities can serve as preventive measures against burnout. Collaborative meetings that allow sharing experiences and discussing challenges may also foster a sense of belonging and reduce isolation.

At the policy level, educational authorities should consider including teacher and staff well-being in national education strategies. Policies that address staff-to-student ratios, workload regulations, and access to psychosocial support would contribute to more sustainable and effective inclusive education. Institutional funding for training programmes focused on mental health and stress management could also enhance long-term resilience among professionals.

### **5.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study provides valuable insight into burnout and coping strategies among special education professionals, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was relatively small and limited to the Tirana region, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. Data were collected through written responses rather than in-person interviews, which may have restricted the depth of exploration despite allowing greater reflection and anonymity. Future research should consider complementing written methods with interviews or focus groups to provide richer qualitative data.

Further studies could also explore differences in burnout experiences across regions or between different types of educational institutions. Mixed-methods or longitudinal designs could provide deeper understanding of how burnout develops over time and how coping strategies evolve. In addition, research that includes organisational leaders' perspectives could provide a more comprehensive view of the systemic factors contributing to burnout.

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