

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

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Abstract

Burnout is a pervasive work-related syndrome, particularly among professionals in emotionally demanding fields such as special education. This study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of special education professionals regarding burnout and the coping strategies they employ while working with students with special needs. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 15 special education professionals with diverse levels of experience. Thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed three core dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Participants reported that emotional and physical fatigue significantly affected their motivation and effectiveness, while depersonalization and feelings of inefficacy influenced both professional and personal relationships. The study also highlighted coping strategies, with participants emphasizing the importance of proactive planning, organization, and realistic goal setting, alongside the protective role of social and family support. However, many participants acknowledged a tendency toward reactive coping, addressing challenges only after they arise, which may contribute to the persistence of stress and burnout. These findings underscore the multidimensional nature of burnout and the complex interplay between individual coping mechanisms and organizational and social support. Understanding these experiences is essential for designing targeted interventions that enhance professional well-being, sustain engagement, and improve outcomes for students with special needs. The study contributes to the growing literature on educator well-being by providing a nuanced, human-centered perspective on burnout and resilience in special education contexts.

Keywords: burnout, special education, coping strategies, emotional exhaustion, qualitative study