

# Examining Burnout in Early Career Early Childhood Special Educators

## A Preliminary Analysis on a Mixed Methods Phenomenological Study

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### Introduction

- Many early childhood special educators (ECSEs) leave the field by their 5<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, with **burnout** being a large factor (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024; Jeon et al., 2022, 2024; Kelly et al., 2023).
- This study sought to understand how the phenomenon of burnout is described by early childhood special educators and how to best support their mental well-being.

### Literature Review

- At the individual level, both **self-regulation skills (SR)** and **self-efficacy beliefs (SE)** have been noted to determine whether an individual will persevere through occupational stress (Bandura, 1991; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Blair & Ku, 2022)
- Studies on SR for ECSEs are **limited** (Lynne Calhoun & Rose, 1988; Paquette & Rieg, 2016), and studies for SE are **not present** (Shaheen et al., 2024; Urbach et al., 2015; Viel-Ruma et al., 2010).

### Research Questions

- How is an early childhood special educator's sense of burnout affected by the relationship between self-regulation skills and self-efficacy beliefs?
- How do early childhood special educators describe burnout?
- How do early childhood educators with high vs low self-efficacy describe their experiences and well-being?
- How do early childhood special educators report using self-regulation strategies to regulate their emotions in and out of their workday?
- How can teacher well-being be supported in addressing self-regulation and self-efficacy for early childhood special educators?

### Methods

- Nation-wide recruitment, 11 of 13 participant completion (1 actively completing)
- Mixed methods phenomenological research (MMPR) sequential design, quan→PHEN (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015, pp. 13–14, 33; Tashakkori et al., 2021, p. 138)
- Surveys: MBI-ES, TSES, and MSR-T (Li Sanchez & Schwinger, 2023; MBI: Educators Survey, n.d.; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001)
- Semi-structured 1:1 Zoom interviews, questions pre-planned during study design



### Conceptual Framework

	High Self-Efficacy	Low Self-Efficacy
Low Self-Regulation		
High Self-Regulation		

### Preliminary quan Results

MBI-ES Burnout Profiles	
Engaged	2
Ineffective	0
Overextended	7
Disengaged	0
Burnout	2

TSES	Engagement	Instruction	Management
Engaged	27.5	21	29.5
Overextended	25.1	28.4	25.1
Burnout	23.5	26.5	23

MSR-T	Planning	Monitoring	Reflection
Engaged	27.5	26.5	24.5
Overextended	30	30	29
Burnout	32	28	29

**"And that's when you, you just become more tired and you just become a teacher, not a person."**

**-T2 when describing burnout**

### Preliminary PHEN Results

**RQ1:** ECSEs may be prone to experience the "overextended" burnout profile, by having high SE, but low SR.

- Their current coping strategies are not supporting their SR system with the demands of the profession, which will ultimately affect their SE about their roles.

**RQ2:** ECSEs described burnout as akin to dread, an aversion of going to work, mimicking depression.

- T2: "Having no energy and like just constantly tired, everything, like you're constantly overstimulating, like the smallest noise sets me off."
- T3: "The feeling of like this just dreading going to work dreading doing my job and not feeling like I'm making a difference like feeling like even whatever I do like it's not going to be enough whether for myself or for others."
- T4: "I would say it is waking up in the morning and just going I cannot think of a single thing I want to do less and then get up and drag myself to work again."

**RQ3:** An ECSE with high SE describes teaching experiences with confidence, while an ECSE with low SE describes teaching experiences with uncertainty and anxiety.

- T2: "Definitely, you know, being a first-year special ed teacher, given like the behavior kids and like the kids no one wants because you're the new teacher. **That's a big challenge.** And then because you're the new teacher, you don't, I don't know these kids. **I don't know.**"
- T3: "So in the beginning my, I thought in order to be successful they need to be making progress on the general curriculum and then I realized like it's, it's actually not working it's not helping or helping them make progress at all and so I'd say after that first six months my like idea of what being successful in my career um changed to if they're making any progress in any areas like I'm doing my job correctly and successfully."
- T4: "I have I haven't been doing this for 40 years and I and I'm the first to tell you that I absolutely have a lot to learn but I also bring a lot of really cool things to the table and a lot of effective practices and things."

**RQ4:** ECSEs report work-day strategies such as taking a breath or taking a break, and home strategies such as receiving therapy, medical supplements, mindfulness activities and hobbies they enjoy.

- T2: "So when I get home, I eat, I make sure that that basic need is met. I eat and then I find something else to do to calm myself. Like yesterday I played video games. Today I might watch TV. Some days I might color. Some days I might just take a really long shower, but it depends on the day."
- T3: "I would say before teaching I had never really understood the take a deep breath but once I started teaching and was modeling it for the kids that really makes a difference."
- T4: "I've started taking um a few different supplements specifically geared towards mood stabilization...I also um attend therapy once a week which is very helpful and then in in the classroom like just like excusing myself to take a quick water break or a bathroom break."

**RQ5:** Educators report that having supportive administration, more autonomy and a caring community would positively affect their well-being

- T2: "Having administration that listen is a huge one and having them follow through with what they say they're going to do to support you is a big one."
- T3: "We're being micromanaged um and without this the well-being would be a lot better."
- T4: "I would say...more ability to take the time off that I've acquired. I'm a big believer in my PTO is part of my compensation and I'm going to use that...there's definitely like a there can be a sense of shame with taking time off like from from co-workers."

### Preliminary Conclusions & Implications

- Though early in data analysis, results from this study are promising, offering new insight into the phenomenon of burnout in ECSEs and their well-being.
- Most participants were categorized with the "overextended" burnout profile; they are fulfilled by their job (high SE) but are emotionally exhausted (low SR) (Maslach et al., 2001). This coincides with results from other studies (Walter et al., 2023).
- Coping strategies reported by ECSEs also reflect strategies noted in the literature, with eating, counseling and medical supplementation linked with high stress levels (Cancio et al., 2018; Lynne Calhoun & Rose, 1988); strategies reported were also solo, immersive, sensory-escaping ones, highlighting internal dysregulation.
- Because burnout is a continuum (Leiter & Maslach, 2016), if left mismanaged, ECSEs may move from one burnout profile to another.
- As noted by Walter et al., 2023, well-being should be examined through individual, school-level and structural factors; participants suggested school climate and management changes that may support well-being due to poor experiences with administration and colleagues.
- Potential implications from this research:**
  - Research should continue to focus on understanding coping strategies of ECSEs and their effectiveness on reducing burnout
  - Additional studies may want to also explore school climate and its relationship with burnout, including administrative relationships with staff
  - Future research should also examine practices that administration can implement to help support ECSE well-being

### References

