

# Building Resilience: Strategies to Combat Burnout and Attrition in New Special Education Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of literature on special education teacher burnout and attrition, which has historically been a significant challenge that culminates in a cycle of teacher shortages and subsequent negative outcomes for students with disabilities. As a proactive measure to combat special education teacher stress, burnout, and attrition within the first few years of service, the article presents a framework (addressed as SMIRC) centered on practical, tangible strategies to take directly to the classroom for teachers, administrators, and Educator Preparation Programs. Recommendations for practice are included as supportive, proactive strategies aimed at increasing special education teacher retention.

## KEYWORDS

**attrition, retention, teacher burnout**

In recent years, scholars have come to understand teacher resilience as a “trait that actively fosters well-being” (Pretsch et al., 2012, p. 322) and as “the capacity to ‘bounce back,’ to recover strengths or spirit quickly and efficiently in the face of adversity,” (Sammons et al., 2007, p. 694) which is linked to “a strong sense of vocation, self-efficacy, and motivation to teach” (Sammons et al., 2007, p. 694). Masten (2014) defines resilience as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (p. 10). With the ever-changing circumstances surrounding education given the pandemic, fluctuations in funding, changes in legislation, and shifts in the sociopolitical climate, the ability to adjust to change and thrive when faced with adverse conditions has become critically important. For new teachers, this ability to adapt is uniquely challenging given the reality of learning a new job while doing the job, and for new special education teachers, the specialized demands and responsibilities often present additional challenges. It is unsurprising, then, that attrition and burnout in special education have been of significant concerns across recent decades (Barlow, 2022; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Boe & Cook, 2006; Goldring et al., 2014; Jones, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019), particularly during the first three years (Billingsley, 2004), during which time nearly one-third of all new teachers will leave the field (Cancio et al., 2018). The Office of Special Education Programs currently lists the nationwide special education teacher shortage at approximately 8% (Peyton & Acosta, 2022). In 1989, the attrition rate was below 6% but has remained near 8% since 2004 (Sutcher et al., 2019). “The difference between a 6% and 8% attrition rate might seem trivial, but in 2015-16 alone, a 6% attrition rate would have cut demand by nearly 25%, eliminating the need to replace approximately 63,000 teachers” (Sutcher et al., 2019, p. 12).

The concept of burnout emerged in the 1970s and was originally defined as “a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, a way of life, or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward” (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Gold, 1985). As burnout is a psychological construct, the body

**TABLE 1:** Categories of Retention and Attrition

Category	Description
“Absolute” retention (Boe, 1990)	Teacher remains in same teaching assignment at the school as previous year
Transfer within special education	Teacher transfers to another position (either in the same or different district) but remains in special education
Transfer to general education	Teacher transfers to position in general education (either in the same or different district)
Exit attrition	Teacher leaves education entirely (including those who retire, return to higher education, stay home with children, or enter a new profession)

(Billingsley, 2003)

of research on burnout draws parallels between burnout and depression, particularly with regard to the feelings of hopelessness and sadness (Gold, 1985), which remains relevant to those in helping and service-focused professions. Burnout as a whole “encompasses multiple components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of reduced personal accomplishment” (Gilmour et al., 2022, p. 1). Professionals experiencing burnout are considered to experience a loss of concern or emotional connection to the persons whom they work (Gold, 1985) and burnout is considered a precursor to attrition (Gilmour et al., 2022).

Billingsley (2003) presents four categories for defining retention and attrition presented in Table 1.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ATTRITION

Billingsley (2004) reported that approximately half of special education teachers leave the profession within the first five years, which is supported by findings that demonstrate it is during this time frame that teachers experience higher levels of stress and burnout (Hester et al., 2020). Teacher attrition is a significant, heavily researched issue in special education, and has become even more prevalent in recent years as the teacher shortage has grown (Monnin et al., 2021; U.S. Department of

Education, 2021).

Some researchers have documented unpreventable reasons for attrition, including having children or relocating, but perhaps some of the most notable reasons for leaving the field include a perceived lack of administrative support (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020) and burnout (Robinson et al., 2019). Hagan & Casey (2018) indicated that the top three reasons new special educators leave the field include: 1) stress; 2) “lack of cooperation, recognition, and support from other teachers and administrators” (p. 283); and 3) a large and/or high-maintenance caseload of students with complex needs. These findings are consistent with other research findings related to attrition in special education across recent decades (Billingsley, 2004; Hester et al., 2020).

## Stress and Burnout

Teachers who experience high levels of work-related stress are more likely to leave their jobs (Cancio et al., 2018). The consequences of stress for special education teachers extend to teaching quality, student engagement, collaboration with colleagues, and decreased feelings of accomplishment (Cancio et al., 2018). However, perhaps the most significant consequence of stress among special education teachers is burnout and eventual attrition (Robin-

son et al., 2019). Literature on special education teacher burnout attribute “low job satisfaction” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 296) as a key indicator of attrition. Job satisfaction may be determined by several factors, including school environment/climate, access to resources, workload manageability, collaboration, perceived support, and ongoing professional development. When special education teachers experience high levels of stress, they are more likely to develop feelings of burnout, and then they become more likely to leave the profession.

## Caseload Challenges

Regarding the demands of a challenging and/or too-large caseload of students, it is worth noting that research has also indicated that new teachers have specified that students’ challenging behavior is not a contributing factor in attrition (Newton, 2018), but rather the stress of a lack of administrative support when handling those challenging behaviors that serves a predictive factor of attrition (Cancio et al., 2013). Although chronic exposure to challenging behavior can contribute to a negative emotional state and stress, perceived support in handling those challenging behaviors is meaningful and impactful on retention efforts (Cancio et al., 2013; Hester et al., 2020; Paris et al., 2021). A too-large caseload

is often a source of stress for special education teachers, which may contribute to feelings of burnout based on overwork and lack of manageability. Since special education teachers have additional responsibilities related to progress monitoring, data collection, paperwork, etc. (Billingsley et al., 2020), having too many students on a caseload may directly cause additional stress and feelings of burnout.

### **Lack of Support**

A perceived lack of administrative support is frequently related to burnout (Billingsley et al., 2020). Conversely, special education teachers who perceive higher levels of administrative support report feeling less stress and higher job satisfaction (Robinson et al., 2019). Perceived organizational support is also related to teacher well-being and job satisfaction, yet special education teachers often report a lack of perceived organizational support (Ramadhani, 2020). With the increased demands of the special education workload, perceptions of administrative and collegial support are critically important, and the lack of perceived support contributes directly to burnout and attrition (Billingsley, 2003; Hester et al., 2020). House (1981) outlined administrative support in four specific areas, including information support (e.g., curriculum, classroom practices), emotional support (e.g., mental health support, appreciation, positive culture between special education and general education), instrumental support (e.g., on-the-job training, funding), and appraisal support (e.g., performance feedback).

### **TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS**

Research has identified “level of certification as a predictive factor of burnout and attrition” (Hester et al., 2020, p. 349); however, emergency licenses are often issued to unquali-

fied and/or unlicensed teachers to fill vacancies, leaving many students with disabilities taught by individuals who have not yet met professional standards (Peyton et al., 2021). Thus, the cycle continues, despite evidence linking teacher attrition to lack of experience and qualifications (Brunsting et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020). Furthermore, research has demonstrated a link between teacher certification status in special education and turnover when teaching students with disabilities; specifically, teachers without special education licensure were more likely to leave the classroom, so holding the required certification (and thus having undergone more specific training) is significant in retention (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Research findings also show that involvement in professional organizations, such as the Council for Exceptional Children, is associated with reduced stress of self-contained teachers (Cancio et al., 2018). These professional organizations may address both the needs for additional training and camaraderie.

### **OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ATTRITION**

In addition to the above-mentioned trends in the literature on special education teacher attrition, several other factors contribute to the cyclical nature of teacher burnout, attrition, and the subsequent cycle of vacancies. The following section discusses other contribution factors rooted in more recent events and culminating trends.

#### **Low Enrollment in Educator Preparation Programs**

According to a 2022 report by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, between 2008 and 2019, the number of students complet-

ing traditional Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) in the U.S. dropped by more than a third. The report found that the steepest declines were in degree programs in areas with the greatest need for teachers, including bilingual education, science, math, and special education (Knox, 2022). Certainly, the cycle of teacher shortages and EPP enrollment decline are related, and both are closely linked to the devaluation of teaching as a profession, epitomized by decades of stagnant pay, onerous workloads, and political demonization (Knox, 2022).

#### **Influence of the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic added an additional layer of stress to the teaching profession. Special education teachers were met with greater demands for ensuring their students received a free appropriate public education (FAPE) while navigating virtual and/or blended instruction. The challenges brought on by the pandemic required special educators to deliver content fully or partially online, and subsequently resulted in many disadvantages for students with disabilities surrounding their progress. While the pandemic influenced learning for all students, it exacerbated issues of access, equity, and inclusion for students with disabilities (Young & Donovan, 2020). When schools closed for in-person instruction in March 2020, teachers were tasked with facilitating learning for “all” learners through online learning platforms, such as Google Classroom and Canvas. Special educators co-taught classes with their general educator colleagues, while also learning how to assess students differently (Young & Donovan, 2020).

The shift to online instruction includes the proficient use of the various devices through which online learning is delivered (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Fluent use of multiple devices, paired

with consistent Internet connectivity, presented obstacles for all stakeholders in online learning. Effective online instruction requires multiple components to produce positive outcome for K-12 students specifically (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Further, school closures eliminated some critical aspects of school beyond academic work, such as the development of interpersonal skills, social problem-solving opportunities, and after-school activities that support children's mental and emotional well-being (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

For teachers, many schools and school districts did not have a framework (or even the right language) to accommodate the shift to online learning (Garcia & Weiss, 2020), which presented unique challenges for planning and executing instruction—especially specially designed instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Due to the increased work demands, many teachers, including special educators, left the workforce. For example, approximately 8.2% of North Carolina public school teachers reported leaving employment during the 2020-2021 school year (NCDPI, 2022). The 8.2% attrition rate for teachers during the 2020-2021 school year did show an increase from the previous year's rate of 7.53%, yet was only marginally higher than attrition rates during each of the three previous years beginning in 2017-2018, when the attrition rate was 8.1% (NCDPI, 2022). Of a total 94,328 teachers employed by the state's public schools, the 8.2% rate represents 7,735 teachers who were no longer employed in the teaching profession at the conclusion of the March 2021 reporting period (NCDPI, 2022). The trends in attrition in North Carolina mirror national trends of the decline of the teacher workforce post-pandemic.

For EPPs, the closure of university and college campuses had a unique im-

pact. Traditionally, pre-service teachers develop theoretical and pedagogical knowledge through coursework and have numerous opportunities to practice their skills through field-based experiences in K-12 partner schools (VanLone et al., 2022). When campuses and K-12 schools moved to remote teaching and learning, many pre-service teachers were unable to continue traditional field experiences (VanLone et al. 2022). As a result, many state departments of education waived field-based requirements and EPP faculty scrambled to develop alternatives that would support the continued growth of their pre-service teachers (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2020).

Teacher shortages are, in part, due to high rates of novice teacher turnover (VanLone et al. 2022). Research has found that up to 44% of teachers leave the field prior to their fifth year and 10% leave before the end of their first year (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Ingersoll et al., 2018). The rates are even higher in schools that serve marginalized populations (i.e., students in poverty, students of color, and students with disabilities). High teacher turnover is costly and has negative outcomes on student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Although these challenges have existed for several decades, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these difficulties for students, teachers, and EPPs alike. Further, the pandemic is likely to continue to exacerbate the teacher shortage issue as experienced teachers either retire early or leave the education profession (Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Monnin et al., 2021). Due to current trends in teacher shortages, developing a high sense of teacher self-efficacy during student teaching may leave novice teachers less vulnerable to burnout and attrition, which can contribute to

positive outcomes for students (VanLone et al. 2022).

### **Influence of Legislation**

Legislation has stemmed from the pandemic in an effort to address learning loss and recovery, economic stimulation, and more, such as the COVID-19 Recovery Act signed into law in North Carolina. Many other states and countries passed legislation to navigate the unprecedented time, and the influence of the legislation continues today with regard to how educators address learning recovery. The funding provided via federal legislation in March 2020 was intended to provide districts with some relief to disseminate funds in a way that would prove positive impact to student learning, amid the global pandemic. Nationally, about \$6.1 billion or 43% of the money spent at the local level went to a category described as meeting student needs, based on the fiscal year 2021 analysis. This includes spending on tutoring, summer and afterschool programs, rigorous curricula, additional school counselors, nurses, and school psychologists, and the implementation of community schools (Jordan, 2022).

In March 2021, President Biden signed into law the American Rescue Plan Act, the third federal relief package designed to address major financial, health and education needs caused and worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Parolin et al., 2021). The law allocated almost \$130 billion to K-12 schools and approximately \$39 billion to colleges and universities (Parolin et al., 2021). The law addressed six areas for funding dissemination, which included the following:

- Through the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER), state education agencies across the nation received around \$122 billion,

twice the amount of the first two relief packages.

- School districts and charter schools that received funding used at least 20% of the funds to address learning loss (or instruction disruption) (Parolin et al., 2021).
- The remainder of the funds received were used on things such as mental health supports, technology supports and devices, and information dissemination to families, regarding supports for virtual learning, etc.
- States and school districts that received emergency relief funding had to adhere to “maintenance of effort” and “maintenance of equity” requirements.

Ultimately, the funds and guidance on how to utilize those funds, proved to be instrumental in assisting state, local, and private education agencies in tackling the many different challenges COVID-19 brought about for all students. For the teacher workforce in particular, legislation compliance adds an additional layer of stress and responsibility, as paperwork documenting adhering to legislation and policies can create additional work. For EPP faculty, embedding legislation compliance into coursework is essential in preparing special educators to adhere to the legal requirements of their profession, but challenging to address due to time constraints and lack of real-world/real-time responsibilities and obligations.

For more than a half-century, national policymakers have established federal education laws and programs aimed to promote equal opportunity in American K-12 education (Lips, 2019). Moving forward post-pandemic, the same urgency toward learning recovery and student progress in legislation must take place to ensure education institutions have the necessary resources and

funding needed to produce positive outcomes of student learning.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ATTRITION**

Teacher attrition and resulting teacher shortages is harmful to students, teachers, and public education overall (Garcia & Weiss, 2019), and high teacher turnover rates are linked to negative impacts on student learning and teacher collaboration (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The instability of the special education teacher workforce presents a threat to students’ academic outcomes based on challenges in staffing (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Furthermore, teacher burnout in education as a field is linked with worse academic achievement and lower student motivation (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

### **Academic Implications**

The implications of teacher turnover and attrition on student academic outcomes are clear in the negative relationship between high levels of turnover and student achievement (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Research in New York City elementary schools showed reduced standardized test performance for all students—even those whose teacher stayed at the school (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Research also shows that when a teacher leaves their classroom in the middle of the school year, students miss an average of 54 days of instructional growth compared to peers whose teacher remained in their classroom all year (Sparks, 2018). For students with disabilities specifically, research shows that special education certification is related to greater academic achievement in both math and reading (Feng & Sass, 2013). Considering the relationship between special education certification and attrition (Gilmour

& Wehby, 2020; Peyton et al., 2021), the resulting relationship in student outcomes is of significant concern. “It is striking that the field that serves the most vulnerable students and, arguably, requires the most wide-ranging teacher knowledge—drawing on medical, psychological, and pedagogical fields—is increasingly populated by underprepared teachers” (Sutcher et al., 2019, p. 6). Since schools are legally required to provide a FAPE and comply with relevant special education legislation (e.g., IDEA), lack of qualified staff could also present opportunities for litigation due to noncompliance rooted in failure to provide a FAPE (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

### **Behavioral Implications**

Teachers who serve students with significantly challenging behaviors (e.g., Emotional and Behavioral Disorders [EBD]) are often better equipped with training necessary to support students without affective responses (Cancio et al., 2013; Gilmour et al., 2022). Considering the importance of effective classroom management, special education teacher attrition—particularly those who serve students with EBD—has detrimental effects on both behavioral and academic outcomes (Gilmour et al., 2022). Furthermore, the cycle of challenging behaviors, emotional exhaustion (leading to burnout), and attrition creates a unique challenge in staffing classrooms serving students with EBD with highly qualified teachers while simultaneously focusing on positive behavior supports for students (Gilmour et al., 2022).

### **Cultural Implications**

Schools that serve a higher proportion of students of color and students living in poverty are more likely to experience higher levels of teacher turnover (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Ham-

mond, 2017; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), which has broader implications on student achievement and outcomes that mirror systemic issues related to less and unequal/inequitable educational opportunities. When a teacher leaves a school, they take with them their institutional knowledge, professional development, collaborative relationships, and knowledge of students unique to the school (Donley et al., 2019). Thus, high rates of teacher turnover disrupt the entire school culture, staff collaboration, and operations (Donley et al., 2019). In addition to the aforementioned implications on student learning, teacher turnover is also incredibly expensive, costing approximately \$7 billion annually on recruitment, hiring, and training that could have otherwise been used for direct student support (Donley et al., 2019; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

## RETENTION BY EDUCATOR PREPARATION ROUTE

To address the teacher workforce shortage, EPPs must develop creative solutions that strengthen existing effective strategies while generating new initiatives to enhance both the quantity and quality of teachers in order to best serve students, particularly those most vulnerable (Sztain, 2023). While there is little data to support any enrollment effects in EPPs specifically rooting from the pandemic, it is clear that the pandemic affected candidates' preparation for stepping into their own classrooms, primarily due to the disruption of clinical experiences. Effective solutions, therefore, must focus on both preparation and retention, and these two issues are connected: better prepared teachers stay longer in the classroom (Sztain, 2023).

A recent study from Texas analyzed data collected over the course of a decade to connect EPPs, teacher retention, and student learning (Sztain,

2023). The study showed the cumulative impact of having under-prepared teachers enter the classroom: students from low-income households who were more likely to be assigned under-prepared teachers over consecutive school years could be a whole year behind by ninth grade (Sztain, 2023). The study also demonstrated that teachers entering the profession through traditional EPPs that included multiple semesters of course-work and practice-based field experiences not only performed well in the classroom based on their students' learning, but they also had a 24% higher retention rate than those entering the profession through other routes (Sztain, 2023).

University-based EPPs play a significant role in preparing highly qualified teachers to step into classrooms. In recent years, alternative routes for teacher preparation, such as Teach for America (TFA), have become important to address the teacher shortage problem. Alternative certification programs were established to address the teacher shortage by increasing the quantity and diversity of teachers (Woods, 2016). Current research indicates that alternative certification programs have been largely successful in this regard, but only in the short-term because the teachers they prepare are significantly less likely to remain teaching (Overschelde & Wiggins, 2019). Traditional EPPs consistently yield better instructional knowledge, self-efficacy, and teacher retention than alternative preparation across all levels of schooling, with the exception of kindergarten (Jang & Horn, 2017). Research shows differences in traditional EPPs versus alternative certification programs based on different demographic characteristics (Overschelde & Wiggins, 2019). Black, Latinx, and other teachers of color, as well as male teachers, are prepared more often by alternative cer-

tification programs, compared to their white and female peers, respectively (Overschelde & Wiggins, 2019).

## Effective Strategies to Enhance Teacher Retention and Recruitment

School leaders can bolster retention by developing a culture of trust, openness, and academic freedom in which teachers are respected and valued both inside and outside of the classroom (Shuls & Flores, 2020). Amidst several challenges, Teacher Preparation Partnerships have emerged in North Carolina as a promising strategy to strengthen the teacher pipeline through collaboration between EPPs, school districts, community colleges, and workforce development partners ([NCFORUM.org](https://www.ncforum.org), 2022). Strong relationships between K-12 school districts and institutions of higher education help to build the pipeline of highly qualified teachers.

Research shows a relationship between certain elements of teacher preparation on beginning teacher retention, which include substantial training in teaching methods and pedagogy (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Teachers who complete at least one methods courses generally have greater retention (Ronfeldt, 2021). Beginning teachers who receive more feedback during their own teaching, more opportunities to observe other teachers, and more opportunities for practice teaching are less likely to leave teaching after the first year (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Opportunities for practice-based teaching are also linked to positive impacts on feelings of candidate preparedness and efficacy on the job, but must receive high-quality feedback and coaching to maximize those impacts (Ronfeldt, 2021). Teachers who complete a traditional clinical experience are much more likely to remain teaching compared to teachers who never student taught (Ronfeldt, 2021), as the clinical experience semester



provides ample ongoing opportunities for feedback, coaching, and continued practice.

## **INTRODUCTION TO MS. CASEY**

*Ms. Casey is a special education teacher candidate currently completing her student teaching semester in a middle school math resource classroom. She was excited to start her student teaching as a special education teacher, after completing the first few years of college coursework. However, her enthusiasm is quickly fading, as she faces several challenges in her first few weeks of student teaching. One of the biggest challenges Ms. Casey is facing is the workload. Ms. Casey, like so many beginning special education teachers, is realizing that being a special education teacher requires much more than just teaching. She has been attending her weekly check-in meetings with her faculty mentor at her EPP, as well as attending the department meetings at her assigned school. Ms. Casey is starting to feel overwhelmed at the amount of work she has to complete for class, while preparing for licensure assessments.*

*Another challenge Ms. Casey is facing is related to student relationships and instruction. Many of her students have complex needs, and Ms. Casey is struggling to tailor her teaching strategies and materials to meet their individual, diverse needs. She feels her 6th and 8th grade classes have been going smoothly, but she has been struggling with her 7th grade class. She feels the students in that class simply do not pay attention and no matter what she does, they ignore her, which has created a chaotic classroom environment. Ms. Casey is hesitant to reach out to her teammates, as she does not want to be labeled as not having good classroom management, especially because she*

*hopes to secure full-time employment at the school upon graduation. She has mentioned to her clinical educator and her EPP faculty mentor her struggles with the 7th graders but their advice has not yet resulted in improvements in student behaviors.*

*Furthermore, Ms. Casey is struggling with working with the other professionals on her multidisciplinary team. She has found that there have been communication breakdowns between the team members, so she is frequently unsure of her role as a student teacher not yet licensed regarding next steps or implications for her students. There have been persistent disagreements about the best strategies to use with two of her more complex students, which has caused tension between Ms. Casey and other members of the team. Ms. Casey feels like she is on an island by herself and goes home feeling defeated. On top of completing the paperwork in preparation for upcoming licensure assessments, teaching, managing behaviors, and all her other duties she realized she is responsible for, she is beginning to rethink her career path.*

## **STRATEGIES TO COMBAT ATTRITION AND BURNOUT: INTRODUCING SMIRC**

Despite the reality that special education is challenging, there also remain promising opportunities to build the resilience of new special education teachers in order to proactively combat burnout and increase retention. The following section will introduce SMIRC, a framework for EPP faculty to employ proactive strategies to support the retention efforts for new and preservice special education teachers before they even graduate from their EPP.

SMIRC was developed by special education faculty in an EPP in a high-poverty county during the 2022-2023 school year, as the field

emerged from the virtual confines of the pandemic. Developed from a place of need to recruit teacher candidates to fill vacancies in local, high-needs schools due to shortages which mirror national trends (Monnin et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021), the SMIRC framework seeks to equip EPP faculty with a toolset to proactively retain their special education teacher candidates by providing more opportunities for practice of professional skills and job-specific responsibilities. As the population of students receiving special education services rises (Monnin et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021), the SMIRC framework provides tangible strategies to keep special education teacher candidates in their jobs long after graduation.

### **Self-care (S)**

It comes as no surprise that burnout comes with physical ramifications, and research findings show that many teachers report leaving the field due to deteriorating emotional and physical health (Hester et al., 2020). While stress is commonly associated with teaching, engaging in self-care and wellness can lower the effects of stress and anxiety (Robinson et al., 2019). Teacher wellness also increases teacher attendance, which may also be impactful in teacher retention (Robinson et al., 2019). The glaring issue with regard to self-care is that burnout is detrimental to teachers' physical and emotional health, so the recommendation via the SMIRC framework is to promote a sustainable self-care and wellness plan. The CDC has emphasized the need for school districts to include wellness programs at the schoolwide level to promote stress management (Kolbe & Tirozzi, 2011), so bringing this recommendation to practice may help to promote self-care as a mitigation strategy. However, the misconception that self-care is

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time-consuming and cumbersome must be addressed by providing educators at every level with a sustainable plan to engage in self-care.

For teacher educators, explicit focus on self-care is (understandably) rarely the focal point of a course or even a course objective. However, it can easily be embedded into course discussions as a proactive counter to all of the course content that presents the reality of the multiple challenges students will face once they enter the classroom. This may be as simple as allowing 3-5 minutes at the beginning of each class for a social-emotional check-in, such as a moment for students to share a celebration or encourage each other through a challenging time (Thomas & Howell, 2021), or sending "mindful messages" (Atkins & Danley, 2020, p. 35) to students and/or teacher candidates during times of particularly heightened stress. On the contrary, explicit focus on self-care may be more complex and embedded as a new course learning outcome. Research suggests the possibility for setting expectations for teacher candidate self-care through department-wide policy (Ollison, 2019) and practice, so that each course in the EPP builds to support candidates' self-care practices and regular implementation. For example, a course on methods in behavior management in special education may lead students in learning about self-monitoring interventions, token economies, and differential reinforcement procedures. The opportunity

here lies in the extension opportunity to engage students in dialogue about how they will maintain a self-care plan once they are handling these challenging behaviors as teachers. Perhaps students create a self-care plan as an initial assignment during the first week of the semester and then revisit at the end to revise their own plan for accountability after they have a better understanding of challenging behavior management.

Another strategy for incorporating self-care into special education teacher preparation is to utilize early field and clinical experiences. For students doing early field experience observation hours, many will conduct informal interviews with their clinical educators (cooperating teachers) for a reflection assignment, so perhaps they could ask a question or two related to teacher wellness/self-care to add into their reflection assignment. For students doing clinical experience as student teachers, many will conduct regular feedback and coaching meetings, so perhaps they could embed an accountability plan for teacher wellness into their existing coaching structure. The self-care and wellness experience would be maximized here if the student teachers had previous opportunities to create a plan (i.e., in other courses), and the focus could shift to accountability. Research has demonstrated that the use of a self-care survey instrument that provides a candidate self-assessment can support faculty member's follow-up and plans for next steps to support that

candidate (Thomas & Howell, 2021). Other academic disciplines (e.g., social work, counseling) already incorporate self-care into preparation coursework, so special education faculty should consider the same (Thomas & Howell, 2021).

*Ms. Casey's EPP faculty mentor, Dr. Johnson, and clinical educator, Ms. Sampson, noticed the physical ramifications of her stress level, and Dr. Johnson recommended in their recent weekly check-in meeting that she should informally interview Ms. Sampson to better understand her self-care practices. Ms. Sampson expressed how going for walks at the park adjacent to the school building has helped her to decompress while enjoying the benefits of physical activity without any financial constraints. Ms. Sampson invited Ms. Casey to join her two to three times a week in the afternoons, and they began incorporating their walks into their weekly routine. Dr. Johnson began setting aside 3-5 minutes at the start of each check-in meeting to discuss Ms. Casey's social-emotional wellness. In their last meeting, Ms. Casey updated Dr. Johnson on her new afternoon walk routine, and expressed the benefits of the outdoor walks on her physical and mental health. Encouraged by the noticeable improvements in her self-care, Dr. Johnson continued to conduct brief social-emotional check-ins at the start of each meeting, and is also going to encourage Ms. Casey to complete a self-care self-assessment at the conclusion of the semester to encourage her to continue prioritizing her wellness.*

### **Management of Time and Responsibilities (M)**

Both the complexity and the quantity of caseloads, in addition to the legal mandates surrounding those cases, contribute to significant stress, particularly among new special education teach-



ers (Hester et al., 2020). Essentially, when a workload feels unmanageable, teachers may not intend to stay long-term, experience emotional exhaustion, and have limited resources of time and energy (Cancio et al., 2018). The recommendation to address the inevitable workload challenges is to incorporate more logistical preparation in EPPs, such as paperwork and data collection for progress monitoring, Individualized Education Program (IEP) goal writing, and other caseload paperwork responsibilities (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). This may be accomplished through guided field experiences (Hagaman & Casey, 2018) to support emerging professionals in their ability to bridge pedagogy to practice while also providing proactive logistical support in completing the workload requirements of caseload management. The goal with this recommendation is rooted in providing teachers with hands-on practice with caseload management and all the logistical tasks associated with being in the job before they actually get to the job, in an effort to better equip them to manage their responsibilities.

Guided field experiences may start informally with early field experience observations by giving preservice teachers specific activities to observe (e.g., progress monitoring assessments, formative assessments, behavior data collection, IEP goal writing) based on what is most relevant to the field experience required by individual courses. Once teacher candidates begin student teaching, their faculty mentors can consider more structured experiences with special education-related tasks, to better bridge the gap between research and practice (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Clinical educators are an invaluable resource, but rather than overloading them with additional responsibilities, faculty mentors can rethink how to structure in these preparation activities

into the clinical experience semester.

Other examples of specific ways to better prepare special educators for their inevitable workload includes those hands-on opportunities to supplement course content in EPPs. For example, in a methods in behavior management class, students can engage in practice collecting data from videos of real students, as they may feel better prepared to efficiently and accurately collect behavior data with more hands-on, lower-stakes practice. To take this practice one step further, students can practice graphing the data and presenting it to analyze and rationale their decision making to mirror how they may present to parents or colleagues in an IEP meeting. The ultimate goal of these scenarios is to provide teacher candidates with “real life” preparation activities before the stakes are high with real life students, as they are likely to better manage their job responsibilities as case managers if they have more practice before stepping into the role. Beltman (2020) presents four lenses through which to view the notion of teacher resilience, and the use of contextual resources is essential in how teacher candidates and teachers utilize their contextual resources and harness them for their own learning and navigating of challenges. These contextual resources include those tangible supports that enable teacher candidates to more efficiently and effectively complete job-related tasks (Beltman, 2020), so any tangible support that EPP faculty can embed as contextual course resources may help to bolster teacher candidates’ resilience before they face job-related stress and challenges.

*In preparation for upcoming IEP meetings, Dr. Johnson showed Ms. Casey resources available through the PROGRESS Center and IRIS Center specific to IEP writing that they reviewed together during a weekly*

*check-in meeting. Ms. Casey was able to observe Ms. Sampson in the IEP meetings after having a structured opportunity to review relevant support resources. Although Ms. Casey has more to learn regarding IEP writing and meetings, the explicit support from Dr. Johnson and Ms. Sampson has put her at ease that she has more tangible experiences before she is solely responsible for these job duties upon graduation. Ms. Casey also spent time during a professional development day creating a task management plan provided by Ms. Sampson, and she outlined tasks that needed to be done daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly. She has been using the task management plan as a checklist for the past few weeks, and she is already feeling more confident in her ability to manage her job responsibilities related to her student teaching caseload.*

### **Identify Support and Resources (I)**

Being a new teacher has often been compared to learning how to fly an airplane while flying the airplane. Following this analogy, it is even more complex with passengers (i.e., students) on board. New special education teachers often struggle to get their questions answered when their administrators have not received adequate training on how to effectively support special education teachers in particular (Bettini et al., 2015). Providing further training for administrators in special education-specific topics (e.g., behavior intervention plans, functional behavior assessment process, alternative assessments) may help to support new special education teachers feel more supported by their administrators (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Some scholars suggest the positive influence of involvement in professional organizations (Cancio et al., 2018) as a proactive measure

for special education support, collegiality, and tangible resources related to classroom practice. Another recommendation to provide further support and resources is meaningful professional development that is directly targeted to tangible support based on changes in responsibilities, program changes, or student services (Hester et al., 2020). There are countless low-cost or no-cost resources available to special education teachers, so providing specific support in meaningful ways based on areas of need while also connecting new teachers to tangible, practical classroom practice strategies can be helpful in the retention efforts. Beltman (2020)'s contextual resource lens for understanding teacher resilience also includes mentors, and the strategies lens includes strategies for professional learning. Embedding both mentorship and professional learning in EPPs may again help to boost teacher candidate resilience. Since part of professional learning entails the art and science of learning itself, it is helpful for faculty to consider embedding elements of self-reflection of learning strategies as teacher candidates explore what specifically contributed to their learning.

Special education EPPs should consider providing scholarships (potentially grant-funded) for students to join a professional organization, such as the Council for Exceptional Children. Though students are frequently not able to afford the annual student membership fees, they can benefit from the professional collegiality, networking opportunities, and structured professional learning opportunities (Cancio et al., 2018), so EPP faculty can consider including membership fees in grant projects. If funding allows (potentially again grant-funded), EPPs can also consider bringing students to annual conferences at the regional, state, or national level. Although it may be

challenging to teach teacher candidates the specific skills they will need to identify resources and support, providing structured opportunities for practice engaging in resource-finding, collegiality, and professional development will equip teacher candidates with the tools necessary for sustainable practice. Lastly, faculty can consider providing preservice teachers with a list of resources during methods courses prior to clinical experience to maximize how teacher candidates benefit from tangible resources for classroom practice (Hester et al., 2020). The list should include evidence-based strategies and tools that students can refer to during student teaching, to ensure they are able to independently and effectively implement those practices. The list should also include teaching videos of effective teachers demonstrating various instructional strategies so student teachers can more effectively implement strategies learned during coursework, perhaps by utilizing existing evidence-based resources provided by the IRIS Center, CEEDAR Center, or the Institute of Education Sciences, for example.

*Dr. Johnson applied for and received a grant aimed at supporting special education student teachers, and provided the funding for Ms. Casey's student membership for the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and special interest division for emotional and behavioral disorders. Upon joining the CEC, she received access to thousands of resources relevant to her job responsibilities, both live and pre-recorded professional development, and networking opportunities. Dr. Johnson encouraged her to attend the upcoming local conference for the state chapter. Ms. Casey decided to attend the conference with Ms. Sampson and they attended several sessions together on behavior support strategies. In the sessions, she networked and befriended*

*several colleagues who serve in a similar role, and the new friends have started to share resources. One of the presenters also gave Ms. Casey a list of high-quality reputable organizations for professional learning resources and supports. One of the examples provided was the National Center on Intensive Intervention, which provided Ms. Casey with tools and strategies for data-based individualized for students with emotional and behavioral needs. She has also started to listen to webinars and podcasts on her drive to work to better understand some of the complicated processes that she is learning to navigate as an aspiring special education teacher. After returning from the conference, Ms. Casey proposed collecting Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC) data for one particular student in her 7<sup>th</sup> grade class using tools she learned from resources provided. Dr. Johnson and Ms. Sampson were thrilled to hear that she has already utilized some of the (free) resources provided and have encouraged her to continue utilizing these existing, evidence-based resources.*

### **Relationship-building (R)**

The responsibility of managing collaborative relationships with general education teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and families is linked to increased stress for special education teachers (Hester et al., 2020). Relationships with students are often at the forefront of work in special education, and these relationships must extend to the entire multidisciplinary team to truly benefit every stakeholder. One recommendation is to utilize a strengths-based approach and encourage beginning teachers or teacher candidates to build relationships with intentionality and authenticity. Building upon strengths is likely to yield a positive outcome for both the professionals

and students, as each team member has respective strengths that they can contribute to student services. Leveraging the expertise and knowledge of an occupational therapist, for example, can assist a special education and general education teacher in providing relevant accommodations for students with fine motor difficulties, as this area is likely outside of the expertise of classroom teachers. More discussion on collaboration strategies and corresponding research rationale are presented in the following section. The last recommendation, which is arguably the most important, is to assume the best and check internal biases. In order to fully engage in meaningful relationships and focus on the shared goal of positive student outcomes, one must recognize and actively work to reduce implicit bias. Open and honest communication should be a priority, so the relationship can be cultivated into a healthy, mutually beneficial working relationship that centers student growth. Being mindful to assume good intentions when encountering challenges, while being cognizant of one's own motives and biases, will further assist in the relationship-building process in a positive manner.

Faculty in EPPs can focus on relationship-building in many ways, and many already do as part of special education teacher preparation. The lowest-effort strategy is for faculty to consistently model how to build positive relationships with various stakeholders, but this practice should be commonplace at the bare minimum. One specific way to focus on family relationship building may include an assignment that requires teacher candidates to create a communication plan with future students' families that they can take with them and utilize after graduation. Faculty can provide feedback on how teacher candidates can

take into account how to learn family communication styles and preferences to circumvent communication breakdowns, address cultural considerations, and problem solve inevitable challenges. Another recommendation for family relationship building is to create a plan for family involvement in IEP goals, specifically how to support families in implementing relevant strategies at home. To extend the communication plan recommendation, faculty can also embed relationship-building with related services personnel by incorporating action steps for how teacher candidates can forge relationships with other members of the multidisciplinary team, including occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, adapted physical educators, etc. Providing these tangible opportunities during EPP coursework aligns with Beltman's (2020) contextual resources lens for and understanding and building teacher resilience, since professional relationships present a more positive and enduring context for teacher candidates in the face of adversity.

When students are doing early field experience, relationship building can be embedded by giving specific tips and recommendations for building relationships with the clinical educator. The clinical educator can also provide feedback in the existing evaluation forms on how the teacher candidate managed relationships with the relevant stakeholders, during both early field experience and student teaching. Many EPPs embed evaluations on candidate dispositions, so these existing structures can be modified to focus on relationship building while teacher candidates are still under the supervision of faculty mentors (and thus can receive and incorporate feedback to improve as needed).

*Ms. Casey reflected on the challenges she was experiencing with her 7<sup>th</sup> grade*

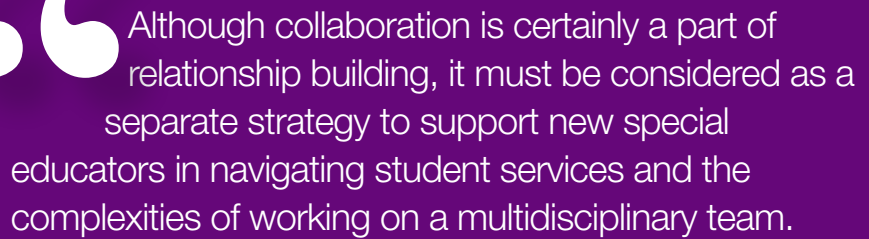
*class, and she decided to consult with Ms. Sampson to re-work their daily pull-out schedule to allow for five minutes of relationship-building at the start of each session of specially designed instruction. Students were initially confused as to the change in schedule, but quickly realized the benefits of spending more time building positive relationships. Ms. Casey created a schedule for positive family contact, and she asked Ms. Sampson to review the plan for future use. Dr. Johnson created a family involvement plan assignment as part of the portfolio assessment at the conclusion of the student teaching semester. In this assignment, Ms. Casey created a plan for lunch and reading dates with students and their families, where she will invite students' families to come eat lunch with them and then observe a small group reading lesson to learn what they could do at home to support their literacy growth. Dr. Johnson and Ms. Sampson both expressed their enthusiasm for this plan and also provided feedback to encourage Ms. Casey to continue to consider lower-effort family involvement strategies to capture more opportunities.*

### **Collaboration (C)**

In alignment with relationships, special education teachers collaborate with several other professionals in the multidisciplinary team in providing services to exceptional children. Although collaboration is certainly a part of relationship building, it must be considered as a separate strategy to support new special educators in navigating student services and the complexities of working on a multidisciplinary team. It is a markedly different skill to collaborate with a general education teacher, administrator, or adaptive physical education teacher, for example, than merely build relationships with them, but learning to collaborate in a professional way can

be challenging and stressful for new professionals. When special education teachers are supported by general education teachers and are provided meaningful collaboration opportunities, they often report higher job satisfaction and experience higher retention rates. New special education teachers often indicate that being assigned a paraeducator was the most important resource or support to help them in their first year of teaching. Paraeducators help new special education teachers address day-to-day logistical tasks in a practical way that solves immediate/short-term problems. Furthermore, new special education teachers have identified mentorship specific to supporting students with disabilities as beneficial to their professional growth and job satisfaction (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

The first identified recommendation for collaboration is to provide meaningful new teacher induction programs. Induction programs should provide meaningful, collaborative opportunities to connect with other teachers. Meaningful induction programs also present specific opportunities for collaboration, which may help to better equip new special education teachers with the tools they need to succeed during the first few years of service (Billingsley et al., 2019). Although induction programs occur after students leave EPPs, it may be helpful to consider developing an induction program assignment as part of special education administration programs. Many districts may have induction programs on a broad scale, so partnering with these programs to bring them to the school level (and even more specific to the content/subject area) may be a feasible way to address this recommendation. It may also be possible to model this recommendation by hosting an induction once candidates are admitted into teacher education majors, such as a 1-2 day workshop that



Although collaboration is certainly a part of relationship building, it must be considered as a separate strategy to support new special educators in navigating student services and the complexities of working on a multidisciplinary team.

provides candidates with more information regarding their pathways, resources and supports on campus, and any other content-specific support.

Another recommendation for new special education teachers is explicit support in intentional collaboration with paraeducators (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). New special education teachers benefit from the tangible and logistical support the paraeducators provide them, which requires great intentionality in collaborating to maximize both teacher and student support. For teacher educators, courses that discuss collaboration and co-teaching should extend to explicit discussions of teacher-paraeducator collaboration. This instruction can include how to problem solve challenges (e.g., interpersonal issues, student-related disagreements, differences of opinions), how to maximize the instructional assistant in various co-teaching models, and how to provide training to instructional assistants that remains respectful of their strengths. Role play in problem-solving conversations can be particularly useful so teacher candidates feel more comfortable addressing confrontations that will inevitably arise. Research has demonstrated the importance of effective communication in collaboration and co-teaching (Friend & Cook, 2007; Ricci & Fingon, 2017), so guided practice and support navigating those professional relationships is critical to how special education teacher candidates develop those skills before even entering the classroom.

EPP faculty can also consider the effectiveness of modeling collaboration skills, by collaborating with general education faculty to host a workshop, guest lecture, or professional development session, for example (Ricci & Fingon, 2017).

The third recommendation is mentorship with an appropriate mentor and at an appropriate time (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). For students in Master's of Arts in Teaching (MAT) programs, it may be particularly helpful to embed mentorship in the clinical experience semester, especially for residency teachers who are in year 2 or 3 of teaching. Although faculty often serve as mentors during this semester, they can also consider holding structured conversations with residency teachers to support their ability to identify and form relationships with mentors. Another recommendation during the clinical experience semester is to incorporate a collaborative inquiry project based on challenges during student teaching. Research shows positive outcomes on teacher candidates' collective efficacy after engaging in a collaborative inquiry project (Osmond-Johnson & Fuhrmann, 2022), so this may be a specific collaborative opportunity that EPP faculty can embed toward the end of the clinical experience semester.

*Dr. Johnson was excited to use the grant funding to create an induction program for recently admitted teacher education students. While Ms. Casey*

will not be able to attend as she nears graduation, Dr. Johnson plans to send out a survey to solicit student feedback to best design an induction program that will proactively meet students' needs before and during student teaching. Dr. Johnson also created a collaborative inquiry project for the student teachers to complete during the final week of the course before graduation. After reading over the assignment guidelines, Ms. Casey identified her challenge as the persistent challenging behaviors in her 7<sup>th</sup> grade class. Her peers chose similar challenges, as behavior management was a consistent struggle for all of them. After working collaboratively to complete the project, Ms. Casey felt encouraged that her peers had similar struggles, and they were able to generate ideas to support their future students. With a stronger understanding of both collective and individual problem solving, Ms. Casey was inspired to utilize much of her new learning from her student teaching semester with her own roster of students in the upcoming school year. As Ms. Casey gained more experience and learned from her faculty mentor and clinical educator, she grew in her confidence in reaching out to ask for help and support. She began to feel more comfortable on days that had previously felt overwhelming due to work-related challenges, as she had more support and collegiality with professionals who often experienced the same challenges. Ms. Casey came to realize that she cannot necessarily remove some of her job responsibilities, but she can absolutely find support, resources, and community within her role. Many skills related to caseload management can be learned and practiced, so she grew in both confidence and capability with practice and utilization of the newfound support and resources.

## CONCLUSION

The SMIRC framework embeds literature on teacher resilience and student support strategies with practical experience to provide EPP faculty with an actionable toolbox designed to retain teacher candidates before they even leave their EPP. Informed by the implications of burnout on attrition and student outcomes, the SMIRC framework seeks to change the narrative of special education teacher burnout and attrition by targeting teacher candidates during candidacy to promote retention after graduation. Schools and administrators cannot necessarily or realistically promise to make teachers' lives easier by removing responsibilities. However, schools, districts, and EPPs can work closely together to build resilient special education teachers by equipping them with tools needed to manage their ever-growing responsibilities. By focusing on logistical and practical tools introduced in the SMIRC framework, EPP faculty can proactively support new teachers to mitigate the stress associated with special education. As the field of special education will likely remain both challenging and rewarding, preparing new special educators to remain resilient in the face of inevitable job-related challenges is essential in proactively addressing burnout and attrition.

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