Compassion Fatigue as a Theoretical Framework to Help Understand Burnout among Special Education Teachers

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Compassion fatigue is a theoretical framework researchers have applied to helping professions other than teaching. The purpose of this report is to propose the use of this theory to better understand the prevalent rates of special education teachers' exit from the profession often labeled as burnout. A qualitative study with six middle school special education teachers makes an argument for greater infusion of this theoretical framework within the academy and among K-12 practitioners. Implications for practice and additional research are presented.

Critical teacher shortage has been a concern for more than 20 years. In the early 1980s, researchers predicted shortages of elementary and secondary teachers (e.g., National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Increased enrollments and teacher retirements are crucial factors in the shortages. However, exit attrition, teachers leaving the profession altogether, compounds the severity of the shortage (Billingsley, 2004). In recent years, at least 90% of new hires were replacements for these leavers. For example, from 1999 to 2001, 15% of the teaching force in America was in transition. Of the 3.4 million teachers nationwide, 232,000 were new hires for the 1999-2000 academic year, while 287,778 teachers departed the profession altogether at the end of the 2000-2001 academic year. Of the teachers leaving the profession during this timeframe, 46% were most likely to do so within their first five years of teaching (Ingersoil, 2001).

The special educator exit attrition in particular has caused a chronic shortage in the American school system. The outcome is costly, not only from financial and human capital perspectives, but also from an educational one. The United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education, spends approximately $90 million each year to increase the number of special education teachers and to replace leavers (Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004). The hiring and training of new special educators to replace leavers drains school districts' resources. More important, it hinders the learning potential among students with disabilities.

Consistent teaching quality contributes more to student achievement than any other factor, such as background, class size, or class composition (Sander & Horn, 1998). As the special educator

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teacher shortage increases, students may under-achieve because districts may raise class size limits and/or caseloads to resolve the issue. Furthermore, student performance in the workforce as adults may be diminished.

Special education has the greatest teacher shortages nationally (McLeskey, Tyler, & Saunders-Flippin, 2004). Furthermore, special education teachers exit the profession more than any other disciplines (Ingersoil, 2001). Studies confirm the factors that influence their exodus: (a) demographics, (b) support, and (c) job design.

Factors Influencing Special Education Teacher Exoduses

First, a demographics factor stems from the reality that younger teachers are more likely to leave than older teachers (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitner, & Weber, 1997; Brownell & Smith, 1992). Teachers with less experience are also more likely to leave (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999) than teachers with tenure and years of teaching experience. Second, lack of support influences teacher exodus. Littrell, Billingsley, and Cross (1994) reported special education teachers value emotional and instrumental principal (administrative) support the most. The authors defined emotional support from principals as trust, concern, open communication, appreciation, and interest in teachers' work and ideas. They defined instrumental support from principals as help with work-related tasks (e.g., the provision of necessary materials, space, and resources), along with adequate time for teaching and nonteaching duties. Leavers have cited a perceived lack of emotional and instrumental support and encouragement from administrators as a major reason for their exits from the profession (Boe, Barkanic, & Leow, 1999; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) reported a lack of collegial support was associated with special education attrition as well.

Third, and most important for the present study, job design appears in the literature as an essential contributor to special education teachers' departures from the profession. Having borrowed the concept of job design from the occupational research field, Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss (2001) captured the construct's fundamental aspects and related them to special education:

> Does the job, with all that it entails, make sense? Is it feasible? Is it one that well-trained, interested, special education professionals can manage in order to accomplish their major objective – enhancing students' academic, social, and vocational experience? (p. 551)

Job design contributes to organizational stress, a combined effect of role conflict and role ambiguity. Role conflict is two or more simultaneous sets of inconsistent, expected role behaviors. Role ambiguity is the lack of clear, consistent information about the rights, duties, responsibilities of teaching, and how to perform each one. For example, research has identified workload manageability, particularly paperwork, as a major deterrent to special education teaching and the greatest frustration for teachers (Billingsley, 2004, Embich, 2001, Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). The combination of paperwork, meetings, testing, scheduling, and reporting leads to role conflict.

When teachers' personal beliefs about their roles as special educators and their actual day-to-day activities are in conflict, role ambiguity occurs (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Special education teachers who struggle with changing roles and shifts in responsibilities due to movement toward a full-inclusion model of special education have also experienced role ambiguity. Embich (2001) concluded certain special education teachers who teach within this delivery model consider their efforts as unfulfilled. They perceive they are not wanted in general education classrooms and reveal their lack of skills for this teaching arrangement.

Factors of inexperienced teaching, lack of administrative and collegial support, and poorly structured job designs are indirect measures of stress and its relationship to special educator attrition. Given this stress, certain teachers report feelings of inferiority, resignation, and helplessness (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997), precursors of professional burnout.

Professional Burnout

First introduced by Freudenberger (1974), professional burnout occurs in response to prolonged work tensions and stressors. Pines (1993) reported it: "Happens most often among those who work with people and results from the emotional stress that arises during the interaction with them" (p. 387). Maslach and Jackson (1981) later defined burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. In depersonalization, a sense

of detachment and social distancing occurs, usually at the expense of personal and professional relationships. Pessimistic or unsympathetic responses to others, particularly those served, are additional features.

Compassion Fatigue as a Theoretical Framework for Research

Joinson (1992) first identified compassion fatigue as a unique form of burnout directly linked to care-giving professions, particularly nursing. Building on Joinson's foundation, Figley (1995) contended compassion fatigue is a natural outcome of working with people who have experienced extreme stressful events in their lives. As such, professionals who have an enormous capacity "for feeling and expressing empathy tend to be more at risk of compassion stress" (p. 1). Professionals who do not actually experience a client's trauma firsthand may manifest symptoms of it via the client's endurance of it. Discussions in the literature refer to this cost of caring as secondary traumatic stress (STS), secondary stress disorder (STSD), or compassion fatigue. Figley (1995) summed: "It is the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p. 7).

Based on a meta-analysis of the literature, Figley (1995) categorized an array of compassion fatigue reactions into three essential areas professionals who work with trauma victims often manifest. First, indicators of psychological distress occur and include (a) emotions (sadness, depression, anxiety, or dread), (b) nightmares or negative images, (c) sleep difficulties, (d) headaches, (e) gastrointestinal suffering, (f) obsessive behaviors, (g) physiological symptoms of palpitations and hyperventilation, and/or (h) impairment of daily activities. Second, a cognitive shift results in professionals who experience feelings of extreme helplessness and heightened vulnerability. Third, relational disturbances, the process of distancing and detaching from family, friends, and colleagues, may also occur.

Figley (1995) differentiated between burnout and compassion fatigue. Burnout is a process, rather than a fixed condition. The progression includes repeated exposures to job strain of excessive demands along with diminished optimism and lack of achievement. Burnout develops throughout a prolonged timeframe and progressively becomes worse. Stamm (2002) defined compassion fatigue's harmful effects: "The theory of secondary or vicarious traumatization records the deleterious effects of being in harm's way as an act of compassion. We have come to know that this saga can be heroic, tragic, or even dangerous" (p. 107). Figley (1995) concluded compassion fatigue may emerge suddenly with little warning and is acute. Other characteristics unique to compassion fatigue are a sense of helplessness, confusion, and isolation from supporters. Symptoms are often disconnected from real causes. However, recovery rate is faster than burnout, given the appropriate interventions.

An argument can be made that analyzing special educator attrition through the stress/burnout lens does not account for those who stay in the profession and yet experience the stress/burnout-related symptoms. A clear relationship between compassion fatigue and special educator attrition has never been empirically substantiated. Investigators who have addressed compassion fatigue included subjects such as: (a) health care workers (Bunce & West, 1996), (b) mental health care professionals working with adolescent sex offenders (Kraus, 2005), (c) sexual violence survivors (Schauben & Frazier, 1995), (d) criminal victimization survivors (Stalston & Figley, 2003), (e) torture survivors (Deighton, Gurris, & Traue, 2007), (f) employee assistance professionals (Jacobson, 2006), (f) social workers (Bride, 2007), and (g) advocacy professionals in child protection services (Conrad, Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). Interest in investigating compassion fatigue within the veterinary medicine field has emerged (Davis, 2003).

Purpose

The purpose of this multiple case study was to understand if/how compassion fatigue theory relates to novice (0-6 years of experience) special education teachers' experiences. Our overarching question was: Do special education teachers become so engaged in their students' disability needs that they experience fatigue relative to their students' struggles? An affirmative response would pose unique implications for remediation, preservice and inservice professional development, and ongoing research.

Our decision for the upfront use of a compassion fatigue framework aligned with Clark, Dyson, and Milward's (1998) argument about the role of theory in special education research:

> Theorizing, for us, is not a linear progression towards some unequivocal truth, so much as a continuing process of

realignment between values, beliefs, and assumptions. What makes that process more than a pointless carousel of ever-changing positions is that it is—or can become—a rational process, seeking both to explicate and justify each new alignment that is proposed. If that process does not lead to some absolute and final 'truth,' it may nonetheless open up new ways of understanding, and hence of action, for particular times of places. (p. 173)

The use of theory in the present study was not to discover an absolute 'truth' about compassion fatigue. At the same time, it avoided a 'pointless carousel' with an aim to understand compassion fatigue in the particular context of novice middle school special education teachers' experiences.

Method

Based on our collective experiences as past and present special educators, we identified Bunce and West's (1996) and Figley's (2002) discussions about compassion fatigue as the most relevant to middle school special education teachers' experiences. Specifically, the authors suggested compassion fatigue is related to the following five components for which we noted links to middle school special education teaching:

(a) Specific situations (e.g., a student who displays excessive oppositional-defiance),
(b) Workload assignments (e.g., number of special education students assigned to a particular teacher),
(c) Past histories (e.g., a former student's threat of violence towards a teacher),
(d) Symptoms (e.g., calling in sick to avoid interactions with a student), and
(e) Professional development/support opportunities (e.g., addressing compassion fatigue issues and concerns as part of a teacher's annual evaluation).

We designed and posed an interview protocol based on the above five components. Questions and prompts elicited participants' experiences of working in stressful situations and/or within stressful environments. Semi-structured, 90-minute interviews ensued with 20 special education teachers. Our aim was to tap into the voice of novice teachers who mirrored the typical timeframe for exiting the profession due to stress-related symptoms (Ingersoil, 2001).

This report includes the findings from the middle school special education teacher subgroup of the larger study (N = 5). As mentioned, job design appears in the literature as an essential contributor to special education teachers' departures from the profession. Thus, we justify the extrapolation of this specific subgroup of special educators who instruct in middle school settings, assignments unique to ones in elementary and high school environments. Participants (pseudonyms) included: (a) Lisa, an urban self-contained classroom teacher of students with cognitive impairments, (b) Debbie, an urban self-contained classroom teacher of students with cognitive impairments, (c) Kathy, an urban self-contained classroom teacher of students with emotional-behavioral impairments, (d) Janis, an urban resource teacher of 20 students with cross-categorical disabilities, and (e) Beverly, a rural resource teacher of 20 students with cross-categorical disabilities.

We revisited Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss's (2001) description about job design prior to analyzing the transcripts of our audio-recorded interviews among this extrapolated group of novice middle school teacher participants. The authors identified (a) organizational stress, (b) role conflict, (c) role ambiguity, and (d) dissonance as the components of job-based compassion fatigue. We sorted our middle school participants' responses according to these terms. Next, we identified three emergent themes that best captured the middle school teachers' experiences and offer an illustrative example for justifying the use of a compassion fatigue theoretical framework within special education.

Results

Through self-disclosures about their middle school special education teaching experiences, our participants recalled and reflected upon specific students and situations they identified as the genesis of their stress. Our analysis of these discussions pinpointed three consistent thematic findings consistent throughout each dialogue: loss of control, responsibility, and empathy. The thematic behaviors align with compassion fatigue (see Valent, 2002).

Loss of Control

Lisa epitomized the experiences of our self-contained classroom teacher participants. As a fourth-year teacher she recalled her initial entry into the field and attempts to set up and launch a middle school program for her students with cognitive impairments. She was unable to master the

nuances associated with an emergent teacher's entry into the profession, despite her preservice training: "No matter what I did, I felt like I was out of control. It was as if I didn't have the control I wanted."

Our two resource participants equated their loss of control with collaborative breakdowns with their general education counterparts with whom they provided services for students with disabilities. Said Beverly:

> One of the general education teachers drew a line in the sand. She made it very clear that she wasn't going to tolerate any behavioral problems from my [special education] students. The kids fought back and challenged her and drew their own line in the sand. It was an all out war and I had no control over either side.

Janis's negative experiences occurred with her principal, an administrator with no prior special education teaching experiences. Similar to Beverly, Janis used terms of rigidity to describe the lack of tolerance towards students with emotional-behavioral disabilities: "She [principal] is so black and white, cut and dry. She doesn't show much compassion or understanding for my [special education] kids." Beverly admitted her surrender: "I just give in and try to keep my students and myself low on her radar."

Responsibility

Despite reports about loss of control, our participants articulated their overall role associated with middle school special education teaching. Willfulness, not vagueness, best captured their self-awareness. For example, Debbie denounced reactionary behaviors to stressful experiences associated with her self-contained special education teaching assignment. When asked to report about her symptoms of compassion fatigue, she retorted: "No, I would never, ever consider calling in sick just to avoid my job stress or tension. I might as well deal with it now because I will have to deal with it sooner or later." Likewise, Beverly conveyed a sense of moral indignation towards her perception of irresponsible avoidance behavior: "I'm not one of those types of teachers who takes off or quits; I stick through it [stress]."

It is important to note none of the participants expressed their roles in proactive terms. Rather, each one communicated her job duty with terms of fortitude towards general educators. They perceived these counterparts as irresponsible.

Empathy

Our participants admitted their turmoil about whether or not to flee the special education teaching profession in response to the struggles they endured. In the end, empathy towards their students or a particular student with dire needs constituted their resolve to ongoing employment as a middle school special education teacher. Janis's disposition represented this finding:

> It has [leaving special education] crossed my mind. I would never go [apply for] to general education, though. I was going to request a change of placement [within special education] after my first year. However, there was one student who, in particular, I wanted to see through to the end. I didn't want to be another person who left him and quit. That's why I came back the second year and the third year and so on.

Our participants' use of compassion as a vehicle of job sustainability matches the literature's discussions about compassion fatigue and its grip on professionals who outweigh stress with clients' needs.

Discussion & Implications

Our study is a unique contribution to the literature about the specific experiences of compassion fatigue among middle school special education teachers. The alarming rate of teacher exodus from the special education profession justifies research that identifies resolutions for this problem. We argue compassion fatigue is a timely, necessary, and beneficial theoretical framework to employ in research aimed towards this effort.

We base our advocacy on the assumption that attention towards the *process* of teacher exodus/poor performance is equally beneficial to the profession and its teachers as is the *outcome*. Indeed, the end-result of teachers' inabilities to cope and function with the stress associated with special education is evident in K-12 systems and includes examples such as poor monitoring of students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), lack of de-escalation behavioral management skills, and poorly designed instruction. In contrast, the process towards such poor performance is often obscure and not always logically connected to the outcome. For example, an administrator may not connect a special education teacher's stress-induced sleeping problems with poor mathematical instruction. Our position resurfaces an old phil-

osophical debate: Should the end be justified by the means?

In the current educational movement of high stakes assessments and adequate yearly progress associated with the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA), one can argue the end is a stand-alone product: validated and documented student achievement and success. This isolated platform may be fulfilled without acknowledgement and response to the stress its fulfillers (teachers) endure. Therefore, a response to special education teachers' well-being and sustainability is more likely to occur if it is considered important to students' achievement and/or it is understood as an ethical and professional way to treat employees. Regardless of the intention, a compassion fatigue theoretical perspective constitutes the reply.

Our participants serve as an example. It appeared to us these teachers were on a path towards tenure and sustainability in the profession, an 'end' product based on job performance and, subsequently, student achievement. If our perception is correct, then burnout and its final outplay of exiting the profession can be ruled out. Such an incomplete response, however, would not capture the teachers' experiences of compassion fatigue. Namely, for this particular purposefully selected group of participants, strain and exhaustion would constitute the condition, byproducts from tensions between them and their general education counterparts. That is, our participants engaged in unhealthy behaviors (denial, avoidance, grandiosity) to avoid and circumvent collaborative breakdowns and perceived negative stereotypes towards them and their special education students. Although they exceeded in 'getting the job done,' they did so at an emotional cost.

One example of a compassion fatigue response to our participants' condition would include professional development about assertiveness and proactive approaches with colleagues perceived as hostile. Another example would consist of discussions about stress during teacher evaluations with building administrators. An administrator's genuine interest in and concern about a teacher's job-related stress could set forth mutually agreed-upon resolutions to enhance the work environment for all parties involved.

True to qualitative research, our study did not include any counterpoint contributions, especially general education teachers' retorts. It did, however, expose the nuances of compassion fatigue

relative to special education teachers. In doing so, it justified the importance of using this theoretical framework to further understand and respond to teachers' stressors that may ultimately result in leaving the profession.

Our study is a springboard for additional efforts. First, the academy needs to replicate our research and report the insights of other special education teachers and educational professionals. The findings could contradict, complement, or add to the thematic behaviors we identified among our participants. Second, the academy further needs to infuse compassion fatigue topics into its preservice programs. As identified in our report, the initial entry years into the profession pose the greatest risk for novice teachers' stability and ability to overcome stress and fatigue. Student teaching seminars, methods courses, and other preservice settings provide ideal opportunities to discuss the inevitable stress and compassion strains associated with the profession. The academy could suggest self-initiated responses and ways to access help when compassion fatigue occurs. Third, the profession needs to promote compassion fatigue awareness and resolution among its practitioners. For example, guest speakers could guide a building staff through self-identification of compassion fatigue and ideal ways to establish collegial support for its resolution. Days earmarked for professional development time are appropriate settings for such training. Likewise, the profession needs to invite and promote compassion fatigue topics at local and national conferences and among teacher groups.

Conclusion

Special education teacher exodus from the profession has been an ongoing documented concern in the literature. Reports, however, have not considered a compassion fatigue framework for its analysis and discussion of this deleterious outcome, albeit its presence in research about other help-giving professions. This report was a first-time effort to use compassion fatigue theory to analyze the experiences of novice middle school special education teachers. The findings illustrated how the theory can be used to better understand the nuances of special education teaching that may be precursors to burnout and possible exodus from the profession. Implications for the academy and practitioners were provided.

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