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## Recommended Citation

Bataineh, Osamah (2009). Sources of Social Support Among Special Education Teachers in Jordan and Their Relationship to Burnout. *International Education*, Vol. 39 Issue (1).

Retrieved from: <http://trace.tennessee.edu/internationaleducation/vol39/iss1/4>

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# **SOURCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN JORDAN AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO BURNOUT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the source of social support (supervisors, colleagues, friends, spouse, and family) that would be the most efficient in reducing burnout among special education teachers. A sample of 83 special education teachers (43 men and 40 women) completed Burnout and Sources of Social Support questionnaires. Person correlation coefficients and ANOVA procedures were utilized to analyze data. Results revealed significant positive correlations between family support and personal accomplishments; marital status, age, and teaching experience were not significantly related to any of the three burnout dimensions. Results were interpreted and implications for special education teachers were suggested.

## **SOURCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN JORDAN AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO BURNOUT**

The Jordanian Ministry of Education Report of 2006 indicated that children with special educational needs have difficulties reaching the goals and objective behaviors as defined in the Special Curriculum for their special needs categories. With the large-scale implementation of the policy of mainstreaming students with special educational needs, teachers face new challenges. Classrooms are becoming more heterogeneous, with students of diverse abilities and disabilities. These changes stem from the Special Educa-

tion Law of 1993, which gives precedence to the integration of all children with special educational needs in regular classrooms.

In Jordan, where the present research was conducted, the average number of students in one classroom is large and can reach up to 50 students. The tasks facing teachers, especially those who teach in large classrooms and have one or more students with special educational needs, can lead to burnout (Hadidi, 1998). In order to lower the level of burnout and improve teachers' performance it is necessary to investigate the factors that hinder the success of teachers in inclusive classrooms. Many attempts to develop and improve special education provisions in Jordan appear to be delayed for a variety of reasons. For instance, similar to other countries in the Middle East, Jordan has greatly suffered from regional instability and struggles. For the past 60 years, Jordan worried about its economic development, educational restructuring, primary health care improvement, and social development. As a result, problems and needs of people with special needs did not represent priority concerns. However, special education and rehabilitation services have developed. The main pointers which indicate this development are the following: increased realization of the extent of special needs conditions, better understanding of the needs and capabilities of persons with special needs, establishment of special education teacher training programs, legislation of laws and systems pertinent to education and preparation of children with special needs, and change in public attitudes, among many other changes (Hadidi, 1998).

### **Special Education in Jordan**

Special education in Jordan has witnessed a massive development especially after the United Nation declared 1981 a universal year for people with special needs. This declaration led to significant recommendations that contributed to elevating the people with special needs. Jordan has become one of the leading Arab countries in this regard due to the care it displayed in emphasizing that retardation is one of the problems for which the community needs to find a solution, in addition to drawing up the activities and the policies to suit the presentation of the best educational, training, and counseling services as well as the institutional care for all people with special needs according to their abilities and aptitudes (Alazah, 2001).

The government of Jordan maintains, provides and develops special education programs for all concerned categories. These programs include schools, special day schools and residential schools, resource rooms in government schools, and comprehensive centers for vocational rehabilitation. Worried authorities issued new laws and legislations to give a respectable life for special needs persons who were enabled to get their valid privileges sheltered by Law 12, 1993 (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The primary function of special education teachers in Jordan is to identify alternative instructional strategies so that a student can be successful with the mainstream. The Ministry of Education in Jordan has identified six distinct roles for special education teachers regardless of the type of disabilities represented in the class. These roles and responsibilities include the following: 1) teaching the basic skills to the students at the primary level and following the suitable educational serial to improve the areas of weakness so that the students could acquire the basic skills without impairment to academic progress; 2) performing the necessary diagnosis of the children with learning disabilities, 3) measurement of the forms of disabilities; 4) coordinating with regular classes, the parents, the school administration, and the educational counselor in order to identify the case and the need for joining resource room; 5) providing advice and counseling for the regular class teacher about the methods and appropriate material for children with special educational needs; and 6) preparing the individual educational therapy plans according to the need of the students (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Burnout is a major problem in education and teaching in particular has been identified as a stressful situation. Burnout in the teaching profession is described as being similar to burnout at work in general. In a number of studies concerning teacher burnout, the latter is identified as resulting from ongoing stress (Talmor, Reiter, & Feigin, 2005). The symptoms are mainly headaches, migraines, hypertension, nervous stomach, loss of appetite, weight loss and bowel difficulties (Alkhrisha, 2002).

Friedman (2000) found that the main components of burnout among teachers are exhaustion, a sense of a lack of professional fulfillment and an attitude of de-personalization that is expressed by blaming the student. He found that the essence of burnout among teachers is feelings of professional failure as a result of the gap be-

tween the actual feelings of personal professional competence and the ideal competence to which the teacher aspires. The personal competence of teachers relates not only to teaching tasks and interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, but also to the teacher's performance in the school organization.

Talmor et al. (2005) reported that the outward expressions of teacher burnout are usually extreme reactions of anger, anxiety, depression, fatigue, cynicism, guilt, psychosomatic reactions and emotional breakdown. According to Schamer and Jackson (1996), burnout can cause teachers to develop negative attitudes towards students and lose their idealism, energy, and purpose. Furthermore, it can make teachers behave rigidly and show an overly tough attitude towards their students. Also, teachers can have negative and low expectations of students. They may feel emotionally and physically exhausted, and show low levels of involvement in teaching or concern for their students (Hoffman, Palladino & Barnett, 2007).

Researchers have identified several factors that contribute to the teacher burnout syndrome. Of importance to teachers, particularly special educators, are performance of custodial and managerial tasks, excessive amount of direct contact with children, a perceived lack of job success, program structure, and work overload (Sari, 2004; Friedman, 2000). Other factors include excessive work, lack of administrative and parental support, inadequate salaries, disciplinary problems, lack of students' interest, overcrowded classrooms, and public criticism of teachers and their work (Sari, 2004). Other studies (Hoffman et al., 2007; Friedman, 1995), have found that burnout among teachers is often caused by high levels of prolonged stress related to inordinate time demands, large class size, lack of recourses, role ambiguity, lack of support, involvement in decision making, and student behavioral problems (educational here). According to Alkhrisha (2002), major sources of stress of Jordanian teachers are workload, low salary, lack of self-esteem, lack of in-service training opportunities, and lack of access to new information and knowledge. Also, this study found that demographic variables are the major sources of teacher burnout. In addition, some demographic variables, such as age, marital status, experience and sex, were found to be related to burnout (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997; Alkhrisha, 2002).

A concept first introduced by Freudenberger (1980), 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). According to Maslach and Jackson (1986), burnout is comprised of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment and feelings of depersonalization. Leung, Siu, and Spector (2000) reported that burnout symptoms include recurrent bouts of flu, headaches, fatigue, poor self-esteem, difficulty in interpersonal relationships, substance abuse, inability to concentrate on a subject, rigidity and a tendency to blame others for one's problems.

Although different definitions of burnout exist, this long-term stress reaction is most commonly described as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with other people in some capacity. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one's emotional resources. Depersonalization refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people, who usually are the recipients of one's service or care. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one's feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work (Hastings, Horne, & Mitchell, 2004, p. 268-273).

Consequences of burnout include significant decrease in the quality of teaching, long absenteeism, early leaving of the profession, diminished job satisfaction, reduced teacher-pupil rapport, decreased teacher effectiveness in meeting educational goals, and reduced pupil motivation (Abel & Sewell, 1999).

Several studies have recently addressed various issues related to teachers and children with special needs in Jordan. For example, Dababseh (1993) found moderate levels of burnout among teachers of children with special needs. In another study of morale, special education teachers were most satisfied with relations to community, rapport with students, and teaching, and least satisfied with work load and financial incentives (Al-Khateeb, Hadidi, & Elayyan, 1996).

Several studies show that professionals working with special needs students are apt to develop burnout syndrome, leading to an impairment in quality of the services provided by the organization (Cherniss, 1988; Eichinger, Heifetz & Ingraham, 1991). Of the variables identified as antecedents of the syndrome within profession-

als working with special needs students, variables of a sociodemographic style, lack of social support at work, autonomy, and work overload, among others, are mentioned (Sari, 2004).

Burnout also has a negative effect not only on work performance and satisfaction but also in one's social life and personal relationships (Hastings et al., 2004). For instance, Olsson and Hwang (2001) showed that special education teachers experienced a high prevalence of depression, feelings of burden, psychological distress, and role conflict. Consequently, staff stress has been found to be associated with intended turnover and absenteeism from work. They suggest that it is reasonable to conclude that a causal relationship exists between these role dysfunctions and the burnout syndrome within this kind of professional.

Social support has been defined as "processes of social exchange that contribute to the development of individuals' behavioral patterns, social cognition, and values" (p.433). Tracy and Whittaker (1990) defined social support as the means by which people give assistance to each other.

Research findings concerning the relationship between social support and burnout have been inconsistent (Haddad, 1998). Some research has suggested that social support has a negative relationship with burnout: i.e., high levels of social support are associated with low levels of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Russell, Altmaier, and Velzen (1987) show that social support is not associated with any of the MBI dimensions at a significant level, while Price and Spence (1994) show that sources of social support are significantly associated with all the MBI dimensions.

In regard to source of social support, research has not clarified which source of social support is more closely related to burnout and its dimensions. Some studies (e.g., Richardsen, Burke & Leiter, 1992; Gil-Monte et al., 1993) found that the relationship between supervisors' social support and emotional exhaustion is not significant. However, some other studies (e.g., Price & Spence, 1994; Turnipseed, 1994) found that the relationship between this source of support and personal accomplishment is not significant, but that is significant for the rest of the MBI and its dimensions. Ross et al. (1989) found that the relationship between supervisors' social support and all three dimensions of burnout is significant, while colleagues' social support was significant to none. Similarly, Russell et al. (1987) found supervisors' social support related significantly

to burnout dimensions, whereas colleagues' social support was not related.

In regard to teaching experience, workers who had few years of experience reported more burnout (Ross et al., 1989; Kruger et al., 1991), while the result of other studies indicated that there is no significant difference in burnout level in respect to teaching experience (Bataineh, 2005, Haddad, 1998). With respect to marital status, one study found that married workers experience greater emotional exhaustion than those who were not married (Ross et al., 1989), while other studies suggested that married workers experienced less burnout (Bataineh, 2005 ; Haddad, 1998; and Russell et al., 1987).

Concerning gender differences, some studies reported that men tend to experience higher level of burnout than women (Bataineh, 2005; Kruger et al., 1991; Russell et al., 1987), whereas other studies reported no differences between men's and women's level of burnout (Haddad, 1998; Ross et al., 1989). Furthermore, Bataineh (2005) found age to be related to burnout level, while other studies found age to be unrelated to burnout level (Haddad, 1998; Keener, 1986).

Based on the review of social support and burnout research, the main purpose of the study was to examine which source of support is most effective in reducing burnout. Specifically, two questions were formulated, which source of social support (supervisors, colleagues, friends, spouse, family) would be more closely related to the burnout scale and its dimensions? Are there significant differences in burnout dimensions among special education teachers due to gender, age, marital status, or teaching experience?

## METHODS

### Sample

Eighty- three special education teachers (43 men and 40 women) participated in this study during the first semester of the academic year 2007-2008. Participating teachers were certified special education teachers who worked with third to fifth grade students with special educational needs who were educated in the general education classroom for at least 80% of the school day. The special education teachers provided services in pull-out resource room settings, served as co-teachers in general education classrooms, or

provided direct and indirect consultation services to general educators who taught students with special educational needs. No a priori considerations were made regarding age, sex, marital status, and years of teaching experience in the sample of teachers.

Special education teachers completed the questionnaires at their first meeting held by the Governorate of Education for training purposes. When the meeting was over, the questionnaires were returned to the researcher. Out of the 97 questionnaires distributed, 83 were returned, a 90% respond rate. Fifty-two percent of the sample were female ( $n=43$ ) and 48% were male ( $n=40$ ); 86% were married ( $n=71$ ), and 14% were single ( $n=12$ ). Ages of the respondents ranged from 24 to 48 years, while years of experience ranged from 3 to 15.

## INSTRUMENTATION

Social support was assessed by a questionnaire derived from measures used in previous research of social support (Haddad, 1998; Tracy & Whittaker, 1990; Zimet et al., 1988). The measure focused on support received from five sources of the special education teacher's social network (supervisors, colleagues, friends, spouse, and family).

Respondents were requested to rate, on a five point Likert scale the degree of support received from each of these persons. Potential responses on the 5-point scale are the following: no support (1), low support (2), moderate support (3), much support (4), and very much support (5).

The questionnaire consisted of 18 items reflecting three aspects of social support: advice and guidance (5 items), acceptance and belonging (7 items), and feedback (6 items). Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's Alpha) for each source of social support were found to be 0.88 for supervisor support, 0.89 for colleague support, 0.88 for friends support, 0.91 for spouse, and 0.90 for family support.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) was administrated. The MBI consists of 22 items that are divided into three subscales: depersonalization (5 items), personal accomplishment (8 items), and emotional exhaustion (9 items). Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale on the frequency of occurrence and a 7-point scale on the intensity of occurrence only because of the very high correlation between frequency and inten-

sity ratings (Constable & Russell, 1986; Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Maslach and Jackson (1986) reported reliability coefficients ranging from 0.71 to 0.90 for the three subscales. They also demonstrated validity of the MBI in several ways (Haddad, 1998).

For the purpose of this study, the MBI was translated into Arabic and some words were modified to make the items relevant to resource room teachers (see Appendix 1). Reliability coefficients for the frequency of the Arabic version (Cronbach's alpha) were 0.83 for emotional exhaustion, 0.72 for depersonalization, and 0.86 for personal accomplishment, while the reliability coefficients for the strength of the Arabic version (Cronbach's alpha) were 0.86 for emotional exhaustion, 0.60 for depersonalization, and 0.84 for personal accomplishment.

## RESULTS

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between scores of each of the subscales of the burnout questionnaire and scores obtained from source of social support: supervisor, colleagues, friends, spouse, and family as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation coefficients between sources of social support and burnout

	Emotional exhaustion	ex-	Depersonalization	Personal accomplishment
Supervisors	.007		.032	-.145
Colleagues	.118		.157	-.076
Friends	.131		.093	.002
Spouse	-.150		-.095	.001
Family	-.027		-.082	.220

Significant positive correlation was found between family support and personal accomplishment. No significant relationships, however, were found between supervisor, colleagues, friends, and spouse support one hand and the three burnout dimensions on the other.

The second research question concerned whether there are significant differences in burnout dimensions among special education teachers due to sex, age, marital status, and teaching experience. In

order to address this question, ANOVA analyses were conducted for each variable and the three burnout dimensions that pertain to sex, age, marital status, and teaching experience are shown in Table 2. None of these F values was significant at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

Table 2. Analysis of variance of demographic variables with burnout dimensions

Demographic Variables	Emotional exhaustion	ex-Depersonalization	Personal accomplishment
	F	F	F
Sex	1.445	2.434	.118
Experience	.617	.237	.533
Age	.816	.460	.893
Marital Status	.240	.011	.117

## DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to analyze whether the relationship between sources of social support at work (from supervisors, colleagues, friends, spouse, or family) would be more closely related to the burnout scale and its dimensions among special education teachers due to gender, age, marital status, and teaching experience.

The most important finding of this study was the positive relationship between family support and the personal accomplishment dimension of burnout, which reflects the importance of family in Jordan society. The family, which is the most important unit to Arabian culture, provides its members with love, affection, advice, feedback, and practical assistance. Family is considered the most available and preferred source of assistance for Arabs. Thus, it is easier for them to accept help from members of their natural networks than from strangers. In general, family bonds are extremely strong, and the individual relies on family for social, emotional and material support. This result is consistent with the findings of Haddad (1998) and of Rimmerman (1989) who found that family support was positively associated with sense of personal accomplishment.

No significant relationships between all other sources of so-

cial support (supervisors, colleagues, friends, and spouse support) and burnout were detected. Regarding the absence of a significant relationship between supervisor support and burnout, a possible explanation for this result is that supervisors represent authority and don't interact with teachers on an equal basis. It is possible that supervisors are insensitive to teacher-related problems, judgmental, critical and may be limited in their role to providing orientation and professional feedback rather than providing support for teachers. Thus, supervisors usually provide social support of a formal character (e.g., feedback information on the task, chances of promotion, praise, etc.). The lack of relationship between supervisor support and burnout in this study is consistent with the findings of Haddad (1998), Price and Spence (1994), Turnipseed (1994), Kruger et al. (1991), and Rimmerman (1989).

Colleague support, in this study, also showed no significant relationship to burnout. One possible explanation for this result may be conditioned by type of support offered by colleagues; social support from colleagues typically gives informal support, e.g., friendship, a feeling of belonging, or emotional support in general. This finding is similar to those of Ross et al. (1989) and Russell et al., (1987). This finding contradicts other burnout studies (Kruger et al., 1991; Savicki & Cooley, 1987).

Regarding sociodemographic variables, results showed no significant differences in burnout dimensions between males and females. Perhaps this is due to the homogeneity of the sample, and to the fact that both males and females are placed in similar life and work conditions. These results are consistent with previous research conducted in Jordan (Haddad, 1998; Ross et al., 1989) who reported that there were no significant differences in burnout dimensions between males and females.

In addition, there were no significant differences in burnout level in respect to marital status, teaching experience and age. These findings contradict other burnout studies (Ross et al., 1989; Kruger et al., 1991) who found out that fewer years of experience reported more burnout; but support Russell et al. (1987) who suggested that married teachers experienced less burnout. This result is consistent with the findings of Haddad (1998) who found that there were no significant differences in burnout level in respect to marital status and teaching experience. Also, it was found that there were no significant differences in burnout level in respect to age. This result is

consistent with the findings of Haddad (1998) and Keener (1986).

The findings of this study have important implications for special education teachers in Jordan. Intervention programs in cooperation with the school health personnel can help to develop, implement, and evaluate early detection and prevention of burnout through in-service training regarding teacher stress and burnout. An important area for future research concerns designing and evaluating the effects of social support intervention programs in preventing teacher burnout.

Another implication is that if special education teachers are to be the persons designated to provide social skills interventions, training institutions must consider expanding their curricula to include specific training in social skills interventions. Finally, supervisors must be trained to improve their supervisory skills in order to bridge the gap between themselves and school teachers to offer them assistance whenever it is needed.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Sources of social support questionnaire

Supervisor	Co – Workers	Friends	Spouse	Family
1 -5	1 -5	1 -5	1 -5	1 -5

- 1- I like to discuss my work related problems with.
- 2- I feel that my work is appreciated by.
- 3- I have access to get information I need from.
- 4- I feel secure when I talk about my problems with
- 5- I feel that the most helpful person in getting my work done is
- 6- I feel secure and safe when I be with
- 7- I like to share my interests and concerns with.
- 8- I can be totally my self with.
- 9- In a crisis situation I can really count on.
- 10- I feel that the person I can count on to console me when I am upset is
- 11- I have special skills in my work which is appreciated by.
- 12- When I get exhausted from work I can depend on
- 13- When I need help count on.
- 14- The person who really listens to me when I need to talk to someone is
- 15- I feel the importance of emotional support I get from.
- 16- I feel that the person who cares about problems I face in my work is
- 17- I feel I am accepted and loved as a person by
- 18- I like to get advice and guidance when is needed from