EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS WORKING WITH EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
December, 2016

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Abstract

Regular classroom teachers, who often report that they lack adequate training and resources, increasingly find themselves supporting students with special education needs (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Teachers working in challenging environments can thrive in their role and continue to experience professional growth and passion about their work with students with exceptionalities (Perry, Brenner, Collie, & Hofer, 2015). Thriving is one framework of psychological wellness that can provide insight into the experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Chronic stress from occupational demands such as heavy workload and insufficient resources can negatively affect the wellbeing of teachers and lead to poor mental health (Desrumaux et al., 2015). Burnout and compassion fatigue are two constructs of poor mental health that can inform our understanding of teachers’ social and emotional experiences.

The purpose of this study was to explore the social and emotional experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in regular classrooms. The objective of this study was to describe the elements within teachers’ professional roles that they report contribute to their social and emotional experiences understood through the lenses of thriving, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Interviews were conducted with five teachers: one full-time in-service teacher and four teachers who are pursuing graduate studies in education. The theme of thriving emerged as a significant component of the interview with all five participants. All five participants described experiences of vitality and learning as essential to their workplace satisfaction and overall thriving. Although the data from this study did not suggest that participants were experiencing burnout or compassion fatigue, elements of the two constructs did emerge as relevant to the social-emotional experiences of the teachers.
Acknowledgments

Who I am as a graduate student and researcher has grown through the encouragement of many key individuals. First, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Derek H. Berg, who has provided endless guidance and support as I worked toward completion of this thesis. I am also thankful for the patience and understanding of my committee as I worked to overcome the obstacles that come with research.

Thank you to all of my friends within and outside of the Queen’s University community for their willingness to listen. I want to thank my partner Andrew, who has read and edited my work as many times as I have. Without your love and constant belief in my ability to succeed I would have had a much bumpier road here. Finally, I want to thank my parents for the sacrifices they made and the opportunities they provided me so that I could pursue graduate education and my passion for research. I do not take for granted that every success I have had is because of the love and support of the important people in my life.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In Ontario, there is an average ratio of 37 students with special education needs for every teacher with special education qualifications (People for Education [PFE], 2015). The number of students with identified exceptionalities, such as learning disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, is growing (PFE, 2014). Regular classroom teachers, who often report that they lack adequate training and resources, increasingly find themselves supporting students with special education needs (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Teaching is a laborious occupation and those working with exceptional learners are subject to a range of social and emotional challenges, comparable to other human-service workers, due to the similarity of these occupations as helping professions (Putnik, Jong, & Verdonk, 2011; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2015).

Teachers working in challenging environments can thrive in their role and continue to experience professional growth and passion about their work with students with exceptionalities (Perry, Brenner, Collie, & Hofer, 2015). Across the continuum of experience, some teachers are struggling to remain in their professional role while others find their position, though sometimes overwhelming, rewarding enough to remain committed and engaged (Perry et al., 2015). Thriving is one framework of psychological wellness that can provide insight into the experience of teachers working with exceptional learners. Spreitzer and colleagues (2005) developed a model of workplace thriving that can be applied across professions, including teaching. Based on this socially embedded model, thriving is defined as the concurrent experience of vitality (affective) and learning (cognitive) (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012; Spreitzer & Porath, 2013; Spreitzer, Porath, & Gibson, 2012; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, &
Grant, 2005). The first element, vitality, encompasses the feeling of being energized and passionate about one’s work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). The second element, learning, is based on the individual’s growth by acquiring new knowledge and skills through their work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Both elements are critical to the experience of workplace thriving for the individual, with a lack of vitality and the presence of learning leading to feeling depleted, and a lack of learning and the presence of vitality leading to feeling stagnant. Thriving is a construct that encompasses individual growth and progress, and can act as a self-measure of an individuals’ wellbeing at work (Spreitzer & Porath, 2013). Thriving is also conceptualized as a continuum, where the larger social context and situation impacts the degree of thriving experienced.

Chronic stress from occupational demands such as heavy workload and insufficient resources can negatively affect the wellbeing of teachers and lead to poor mental health (Desrumaux et al., 2015). Burnout and compassion fatigue are two constructs of poor mental health that can inform our understandings of teachers’ social and emotional experiences. Burnout is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion (feeling drained), depersonalization (callousness towards others), and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (feeling ineffective) resulting from extreme work stress (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Typically reported in nurses and social workers, compassion fatigue is characterized by feelings of depression, anxiety, and reduced empathy resulting from repeated exposure to the distress of vulnerable populations (Figley, 2002; Najjar, Davis, Beck-Coon, Carney, & Doebbeling, 2009). With a significant reduction in their compassion and empathy, individuals experiencing compassion fatigue no longer feel psychologically capable of providing care to their clients. It is important to recognize the main distinction between these two constructs of psychological distress. While burnout is the result of workload conditions, compassion fatigue develops from
the impulse to help others and is rooted in the social-emotional relationship between professionals and their clients.

Specific to teachers who work with students with exceptionalities, themes consistent with both compassion fatigue and burnout have been reported (Hoffman, Palladino, & Barnett, 2007). Classroom teachers must balance interpersonal demands with the responsibilities of adapting instruction, curriculum, and assessment to meet the diverse needs of students with exceptionalities. Difficulty successfully meeting these demands can place teachers at-risk for burnout and compassion fatigue. Teachers working in special education settings often have negative social experiences in their early career leading them to consider leaving the profession despite the potentially rewarding nature of their relationship with students (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). Teacher attrition is financially costly for school systems and psychologically harmful for professionals (Spreitzer et al., 2012).

Research on burnout is widespread, with various studies looking at the relationship between teacher burnout and factors such as school resources, classroom management, and self-efficacy (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Wang, Hall, & Rahimi, 2015). In contrast, limited research has applied compassion fatigue and thriving to understand the experience of teachers working with students with exceptionalities in an inclusive classroom context. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between teachers’ wellness and their experiences working with exceptional learners. An investigation of the nature of teachers’ experiences will provide a foundation for targeted prevention and intervention programs aimed at supporting the occupational wellbeing of teachers.

The purpose of this study is to explore the social and emotional experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in regular classrooms. The objective of this study is to
describe the elements within teachers’ professional roles that they report contribute to their social and emotional experiences understood through the lens of thriving, burnout, and compassion fatigue. A qualitative methodology is used to conduct this study because the primary research purpose is to investigate in depth the participants’ perceptions of their experience (Creswell, 2013).
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The conversation around mental health in the education context is largely focused on the wellbeing of the student, but the professional wellbeing of teachers has gained significant attention among researchers due to the theoretical and practical implications of this issue (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Desrumaux et al., 2015; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Perry et al., 2015; Schlichte et al., 2005; Wang, Hall, & Rahimi 2015). Teachers working with exceptional learners are subject to a range of social and emotional challenges that are comparable to those experienced by front-line healthcare providers due to the similarity of these occupations as helping professions. Chronic stress from occupational demands such as heavy workload and insufficient resources can negatively affect the wellbeing of teachers and lead to poor mental health (Desrumaux et al., 2015). Burnout and compassion fatigue are two constructs of psychological distress that can inform our understanding of teachers’ social and emotional experiences. Specific to teachers who work with students with exceptionalities, themes consistent with both compassion fatigue and burnout have been reported (Hoffman et al., 2007). Teachers working with exceptional learners often have negative social experiences in their early career leading them to consider leaving the profession despite the potentially rewarding nature of their relationship with students (Schlichte et al., 2005). Teacher attrition is financially costly for school systems and psychologically harmful for professionals (Spreitzer, Porath, & Gibson, 2012). Teachers working in these demanding situations can also thrive in their role and experience a sense of accomplishment working with challenging students (Perry et al., 2015). Across this continuum of experience, some teachers are struggling to survive in their
professional role while others find their position, though sometimes overwhelming, rewarding enough to remain committed and engaged (Perry et al., 2015).

**Thriving**

Individuals in psychological distress tend to feel depleted and stagnant, while in contrast those who are thriving are typically growing, developing, and feeling energized in their work. Spreitzer and colleagues (2005) developed a model of workplace thriving that can be applied across professions, including teaching. Based on this socially embedded model, thriving is defined as the concurrent experience of vitality (affective) and learning (cognitive) (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer & Porath, 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005). The first element, vitality, encompasses the feeling of being energized and passionate about one’s work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). The second element of learning is based on the individual’s growth by acquiring new knowledge and skills through their work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Both elements are critical to the experience of workplace thriving for the individual, with a lack of vitality and the presence of learning leading to feeling depleted, and a lack of learning and the presence of vitality leading to feeling stagnant. Thriving is a construct that encompasses individual growth and progress, and can act as a self-measure of an individual’s wellbeing at work (Spreitzer & Porath, 2013). Thriving is also conceptualized as a continuum, where the larger social context and situation impacts the degree of thriving experienced.

Perry and colleagues (2015) applied self-determination theory to report the experience of one teacher working in an alternative education program for 20 high-needs students (e.g., addiction, mental health challenges) in western Canada. The focus of this research was on the thriving of this teacher despite the challenging nature of his work which others may consider overwhelming (Perry et al., 2015). The authors found that the participant’s experience was
reflective of the satisfaction of the universal psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Perry et al., 2015). The participant’s interview reflected feeling autonomous in the decisions he made for his classroom, competent in his ability to make a difference for his students, and relatedness to his students and classroom aide (Perry et al., 2015). The participant also reported feeling committed and engaged in his work, and despite the experience of frustration he did not report social and emotional experiences reflective of burnout (Perry et al., 2015). The participant in this case study was situated in a unique program and had a distinctive outlook on his role and students with exceptionalities compared to typical classroom teacher (Perry et al., 2015). The average classroom teacher may feel limited in the choices they can make for their classroom, and does not exclusively serve a classroom of students with high needs. The circumstances and challenges of teachers vary in each classroom, as do their social and emotional experiences. The research by Perry et al. (2015) suggests that the self-determination theory framework is appropriately reflective of the experience of this teacher, and that the satisfaction of the universal psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can act as protective factors when working in challenging circumstances. Alternatively, teachers who do not feel autonomous, competent, or relatedness in their role may struggle when working with challenging students, placing these teachers at-risk of reduced wellbeing.

**Burnout**

The construct of burnout, first introduced by Maslach and colleagues, is often used in literature to describe the negative emotional experience of professionals working in a human services role (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Burnout is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment resulting from extreme perceived work stress (Mantilla & Diaz, 2012; Maslach, 2003; Maslach
& Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion as experienced by “burned-out” individuals describes a feeling of being emotionally drained, as if, psychologically, they are no longer able to care for their clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The term depersonalization in research is sometimes used interchangeably with reduced feelings of empathy and is used to describe a state wherein individuals develop negative or sometimes callous perceptions of their clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The third characteristic of burnout, referred to as reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, is used in research to describe the negative self-appraisal by professionals, specifically dissatisfaction in their achievements and their work with clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Burnout is considered a syndrome, suggesting that the specific symptoms are displayed in a pattern and are often chronic by nature (Mantilla & Diaz, 2012). The implications of burnout are multifaceted, with negative effects on the overall mental health of individuals experiencing burnout, the quality of care provided to clients, and the attrition of staff (Mantilla & Diaz, 2012; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In current research, the chronic negative emotion of teachers due to workplace stress is typically operationalized as burnout (Van den Berghe et al., 2014).

Research on the topic of burnout in educational settings is widespread, with various studies looking at the relationships between teacher burnout and factors such as school resources, student misbehaviour, classroom management, self-efficacy, and motivation (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Wang, Hall, & Rahimi 2015). Though in extant literature burnout is generally operationalized as a stable construct, research by Hultell, Melin, and Gustavsson (2013) considered the difference in trajectory for individual experiences of burnout. The authors conducted a longitudinal quantitative study on the burnout levels of 816 beginning teachers across the first three years of their professional career. Although the findings
suggest that for teachers as a group the occurrence of burnout remains relatively consistent, the burnout level of individual participants can follow one of seven paths over time (Hultell et al., 2013). These trajectories of burnout include: significant increase from low initial levels of burnout (13%), minor decrease from high initial levels of burnout (11%), increase from low initial levels of burnout followed by a decrease (10%), decrease from high initial levels of burnout followed by an increase (9%), stable low levels of burnout with no significant change (25%), stable high levels of burnout with no significant change (5%), and stable moderate levels of burnout with no significant change (27%) (Hultell et al., 2013). The findings of this study suggest that the initial experience of burnout in beginning teachers is not directly predictive of future career burnout (Hultell et al., 2013).

The construct of self-efficacy as it relates to burnout is a topic of interest in current literature. A recent study by Wang et al. (2015) investigated self-efficacy and the individual attributes that predict burnout, adjustment, attrition, job satisfaction, and illness in 523 Canadian teachers. The authors defined teachers’ self-efficacy using social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2001), operationalizing it as the individuals’ beliefs about their ability to be effective in teaching, in motivating students, and in classroom management (Wang et al., 2015). Wang et al. (2015) discussed the positive effects of teacher self-efficacy, with higher self-efficacy suggesting more positive affect, better job satisfaction, and reduced burnout symptoms. The authors initially defined burnout as the symptoms typically associated with the construct (i.e., emotional exhaustion, reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization) (Wang et al., 2015). In measuring burnout as an outcome variable, Wang and colleagues (2015) used the umbrella of ‘psychological adjustment’. Data collection for burnout was conducted using a modified version of the 22-item Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI;
Participants were asked to complete questions assessing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Wang et al., 2015). The findings of this study suggest that higher teacher self-efficacy in student engagement predicts lower levels of emotional exhaustion in teachers. Teachers’ causal attributions of occupational stress (e.g., personal control, external control) acted as mediating factors for self-efficacy and burnout, with personal control attributions predicating lowers levels of emotional exhaustion (Wang et al., 2015). Wang and colleagues also found low levels of depersonalization in teachers with higher self-efficacy in student engagement. Finally, the researchers reported that higher levels of self-efficacy for classroom management, student engagement, and instructional strategies predicted a greater sense of personal accomplishment in teachers (Wang et al., 2015).

In another study, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) examined the relationship between teacher burnout and self-efficacy. The authors analyzed the relationship between teacher burnout and self-efficacy, as well as their impact on teachers’ perceptions of school context and job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Consistent with other research, the authors introduced burnout as a syndrome of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) discussed the conceptualization of burnout in extant literature and the differing operationalization of the construct found across studies. The authors’ conceptualization and analysis of burnout in the context of this study focused on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization aspects of the construct (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) applied a modified version of the Maslach
Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1996) to measure participants’ emotional exhaustion and burnout. The data from this study suggest that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization should be analyzed as separate constructs (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). The findings of this study are consistent with other research on teacher burnout and self-efficacy, suggesting that our current operationalization of the constructs may not be reflective of the experiences of educators (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Wang et al., 2015). Self-efficacy negatively correlated with both depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, and emotional exhaustion was found to be the strongest predictor of reduced feelings of accomplishment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). With a focus on relations to self-efficacy, the authors concluded that the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization dimensions of burnout were most pertinent to identifying teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

A unique aspect of the Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) study was the operationalization of burnout using only two dimensions while initially defining it based on the three characteristic symptoms. This separation of the dimensions of burnout suggests an interesting juxtaposition between how the construct is defined and measured. Operationalizing a defined construct into discrete variables and measuring only two of the three aspects calls into question the use of the construct as an umbrella label for the experience of individuals. The inconsistency in defining and operationalizing the construct of burnout may result in an incomplete measurement of reduced psychological wellness through the lens of burnout. Further, if not all elements of the defined burnout are essential to measuring the construct of psychological distress, there may be another construct that could provide a more holistic concept of individual experiences.

Classroom management is another construct that is often found in research on teacher burnout. Brouwers and Tomic (2000) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the relationship
among classroom management, perceived self-efficacy, and the three components of burnout as experienced by teachers. In this study, the authors defined burnout as a syndrome that occurs in professionals who work with people, characterized by the symptoms of depersonalization (excessively detached, negative, or callous response to clients), emotional exhaustion (feeling depleted of emotional resources), and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (negative self-evaluations of job performance) (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). A sample of 558 secondary school teachers in the Netherlands completed the initial wave of mail-out questionnaires and a sample of 243 responded five months later during the second wave of data collection (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). To measure burnout in teachers, the researchers administered the Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers (MBI-NL-Ed; Schaufeli, Daamen, & Van Mierlo, 1994), a 20-item questionnaire that consisted of three subscales, one for each symptom category of burnout (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). The findings of the study suggest that perceived self-efficacy in classroom management has a synchronous effect on personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion, as well as longitudinal effect on depersonalization (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). These results indicate a need for research to examine the separate effects of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment on the experience of burnout in teachers (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). It is necessary to understand how burnout is being experienced by teachers and whether its current operationalization is a valid measure of the construct. If the sub-constructs (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced sense of personal accomplishment) under the umbrella of burnout are affected separately by external variables and can be present to differing degrees in individuals, it may be that burnout is too general a term to capture the experience of teachers.
In more recent years, researchers have begun to apply self-determination theory in understanding the experiences of workplace stress and burnout in teaching professionals. Van den Berghe and colleagues (2014) discussed self-determination theory as it applies to teacher motivation and universal psychological need satisfaction, focusing on within-person variation in burnout experienced by teachers. The first aim of the study was to determine the motivational profile of each participant in terms of quality (autonomous vs. controlled) and quantity (Van den Berghe et al., 2014). Second, the study aimed to assess the relationships among motivation profile and burnout, need satisfaction, and quality of teaching (Van den Berghe et al., 2014). The definition of burnout used in the study is consistent with other research on the topic, operationalized as three symptom dimensions of emotional exhaustion, reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization (Mantilla & Diaz, 2012; Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Van den Berghe et al., 2014). In addition to this standard definition, the authors added that teachers experiencing burnout are no longer able to gain satisfaction from their involvement and impact in their role (Van den Berghe et al., 2014). A sample of 201 physical education teachers in Belgium completed four online questionnaires. Similar to Brouwers and Tomic (2000), Van den Berghe et al. (2014) used the Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers. In addition, the study also conceptualized emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as the core of burnout, with reduced feelings of personal accomplishment considered to be more of a consequence of the first two rather than an independent element. The findings suggested that the motivational clusters are differentially linked with the constructs of burnout, need satisfaction, and quality of teaching. The within-person approach to this study was beneficial as it allowed the researchers to understand better the experience of negative affect in teachers as individuals rather than teachers as a group.
Novice teachers and attrition. Beginning teachers, during the initial stages of entering the profession, generally hold some inaccurate beliefs about their professional role in the classroom. Brackenreed and Barnett (2006) measured the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding stress, inclusion, and classroom management. The purpose of the study was to gather data about the beliefs of pre-service teachers in Canada on the management of disruptive behaviours in the inclusive classroom (Brackenreed & Barnett, 2006). Questionnaire data were collected from 428 teacher candidates enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program, all of whom were required to take one course on classroom management and one class on special education (Brackenreed & Barnett, 2006). Participants reported a lack of confidence in dealing with students with limited speech, depression, students prone to running away, and students engaging in sexually explicit behaviour (Brackenreed & Barnett, 2006). The teacher candidates in this study reported being somewhat confident in their ability to meet the needs of all students in the classroom, a strong confidence in meeting the general needs of most students, and only somewhat confident in meeting their own needs (Brackenreed & Barnett, 2006). It seems that even before teacher candidates become in-service classroom teachers, they are already experiencing the high commitment and time consuming demands of the profession (Brackenreed & Barnett, 2006).

A study by Connelly and Graham (2009) examined the role of teaching practica on the attrition of beginning special educators. The authors looked at the difference between special education teacher candidates with more than and less than 10 weeks of practicum experience in the classroom, as well as the qualities of the classroom experiences that related to the attrition of novice teachers working with exceptional students. Participants consisted of 168 novice special education teachers with less than 3 years of experience (Connelly & Graham, 2009). The authors
found that 80% of teacher candidates reporting ten or more weeks of practicum experience were teaching in special education one year later, 6.7% had moved to a different education field, and 14.3% had left the profession (Connelly & Graham, 2009). In contrast, 63% of teachers with less than 10 weeks of practicum experience were teaching in special education one year later, 16.3% had moved to a different education field, and 20.4% had left the profession (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Connelly and Graham (2009) suggested that the additional practicum experience of special educators during the teacher preparation programs acts as a protective factor against the detrimental stress, burnout, and disillusionment that beginning teachers working with exceptional learners.

A 2005 study by Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler aimed to identify risk factors associated with burnout and examine the experience of special education teachers during their first year in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine first-year special education teachers’ level of perceived support and stress, as well as any factors that contributed to their decision to stay in the profession (Schlichte et al., 2005). This qualitative study involved individual interviews with five first-year special education teachers, responding to open-ended questions regarding the development of collegial relationship and their overall experience during their first year in the profession (Schlichte et al., 2005). The participants were asked a series of questions regarding their positive experiences, to what did they attribute any difficulties, the most useful aspect of their pre-service preparation, what they believed would have made the experience successful for them, and what advice they would give to other first-year special education teachers (Schlichte et al., 2005). Several themes emerged from participants’ interview including the need for a true mentor (an individual who cares about them and is present to provide
guidance), supportive relationships with administrators and other staff, a positive relationship to students, and feelings of support (Schlichte et al., 2005).

Among the five participants interviewed, only one special educator seemed to consider his first year in the profession a success (Schlichte et al., 2005). The four participants who did not consider their first year teaching a success reported feeling isolated and alienated within school, lacking the support of a mentor or administrator, and feeling negative emotions about continuing in the profession (Schlichte et al., 2005). Although a positive relationship with students was emotionally rewarding to the first-year special educators, all four participants with negative experiences stated that they had seriously considered leaving the profession, and two of these teachers resigned by the end of the school year (Schlichte et al., 2005). Without the support of a mentor, administrators, or other staff these teachers began to display symptoms of burnout within their first year in the profession (Schlichte et al., 2005). This study is an example of the implications of negative social and emotional experiences in novice teachers working with exceptional learners and the duty schools have to create a supportive environment for staff. In line with the findings of Brackenreed and Barnett (2006), instructing teacher candidates more about self-care and effective coping may help ease the transition for novice teachers working with exceptional learners. The extensive research on burnout provides insight into the relevance and limits of this construct in understanding the complex experience of teachers working with exceptional learners.

**Compassion Fatigue**

The term compassion is generally defined as an awareness of the suffering of others and an impulse to relieve the suffering (Radey & Figley, 2007). The construct of compassion fatigue is primarily used for research involving nurses, physicians, counselors, and other front-line
health care providers. The term fatigue when applied to compassion refers to the exhaustion, dissatisfaction, and work-related stress that accompany professionals’ experience as caregivers (Najjar et al., 2009). Radey and Figley (2007) discussed the social psychology of compassion fatigue in social workers. In the same way that social workers care a great deal for their clients, teachers care for the students they support. Radey and Figley (2007) conceptually defined compassion fatigue as resulting from direct exposure to the suffering of clients without adequate support in the workplace or home. Consequently, professionals with compassion fatigue experience a disconnection with others, hopelessness, and emotional and physical exhaustion (Radey & Figley, 2007). These authors stated that the four contributing factors to compassion fatigue are poor self-care, existing unresolved trauma, lack of satisfaction from work, and a lack of control over work stressors (Radey & Figley, 2007). It is when professionals in human service roles experience job satisfaction, feel a sense of control over stressors in the workplace, increase self-care, and resolve their previous traumas that compassion can benefit the individuals in providing care to clients (Radey & Figley, 2007).

Najjar and colleagues (2009) reviewed 57 studies to understand the prevalence of compassion fatigue in cancer-care providers. Although this review was focused on a specific population, the implications of the findings can help us to understand better the experience of numerous frontline care-providers in various emotionally intense work environments. Compassion fatigue is understood as specific and acute stress responses characterized by feelings of depression, anxiety, reduced empathy, confusion, and helplessness (Figley, 1995). This review described the differences and similarities with the various terms related to compassion fatigue such as burnout, secondary traumatic disorder, and vicarious traumatization (Najjar et al., 2009). Najjar et al. (2009) discussed the definition of compassion fatigue and the inconsistency that can
be found in research. The authors stressed that the significant factors involved in burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious traumatization are related to empathy, emotional engagement, and the experience of negative affect (Najjar et al., 2009). In their study, compassion fatigue was characterized by a sudden stress response accompanied by feelings of confusion, isolation and helplessness, and includes both aspects of burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Najjar et al., 2009).

Bride and colleagues (2007) defined compassion fatigue as the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive changes experienced by mental health professionals through indirect exposure to the trauma of their clients. In existing literature, compassion fatigue is sometimes referred to as vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatic stress (Bride et al., 2007). In contrast, some professionals experience positive effects through their work in helping traumatized or suffering individuals; this is referred to as compassion satisfaction (Bride et al., 2007; Perry et al, 2015). The experience of compassion fatigue has been found to affect negatively both the wellbeing of professionals and their ability to help their clients (Bride et al., 2007). Applying the theoretical framework of compassion fatigue may provide insight on the nuanced experience of educational professionals beyond what is known through the construct of burnout (Hoffman et al., 2007).

While burnout is the result of workload conditions, compassion fatigue is derived from the impulse to help others and is centered around the social and emotional relationship of the professional and their clients. It is necessary to explore the complex experience of teachers to ensure that researchers’ conceptualizations are reflective of teachers’ perceived experiences.

**Compassion fatigue within the education context.** Although in recent years there has been increased attention on examining compassion fatigue in educators (Hoffman et al., 2007; Tepper, 2007), the amount of research on teachers’ experience of this construct is limited.
Burnout has been an important phenomenon in understanding teacher wellbeing; however, no study has examined thriving and compassion fatigue in teachers in addition to burnout. This discussion on the compassion fatigue of teachers in extant literature is limited to one published article and to academic dissertations. Additionally, no research has looked at the experience of compassion fatigue in teachers who work with students with exceptionalities. This study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge currently available in the field with hopes of reducing this gap in research.

Teaching as a profession is focused on providing care to students, thus, placing educators in a human services role. Specific to teachers who work with students with exceptionalities, themes consistent with both compassion fatigue and burnout have been reported. Hoffman, Palladino, and Barnett (2007) applied compassion fatigue theory as a framework to examine its influence upon the early exodus of teachers, in particular those working in a special education context. The authors applied a multiple case-study approach, with data collected through 90-minute semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 special education teachers (Hoffman et al., 2007). Similar to other studies, burnout was defined as a syndrome of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) resulting from prolonged exposure to workplace stress. Hoffman and colleagues (2007) specified that depersonalization includes social distancing from personal and professional relationships, and may be accompanied by feeling unsympathetic or pessimistic towards the clients under care (Hoffman et al., 2007). The authors stated that while burnout can be conceptualized as repeated exposure to significant stress resulting in a gradual increase of the burnout, compassion fatigue is conceptualized as secondary traumatization through the act of compassion (Hoffman et al., 2007). Compassion fatigue emerges suddenly and with intensity,
and is characterized by feelings of helplessness, isolation, and disorientation making it distinct from burnout (Hoffman et al., 2007). The interview protocol focused on specific situations, workload assignments, past histories, symptoms, and professional support and development opportunities (Hoffman et al., 2007). The interviews were analyzed and identified three themes: loss of control, responsibility, and empathy (Hoffman et al., 2007). The authors’ contended that the three themes found in the interview with participants were consistent with the conceptual definition of compassion fatigue (Hoffman et al., 2007). The Hoffman and colleagues (2007) study is the only published research on the topic of compassion fatigue in educators.

A dissertation by Tepper (2007) is another example of a qualitative study that has looked at the experience of compassion fatigue in special education teachers. A case-study methodology similar to that of Hoffman and colleagues (2007) was employed to describe the relationship between the experiences of burnout and compassion fatigue for nine in-service teachers working in elementary special education classrooms (Tepper, 2007). The author focussed on how participants professionally and personally managed the demands of their position. In the study, burnout was viewed consistent with extant literature in the field as a syndrome of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Tepper (2007) suggested that there is an overlap of symptoms that can be found between burnout and compassion fatigue, and that compassion fatigue is comprised of both of burnout and secondary trauma. An important distinction suggested by the author was that burnout and compassion fatigue result from separate human needs. While burnout results from the drive to achieve a specific goal, compassion fatigue is the result of the human impulse to help others (Figley, 2002; Tepper, 2007). This important distinction is beneficial in pursuing research on compassion fatigue in educators because it suggests that the experience of teachers
cannot necessarily be explained using a single construct, and that research on human experience should be treated as complex and interrelated. This perspective can guide a discussion on the value of applying different constructs when attempting to understand the social-emotional experience of teachers.

The conversation around stress and wellness in teachers is widespread and largely relies on a deficit model of mental health focused on reduced wellbeing and psychological wellness in individuals. Applying a positive psychology lens, researchers have begun to shift the focus of research in this field toward a model of wellbeing. Constructs like universal psychological needs and thriving, aim to address the social-emotional experiences of teachers through a lens of optimal functioning and wellbeing. A model that focuses on factors that support wellbeing in individuals working in tandem with deficit models focusing on avoiding poor mental health can provide researchers with a holistic understanding of teachers’ social-emotional experiences (Nilsson et al., 2015). Although constructs of psychological distress like burnout and compassion fatigue may reflect the experiences of some individuals, teachers working with exceptional learners can also thrive in their professional role.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was selected to conduct this study because the primary research purpose was to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers’ perceptions of their experience in their own words. It is necessary for researchers to apply a qualitative perspective to understand better the experience of teachers working with exceptional learners in inclusive classrooms and the factors that teachers report contribute to their social and emotional experiences. A general qualitative framework allowed the data collection and analysis to be conducted without being limited by a specific methodological structure. Protocol for this study was informed by the existing literature on thriving, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Although existing definitions and findings on the constructs of interest acted as the starting point for conducting this research, qualitative methodology using an emergent design evolved as the study progressed. Additional demographic data (e.g., gender, education, years teaching, classroom size, resources available) were also collected to inform the findings of this study. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any point during the study without reason and with no negative consequences.

Participants

The sample consisted of five teachers under the age of 40 in Ontario with experience working with exceptional learners at the elementary level of education. Four participants had previous in-service experience and one participant was a current in-service teacher. All participants in this study either held a graduate degree in Education or were currently enrolled in graduate studies in education.
**Claire.** Claire is a female teacher with less than one year of in-service experience working in the regular education classroom at the elementary level. As a long-term occasional regular classroom teacher, Claire taught a class of approximately 25 students, with 6 students having identified or unidentified exceptionalities. Claire identified herself as an adaptive teacher, being aware of what each situation she encounters requires. Claire is currently enrolled in a graduate studies program in education, pursuing research related to exceptionalities.

**Jacob.** Jacob is a male teacher with 9 years of in-service teaching experience at the elementary level of education. Jacob’s in-service teaching experience consists of both the regular education classroom as well as a specialized education resource classroom for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder within an elementary school. As a regular classroom teacher, Jacob taught a class of approximately 30 students, with approximately 5-10 students each year with identified or unidentified exceptionalities. Jacob’s professional identity is that of a teacher that protects his students from the educational and personal challenges they face. At the time of the interview, Jacob was currently enrolled in a graduate studies program in education, pursuing research related to exceptionalities.

**Isaac.** Isaac is a male teacher with 3 years of in-service teaching experience at the elementary level of education. Isaac’s in-service teaching experience included supply teaching in regular education elementary classrooms as well as a specialized education program for students with exceptionalities. As a supply teacher, Isaac would typically teach classroom sizes of approximately 25 students, with approximately 3-5 students each year having identified or unidentified exceptionalities. Within the specialized educational program, Isaac gained experience working with approximately 12 students with exceptional educational needs. Isaac
identifies as a teacher who is tactful, patient, and supportive. Isaac is currently enrolled in a graduate studies program in education, pursuing research related to exceptionalities.

**Adam.** Adam is a male teacher with one year of in-service teaching experience at the elementary level of education. Adam is the only participant in this study that was a current in-service teacher working in a regular education classroom. Adam’s experience at a high needs school included working with approximately 17 Individualized Education Plans for students with both identified and unidentified exceptionalities in classroom sizes ranging from 18-25 in total. At the time of the interview, Adam had completed a graduate studies program in education.

**Grace.** Grace is a female teacher with 10 years of in-service teaching experience at the elementary level of education. Throughout her career, Grace gained experience as a regular education classroom teacher as well as a methods and resource teacher directly supporting students with exceptionalities in the larger school context. As a methods and resource teacher, Grace supported approximately 20 students with exceptionalities. Grace expressed her professional identity as one of an ongoing learner, working to provide the most effective support for students with exceptionalities. Grace is currently enrolled in a graduate studies program in education, pursuing research related to exceptionalities.

This study is situated at the primary/junior level of education because of the teachers’ full day exposure to the same group of students. The participant sample target for this study was initially six participants but was limited to five participants at study completion due to challenges in recruitment and time constraints. Participant recruitment occurred in two phases.

**Recruitment Phase 1**

This study received research clearance from a school board in southeastern Ontario. Principals of public elementary schools in this board were approached and asked for permission
to distribute a recruitment package to teachers working in their school. Teachers meeting selection criteria (i.e., in-service, elementary level, regular education classroom, teaching in Grades 4-8, have students with identified and unidentified exceptionalities in the classroom) who were interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher. Three schools were initially approached for recruitment and subsequent schools were contacted to attempt to reach the participant sample targets. There was a minimal response from administrators allowing for participant recruitment to be conducted within their schools. A paper package outlining the purpose of the study, that the study had received school board ethical clearance, and asking the Principal for permission to conduct recruitment at the school was delivered to administrators and a follow-up email was sent to all Principals contacted. Seventeen principals of elementary schools throughout the school board were contacted. One principal out of those contacted provided permission to recruit teachers working at their school. One participant was recruited in phase 1 of this study.

**Recruitment Phase 2**

The method of participant recruitment was expanded to meet the study’s sample target. Recruitment was expanded to include individuals with previous in-service teacher experience in addition to current in-service teachers. In addition to full-time contract teachers, teachers with long-term occasional positions placed within the same school for an extended period of time were also recruited. Participant recruitment in phase 2 relied on snowball sampling methods using personal connections. Current and former in-service teachers known to the researcher were emailed a copy of the recruitment letter, the Letter of Information, and Consent form and were asked if they are interested in participating in the study. The recruitment email also asked the recipient to forward the email onto anyone they believed might fit the recruitment criteria.
Including former in-service teachers in the study population does not impact the value of the research as the purpose is to gain insight into the social and emotional experiences of teachers who have worked or are working with students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom. The use of personal connections and snowball sampling allowed for the recruitment of four additional participants with previous in-service teaching experience. Despite incorporating recruitment through personal connections, the sample size was still not met.

Procedure

Eligible teachers were selected and asked to participate in a 60-90-minute semi-structured individual interview to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of their experiences working with students with exceptionalities. Individual interviews were conducted with participants outside of work hours at a location and time that was convenient for them so as to not interfere with the teachers’ workday or studies. Participants were not compensated monetarily for enrolling in the study to avoid the element of coercion, but were provided with coffee and snacks during the interview. Considering this study may have presented topics that are sensitive for some participants, information about access to a mental health counsellor was provided to offset any potential risk to the participants’ psychological and emotional wellbeing. To protect the anonymity of the participants, schools, and school board, all identifiable information within the data was deleted and all data were maintained in a password-protected document to which no one other than the researcher and supervisor had access. Pseudonyms for participants were used and the list matching participants with their pseudonyms stored separately from collected data. All participants, except Adam, were provided with the opportunity to review the interview questions prior to the actual interview, giving them a chance to reflect on their experiences. Adam did not have that option because he was the first participant recruited. Jacob, the second
participant recruited, asked to review the interview questions prior to the interview and all participants after Jacob were offered that courtesy. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, including pauses, to contribute to the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research data. Prior to analysis, participants received a copy of their transcripts from the interview. Participants had the opportunity to review their transcript to determine if there was any part they were uncomfortable with that they wanted to have excluded from the study.

Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted manually by the researcher, including the storage and management of the data collected from participants. An emergent design was integrated into the research protocol to allow for partially open-ended interview with participants to guide the direction of the methodology and analysis of the study. Inductive and deductive data analysis was conducted to identify the themes and patterns found in the interview with participants. The analysis process began with deductive analysis. The participant reflections were examined to identify their fit with the constructs of the theoretical framework: Thriving (Learning and Vitality), Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout. The process continued with inductive analysis to identify the minor themes relevant to the context of the participants. Constant comparison through the recursive analysis process was employed to search continuously for both consistent and inconsistent evidence about the meaning of a theme. The interviews with all five participants were transcribed by the researcher. All five participant data sets were read individually and ideas about the data as a whole were written. Initial codes were generated from the data and written in the margins of the transcripts. The transcriptions were then stored individually in the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis program. All codes across participant data sets were compared for duplications and overlapping descriptions. Similar codes were grouped and a description was
written to encompass the code group. The coding system continued to be refined and changed with further analysis of the data sets. Themes and patterns in participant transcripts were first analyzed intra-personally and then inter-personally to provide a synthesis of the data.
Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in regular classrooms. The objective was to describe teachers’ social and emotional experiences, understood through the lenses of thriving, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Teachers’ social and emotional experiences were defined using the central themes of psychological wellness and psychological distress, presented as two overarching sections of this chapter. The initial structure of this thesis was focussed upon psychological distress as characterized by the constructs of burnout and compassion fatigue. Psychological wellness emerged as a core construct throughout the interviews and was a prominent theme during the analysis process as a relevant component of the social-emotional experience of teachers.

The theme of psychological wellness was explored using the construct of thriving with two subthemes that reflect participants’ experiences of vitality and learning. This component of the chapter will include three major sections (thriving, vitality, and learning), with the first section including two minor sections (teacher thriving and student thriving), the second major section including three minor sections (feeling energized, passion, and student engagement) and the third major section including three minor sections (workplace learning, lifelong learning, and student learning). The central theme of psychological distress was explored using the constructs of burnout and compassion fatigue. This component of the chapter will include two major sections (compassion fatigue and burnout). The first major section will include three minor sections (inclusive classrooms, meeting student needs, and resources to support success) and the second major section will include four minor sections (limited time, overwhelming responsibilities, exhaustion, and limited resources).
**Perspectives on Inclusion**

A discussion on the social-emotional experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom is incomplete without first addressing participants’ perspectives on inclusion. For Claire, the inclusion of exceptional learners in the regular classroom necessitated the teacher have an awareness of the various needs of the classroom:

You have some students who will need more support or a specific kind of support but you also have the needs of students who may not be as apparent in terms of the support they need. And then you have the needs of the whole class and you have the needs of the teacher, so I think an inclusive classroom is one in which you can first of all be aware of all those needs and then second of all find a way to balance it so that maybe not everyone is having all their needs met at the same moment but in the grand scheme of things no one is being ignored.

Claire approached the idea of an inclusive classroom not as a place where every individual’s needs are constantly addressed, but as an environment that attempts to balance the needs of all individuals. Claire added that an inclusive classroom environment can have positive implications for all learners “that’s one of the nice things about having an integrated classroom is that there are things that both students with exceptionalities and without exceptionalities can get in that experience built in those kinds of relationships.” Claire continued to suggest that for inclusion of exceptional learners to have benefits for the classroom community and peer relationships it must be the best option for that specific student “you would have to present me with a case and I would be like, ok in this case, I would feel comfortable integrating or not integrating.” Although Claire is in support of integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom, she believes that decisions must be made on the basis of individual student need.
Similarly, Jacob discussed the benefits of integration for students with exceptionalities: “benefits for the child with special needs or the exceptional students is that they don’t get shipped off to this room down the hallway with eight other kids and they know perfectly well why they’re there.” In Jacob’s perspective, inclusion of exceptional learners allows some protection for the student’s emotional needs, preventing the damaging stigma that may be associated with leaving the regular classroom. Jacob also suggested the benefits that universal design for learning (necessary for some, helpful for all) can offer typically achieving students in the classroom while meeting the educational needs of students with exceptionalities. Like Claire, Jacob is in support of integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom, assuming that it is best for both the emotional and educational needs of the student:

My easy answer is that every kid has a right to be in a neighborhood classroom for their social and emotional wellbeing … it has to be mitigated slightly by the fact that we are not living in a perfect world. Now when Ontario trains every single teacher to be as qualified as the best qualified special education teacher, then I will be all on board for a pure inclusion model.

Jacob also expressed concern for the current state of inclusion “it’s terrifying to me to trust so many important things to teachers who are—not their fault—but ill-equipped to take care of some of these exceptionalities.” Jacob’s support of the full inclusion model was dependent on the teacher’s qualification, resources, and preparedness to adequately support the needs of the student with an exceptionality.

Isaac described what an inclusive classroom means to him “I think an inclusive classroom is one that students feel that they are a part of that community that they are a valued member and that they belong there.” For Isaac, an inclusive classroom is an environment that
must balance a sense of safety and community belonging for all students. Isaac continued by addressing the challenge that other students in the classroom may pose to the successful integration of a student with an exceptionality “I think it can be challenging when students don’t understand each other, there isn’t this sense of a community.” If other students are not accepting of the integration process, it can compromise the sense of community in the classroom, impacting the effectiveness that Isaac felt as a regular classroom teacher. Isaac suggested that integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom should be a goal for teachers and the school “as much as you can, I think you should include students, again thinking about the quality of the education or are they getting something from it.” Like Claire and Jacob, Isaac also believes that inclusion is an ideal practice as long as it does not compromise the educational quality and emotional wellbeing of the students in the classroom.

Adam conceptualized the inclusive classroom as one that fosters a sense of safety and respectfulness:

I really try to foster a safe environment in the classroom and getting kids to be respectful of each other, be respectful of me, and be respectful of the classroom.

… An inclusive classroom is one where, if we’re doing a group activity, people are okay to take risks, people are feeling confident, people aren’t feeling like they’re going to be attacked or anything like that.

As a teacher, Adam encouraged respect among all students in his classroom, maintaining it as an essential component of inclusion. Discussing the benefits of inclusion, Adam stressed the positive impact it has had on his practice “having children with exceptionalities in the classroom means that it’s not, there’s no question of me having to differentiate my instruction.” Integrating students with exceptionalities into the classroom necessitated that Adam engage in differentiated
instruction, in his perspective, ultimately improving his teaching. Adam stressed the importance of meeting the educational needs of exceptional students if they are integrated into the regular classroom, “it’s really important to ensure that including those students means that those students are able to achieve just as much as regular stream students.” Similar to Claire, Jacob, and Isaac, Adam’s support for inclusion was dependent on the needs of the students.

Grace discussed inclusive education by stating “It has to do with the teacher’s approach to learning, so, the teachers’ beliefs about student learning. So, if your belief is that every student can learn, and it’s your job to help them learn, that is an inclusive approach.” For Grace, the mindset and perspective of the classroom teacher is essential to developing an inclusive environment for all students. Similar to Claire, Jacob, Isaac, and Adam, Grace discussed the benefits of inclusion for the overall classroom environment:

Everybody should be thought of as part of the group as part of the community but, then, they also need to understand that everybody needs something different to learn and so that’s a benefit that students learn as they realize that everybody belongs to this classroom and we need to help each other and support each other. Integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom can help the sense of community and support among all students in the classroom. Grace also expressed her support for inclusion of exceptional learners into the regular classroom:

I believe that with the right supports full inclusion is better, it’s never good to segregate or to keep students in different rooms and have them in different—they need to have a sense of belonging is what it comes down to.

Like the other four participants, Grace believed that inclusion is an ideal practice when it is done in a way that appropriately supports the teacher and the student.
Grace, Jacob, Isaac, Adam and Claire reflected on both positive and negative social-emotional experiences in their teaching career, and all participants expressed their support for integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom provided it is done appropriately and as the best plan for the student.

**Psychological Wellness**

**Thriving**

The central theme of psychological wellness was explored using the construct of thriving. The two subthemes that reflected participants’ experiences of thriving were vitality and learning. Thriving is defined as the concurrent experience of vitality (affective) and learning (cognitive). The first element, vitality, encompasses the feeling of being energized and passionate about ones’ work. The second element, learning, is based on the individuals’ growth by acquiring new knowledge and skills through their work. All five participants described experiences of vitality and learning as essential to their workplace satisfaction and overall thriving. The participants indicated that despite the challenges and frustration in working with exceptional learners, they continued to grow and learn in their work and to feel passionate and energized about their work.

Themes related to overall teacher thriving emerged in the interview with two participants and themes related to overall student thriving emerged in the interview with one participant and will be presented respectively. A discussion on the themes of vitality and learning will follow.

*Teacher thriving.* Reflecting on the decision to become a teacher, two participants indicated the active choice to pursue a profession where they felt they could achieve overall thriving. Claire stated:

I’m a really relationship driven person, [and] really thrive off of those interpersonal connections and I really like learning so it was a combination of
those two things, I thought that teaching would be a pretty harmonious combination of those needs in myself.

Jacob expressed a similar sentiment by stating:

I enjoyed being part of a creative life and I thought that that kind of lifestyle would be creative. You’re working with kids which, you know, I have the sense of humor and sensibilities of a nine-year-old so I thought that would be a great place for me to thrive and enjoy.

While all participants discussed experiences of thriving in their daily work, Jacob and Claire were the only two to discuss actively choosing an occupation where they thought they could thrive. This distinction suggests an ability to identify their own needs and the motivation to pursue an environment where those needs could be satisfied. It is important to note that Claire and Jacob described different characteristics of the profession that they found appealing. Claire chose a career in teaching because it allowed her to merge a love of learning with interpersonal relationships, while Jacob selected teaching because it offered a creative workplace and provided him with energy. Although Jacob selected a professional environment where he could thrive, changes in that environment proved to be a challenge to achieving that thriving. Jacob expressed how his thriving was hindered after moving to teach in an Autism Spectrum Disorder specialized classroom:

I think that my first year in the ASD classroom was incredibly difficult. Just incredibly difficult especially since I considered myself, I mean I think everyone sort of considered themselves a good teacher, but I thought of myself as a great teacher and then to go into a totally different set-up, I had to learn how to be successful in a totally new place.
Direct references to the significance of their own overall thriving was not found in the interview with Adam, Isaac, and Grace. While these three participants did not directly include reference to the construct of thriving, elements reflective of thriving were prominent in their reflections of their experiences as teachers. This does not suggest that participants did not value their own thriving, but that thriving may not have been a factor in their decision to pursue the profession. The next section discusses the theme of overall thriving of students which emerged in the interview with Jacob and Isaac.

**Student thriving.** The overall thriving of students emerged as a theme in the interview with Jacob and Isaac. Jacob discussed his conceptualization of student thriving by stating:

> An inclusive classroom is a place where everyone can thrive. Now that’s kind of a, that word thrive is one that I, you know, don’t use lightly. I think that means both their academic success and also their emotional wellbeing, and sometimes those things work together in that when kids get the support they need to learn what they are supposed to learn they probably feel better about themselves … and the exact opposite thing happens when they are not being taught appropriately.

This interpretation of overall student thriving parallels Jacobs’ perceptions of his own overall thriving in that specific needs are identified and the environment must support those needs in order to achieve thriving. Jacob later connects the thriving of his students to his own work engagement by stating:

> The lines that delineate their academic success and emotional wellbeing are actually really hazy and um when you, you know, find a kid who is maybe feeling a bit lost, it’s just the most fun you can have to really invest with them, in them, you know, see them grow.
Similarly, Isaac discussed the professional responsibility of helping students thrive, stating “That’s your focus, your business is helping people grow.” The concept of growth is reflective of the theme of thriving as it encompasses the elements of vitality and learning found in the conversation about participants’ social and emotional experiences.

**Vitality.** A central theme that emerged from the interviews with participants was the element of vitality. Participants described vitality through experiences that helped them feel energized in their professional role, maintained their passion about their work, and encouraged student engagement.

**Feeling energized.** Participants reported the continued experience of feeling energized by their work as teachers. Three participants discussed the energy they felt from the nature of the job, specifically how everyday felt unique. Isaac expressed feeling energized at work, “I think that it is always a stimulating, challenging, novel environment. No class is the same, no day is the same.” Grace shared a similar sentiment, “every day is such a different day and I think it’s also something that appeals to me because its always interesting, something new is always happening, it’s never boring.” Similar to what Isaac and Grace suggested, Adam stated “I just feel energetic when I’m here, and you kind of have to be because you’re working with children.” Adam also discussed feeling energized at work, “I like creating my own stuff and sometimes it bombs but when it doesn’t, it’s extremely satisfying when the kids really like an idea that I had and they really enjoyed the activity.” Describing a specific rewarding experience at work that helped her feel energized, Grace suggested:

> I find that when humor, natural humor arises and you end up smiling or laughing at yourself or at the situation I think it’s very positive…. that’s rewarding to me,
just that to be able to see situations that maybe somebody else could see as maybe frustrating and I just found the humor in it.

Both Adam and Grace discussed how specific rewarding experiences maintained feeling energized by their work.

While Adam, Isaac, and Grace expressed feeling energized at work, Jacob warned about the potential for teachers to lack that experience by suggesting “as a teacher it’s so easy just to teach Grade 5 for like 15 years in a row and use the same resources and the same program over and over and over again and, oh man, you see these people and they’re just stuck in a rut.” Jacob continued by describing how he maintained his own workplace engagement:

I’m incredibly easily bored so I learned that I actually have the same attention span as the average 9-year-old boy, which is good because when I’m bored I know they’re bored. So when I’m bored doing something I always want to be changing it up and trying new things.

For Jacob, feeling energized at work depended on the changes he made to his own practice. Jacob also described the obstacles to feeling energized he experienced working in an Autism Spectrum Disorder specialized classroom by stating “after, you know, the 7 years of enjoying that back and forth and the emotionally reciprocal experience, having a classroom where that was not at all present was really difficult.” Jacob felt energized when teaching in the regular education classroom but his transition into the specialized classroom proved to be challenging as it did not allow for similar energizing experiences. Reflecting on his future in education, Jacob stated:
I was thinking how much I would love to just go teach a grade four classroom again. Just have a year just to totally have the best year any of us have ever had and you know try all these new things.

The theme of feeling energized at work emerged in the interview with four of the five participants, all but Claire. Adam, Isaac, and Grace discussed feeling energized by the nature of the job as a unique or different experience every day. Jacob discussed feeling energized in terms of what he could do in his daily practice to remain engaged. Jacob also discussed the challenges to feeling energized that he encountered or observed in other teachers. The theme of passion emerged as another aspect of participants’ experiences of vitality and is discussed next.

**Passion.** In addition to describing experiences of feeling energized at work, four of the five participants indicated a continued passion for teaching. Referencing fellow teachers with which she maintained a relationship, Claire stated: “I’m drawn to people who are still connected to the love of the job.” For Claire, seeing other teachers’ passion for their work sustained her own passion about teaching. Like Claire, Isaac described the role of his colleagues in maintaining his passion for work by specifying:

> Schools I’ve been to that I’ve worked in where I know a teacher is just mailing it in and they’ve been doing it for the last 5 years and they’re not reinventing and they’re just using the same lesson again and again cause they’ve done it, that has a negative effect on me because I know that’s not the best for the students.

To Isaac, the passion of his colleagues was not just essential to his feeling passionate but also to the needs and success of the students in the classroom.

Passion also emerged as a theme in the context of rewarding or satisfying experiences as teachers in the interviews of Claire, Grace, and Jacob. Detailing a specific rewarding aspect of
Claire stated: “I get really excited when I’m learning things and then to see students, you know, go through the same experiences is the most exciting thing for me. It’s what I love the most.” For Grace, her passion about her work was not the result of specific satisfying experiences but the overall experience she had as a teacher. Describing her general experience working with students with exceptionalities, Grace expressed, “overwhelmingly I would say its positive and that’s why I’m still here, because I still enjoy it, I still enjoy being a teacher.” Grace reaffirmed this passion later by stating: “Obviously I enjoyed my work, I enjoyed going to school and seeing the students and I felt like I had a role to play.” Similar to Grace, the theme of passion emerged in Jacob’s reflection on teaching as the general experience of enjoying his work and remaining committed to his students. Jacob expressed his continued passion for teaching, “I love and I genuinely miss teaching nine and ten year olds because it’s just the most fun you could have. It’s just a glorious personal experience.” Jacob continued by saying: “I mean in what other situation would one adult be just investing so much emotional energy in someone who is not their child or their nephew.”

Claire, Isaac, Jacob, and Grace all discussed feeling passionate about their work, with the passion of other teachers and the rewarding nature of their experience with students acting as sources for that passion. Related to participants’ experience of vitality, the theme of student engagement emerged in the interview with participants and is discussed next.

**Student engagement.** Three of the participants identified students feeling energized and engaged at school as a rewarding experience and essential to their work satisfaction as teachers. Jacob stated: “when kids feel listened to, they love to talk, when they feel loved, they love to love back, when they feel cared for, they end up opening up, and that’s a wonderful experience.” For Jacob, his competence as a teacher and energy at work was rooted in his positive relationship
with his students. Jacob expressed this sentiment later by saying: “I felt best about myself when I could see the kids having fun and learning stuff. And in that order I think.” Similarly, Adam suggested: “I want to do things that are engaging them and that are relevant to them, the things that are fun for them.” Describing what is satisfying about being a teacher, Grace articulated:

Your students are having fun in your class and they’re exciting about the learning and they are actually learning and they’re producing something that makes them feel confident; and, when I see that, that makes me feel good. That’s probably the best part.

For Jacob, Adam, and Grace, the success and engagement of their students was important to their experience of vitality in their work.

**Learning.** A central theme that emerged from the interviews was learning. Participants described learning through the value of workplace learning and lifelong learning, as well as experiences of satisfaction from the visible growth and learning of their students.

**Workplace learning.** Workplace learning emerged as a theme in the interview with all five participants. Claire, Isaac, Adam, Jacob, and Grace all indicated that learning experienced in the workplace was a significant rewarding aspect of their professional life.

Related to her feelings of success working with exceptional learners, Claire stated:

In terms of my teaching practice, I gain a lot from observing other teachers and seeing how they handle themselves or the way that they react to certain situations. I feel like a lot of the things that I have done successfully, or that I did feel prepared for, came from observing more experienced teachers or just sort of observing teachers who have a different nature than me to see how they naturally
respond to situations. That to me I think was the most significant learning in terms of working with students with exceptionalities.

For Claire, her colleagues were an important source of knowledge for learning at work. Through observing her colleagues, Claire gained valuable strategies for working with students with exceptionalities and engaged in workplace learning. To Grace, as a teacher working with students with exceptionalities, workplace learning was an essential part of her every day job. Grace described the nature of her experience working with exceptional learners by saying, “As a teacher that works with a population that requires you to think outside of the box sometimes, to really problem solve and reflect in a deeper way because you’re trying to solve problems really.” The nature of her work supporting exceptional learners pushed Grace to continue to engage in workplace learning throughout her career.

Working within a high needs school, Adam stated: “I’m learning more about how children learn who maybe aren’t motivated to learn or maybe want to learn but feel that they can’t—so generally speaking, I mean, experience has been quite satisfying working at this school and my last school as well.” For Adam, the new experience of teaching exceptional learners was a rewarding opportunity to engage in workplace learning. In the interview with Claire, Grace, and Adam, the experience working with exceptional learners allowed for the opportunity to engage in continuous workplace learning and may have ultimately contributed to their experience of vitality as teachers. Isaac described the importance of workplace learning to his feelings of competence as a teacher by stating:

I was trained in literacy with the specialized program that I was part of, we had extensive training and I did it for a few years in a row … the last class I taught I
remember was a Grade 7 and 8 class, I felt like I knew exactly what I wanted to do, the only thing missing was I didn’t know the students yet.

For Isaac, gaining knowledge through continued workplace learning was essential to feeling like a good teacher. Jacob shared his experience with workplace learning as continuous by stating:

I think that everything that I’ve learned to do right I learned because I did it wrong like 14 times in a row and trial and error is a shitty way to learn how to help kids because you have to get it wrong so many times before you get it right.

Jacob emphasized that, for him, the goal of workplace learning is to be able to better support students and is an ongoing process with potential social and emotional challenges. The interview with Jacob and Isaac suggested that workplace learning can offer a satisfying opportunity to grow but is not without its obstacles.

Isaac described the importance of a school professional culture that values workplace learning by stating, “I’ve been to some schools where teachers feel like they want to be there and they’re always looking to learn and improve and grow, and that’s really contagious.” Isaac continued by saying “I think the way the staff view learning and education really affects my emotional wellbeing; the people I work with.” Adam also discussed the role of his colleagues in his own learning at work by stating, “my principal has been amazing here, just learning from her and talking to her about stuff like pedagogy.” Adam later added: “and learning from the staff inside about their experiences and how they’re getting their classes to function has been good.”

For both Isaac and Adam, workplace learning was an important part of a positive and successful school culture. It is not only important for individual teachers to engage in continuous workplace learning, but for the work environment in the school to encourage the value of learning at work.
Grace described her experience of growth as a teacher through her learning at work by stating, “You learn from both, mostly your challenges I would say you learn from because that really forces you to think and reflect and realize what it is that you need to do and how to do it.” This idea was also expressed by Isaac: “the challenges I’ve had are always changing the way I feel and the way I’m going to react next time to try and do better.” Adam discussed a similar experience by stating:

Just really learning from all these experiences, the challenges and the successes, what works with students what does not work with students, what does classroom management look like, what’s successful classroom management. It’s gotten me asking those questions. Adam later reiterated: “just constantly trying to find solutions and constantly trying to think on your feet. Oh this isn’t working now [and] I have to find something else.” For Adam, Grace, and Isaac, a salient aspect of workplace learning is the opportunity for personal and professional growth.

Reflecting on his experience as a novice teacher, Adam expressed, “I’m the newest teacher at the school, so everybody has been able to accommodate the students as a result, so just learning from them by voicing my frustrations has been helpful.” For Adam, an important example of workplace learning was asking questions and learning from his colleagues with more experience supporting students with exceptionalities. Describing her transition into the special education resource teacher role, Grace stated, “I was kind of slowly getting used to all these things at that one school, it made me a better teacher; at the same time, it was something that was rewarding.” The shift into a different professional role necessitated that Grace adapt, but that learning also proved to be a rewarding aspect of teaching for her. Discussing her experience of
stress as a teacher, Grace suggested: “I think some things do become easier because you realize you have some go-to strategies that are universal and can work with most students.” For Grace, learning at work as an early career teacher translated into preparedness and knowledge that could be used as her career progressed. Grace continued with a discussion of how workplace learning can also be a professional challenge by arguing, “at the same time because of all the turn-around in terms of policies and rules and different things that you’re supposed to apply, teaching is always changing so you’re never at a point where you’re like—I know everything.”

Although the process of continuous learning can be a satisfying aspect of the job for some teachers, when learning is an overwhelming professional demand, it can start to act as more of a responsibility rather than a reward. Isaac also discussed the challenges of workplace learning as an obligation by saying:

Sometimes we don’t know what LD means, and sometimes we don’t know what ADHD means, what cerebral palsy is like, what that means for teaching, and so there may be that extra load where teachers feel like not only do I have to learn what it is but I have to learn about what types of things I have to do to support that student appropriately and of those things maybe 8 or 10 may not work for this student so what are the ones that do work.

To Isaac, learning at work was also an added pressure to ensuring the proper support for students with exceptionalities. Jacob warned about the nature of workplace learning as a potential double-edged sword by suggesting, “being forced to learn new things and to adjust your practice is not always a fun experience, it can actually be a really…what’s the word…really shift your center of weight.”
Discussing his reasons for leaving teaching for further education, Jacob stated, “not only are teachers not supposed to use their intellect and their creative energy in the classroom, in a lot of ways they’re not allowed to.” Workplace learning emerged as an important theme in the interview with all five participants. Workplace learning was discussed in five contexts: working with exceptional learners, feeling competent as a teacher, the role of the workplace culture in encouraging learning, related to personal growth, and significant to the experience of novice teachers as well as a factor in leaving the teaching profession. The interviews suggest that the obstacles these teachers faced were an important aspect of learning at work and ultimately growing and succeeding as a teacher.

**Lifelong learning.** Another type of distinct learning that emerged as important to the experience of participants was the idea of ongoing or lifelong learning. Claire highlighted this when she stated: “I really enjoy my own learning; I get really excited when I’m learning things.” Claire suggested that an important aspect of her decision to pursue a career in teaching was her own love of learning. When asked to describe her professional identity as a teacher, Grace stated, “I would say, because of my trajectory I’ve been on, that’s my professional identity, as just an ongoing learner. Just continuously trying to figure out the best methods and ways to teach and effective ways to reach students.” For Grace, lifelong learning was an important part of her identity as a teacher. Jacob indicated that lifelong learning was a significant aspect of how his professional identity has changed, saying: “when I did my masters, and I did that at year four or five I started and I finished. It really changed actually because I began to think critically about the curriculum and why we were doing things we were doing.” Engaging in opportunities for lifelong learning in graduate studies was an opportunity for Jacob to grow as a teacher. Isaac also
expressed the significant impact of lifelong learning on his growth, in combination with his successes and challenges as a teacher, by stating:

It’s through these experiences, coupled with reading, but mainly experiences that I’ve changed my philosophy of education. I guess, my approach to education, and I think generally to life, to the way I treat people to the way I think how people should be treated. Education is a big part of my life because it’s my current focus and I’m hoping it will be my future career.

Isaac values opportunities to learn, and is engaged in lifelong learning in addition to workplace learning to grow and improve as a teacher. Isaac continued to discuss the value he places on lifelong learning by saying:

I think about education a lot even when I’m not formally doing work … I think I deal with problems by reflecting constantly about things that are happening, and this will fuse into conversations with my friends and family and that, and I think that’s separating yourself from work, it’s just intellectual growth generally.

Extending the value of lifelong learning to the success of students, Grace described a resource that she thinks is necessary for supporting exceptional learners in the regular classroom by suggesting: “there needs to be ongoing professional learning for teachers, workshops that they can go to and find out different methods to be able to include all types of students. Um, so yeah professional learning, ongoing professional learning.” Grace later suggested that lifelong learning may also benefit the wellbeing of the teacher by adding: “you can take, like, AQ [additional qualification] courses, maybe not online as much as you do take courses that you’re in a physical room present with other teachers who can, who are dealing with similar issues that’s also a good way to cope.” To Grace, engaging in lifelong learning also offered an
opportunity to build relationships and feel connected with other teachers. A similar perspective was shared by Jacob when he stated: “I would work so that every teacher had the kind of training that you would need to integrate people into the classroom. Jacob valued lifelong learning not just for himself but also as a standard for all teachers to better support students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom.

Isaac indicated that lifelong learning was an important aspect of his feeling competent as a teacher working with exceptional learners by stating:

I would love to be on the cutting edge of information about any type of exceptionality as well as just generally how to help your students motivate themselves and be self-regulated learners. But, particular to exceptionalities, I would love to know like what the research is saying on how to best support these learners.

Isaac, Grace, and Jacob all expressed the value of lifelong learning in working with students with exceptionalities to better support their success in the regular classroom. Isaac echoed this idea later by saying:

To me, to be good at my job is to always be looking to improve, that would be my simple answer, that you never give up on, you never decide okay I’m not going to learn anymore, so I think to be good at your job is to always be learning and recognizing that you’re always learning and trying to do better.

Lifelong learning to Isaac was an important aspect of growing and improving his competence as a teacher. Grace shared a similar sentiment when she said: “I think that the main part of that has to do with the training workshops that you are able to put under your belt and just say I’ve attended this, I’ve attended that, I have this degree in that area, I have yeah. Mostly
professional learning I would say.” For Grace, professional learning was an aspect of lifelong learning and significantly contributed to her feelings of competence as a teacher. Lifelong learning can be obtained through different contexts, as suggested by Isaac when he said “everybody has mentored me in some way because they’re teaching me something that I hadn’t thought about.” For Isaac, learning from others in his life was considered another source of valuable lifelong learning.

Jacob indicated that the absence of lifelong learning as a teacher was also important. Jacob highlighted this aspect by stating “what sent me away is teaching is not an intellectual activity, it’s an emotional activity it’s a social activity.” Jacob left the teaching profession to pursue graduate studies with the purpose of engaging in fulfilling lifelong learning. Lifelong learning emerged as a theme in the interview with all five participants, most robustly in the interviews with Isaac, Jacob, and Grace. Lifelong learned was discussed in the context of formal education as well as professional development and training, and contributed to participants’ feelings of competence.

**Student learning.** In addition to their own learning on the job and the value of lifelong learning, participants discussed the significance of student learning to the work satisfaction of teachers. Reflecting on what is rewarding to her as a teacher, Claire mentioned:

It’s being able to bear witness to the learning over a period of time, so seeing them start at one, and then like having those ‘aha’ moments and then finding the learning exciting. That to me is probably the most gratifying thing just because, like I said, I really enjoy my own learning.

To Claire, the learning of her students was an important rewarding aspect of her role as a teacher. Claire continued by adding:
Seeing the learning that they do kind of them like independent of me as well, so I give them the tools and I’ve set up the situation but they figured it out. With the right like scaffolding, it feels like they’ve figured it out completely on their own and that to me is like really exciting learning as well.

Claire’s discussion of student learning suggested that what she valued was seeing her students engage in learning and their succeeding without her direct support. Claire’s sense of self-competence was reaffirmed when she could see her students valuing learning on their own.

Similar to Claire, Adam said “it’s especially satisfying when they’re then taking what I taught them and like extending their thinking.” Adam continued by saying “those kinds of things where students are taking their learning and extending it beyond what we’re doing in the very moment—is always very exciting for me.” Adam later reiterated the satisfaction he received from student learning by stating “if I’m getting them to learn, if I’m getting them to take what they’re learning in my portable and taking it inside the school than I think that’s great. If they’re taking it home that’s even better.” For Adam, student learning was especially rewarding when it was extended beyond the immediate lesson to reflect a deeper engagement and growth of the student.

Isaac expressed the importance he placed on student learning by stating “you need to make a difference, because learning is difference, learning is change, learning is growth and so if you’re not making a difference then somebody should be in there who can make a difference.” Isaac extended the value he places on his own learning and growth to that of his students. Reflecting on a significant experience involving student learning, Isaac stated “To see that it meant something to him and he was going to use it, it helped him, I think that was really rewarding.” For Isaac, having a student with an exceptionality that had struggled with academics express the value that he or she placed on learning was satisfying to him as a teacher.
Related to working with exceptional learners, Grace described what an inclusive classroom is to her by suggesting “it has to do with the teacher’s approach to learning so the teacher’s beliefs about student learning. So if your belief is that every student can learn and it’s your job to help them learn that is an inclusive approach.” For Grace, a teachers’ perspective on student learning was an important aspect of successful inclusion for students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom. Discussing what resources are necessary to support exceptional learners, Grace later reaffirmed this idea by stating “the general beliefs about how learning works and that all students can learn no matter how or what their level is at they can still learn.” Student learning emerged as a theme in the interview with four of the five participants, with the exception of Jacob. Student learning was discussed as an extension of the value participants placed on their own learning, a rewarding aspect of their role as a teacher, and necessary to supporting the success of students.

**Psychological Distress**

**Compassion Fatigue**

Burnout and compassion fatigue are two constructs of poor mental health that can inform our understandings of teachers’ social and emotional experiences. The central theme of psychological distress was first explored using the construct of compassion fatigue. Typically reported in nurses and social workers, compassion fatigue is characterized by feelings of depression, anxiety, and reduced empathy resulting from repeated exposure to the distress of vulnerable populations. With a significant reduction in their compassion and empathy, individuals experiencing compassion fatigue no longer feel psychologically capable of providing care to their clients. While burnout is the result of workload conditions, compassion fatigue develops from the impulse to help others and is rooted in the social-emotional relationship...
between professionals and their clients. Compassion fatigue emerged in the participant’s discussion regarding the challenges of their students with exceptionalities in the context of inclusive classrooms, meeting the needs of students, and resources to support the success of students.

**Inclusive classrooms.** The challenges that come with integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom emerged in interview with all five participants. Although Jacob expressed that he is in favor of inclusion of exceptional learners into the regular classroom, that perspective is influenced by the qualification, resources, and preparedness of regular classroom teachers:

> What we have are these kids with these profound challenges being sometimes dumped into a general education classroom. And, if that teacher doesn’t happen to have his or her specialist in ASD or Spec-Ed that, teacher is going to be overwhelmed.

Jacob discussed his conceptualization of inclusion as a balance between being delicate and deliberate, “sometimes the academic success and emotional wellbeing are actually working in opposite directions, in that you can do a lot of good for a kid academically, and inadvertently do a lot of damage to their emotional wellbeing. And that’s why when I talk about inclusion I talk about two things. One being deliberate and being delicate.” For Jacob, successful inclusion of a student with an exceptionality requires the teacher to be cognizant of the emotional and educational needs of the student as well as the academic needs.

Grace discussed her experience as a resource teacher working with a specific student and a regular classroom teacher who was not inclusive in her practice. Grace described the teacher:
She wasn’t really good at accommodating, she wasn’t flexible, and so she came into a lot of conflict with the child and she thought that the child was being willful on purpose. She didn’t understand the reasons behind his behaviour so it was very difficult trying to help her understand what the issues are and help her understand that she needs to accommodate for some of the student’s needs.

In that example, the challenges of integrating the student with an exceptionality included overcoming the rigid perspective and limited understanding of the regular classroom teacher. Working in a high needs school, Adam expressed that it was often challenging for him to meet the needs of all students with exceptionalities integrated into the regular classroom, “I try to reach every student and in some cases it doesn’t work, because this activity really doesn’t work for a certain student or this student has a very intense writing disability which means that he can’t participate in this.” For Adam, balancing the multiple needs of students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom was challenging despite his best efforts, with certain activities inevitably limiting the participation of some students.

Grace discussed a similar sentiment:

It’s really difficult in a classroom with so many different needs if you do have a lot of students with different needs and high needs versus just needs that you can meet. So behavioural issues, they can disrupt the flow of the classroom … it’s up to the teacher to find out what the reason is, so that’s where challenges can arise.

To Grace, inclusion of exceptional learners into the regular classroom can pose additional challenges, and it is the responsibility of teachers to balance various needs as well as understand the source of behavioural issues.

Claire questioned the benefits of inclusion for one particular student she worked with:
So not one of my students, but I worked really closely with him, I often wonder how beneficial it was for him to be integrated into the classroom because his exceptionalities were behavioural…I would really strongly wonder if integration was the best route but then I can’t say that about all exceptionalities. I do think that it’s quite beneficial to integrate students in certain cases and I’m also a little weary of like blanket terms, or blanket, blanket solutions like that.

Reflecting on the challenging experience of a specific student with an exceptionality, Claire discussed the limitations of regular classrooms in meeting student needs of one exceptional student:

I feel bad that…we couldn’t even offer the same kind of support that he got in that program in the school. He had to be pushed to suspension instead of [having] those kinds of supports within his daily school life back then.

Claire experienced remorse associated with the unsuccessful integration of her student with an exceptionality into the regular classroom and the school’s inability to support the success of that student. Similarly, Isaac discussed an instance where inclusion of a student with an exceptionality had been done at a cost to their quality of education, “I’ve been in classrooms before where I’ve got a student who has been integrated into the regular classroom who probably shouldn’t be there because they’re not anywhere near academically the level of the lesson that’s happening, so I think that’s poorly done.” Jacob, Claire, and Isaac, all described instances where integrating a student into the regular classroom was not done appropriately, leaving both the student and the teacher to face additional obstacles.

Inclusion of students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom was a responsibility that Jacob did not take lightly: “I had to build lessons for these small groups that were really
really clearly set up, and all of this had to be done in a delicate way so that no one had the sense that they were being isolated or pulled out.” An important goal for Jacob was balancing the delicate and deliberate aspects of inclusion, ultimately adding to his perceived responsibilities as a teacher.

Discussing the challenges of teaching exceptional learners in the regular classroom, Jacob stated, “They require different strategies and I framed that as a positive thing but that actually can also be, you know, a negative sort of thing as well.” Jacob continued by highlighting the impact that inclusion may have on the wellbeing of teachers:

I think the wellbeing and growth of teachers is maybe not as important as that of the students but, you know, it’s like one of those [situations], in an airplane you have to put your own oxygen mask on first right? And when teachers are feeling disconnected and they’re feeling…not able to support the students, that is also a downward spiral as well.

For Jacob, the wellbeing of the teachers working in inclusive classrooms is tied directly to supporting the needs of all students, with teachers experiencing reduced mental health negatively impacting the wellness of students. Similarly, Adam discussed the frustration he experiences working with students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom:

It gets frustrating when I have one student who will not stop talking no matter—I could be trying to explain something and it’s non-stop talking and I don’t know if it’s because—well I know it’s because he’s very high, like, very intense ADHD, and he’s got a number of learning exceptionalities but he has not come around like the other kids who have similar issues. So I find that very challenging, and I
find that that’s been a recurring issue for me when working with children with exceptionalities, it’s just the behaviour piece.

Understandably, the challenging behaviour of some students with exceptionalities had a negative impact on the well-being of Adam.

For Claire, another challenge of inclusion of exceptional learners was the negative perceptions of her fellow teachers:

I didn’t want to go to colleagues who I knew would automatically turn to bashing the kids because that’s not what I’m there for, I’m not there to listen to you bad mouth students I’m here because I feel like I’m struggling with something.

Claire later reiterated this sentiment:

I can’t listen to people bad mouth students during lunch break, I just I can’t listen to people complain about the job so um, its more so like, being able to tell when I don’t want to be around a certain energy or certain attitude yeah.

Like Claire, Jacob also had negative experience with other teachers speaking negatively of students with exceptionalities, “I was really frustrated by other teachers, in fact for most of my career I just totally avoided the staff room … I’m really embarrassed of the profession when I go into a staff room. There’s just so much ugliness in those places.” While some teachers may use the staffroom as an opportunity to express frustrations, the negative conversation about students with exceptionalities can lead to poor social emotional experiences for teachers who have relationships with those students. In contrast, Jacob also discussed the stigma associated with disclosing frustrations to colleagues for teachers working with exceptional learners:

You don’t want to admit to colleagues that you’re having a really difficult time unless you admit it in the form of a complaint in the staff room for instance. But
actually, okay, how do you help this kid out because you have a monster, what did you do with it? There’s some stigma around even asking that question so the bulk of the responsibility for helping these kids out ended up being on me the individual teacher.

Jacob expressed that as a teacher he often felt like a “lone wolf” in managing the obstacles of working with exceptional learners, feeling unable to ask for support from his fellow teachers.

Having experience teaching in the regular classroom as well as in an Autism Spectrum Disorder specialized classroom, Jacob provided a comparison of the two environments. Jacob first described the distinct nature of working in a specialized classroom for students with Autism Spectrum disorder compared to regular education classroom context:

That’s not what it’s like working with kids with ASD. In fact, I would say that the relationship between kids with ASD and their teacher appears relative to the general education classroom to be absent of that sort of emotional back and forth.

Jacob continued with an analogy describing the continuously satisfying nature of working with typically developing students in the regular classroom, “I used the analogy of the general education classroom is like being in the hospital and having an adrenaline drip into your IV like ‘bloop bloop’ it’s constant, like, you’re always feeling, this like, yeah this is wonderful.” Jacob also expanded on the differing nature of working with students with moderate to severe exceptionalities in the specialized education classroom in comparison to his experience in the regular classroom:

In special education there will be nothing for like the longest time because they are rightfully so, way more concerned about their sensory experience or their communication needs or their preferences than they are you know telling you that
you’re a good teacher or you know sharing cool things that they learned about
Star Wars with you.

Jacob emphasized that working in the specialized education classroom still included satisfying experiences with students, “But occasionally every once in a while something will happen and they will, like, do something they couldn’t do before or they will demonstrate knowledge and development in a way that no one thought.” Jacob expanded on his earlier analogy to convey his experience in working with exceptionalities in the autism spectrum disorder specialized classroom:

   It happened rarely but it’s like that scene in pulp fiction to push the metaphor of the adrenaline, there’s a scene where one character his heart stopped, and so the other character takes a syringe and then plunges the adrenaline into like directly into his heart. And that’s what it feels like being in a special education classroom. Like nothing for days, and then something will happen and you’ll say ‘come here, come here! Look at this! Look at that!’ and the person’s like ‘he’s just sitting there’ I’m like ‘YEAH he totally is! He’s not punching anyone, he’s not hurting himself, he’s totally just sitting there, that’s amazing!

For Jacob, the emotionally reciprocal nature of the classroom environment in the regular education classroom was distinct from the special education classroom.

In contrast to a discussion on the challenges of working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom, Isaac discussed the positive aspect of his work:

   One of the most satisfying things is seeing students say ‘I know I’ve got a learning disability but I can still read, like I can overcome this. This is what I have trouble with but I can still do this.’ Or a student with ADHD really work on a plan
to focus and be able to self-regulate and all that stuff. So to see them overcome
and view their exceptionality as an obstacle.

Despite the obstacles that come with inclusion of exceptional learners into the regular classroom, witnessing students overcoming barriers to success can be rewarding to teachers. Conversely, seeing an exceptional student be unwilling to attempt to overcome any obstacles can be frustrating, as later discussed by Isaac, “When I see a student who you see demonstrating learned helplessness or for whatever reason deciding that they can’t do something so they aren’t even going to try. Like, I have ADHD so I’m not even going to try and focus, I can’t, and that really frustrates me to see that, when they just give up.” Although Isaac did not express any blame toward the student, witnessing the negative impact that having an exceptionality can have on particular students’ motivation and confidence was frustrating for him. Participants discussed both positive and negative experiences related to the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom.

Meeting student needs. Meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities emerged as a significant theme in the interview with all participants. Jacob discussed the responsibility he felt to meet both the educational and emotional needs of his students:

I see myself as someone who tried to protect the student from the curriculum, from the school—not that I don’t teach those things, obviously you teach those things. But there’s a lot of pressure on the classroom to do certain things and be certain places at certain times, and then with the testing, and as a teacher I sort of saw myself as a mother hen of the students so you know being able to protect them.
Jacob perceived his role as not just an educator but also a support to protect his students from the various pressures the experienced in an outside of the classroom. Reflecting on a specific traumatic experience of a student outside of the classroom impacting his in-classroom learning, Jacob continued to describe:

He is normally kind of an at-risk kid but he was particularly, like, off his game that day and so I pulled him aside and [asked] ‘what’s going on, like, you’re disrupting my class, we’re working on these things together, you know, tell me what happened’… trying to understand the child not just as a passive recipient of knowledge and me as the prophet teacher, sharing it down from up high, but understanding them as people and as humans and you’re offering them the dignity of being able to have a bad day and that’s actually okay, we all have bad days.

Isaac also discussed the power of a student’s life outside of the classroom, emphasizing feeling limited in protecting his students and meeting all of their needs:

Knowing that no matter how inclusive and positive a classroom I make for any given student, they still go home to a place that may not be positive and may not be motivational or positively influential for them. So I’m thinking of some of students from low SES populations, um, who go home to these really tough situations and they’ve got maybe a really poor relationship with a guardian, or whatever it may be. Knowing that they’re happy at school and I can keep them happy and safe and wanting to learn but when the bell rings I go home and they go home and there’s not much I can really do, I think that’s a really frustrating thing.
For Isaac, the awareness that student needs may not be met outside of his classroom and feeling ineffective in extending his support outside of the context was a frustrating aspect of his teaching experience. Isaac later reiterated this sentiment:

If I know a student is in a really tough situation at home, or they’re going through something really tough, I think that really affects me too because I feel like, I feel responsible and I feel obligated to do something and I can’t always do something.

The feeling of responsibility to ensure the needs of his students were met and the limitations of his reach outside of the classroom had a negative impact on the wellbeing of Isaac.

Claire discussed the impact of not meeting the needs of her students on her wellbeing as a teacher:

I feel like when you’re trying to accomplish five things in a 40 minute period and you don’t feel like you’re accomplishing any of them I just, I feel like that can take real toll on the teacher as well and at the end of the day you’re like, I don’t feel like I’m doing any job justice. I’m not meeting the needs of this one student, I’m not meeting the needs of the classroom and then I just feel exhausted at the end of the day. So that is the biggest thing for me is trying to like, actually do the job well and meet everyone’s needs and keep that balance.

For Claire, feeling unable to meet the needs of her students with and without exceptionalities in her classroom negatively affected her wellness. Like Claire, Jacob described the negative impact that feeling unsuccessful in meeting the needs of exceptional learners had on him as a teacher, “When you have a kid who is not integrating and not being successful and you can see it, then you’re either unable to do something to help them or you’re trying and it’s not having an effect,
that’s going to end up being really emotionally draining you know, I think that every teacher that I’ve met ultimately wants to be superman or superwoman.”

For Jacob and Claire, an important aspect of feeling competent as a teacher was meeting the needs of all students, and witnessing a student with an exceptionality struggle with integrating into the classroom was disheartening. Similarly, Grace communicated the frustration she felt when feeling unsuccessful in meeting the needs of a student with an exceptionality, “when you believed that you put in the effort and you really tried really hard to develop a good program and get a student to move up a little bit incrementally, and still didn’t work, that was frustrating I would say.” Grace continued to suggest that feeling unsuccessful in meeting student needs may necessitate asking for help from someone with a different perspective. When asked if she considered supporting students with exceptionalities and typically developing students as two different job, Claire continued by stating:

I do feel like it can be two jobs or it could five jobs it could be 12 jobs and um, it’s just because I feel like there needs to be that individual context for students with exceptionalities, depending on the case of course. But I’m just, I guess I keep on going back to a handful of students from my past where I’m just sort of like, I wish I could have given them actual one-on-one time for us to debrief that situation. So, in my mind, it’s just, you know, because the whole class wouldn’t necessarily benefit from that same conversation it does feel like I’d need to have space for that to be a one-on-one thing, that’s what I meant.

Claire was overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being a teacher, placing a strain on her ability to meet the needs of her students. Similarly, Jacob discussed the additional pressure of meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities on regular classroom teachers:
There are some really muddy yucky heavy things about, you know, helping these students and the difficult thing is that these students probably need more than everyone else, like, extra heaping of patience and yet as a characteristic of sort of how they interact in the classroom we, its more effortful for us to even give them what everyone else needs.

In Jacob’s perspective, the challenges of helping students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom can have a direct negative impact on the social-emotional experiences of teachers. That said, Jacob did not lack empathy towards difficult students, approaching student behaviour as a function of their circumstances, “it’s really clear to see why its happenings, but that doesn’t take away from the fact that it sucks everyday being that kids’ teacher. And so I mean that’s not for all kids. But there are some kids whose experience and life situations makes its actually really hard to be their teacher.” While Jacob did not express blame towards students, he did acknowledge the demanding environment exceptional learners can potentially create for the teachers.

Claire discussed a specific salient experience in working with exceptional learners where she felt she wasn’t meeting the needs of her students, “in terms of me feeling guilty the one that, the one incident I keep on going back to in terms of I could’ve done that so much better like I don’t understand why I wasn’t, you know, like why I didn’t make better decisions that day.” Claire’s description of guilt and rumination around this incident is indicative of psychological distress resulting from the challenges of working with students with exceptionalities. Claire continued by describing the details of the incident:

I couldn’t observe it long enough to notice that there was a problem but apparently there was and they got into this huge fist fight after they left my class.
And as a result um, one of the students, the student with the exceptionality ended up getting suspended. And I keep going back to that being like, ah like, like, I could have, I should have known, there should have been like some kind of intuition.

For Claire, feeling that she did not successfully meet the needs of her student with exceptionalities resulted in the experience of guilt. The social-emotional relationship between the teacher and her student had implications for the wellbeing of Claire. Following the incident, the student with an exceptionality was suspended from school and temporarily placed in a specialized program. Claire discussed a conversation she had with the student upon his return to the regular classroom: “I think because we had that conversation I was just sort of; I didn’t want him to think that he was a bad kid because he wasn’t a bad kid. He’s just a kid who, who maybe on like one day wasn’t set up to make the right decisions and that was my job as a teacher so I don’t know.” Claire absorbed the responsibility for the student’s actions during that particular event, displaying an urge to help and protect the wellbeing of the student with an exceptionality at the cost of her own wellness.

Claire maintains a positive image of the student despite any memories of challenging experiences, “I think about him a lot, I hope he’s doing well, he’s in grade 8 now ha-ha. He’s such a good kid it’s just that, that school is too busy for him. I think it’s just, no one can give them, give him the amount of time that I think he’s needing.” In part, Claire attributed the limitations of meeting student needs to the environment of the school, with the overwhelming number of students leaving teachers lacking the necessary time. For Jacob, meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities included addressing the issue in the moment as well as working to prevent future incidents:
First off, there’s the element of like you literally have to get in there and stop that child from hitting himself, that is just a big big challenge in its own … But then there’s also the other challenge of, okay, so it happened on Tuesday, what can we do to make sure it doesn’t happen on Wednesday and on Thursday and on Friday cause it’s going to happen every single day.

As Jacob highlights, meeting the needs of students requires continuous reflection and action on the part of the teacher. Isaac discussed the role that the student has in having their needs met by the teacher, “I get frustrated with them and I try to be supportive always and respectful but sometimes like I’ll be in a situation where I feel like they can do something and they’re not making any effort to do it so that’s a real challenge because you’ve got this barrier now.” For Isaac, the self-perceptions, motivation, and confidence of students with exceptionalities were an important component of his success in meeting their needs.

The responsibility of meeting the needs of her students contributed to the reduced wellness of Claire:

I so very much absorb the responsibility of the students and I feel like these are my students, I am responsible for them. I felt like it was my duty to do every single thing needed to meet their needs and that ate into my personal life tremendously. To the point I, after that LTO I had to sit down with myself and say never again, you can’t ever ever put yourself in that situation ever again.

Feeling the overwhelming duty to meet the needs of her students pushed Claire to compromise her work-life balance, ultimately contributing to experiences of psychological distress. Claire later reiterated her experiences of reduced emotional wellbeing as a teacher:
There were definitely days where I could identify that in myself, being like you know, I just, like, knowing that I was emotionally not in a good place and that I would have to sort of, be there for these students for the next, for the rest of the day. I definitely felt that and I could identify it.

Claire was able to identify the reduced wellness she experienced as a teacher, while emphasizing that it limited the support she was able to provide her students. Adam also expressed a reduced ability to meet specific needs of his students:

I don’t know I just find that it’s hard for me to care about the little things like that.

I would say that if a kid has an actual problem, then I’m never too emotionally drained to help through it, I’d like to think that I’m there for them when they need it the most.

Adam expressed a compromised sense of empathy in meeting the needs of his students that he judged as trivial in order to better support his students during more tumultuous circumstances.

Grace discussed balancing the various needs of her students while maintaining her own wellbeing: “The whole day was kind of a bizarre day and you had to deal with a lot of student issues so their emotional issues, you had to try to regulate so that is difficult at times and you need to be able to do that and still maintain your own sense of calm and wellbeing.” Meeting student needs while maintaining her own wellbeing was a frustrating aspect of Grace’s workday as a special education resource teacher. When questioned whether she ever felt the need to take time off, Grace responded, “I don’t think I ever have. Not that I never wanted to but teaching is a job where you’re required to be there. That is the main part, you’ve got to be there and you do feel extremely responsible for your students.” For Grace, taking time away from the classroom to support her own wellbeing meant compromising the needs of her students.
Discussing the changes that he would make to the profession, Jacob stated, “I would change how we initiate new teachers into the schools, cause that’s kind of a mess right now. I would detoxify the staffrooms, and I would work so that every teacher had the kind of training that you would need to integrate people into the classroom.” The changes that Jacob suggested would work to better support new teachers as well as help ensure that the needs of all students are met in the classroom. For all five participants, meeting the needs of typically developing and exceptional students appeared in relation to academic and emotional needs, student needs beyond the classroom, feelings of competence as a teacher, and reduced wellbeing as teachers when they felt they did not meet the needs of their students.

**Resources to support success.** A discussion of the resources available to students with exceptionalities to support success emerged in the interviews with Claire, Jacob, Isaac, Adam and Grace. Jacob suggested that the general nature of working with students with exceptionalities can be isolating for teachers as it may act as a barrier to relying on colleagues as a resource. “I think working with students with exceptionalities can be really isolating because you know, the further you move from the default sort of normative expectations for teaching the less you have in common with people around you.” Although Jacob was discussing the isolating nature of teaching in a special education classroom, feeling unable to ask for help from other teachers is an issue that can arise for regular classroom teachers as well. In contrast, the resources offered at his school were an important component of successful classroom management for Adam:

There’s a lot of support at this school and um there was some support at my last school as well just from the admin and from the other teachers–just getting those resources and learning how to do things, learning how to, especially as a new teacher, learning how to curb those…frustrations.
Adam discussed how relying on his colleagues and administration has been able to help him successfully support his students with exceptionalities and grow as a teacher.

Claire addressed the limited resources available to support her students with exceptionalities:

I feel like I have a lot of guilt attached to my experiences working with students with exceptionalities just because you know, it’s very very apparent like at the end of my, like at the end of my day or at the end of my LTO, its very apparent to me that there was something that that was just not being addressed for whatever reason. Whether it was a time issue or whether it was a resource issue or me feeling overwhelmed by all the things I needed to accomplish in my LTO. I feel like, I feel guilty about that even though I don’t necessarily know what I would have done differently given the situation I was in. It’s just sort of, well like is this just the system then? Are these just sort of the resources we have available to them or is this just sort of the way it is for students with exceptionalities?

Claire also discussed the limitations of relying on her schools’ resource teacher: “He has the training to handle behavioral exceptionalities. He’s supposed to be the go-to but he can’t even make face time in the classroom because he has other things going on in the school.” Although the school offered the knowledge and experience of a resource teacher to help support student success, that support was difficult to access due to the overwhelming demand, ultimately leaving regular classroom teachers like Claire to cope alone. In a juxtaposition, Grace discussed her role as a special education resource teacher, “because my job allowed me to go into different classrooms, I was able to try to bring that different perspective to other teachers and it was difficult when they didn’t see that as a positive or as a helpful for them.” While Claire was
unable to access the resource teacher at her school, as a resource teacher Grace found herself encountering resistance from regular classroom teachers when having her provide support for students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom. Isaac addressed his own knowledge and education as an important resource in supporting the success of students with exceptionalities, “Another would be a lack of education I guess, some exceptionalities I just don’t know a lot about.”

Discussing the integration of students with physical limitations into Physical Education classes, Isaac expressed the challenge of supporting the success of the student when he has a limited understanding of how to best design the lesson for that specific need. Grace also introduced the use of technology as an important resource in supporting the success of students with exceptionalities, “technology has kind of developed in um, especially assistive technology, to help students that need different types of programs.” Using assistive technology can enable teachers to support the success of students with exceptionalities beyond their own capabilities.

Jacob discussed the principal of a school as another important resource in supporting students with exceptionalities. “I disagreed a lot with my principal especially over my last years when I was in the classroom with ASD and in the end he said your objection is noted but it’s still going to be this way. But over my years I have become, you know, more comfortable speaking with my principal.” Jacob was placed in a position where he was required to act as an advocate for the needs of his students with exceptionalities, and the support of the principal became an essential resource for supporting student success.

Discussing his experience as a supply teacher, Isaac emphasized the importance of having appropriate resources in order to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom:
It can be really frustrating when you as a teacher don’t have the appropriate resources—I’m thinking of an IEP in this case- that says these are the exact problems that we have identified with this student or deficits I should say, challenges, when you don’t know that and you’re trying to figure out how much of this is motivational and how much of this is like actually diagnosed and something they experience.

As a supply teacher, Isaac was not familiar with the specific needs of the students in the classroom, and lacking the resources to support the success of the students left Isaac feeling unprepared. All five participants discussed the use of human and other resources in supporting the success of students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom.

The construct of compassion fatigue was found in the participant’s discussion regarding the challenges of their students with exceptionalities in the context of inclusive classrooms, meeting the needs of students, and resources to support the success of students. Specific to their work with exceptional learners, the participants’ impulse to help their students but feeling ineffective in meeting their needs contributed to psychological distress reflective of compassion fatigue.

**Burnout**

The central theme of psychological distress was also explored using the construct of burnout. Burnout is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion (feeling drained), depersonalization (callousness towards others), and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (feeling ineffective) resulting from extreme work stress. Burnout emerged as a theme in the interview with all participants and was described through their experiences of limited time, overwhelming responsibilities, exhaustion, and limited resources available. Strategies for coping
with challenges of being a teacher were evident in the interview with all participants. Jacob highlighted the allure of seeking negative coping mechanisms, “a really emotionally draining day would end with me just going home and taking a shot of whisky and then trying to get on with my day.” Jacob later discussed his pursuit of healthy coping strategies to avoid engaging in unhealthy behaviour:

As tempting as it is to become a raging alcoholic and there were times where I was drinking way more than I should. Not in the morning, not at lunch, not alone in the shower but just coming home and having a drink everyday which is not great for your health, and so I joined a band and you know had you know card night and hang out.

As his career progressed, Jacob developed new strategies to cope with the challenges of being a teacher.

**Limited time.** Feeling limited in time emerged as a significant theme in the experiences of Claire, Grace, and Isaac in working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom. When asked about what is frustrating about being a teacher, Claire responded, “Just, it’s the time thing. I just, when I was teaching last year, I just, I felt like I didn’t have any of the time that I needed to do anything.” Claire felt limited in her time to meet the demands of her role as a teacher successfully. Claire continued by describing the specifics of her work with exceptional learners as it related to time:

I would transition them in, that would be another 5 minutes of them actually getting to class if I was lucky it would be five minutes, and then we would have to start packing up, and so what I would have half an hour for actual teaching, and so it was one of those things where I’m, you know, when is the learning supposed to
happen? Or when are we supposed to have those conversations for the hidden curriculum thing, part of school where you are talking about the social issues or you are talking about those development things that aren’t necessarily in math.

For Claire, feeling limited in her time directly related to her experiences of effectiveness as a teacher working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom. Similarly, Grace suggested that the factor that most inhibited her ability to succeed as a teacher was time “you need time to process some things and reflect and find resources that are appropriate for students. Time to go to a workshop and learn new things. Time to teach the curriculum in a proper way, yeah, time is the biggest issue.” Commenting on her effectiveness as a teacher, Claire stated: “if I had half the amount of students in that class I feel like I could have done 300% better.” For Claire, having fewer students in her class meant having more time to support each student, and ultimately would be more effective as a teacher. Time also emerged later in the interview with Claire as it related to balancing the various responsibilities of being a teacher in the regular classroom:

Not feeling like I had enough time. And so that feeds into the whole eating thing not feeling like I had enough time to eat or talk to students or meet with students, do small group work or you know, even do small things like check agendas, do I have enough time to do that or you know, properly prep for a science experiment.

It was, just not enough time in the period not enough time in the day.

Claire felt that a lack of time was a major obstacle in meeting the responsibilities of her role as a teacher. Similar to Claire, Isaac discussed the impact of limited time on satisfying the responsibilities of being a teacher and the impact it had on his health:

I had the food but it’s finding time, I think, to do it. Because you’re in a placement, and even when you’re teaching, generally in the classroom you really
want to do things well and so I wouldn’t take the time to take a break because I would think ‘oh no, well, I want to spend this lunch with this student who I know needs more time, they need some support, or this staff member needs help with this.’ So I don’t take my time personally, and physically that exhausts me, and I’m not healthy if I’m not eating.

Isaac suggested that time constraints resulted in compromising his own physical and emotional health in order to meet the needs of his students and fulfill the responsibilities of his role. Like Claire and Isaac, Grace discussed the importance of time in successfully meeting the responsibilities of her professional role:

Everyday there would be at least one crisis so you had to balance your organization of things that need to be done on a daily basis with crisis time situations. Sometimes you felt kind of ineffective because otherwise it would prioritize your ability to do your job and that is part of your job, the crisis situations. But you do get behind on certain things unless you’re willing to put in the work later on after school. But that really impedes your own mental health as well.

In discussing her effectiveness as a teacher, Grace addressed the time constraints that limit a teachers’ ability to fulfill all their responsibilities, causing them to use her personal time which can ultimately contribute to reduced mental health. Although the participants discussed limited time more generally as teachers, the responsibilities that come with inclusion of exceptional learners placed additional constraints on their time and their subsequent self-perceptions of effectiveness in their professional role.
**Overwhelming responsibilities.** The responsibility of the professional role was found to be a prominent theme in the interview with all participants. Claire commented on the nature of responsibilities by stating: “I just feel like it’s so many responsibilities for one human, like it’s just a ton, ha-ha, it’s the burden of responsibility to where you feel like, you feel responsible for all these young people and then but you feel like you’re doing it alone.” Although Claire did not express resentment toward specific responsibilities, the countless overwhelming responsibilities of being a teacher was a challenge for her. Claire later discussed the impact of her many responsibilities by stating: “I have so much to do, I have so much math to get through in the day and I wasn’t thinking ‘okay, so what is it in this precise moment that the students are telling you what they need.’” The overwhelming responsibilities of being a regular classroom were difficult to balance for Claire, with student needs being overlooked to manage curriculum content. Claire later outlined the specific responsibilities that can accumulate for the regular classroom teacher:

> It’s such a hard job and it’s such a demanding job and you have so many unwritten responsibilities in terms of you’re not just there teaching–you’re there you know responding to students, you’re there supervising students and tracking their growth and being able to fit curriculum into the school year. And then also thinking about the wider community of the school–it’s a million responsibilities and you know if you don’t find that stressful then you’re a very particular person, but most people I know would say that teaching is just inherently stressful because there’s so much to the job.

Similarly, Isaac listed the many responsibilities of being a classroom teacher that he found frustrating:
Marking—I don’t like marking very much. Attendance because I always forget, um, sometimes planning can be frustrating because I know how much time it can take to plan things. Having an organized system, generally, whether it’s like handing assignments back, checking off who did what, I’m really really poor with that type of stuff so that’s frustrating for me.

For Isaac, the necessary organizational responsibilities that did not involve his relationship with students added a challenge to his professional experience. In line with Claire and Isaac, Grace discussed the many responsibilities of being a teacher and working with students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom:

There’s a lot of decisions you have to make all the time, um, and there’s a lot of work to be done behind the scenes so, while you’re in school you’re in the moment and you’re trying to accommodate and adapt [for exceptional learners] and help students and scaffold their learning and then there’s also a lot of prep work that has to be done before that. And even after that, so there’s a lot of reflection that happens, a lot of um, and that is just time consuming its cognitive consuming, there’s also the element of you coming up against challenges to do with uh, different belief systems from other, from parents, from teachers, maybe principals sometimes.

Grace’s role as a teacher included a range of responsibilities which she found difficult to escape. Grace later suggested that the expected responsibilities may be unique to the culture of the individual school:

A school where a lot is expected of you which was the case in my second school. I did find the lines more blurred because I found I had to do a lot more work at
home. And so the line was blurred because there’s a lot of work to be done and I sometimes I found myself waking up at 5 in the morning thinking about all the things I had to do the next day at school. So it’s difficult. You can try to, it depends on how much work you have to, you’re expected to do as a teacher at the certain school.

For Grace, the responsibilities of her role were not a constant consequence of teaching but dependent on the specific workplace context. Grace discussed how the she adapted to the overwhelming responsibilities of being a teacher as she progressed through her career,

I think that as you move along your journey as a teacher you learn a lot but then you also realize how much more you can be doing and that balance is difficult and um, you need to deal with that internally and realize okay I’ve done enough, I’ve done as much as I can do. Otherwise you kind of beat yourself up over things that you can’t actually do.

As Grace became a more experienced teacher she recognized that there is a limit to the responsibilities that can be fulfilled without feeling ineffective as a teacher.

Claire discussed the impact that teaching had on her physical health, reflecting: “just mentally so preoccupied with my work that I even found it hard to fall asleep. So it was really that whole work life consuming my personal life part.” When probed further, Claire discussed the stress she felt in her personal life to plan and manage her responsibilities as a teacher, “It was more so just trying to figure out, okay, I need to do this before period 2 and I need to do before the end of the day and I need to make sure that I call back this parent before the kids come in and don’t forget you have [yard] duty because its day 5. It was more so me feeling stressed about the things to come the next day.” For Claire, the responsibilities of being a teacher consumed her
personal life as well as her professional. Jacob shared a similar sentiment, stating: “I would just be constantly thinking and perseverating about what was happening in the classroom, what can be done better, that kind of thing.” Jacob found that his challenges as a teacher were often brought home to his personal life. Like Claire and Jacob, Adam found it difficult to separate his professional responsibilities from his personal life:

Sometimes it’s very easy to leave what happened at school and sometimes it’s difficult, like, there have been full days where all my lessons have bombed and it’s like, it sucks, because you put in your six hours at school and then you go home, and I certainly plan for another couple of hours, so it’s like, it’s hard for me not to… not to separate those pieces, and I’m trying not to take it personally, but it is hard sometimes.

Feeling unsuccessful in meeting the responsibilities of being a teacher was difficult for Adam to move past during his personal time.

Adam later discussed the negative impact that feeling ineffective as a teacher has on his emotional wellbeing:

Another thing that’s difficult for my emotional wellbeing I guess is days when um lesson that I’ve worked hard on have bombed…Because I work so hard doing them, I spend a number of hours at home preparing that stuff, so bringing it here when the kids are unenthusiastic about it it’s kind of painful cause then I think well why did I even make that. But, and even the worse part about it is, at this point, I now know the types they like and the types of things they don’t like so when I make something with them in mind and they don’t like it, for x or y reason, it’s just kind of disappointing.
Meeting the responsibilities of the professional role weighed heavy on all participants, and feeling ineffective in that aspect of teaching had implications on their overall competence and wellness.

**Exhaustion.** All participants with the exception of Adam discussed feelings of exhaustion related to their professional role. In the context of being exhausted as a novice teacher, Claire suggested, “I think that’s actually pretty common for new teachers because you feel like you’re starting from scratch, to give it all to the job and have nothing.” As a new teacher, Claire felt that exhaustion was a normal aspect of her job. Claire later added: “that’s the biggest thing in terms of my own experience that I found with other new teachers, specifically, in learning how to adapt to this new role being an in-service teacher is just, so tired and you love the job but gosh you’re so tired. And that’s the thing that I keep hearing over and over again, and I’m like, yeah, unexpected exhaustion.”

Considering the negative impact that exhaustion may have on individuals, it may be an important factor to consider when discussing the high attrition in early career teachers. Isaac lacked full-time employment experience in the regular classroom but reflected on his experience of exhaustion in the different teaching contexts he had worked in:

> Because I’m a supply teacher it’s a lot easier because I rarely have to do planning. But when I’m working in the specialized program [with at-risk youth], there wasn’t a lot of separation and that can be really tough mentally, to uh, never switch gears really. But because they were such short programs–like two weeks at a time, and then you get a week off, and then two weeks at a time, um you were like a 100% and then you were like 0% after. So I didn’t separate really well.
Isaac continued by stating: “I need to rest and I need to recharge and if I have worked my tail off to plan and to think about students but I’m so mentally exhausted, then the quality of my teaching goes down.” For Isaac, the nature of his teaching contexts did not allow for a separation between his personal and professional life resulting in exhaustion and ultimately impacting his competence as a teacher. Isaac later discussed how time was a factor in experiencing exhaustion because of his role, “I would spend hours at home planning and didn’t have any personal time and so, physically, I’m tired because my mind has just been thinking about work and that has an effect on my body and you just get tired and eventually get sick.” Isaac lacked the time to fulfill his responsibilities of being a teacher during the work day and the time dedicated during personal life was psychologically consuming and exhausting. Isaac continued to specify the most challenging period of his teaching career:

I remember working really hard, especially in the early years with this specialized [at-risk] program where I would just be planning and planning and planning and planning all the time. And, it would make me sick by the end of the two weeks because I would just be so exhausted and I hadn’t been sleeping eight hours and I hadn’t been necessarily eating as much as should be so your body is like ‘okay, are we done? Now we’re going to get sick’ kind of thing.

Isaac’s experience teaching in the specialized program, as opposed to supply teaching, parallels the experience of teaching in the regular education classroom on contract or as a long-term occasional teacher.

Reflecting on her future in the profession of teaching, Claire stated: “I’m not sure it’s a culture I want to be in right now…I still feel like the teacher part of me is being satisfied working outside of the k-8 system. I don’t know if in the next five years I’m going to return to it.
I feel like I’d have to take it on a year-by-year basis and we’ll see what happens but right now it just, I just don’t feel like it’s a good match.” The workplace and emotional pressures of her role pushed Claire out of the profession following her year as a long-term occasional teacher. Although her love for teaching has not faded, characterized in her pursuit of graduate studies in education, the social-emotional challenges of the role has a teacher and the culture of the profession has left Claire questioning her return to teaching.

Discussing her experiences of emotional exhaustion and reduced mental health, Claire addressed the need for prolonged time off:

I don’t think they realized that it’s not a matter of taking a sick day every now and then. I was completely depleted and I had nothing left so for me, I needed to take a good three weeks off where I was just like I can’t accept any jobs I’m too sick, so, uh, yeah. In my case uh, an occasional sick day wouldn’t have really been helpful in my recovery. It needed to be a prolonged period of time, but yeah I did do that after my LTO.

Claire’s thoughts highlight the inadequate relief that a single sick day offers to teachers struggling with burnout or compassion fatigue. Jacob also discussed the concept of mental health days to recuperate from the challenges of being a teacher:

I’m a strong believer in mental health days, I never went on stress leave but it was a part of my experience to take, you know, a day occasionally and just you know um, just to take care of myself a little bit. And I balanced that out by occasionally going to work even when I wasn’t you know absolutely healthy. By working ill I felt like I could skip work well, and in the end it would all kind of balance out.
For Jacob, sick days were a way to balance his health despite the social and emotional challenges of being a teacher. In contrast to Jacob and Claire, Isaac expressed that despite experiencing exhaustion, he did not feel the work to be stressful, “Not very stressful. Um I think it’s exhausting but I don’t see exhaustion as stress. I don’t really, I don’t think I get stressed very easily or if I do I don’t know it as stress.” This may be due to Isaac having experience as a supply teacher and in a specialized program rather than full-time teaching in the regular classroom.

Exhaustion can also emerge as a result of the workplace environment, as discussed by Claire, “that was a surprising way exhaustion snuck up on me, because I didn’t realize something so small could tire me out. It wasn’t anything to do with what I was actively doing, it had to more so do with the environment.” Claire reflected on her sensitivity to sound in the classroom and the potentially draining effect it had on her.

Considering the impact of teacher exhaustion, Claire stated:

I feel like exhaustion has the most to do with it. And just like they could be the best teacher, like a great teacher, have the most fantastic outlook on teaching, great, um like, personality for teaching but you know, you can have all those skills and all that background and all that things, all those things attached to your personhood but if you’re so tired you can’t, you know, you can’t use any of those things in your toolkit.

As Claire highlights, exhaustion can limit the success and competence of a teacher despite the many qualities that may set them up to be an effective teacher. Isaac reflected on the impact that exhaustion from teaching can have on personal relationships, “it affects my relationship if I’m taking work with me and I don’t shut-off.” Isaac’s negative social and
emotional experiences from work extended to his relationship with his partner, putting an additional pressure on an essential support system in his life. In contrast, Grace discussed that difficulties in a teacher’s personal life may contribute to negative social and emotional experiences in the classroom, “I think when you have situations where your home life is not the perfect one and you’re dealing with stressful things at school and you’re a young teacher, I think that was one of my earlier experiences then it can really impact your ability to remain well.” As Grace suggested, teachers’ professional and personal lives do not exist in isolation from one another, and the challenges in one aspect of their life can contribute to exhaustion in the other. Claire, Isaac, Jacob, and Grace discussed feeling exhausted due to the overwhelming responsibilities of being a teacher rather than their specific work with exceptional learners.

**Limited resources.** Four participants with the exception of Isaac discussed the various necessary resources to feel successful as teachers. When asked what she would change about her role or responsibilities as a teacher, Claire stated, “I feel like if I had half the amount of students in that classroom, we would have been so much more equipped to deal with all the challenges that come with teaching so like, there are a ton of other things I could talk about in terms of resources and training but that’s the biggest thing for me, it’s like give me smaller class sizes.” For Claire, with a smaller classroom size she could meet the needs of her students with the time and resources available to her. In addition to needing more time, Grace suggested another important resource in succeeding as a teacher. “Sometimes money would be an issue because you couldn’t get the program that you really wanted or attend a workshop because it was too expensive or um, or you could buy the resources that you really want to have at your fingertips for example. Yeah you had to be creative with what you had.”
Describing the experience of a teacher that may be struggling in their role, Jacob stated:

Well I would presume that they don’t have what they need. And that may be partially their fault, but it’s more likely the fault of their school or their principal or their board or their ministry of education…when people who are capable, intelligent, well-meaning, emotionally available are having a really hard time teaching–I don’t attribute that to their fault. Um, so yeah I would say that I would describe a person who’s having a difficult time as someone who is unsupported.

To Jacob, an essential resource in the success and wellbeing of teachers is the various supports made available to them by other key stakeholders in the school. Adam discussed his colleagues as an important resource in helping with the frustrations of teaching, “the homeroom teacher has had these students since September so she knows, she knows what works and just approaching her as a resource to be like, I’m getting really frustrated, I’m trying to figure out, I need a writing mark for this student I don’t know what to do.” For Adam, colleagues with more experience supporting students with exceptionalities were essential in managing the challenges of being a regular classroom teacher. Adam later reiterated the role of his colleagues as an essential resource in supporting students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom and coping with various challenges:

Really voicing those frustrations because a lot of the teachers might feel the same way – I wouldn’t know that if I didn’t talk about it, and talking about it with them has gotten me strategies. Even if they’re not feeling those feelings at that moment, I mean, everybody, I’m the newest teacher at the school so
everybody has been able to accommodate the students. So just learning from them by voicing my frustrations has been helpful.

Developing a community of supportive teachers and administrators can be an important resource for beginning teachers, particularly by providing professional and personal support in coping with the frustrations of working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom. Claire, Jacob, Grace, and Adam reported that feeling limited in the resources available, including education and colleagues, contributed to feelings of psychological distress reflective of burnout.

**Summary**

Teachers’ social and emotional experiences were defined using the central themes of psychological wellness and psychological distress, presented as two overarching sections of this chapter. The theme of psychological wellness was explored using the construct of thriving with two subthemes that reflect participants’ experiences of vitality and learning. This component of the chapter included three major sections (thriving, vitality, and learning), with the first section including two minor sections (teacher thriving and student thriving), the second major section including three minor sections (feeling energized, passion, and student engagement) and the third major section including three minor sections (workplace learning, lifelong learning, and student learning). The central theme of psychological distress was explored using the constructs of burnout and compassion fatigue. This component of the chapter included two major sections (compassion fatigue and burnout). The first major section included three minor sections (inclusive classrooms, meeting student needs, and resources to support success) and the second major section included four minor sections (limited time, overwhelming responsibilities, exhaustion, and limited resources).

The chapter began by addressing participants’ perspectives on inclusion in order to
situate the discussion on teachers work with exceptional learners. Grace, Jacob, Isaac, Adam, and Claire reflected on both positive and negative social-emotional experiences in their teaching career, and all participants expressed their support for integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom provided it is done appropriately and was the best plan for the student.

All five participants described experiences of vitality and learning as essential to their workplace satisfaction and overall thriving. The participants indicated that despite the challenges and frustration in working with exceptional learners, they continued to grow and learn in their work and to feel passionate and energized about their work. A central theme that emerged from the interviews with participants was the element of vitality. Participants described vitality through experiences that helped them feel energized in their professional role, maintained their passion about their work, and encouraged student engagement. The theme of feeling energized at work emerged in the interviews with four of the five participants, all but Claire. Claire, Isaac, Jacob, and Grace all discussed feeling passionate about their work, with the passion of other teachers and the rewarding nature of their experience with students acting as sources for that passion. For Jacob, Adam, and Grace, the success and engagement of their students was important to their experience of vitality in their work.

Another central theme that emerged from the interviews was learning. Participants described the importance of learning through the value of workplace learning and lifelong learning, as well as experiences of satisfaction from the visible growth and learning of their students. Claire, Isaac, Adam, Jacob, and Grace all indicated that learning experienced in the workplace was a significant rewarding aspect of their professional life. Workplace learning was discussed in five contexts: working with exceptional learners, feeling competent as a teacher, the role of the workplace culture in encouraging learning, related to personal growth, and significant
to the experience of novice teachers that was also highlighted as a factor in leaving the teaching profession. Lifelong learning emerged as a theme in the interviews with all five participants, most robustly in the interviews with Isaac, Jacob, and Grace. Lifelong learning was discussed in the context of formal education and professional development and training, each of which contributed to participants’ feelings of competence. In addition to their own learning on the job and the value of lifelong learning, participants discussed the significance of student learning to the work satisfaction of teachers.

The central theme of psychological distress was first explored using the construct of compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue emerged in the participants’ discussion regarding the challenges of their students with exceptionalities in the context of inclusive classrooms, meeting the needs of students, and resources to support the success of students. Participants discussed both positive and negative experiences related to the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom. For all five participants, meeting the needs of typically developing and exceptional students appeared in relation to academic and emotional needs, student needs beyond the classroom, feelings of competence as a teacher, and reduced wellbeing as teachers when they felt they did not meet the needs of their students. A discussion of the resources available to students with exceptionalities to support success emerged in interviews with Claire, Jacob, Isaac, Adam, and Grace. Specific to their work with exceptional learners, the participants’ impulse to help their students while also feeling ineffective in meeting their needs contributed to psychological distress reflective of compassion fatigue.

The central theme of psychological distress was also explored using the construct of burnout. Burnout emerged as a theme in the interviews with all participants and was described through their experiences of limited time, overwhelming responsibilities, exhaustion, and limited
resources available. Although the participants discussed limited time more generally as teachers, the responsibilities that come with inclusion of exceptional learners placed additional constraints on their time and their subsequent self-perceptions of effectiveness in their professional role. The overwhelming responsibility of being a teacher was found to be a prominent theme in the interview with all participants. Claire, Isaac, Jacob, and Grace discussed feeling exhausted due to the overwhelming responsibilities of being a teacher rather than their specific work with exceptional learners. Claire, Jacob, Grace, and Adam reported that feeling limited in the resources available, including education and supportive knowledgeable colleagues, contributed to feelings of psychological distress.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in regular education classrooms. The objective was to describe teachers’ social and emotional experiences, understood through the lenses of thriving, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Teachers’ social and emotional experiences were defined using the central constructs of psychological wellness and psychological distress. The construct of psychological wellness was viewed through the lens of thriving which in turn was explored through two aspects: vitality and learning. The construct of psychological distress was explored using the lenses of burnout and compassion fatigue. Limitations and implications of the research will be addressed prior to a summative conclusion including recommendations for future research.

Psychological Wellness Themes

Thrivingle

The theme of thriving emerged as significant experiences of all five participants. The definition of thriving as described by Spreitzer and colleagues (2005) guided the interpretation of psychological wellness. Based on this socially embedded model, thriving is defined as the concurrent experiences of vitality (affective) and learning (cognitive). Each participant described experiences representative of vitality and learning, and emphasized that these were essential to their workplace satisfaction and overall thriving. Vitality was expressed through a range of experiences related to a passion for their work, feeling energized, and student engagement. Learning as reflective of thriving emerged through a series of contexts: lifelong learning, workplace learning, and student learning.
The participants indicated that despite the challenges and frustration in working with exceptional learners, they continued to grow and learn in their jobs and to feel passionate and energized about their work. Claire and Jacob directly described selecting teaching as an occupation that would allow for their thriving. These participants actively chose a profession that they believed would meet their needs as teachers and as individuals. Although the other participants did not address this decision directly, the qualities of the profession and motivations to pursue it may reflect a similar disposition. Overall, the motivations of an individual to choose to pursue the teaching profession may be an important predictor of their psychological wellness and thriving. Consistent with the research by Van den Berghe and colleagues (2014), teachers with more autonomous motivation, rather than controlled motivation, experience higher needs satisfaction at work, are more supportive of student’s needs, and exhibit less burnout. Those who do not experience vitality through learning as teachers may be at-risk of psychological distress and potentially burnout and compassion fatigue.

While Claire pursued teaching because it fulfilled her needs for learning and relationships, Jacob chose a career in teaching because it offered opportunities for creativity and vitality. An underlying similar element in Claire’s and Jacob’s pursuit of teaching was the impact of positive relationships with students in contributing to experiences of vitality, passion, and growth as individuals. Jacob and Isaac described the concept of student thriving, addressing the teacher’s role of adapting in order to meet the needs of their students. As Isaac described, a teacher has a professional responsibility to help their students thrive in the classroom. Extending that sentiment, these teachers’ ability to create an environment where their students could thrive had a direct connection to their own experiences of thriving. Teachers lacking experience with vitality and learning in their professional roles may improve their own thriving by facilitating
opportunities for students to thrive. In contrast, teachers lacking the experience of developing students’ thriving may struggle with their own psychological wellness. Framing teaching as a human-service occupation, where teachers are viewed as professionals who fundamentally seek to support the social-emotional and academic success of their students, might protect teachers from compassion fatigue. The professional responsibility of supporting the growth of students beyond a focus just on achievement may also support the psychological wellness of teachers.

Although Claire, Grace, Isaac, and Jacob all left the profession of public school teaching, they remained engaged in the field of education and pursued areas related to exceptionalities. Considering the high attrition rate of teachers, these four participants are not examples of direct professional attrition. Each pursued an alternative path that would engage them in learning and allow for vitality. Instead of psychological distress, these teachers sought opportunities that would allow for psychological wellness and thriving. In turn, it is possible that they were redirected away from the route to burnout and compassion fatigue by pursuing graduate studies in education. This pursuit, in the context of research and learning further about exceptionalities directly, is related to their feeling effective and competent in supporting the needs of students with exceptionalities. Participants not only chose to pursue higher education so they could thrive, they chose a field directly related to working with students with exceptionalities that explored the challenges they experienced while they were actively teaching in the regular education classroom. They not only sought higher education that was related to self-improvement and growth; it also appeared to be a consequence of their work with students with exceptionalities. These teachers wanted to increase their knowledge, understanding, and ability to provide support for their students who they often witnessed as struggling in the regular education classroom. This suggested that working with exceptional students challenged these educators to be better teachers.
for their students. Their work with students with exceptionalities did not push them out of the field of education; it encouraged the participants to seek learning and experience related to better teaching for students with exceptionalities in a graduate school setting.

**Vitality.** Evidence of the element of vitality was found in the interview with all five participants. Vitality is an essential component of thriving used to understand the theme of psychological wellness in this research. Participants described vitality through experiences that helped them feel energized in their professional roles, maintained their passion about their work, and encouraged student engagement. Three participants, Grace, Adam, and Jacob, all described feeling energized by their work as a teacher. The changing dynamic of their role as a teacher and the fluid nature of their responsibilities helped Grace and Isaac feel energized with their work. For Adam, working with children necessitated feeling energized in order to meet the needs of students successfully and to meet the diverse responsibilities of being a regular education classroom teacher. Feeling successful as a teacher was directly related to feeling energized at work for Adam. Because of the direct interaction with students within the elementary school division, Adam echoed the dynamic nature and energizing quality of being a teacher. For Grace, Isaac, and Adam, the everyday experiences of teaching and working closely with individual students helped them feel energized. The fulfillment of having a positive interpersonal connection with students revitalized their passion for teaching. Feeling related to students encouraged their self-perceptions of competence as a teacher and encouraged the energized quality that is essential to vitality and overall thriving. The reciprocal nature of relationships with students supported psychological wellness of both the student and the teacher. For teachers to experience vitality they likely benefit greatly from feeling energized through their work in the classroom, specifically the relationships they have with students. As discussed in research on
teachers working with exceptional learners in the special education contexts, positive relationships with students helps maintain teachers’ feelings of passion and engagement for their work (Perry et al., 2015; Schlichte et al., 2005). Teachers lacking the energy from working with students may be at-risk of psychological distress. Beyond the impact on daily challenges of classroom practice, the experience of psychological distress for teachers that might arise from working closely with exceptional students can negatively impact the wellness of students.

Jacob felt energized by maintaining his own engagement as a teacher, that is, if he was bored, his students would likely be bored. An additional challenge to feeling energized was the limited relatedness to students that Jacob experienced when he moved to the specialized classroom for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder compared to the emotionally-reciprocal nature of working with typically developing children in a regular education classroom. The energy Jacob experienced working within the specialized education context was, at times, lacking. While working in the regular education classroom, Jacob experienced continuous energy from the work and connection with students. Working exclusively with ASD students, energy was experienced in bursts that were portioned until the next opportunity; the energy was sporadic and based on unique student-teacher shared experiences. While vitality was continuously sustained in the regular education classroom, occasional powerful rewarding instances maintained Jacob’s commitment to teaching in the ASD classroom. Jacob compared this to an adrenaline rush. Whereas ASD students are only concerned with whether their needs are met, in Jacob’s view feeling satisfied with interactions with ASD students happens rarely for teachers, but arises in strong bursts. By comparison, in his view, energy is sustained by reciprocal and successful interactions with typically-developing students—like a morphine drip. Although Jacob left classroom teaching to pursue higher education, if he did not find a position in higher
education he would like to return to the regular education classroom where he experienced the greatest sense of being energized. Jacob’s initial attrition from the profession of teaching directly followed his work in the ASD classroom. That pursuit of higher education in the context of exceptionality research helped Jacob maintain his passion for and growth in the field of education. The continuous experience of energy felt by Jacob in the regular education classroom was more supportive of his psychological wellness than a specialized classroom, and presented a context where he felt he could obtain more success if he returned to classroom teaching.

Related to the experience of vitality, although four of the five participants were currently pursuing graduate studies in education, they maintained a continued passion for supporting the success of students. An important element of their passion was their focus on researching exceptionalities and improving their own knowledge and understanding of supporting students with special education needs. Even though they left in-service teaching, they still cared about education—specifically students with exceptionalities. Their reasons for leaving public classroom teaching were not because they lost interest in teaching. They shifted their focus to supporting students with exceptionalities better, which may have been related to the challenges they witnessed when they were teaching. Despite the challenges of supporting students with exceptionalities, they never stopped caring about helping their students because their relationships with them were integral to their energy and passion. Isaac and Grace discussed the importance of having relationships with colleagues that continued to express a passion for teaching and sustaining their own passion for the profession. Being within a community of passionate teachers was essential for these teachers to maintain their passion as teachers and exposure to such teachers sustained their own passion for supporting exceptional students and learning. An essential element of psychological wellness for teachers is the culture of a school
and the overall workplace environment—one that specifically values education, learning, and supporting students. Research by Deci and Ryan (2008) and Spreitzer and Porath (2014) has found that the work satisfaction, performance, and wellbeing of professionals is dependent on the work environment meeting the needs of its staff.

Passion also emerged as a theme in the context of rewarding or satisfying experiences as teachers in the interview of Claire, Grace, and Jacob. Specifically rewarding experiences often tied to relationships with students and supporting student success sustained their passion for teaching. When teachers have positive experiences in their work with students, it perpetuates their passion for their work and contributes to their psychological wellness and overall thriving (Perry et al., 2015; Schlichte et al., 2005). Claire expressed her passion for her own learning and described seeing learning occur in her students as a rewarding aspect of her job that maintained her vitality. The value she placed on learning was a key aspect of maintaining her passion for teaching. She cared for her students, and because she valued learning so much, when she saw their shared value of learning it supported her feelings of competence as a teacher and was a rewarding aspect of her professional role. Both Jacob and Grace expressed enjoyment for their work as a teacher and the positive role they could play in the lives of their students. The satisfaction that resulted in positive student experiences extended beyond the classroom to the overall wellness of students. Jacob and Grace were not only supporting students within their classroom but also encouraging the overall growth of their students as individuals. The reach of their success as teachers encouraged their passion for their work. Alternatively, teachers who lack the perspective that they are able to help students succeed beyond their classroom may not be able to experience the thriving that Jacob and Grace felt in their classroom.
Three of the participants identified students’ feeling energized and engaged at school as a rewarding experience and as being essential to their satisfaction as teachers. Witnessing students’ passion and engagement about being in the classroom was indicative of effectiveness as teachers which contributed to their own passion and vitality. Teachers who do not feel they contribute to students’ engagement may experience compromised psychological wellness. For teachers to maintain their passion for their work, they should provide a classroom that fosters student engagement and passion. In the context of supporting students with exceptionalities, overcoming the obstacles these students all face in achieving success is an important component to maintaining the engagement of all students. As Isaac discussed, students’ knowledge and understanding of their own exceptionalities may hinder their passion for learning which could also be addressed in order to support teachers’ general success. As articulated by these teachers, students having positive and engaging experiences in their classroom contributed to these teachers’ feelings of competence as a teacher. In this context, a teacher’s responsibility expands beyond curriculum expectations and extends to the support of student growth as individuals. Responsibilities go beyond being a teacher; being a teacher includes creating an environment where students feel they can learn and where they want to learn. In addition to balancing all the other responsibilities, some teachers may feel overwhelmed by their various responsibilities. Teachers might feel that they do not have the time or energy to do anything beyond their mandate—but supporting the emotional needs of students may help teachers feel more energized and reinvigorate their passion for teaching.

**Learning.** A central pattern presented in the interviews of all five participants was the element of learning. Participants described learning through the value of workplace learning, lifelong learning, and experiences of satisfaction from the visible growth and learning of their
students. Not surprising, due to their choice of a career in the field of education (both as classroom teachers and as graduate students), all participants valued learning and found opportunities to engage in their own learning to be a rewarding experience.

All participants indicated that their learning experiences in the workplace (the classroom and the larger school environment) were rewarding aspects of their professional life. Adam, Grace, Isaac, and Jacob all expressed that working with exceptional learners necessitated engaging in workplace learning in order to increase their competence as teachers and to meet the needs of their students. Workplace learning was referenced both directly and indirectly as an integral part of their work with students with exceptionalities, which allowed these teachers to support their students successfully. For Jacob, the opportunity to engage in workplace learning was also a factor in his decision to pursue teaching as a profession. When Jacob felt that he no longer had opportunities for learning at work, he chose to shift his passion about education into pursuing graduate studies related to exceptionalities. Workplace learning emerged in the context of observing colleagues, adapting teaching practices to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities, personal growth, and the school culture. When teachers are able to engage in workplace learning, it can contribute to supporting overall thriving and psychological wellness (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Consistent with research on organizational psychology by Spreitzer and colleagues (2012), thriving employees seek opportunities to grow and learn.

Learning in the workplace can be evident in observing and learning from the strategies of colleagues in order to better support students with exceptionalities. Another example of workplace learning is adapting instruction when working with students with exceptionalities to improve teaching practice and meet the specific needs of individual students. Wang et al., (2015) found that higher self-efficacy in teacher’s instructional strategies was predictive of a greater
sense of personal accomplishment and overall well-being. Research by Spreitzer and colleagues (2012) suggests that feedback is essential in helping employees thrive, and teachers who are open to the feedback from students may be better able to adapt and support the student needs and increase their thriving as professionals. Teachers with rigid teaching practices may struggle with adapting their instruction to the needs of individual students, potentially leading to reduced psychological wellness. Grace discussed a colleague in her past who struggled with adapting her instruction to support a student with an exceptionality, ending with that teacher leaving her professional role at that school.

The overall findings regarding participants’ learning in this study suggest that the culture of the school community in valuing learning and education can also have an impact on the workplace learning and subsequent thriving of teachers. When workplace learning becomes an obligation rather than a rewarding pursuit, it may compromise the value of learning as a component of teachers’ thriving. For workplace learning to contribute to teachers’ thriving, it cannot be perceived as an additional responsibility to the duties of being a teacher. Grace, Jacob, and Isaac discussed the additional pressures of being required to engage in continuous workplace learning. This, in turn, could potentially have had a negative impact on their social-emotional experiences.

Lifelong learning, or learning outside of work, also appeared as an important component of four participants’ experiences of thriving. For Claire, Isaac, Jacob, and Grace, a love of learning was an integral part of their identity as individuals and was an important factor in pursuing a career in teaching. These participants’ ability to identify as a learner and as a teacher may have supported their psychological wellness. The importance of lifelong learning is evident in the decision of all five participants to pursue graduate studies in education. As Isaac
suggested, integrating workplace and lifelong learning can have implications for the growth of teachers as individuals and professionals. As evident in the discussion with each participant, the value on education and opportunities to pursue further learning contributed to their experiences of psychological wellness. The concurrent experience of learning at work and learning as individuals allowed the participants to grow and thrive, and may have acted as a protective factor against negative social-emotional experiences such as burnout and compassion fatigue. The protective value of lifelong learning can also be extended to the success of students and the psychological wellness of teachers. When teachers have opportunities to learn, it can contribute to their experiences of thriving, which in turn can help to create a supportive classroom environment for their students to learn and grow.

Teachers engaging in continuous learning can also increase their knowledge and preparedness to support students with exceptionalities better and, by extension, feel more competent and less overwhelmed by their teaching roles. Jacob noted that limited opportunities to learn and grow as a teacher motivated his pursuit of graduate studies, contributing to his leaving the profession. Jacob did not leave teaching because he stopped enjoying the work; instead, he sought opportunities in the field of special education to further his learning and vitality. Teachers lacking opportunity for learning may experience compromised psychological wellness contributing to their decision to leaving the profession.

In addition to workplace and lifelong learning, participants discussed the satisfaction of contributing to student learning. Claire, Adam, Isaac, and Grace reflected on the rewarding nature of witnessing their students engage in and value learning. Participants’ interview suggested that student learning was an important component to feeling successful as a teacher. Wang and colleagues (2015) found that teachers with higher self-efficacy in supporting student
engagement experience had lower levels of depersonalization, suggesting that teachers who feel they contribute to student learning may be protected from that component of burnout. These four participants indicated that learning and education were core values for them and seeing their students share that value was important to their thriving as teachers. Teachers, who invest time and energy into their students, experience satisfaction and a sense of personal accomplishment when they perceive themselves supporting the learning of students.

Psychological Distress Themes

Compassion Fatigue

While burnout is the result of workload conditions, compassion fatigue develops from the impulse to help others and is rooted in the social-emotional relationship between professionals and their clients. Compared to special education teachers, teachers working in regular classroom settings typically lack additional qualifications and provide support for a larger number of students with more mild to moderate educational needs (Karsenti & Collin, 2013). Regular education classroom teachers must balance the needs of typically developing students as well as the special educational needs of exceptional learners integrated into the classroom. Although participants in the present study did not experience compassion fatigue, elements of compassion fatigue, conceptualized as psychological distress resulting from the social-emotional relationship with the teachers and their students, were evident in the dialogue. This suggested that compassion fatigue may be a relevant lens when considering the experience of teachers working with exceptional learners. Elements of compassion fatigue emerged in participants’ discussions regarding the challenges of their students with exceptionalities in the context of inclusive classrooms, meeting the needs of students, and resources to support the success of students.
The challenges that come with integrating students with exceptionalities into the regular classroom emerged in interview with all five participants. For Jacob, successful inclusion of a student with an exceptionality requires the teacher to be cognizant of the emotional and educational needs of the student. Teachers witnessing a student who has not been successfully integrated into the regular classroom may experience elements of compassion fatigue. Inclusion of exceptional learners into the regular classroom can pose additional challenges, and it is the responsibility of the teachers to balance various needs as well as understand the source of behavioural issues. Teachers who are able to feel effective in balancing the needs of all students, in particular the exceptional learners that require additional support in their classroom, limit their risk of experiencing psychological distress reflective of compassion fatigue. Claire experienced guilt associated with the unsuccessful integration of her student with an exceptionality into the regular classroom and the schools’ inability to support the success of that student with insufficient resources. A teacher invested in the success of an exceptional learner may experience psychological distress when exposed to the distress of vulnerable students.

Efforts for successful inclusion of students with exceptionalities into the regular education classroom can ultimately support the psychological wellness of teachers and prevent experiences of compassion fatigue. For Jacob, the well-being of the teachers working in inclusive classrooms is tied directly to supporting the needs of all students, with teachers experiencing reduced mental health negatively impacting the wellness of students. The psychological wellness of teachers and students is reciprocal in nature, with the wellness of teachers supporting the wellness of students and the wellness of students supporting the wellness of teachers. Specific instances of challenging behaviour from students with exceptionalities had a negative impact on the well-being of participants. While some teachers may use the staffroom as
an opportunity to express frustrations, negative conversations about students with exceptionalities can lead to poor social-emotional experiences for teachers that have relationships with those students. Vicarious experiences of the stigma and challenges that students with exceptionalities need to navigate classroom experiences and expectations can contribute to psychological distress and feelings reflective of compassion fatigue for teachers with social-emotional relationships with those students. Although participants did not express any blame toward students with exceptionalities, witnessing the negative impact that having an exceptionality can have on a particular student’s motivation and confidence was frustrating. Vicarious exposure to the psychological distress of students with exceptionalities can place teachers at-risk of compassion fatigue.

Meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities emerged as a significant component of interviews with all participants. Isaac discussed the power of a student’s life outside of the classroom, emphasizing feeling limited in protecting his students and meeting all of their needs. Although supporting student needs outside of the classroom is not in the scope of a teacher’s responsibilities, investing in supporting students as people necessitates an awareness of all aspects of the student’s life. In addition, student experiences outside of the classroom influenced the students’ learning and emotional needs within the classroom. While Jacob did not express blame towards students, he did acknowledge the demanding environment exceptional learners can potentially create for the teachers. Exceptional learners by definition have additional educational needs compared to typically developing children. Thus, integrating exceptional learners into the regular classroom increases the demands on teachers, placing these teachers at-risk of psychological distress.
Claire’s description of guilt and rumination around a specific incident is indicative of psychological distress resulting from the challenges of working with students with exceptionalities. In part, Claire attributed the limitations of meeting student needs to the environment of the school, along with the overwhelming number of students, leaving teachers lacking the necessary time. Claire was able to identify the reduced wellness she experienced as a teacher, while emphasizing that it limited the support she was able to provide her students. Adam expressed a compromised sense of empathy in meeting the needs of his students that he judged as trivial, in order to better support his students during more tumultuous circumstances.

Teachers’ empathy may be compromised as a result of continuous exposure to the challenging behaviour of students with exceptionalities. Teachers may withdraw from their work or from relationships with students as a way to protect their own psychological wellness when the support they provide for students with exceptionalities is ineffective in successfully improving the circumstances for the students.

The importance of having the resources to support the success of students with exceptionalities emerged in the discussion with Claire, Jacob, Isaac, Adam, and Grace. Feeling unable to ask for help from other teachers is an issue that can arise for regular classroom teachers as well as resource teachers or teachers in a special education classroom, a pattern that emerged across the different roles individual participants held. Highlighted in research by Schlichte et al. (2005), perceived support from a mentor and colleagues within the school contributed to the well-being of teachers working with exceptional learners. Consistent with what was discussed regarding burnout, other stakeholders involved in supporting students are an essential resource for teachers. Considering the social-emotional relationship between teachers and students, teachers may feel that they should be able to support the student on their own, and may feel
ashamed to seek outside help which could place teachers at risk of psychological distress reflective of compassion fatigue. Adam discussed that relying on his colleagues and administration enabled him to successfully support his students with exceptionalities and grow as a teacher. Relying on assistive technology can also allow teachers to support the success of students with exceptionalities beyond their own capabilities. Assistive technology can act as an important resource for teachers to support the needs of students with exceptionalities when it is out of the scope of the teacher’s abilities. The use of assistive technology as a resource may have less stigma attached to it for teachers, conceptualized as an additional tool that benefits the student, without compromising feelings of effectiveness for the teacher. Teachers who do not have access to assistive technology may feel ineffective in supporting specific needs of students with exceptionalities, placing them at-risk of psychological distress.

**Burnout**

The theme of psychological distress was next explored using the construct of burnout. Burnout is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion (feeling drained), depersonalization (callousness towards others), and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (feeling ineffective) resulting from extreme work stress. Although participants did not experience explicit burnout, elements of burnout, conceptualized as psychological distress resulting from workload conditions were evident in participants’ interview as experienced through limited time and resources, overwhelming responsibilities, and exhaustion.

For Claire, feeling limited in her time to support students fully directly related to her experiences of effectiveness as a teacher working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom. Similarly, Grace suggested that the factor that most inhibited her ability to succeed as a teacher was time. Feeling incapable of meeting the work demands due to time constraints is
tied directly to the social-emotional experience of teachers. Teachers who feel incapable of successfully meeting their responsibilities experience reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, contributing to psychological distress indicative of burnout. For Claire, having fewer students in her class would mean having more time to dedicate to supporting each student, and ultimately being more effective as a teacher. In the context of teaching exceptional learners in the regular classroom, feeling effective as a teacher includes meeting the individual needs of all students. Having more students in the classroom increases the time demands while simultaneously reducing available time to meet the needs of each student, leaving teachers at-risk for burnout. Time, as emerged in the interview with Claire and Isaac, was related to balancing the various responsibilities of being a teacher in the regular classroom. The responsibility of their professional roles was found to be a prominent theme in the interview with all participants. The potentially overwhelming responsibilities of being a regular classroom teacher with exceptional students in their classroom may be difficult to balance for teachers, with these students’ needs being overlooked in order to manage the curriculum responsibilities of the whole class. As Grace became a more experienced teacher she recognized that there is a limit to the responsibilities that can be fulfilled without limiting her feelings of competence as a teacher. Teachers that can recognize their own limits within their work responsibilities might be able to protect themselves from experiencing reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, thereby preventing psychological distress and burnout. Although recognizing individual limitations may be easier for more experienced teachers, it can be a perspective that could have strong implications for new teachers entering the profession. Meeting the responsibilities of their professional role appeared to weigh heavily on all participants and feeling ineffective in that aspect of teaching had implications on their overall competence and psychological wellness.
As a new teacher, Claire felt that exhaustion was a normal aspect of her job. Considering the negative impact that exhaustion may have on an individual’s psychological wellness, it may be an important factor to consider when discussing the endemic high attrition in early career teachers. For Isaac, the nature of his teaching contexts did not allow for a separation between his personal and professional life that resulted in exhaustion and ultimately impacting his competence as a teacher. Isaac lacked the time to fulfill his responsibilities of being a teacher during the work day and the time dedicated during personal life was psychologically consuming and exhausting. Teachers can experience exhaustion when they must use their personal time outside of work hours in order to meet the responsibilities of their role and support student success.

Although her passion for teaching has not faded, the social-emotional challenges of the role as a teacher and the culture of the profession left Claire questioning her return to teaching. As Claire highlighted, exhaustion can limit the success and competence of a teacher despite the many qualities that may set them up to be an effective teacher. Teachers experiencing exhaustion due to work stress are at-risk of psychological distress, specifically burnout. The reduced wellness that results from feeling exhausted from work has implications on teachers’ commitment to the profession. Teachers who may be committed and engaged to teaching can find themselves lacking the energy to support successfully the needs of their students. Although exhaustion may result from various sources, limited time and resources to support students emerged as the main factors in the interview with participants.

The resources available to teachers were another element of psychological distress reflective of burnout. In Jacob’s experience, an essential resource in the success and well-being of teachers is the various supports made available to them by other key stakeholders in the
school. Stakeholders such as other colleagues, educational assistants, administrators and parents were an essential resource in supporting the success of students. Teachers who lack the support of others as a resource might be at-risk of psychological distress. A school environment that encourages support across all key stakeholders may contribute to supporting the psychological wellness of teachers. For Adam, colleagues with more experience supporting students with exceptionalities were essential in managing the challenges of being a regular classroom teacher. In this context, the knowledge and strategies of more experienced teachers can be an excellent resource in successfully supporting the needs of students with exceptionalities and managing the responsibilities of being a regular classroom teacher. Teachers who lack this resource may face additional challenges and responsibilities that contribute to reduced psychological wellness, placing them at risk of burnout. Considering the high attrition rate of novice teachers, developing a community of supportive teachers and administrators can be an important resource for beginning teachers, particularly by providing professional and personal support in coping with the challenges of working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom.

**Universal Psychological Needs**

Self-determination theory is one framework of thriving and optimal psychological functioning that can provide insight into the experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners. Ryan and Deci (2001) suggested that the concept of well-being does not refer to the absence of mental illness, but is instead a state of optimal psychological functioning. The two components of thriving, vitality and learning, are identifiers of psychological growth, whereas self-determination theory emphasizes the importance of satisfying key nutriments for overall personal growth (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Self-determination theory suggests that a balance among the key nutriments for autonomous motivation, the universal psychological needs of
autonomy (feelings of volition and choice), competence (feelings of mastery and effectiveness) and relatedness (feeling connected to important others) is necessary for individual well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006). The universality of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (sometimes referred to as belonging) have been found to be essential to the experiences of individuals both cross-culturally (through studies conducted in the Americas, Europe, and Asia) and across all groups (children, adolescents, adults, and elderly) and life stages (Dagenais-Desmarais et al., 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Sheldon et al., 2001).

Self-determination theory posits that there is an innate human motivation to seek out conditions that allow for psychological needs satisfaction, which, in turn, facilitates thriving (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Psychological needs satisfaction and need thwarting have been found to trigger experiences of both the positive (psychological well-being) and negative (psychological distress) dimensions of mental health (Dagenais-Desmarais et al., 2014). Few researchers have applied the theoretical framework of self-determination theory to understand the social-emotional experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners, specifically as it relates to experiences of burnout, compassion fatigue, and thriving.

Ryan and Deci (2001) make a relevant distinction between the constructs of hedonic well-being and eudemonic well-being. Hedonic well-being is measured in terms of happiness and pleasure experienced, while eudemonic well-being refers to the optimal functioning of individuals in terms of goal pursuit and psychological growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001). While previous research has focused on hedonic well-being, Ryan and Deci (2001) suggested that a multidimensional approach that includes eudemonic and hedonic well-being is optimal in operationalizing subjective well-being. This operationalization of well-being as eudemonic and growth-based is encompassed in the self-determination theory perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2001).
Relating self-determination theory to the workplace, Deci and Ryan (2008) found that autonomy supportive work environments result in increased subjective well-being of professionals as well as improved job performance and satisfaction. Research has also found that teachers have significantly lower perceived control and well-being than do other, non-teaching professionals (Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012). Teachers, like other people-service professionals, require work environments that are supportive of their needs in order for them to have better subjective well-being. For teachers to experience psychological needs satisfaction, they need to feel autonomous in the decisions they make, feel effective and competence in their role, and feel related to their students and colleagues (Perry et al., 2015).

This study considered the role of universal needs satisfaction and thriving in the experience of teachers who work with exceptional learners to help provide an understanding about the experience of burnout and compassion fatigue. Incorporating the construct of self-determination theory provides a deeper insight into teachers’ perceptions of their social-emotional experience, and will contribute to the body of research currently available. The universal psychological needs component of self-determination theory can provide an interpretative lens that furthers our understanding of teachers’ social-emotional experiences.

Autonomy, the reflective of feelings of choice and volition, is an essential psychological need for thriving and optional human functioning. For teachers to experience thriving and psychological wellness, they must feel that they have opportunities to make choices in their work with students. Jacob discussed challenges to feeling energized as a teacher by limiting opportunities to grow and exercise autonomy through changes to teaching practice. When participants felt autonomous in their teaching practice, it encouraged feelings of competence as vitality. When engaging in learning that felt obligatory, rather than an autonomous decision,
psychological wellness was compromised. When teachers felt that they lacked autonomy, they seemed to experience psychological distress.

Competence, overlapping with symptoms of burnout, is another basic psychological need essential for experiencing psychological wellness. When participants felt competence and a sense of successfully meeting the needs of their students, they discussed themes reflective of psychological wellness. Four of the five participants in this study chose to pursue graduate studies related to exceptionalities in order to increase their own knowledge and feelings of competence in supporting the success of students. Incorporating the lens of universal psychological needs, Adam experienced feeling energized by teaching when he felt competent in developing an effective and enjoyable lesson for his students. Teachers who do not feel competent or effective in their role are at-risk of psychological distress. The importance of experiencing relatedness with students and competence as a teacher was evident in the participants’ discussion of their social-emotional experiences working with exceptional learners.

Feelings of relatedness with important others, in this context colleagues and students, is the third basic psychological need necessary for wellness. Teachers build important relationships with their students, and student learning not only helps contribute to feelings of competence but can reaffirm their relatedness with students through shared values. When teachers have positive social-emotional experiences with students and other stakeholders, it supports their psychological wellness (Perry et al., 2015; Schlichte et al., 2005). The relationship with students was an essential component of vitality for participants and a salient rewarding aspect of their professional role. Teachers who lack positive relationships with students and colleagues may be at-risk of psychological distress.
Limitations

An important limitation to consider for this study is the demographics of this sample of participants being unrepresentative of the average experience of teachers working with exceptional learners in the regular classroom context. The sample consisted of five teachers in Ontario with experience working with exceptional learners at the elementary level of education. Four participants had previous in-service experience and one participant was a current in-service teacher. All participants were either currently enrolled in a graduate studies program in education or had completed a graduate degree in education. Although four of the participants had left teaching, they chose to pursue graduate studies related to exceptionalities, which may reflect a deeper investment related to supporting exceptionalities than the average teacher. That the participants had a continued passion for education is also suggestive of thriving rather than psychological distress associated with their work as a teacher. This likely reflects findings related to burnout and compassion fatigue. Another limitation of this study is the sensitive nature of discussing challenges related to working with special populations. Questions in the interviews probed participants to discuss the nature of their social-emotional challenges, and as one participant pointed out in the context of the staffroom, some teachers may experience stigma in disclosing any struggle in working with exceptional learners. Finally, participants’ experiences were generally limited to urban contexts, specifically in the province of Ontario. Further research could explore distinctions in the social-emotional experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in urban and rural classrooms as well as directly consider the difference in psychological distress for teachers working in specialized classrooms versus the regular education classroom.
Implications

Exploring the social-emotional experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in the regular education classroom can have implications for both theory and practice. Limited research has considered compassion fatigue in teachers and no research has studied, to the author’s knowledge, the social-emotional experiences of teachers working with exceptional learners in the regular education classroom through a combined examination of the constructs of burnout, compassion fatigue, and thriving. The scope of this study considered the continuum of experience for teachers, exploring both psychological wellness and psychological distress. A model that focuses on factors that support well-being in individuals working in tandem with self-perspective model focusing on avoiding poor mental health can provide researchers with a holistic understanding of teachers’ social-emotional experiences (Nilsson et al., 2015). An investigation of the nature of teachers’ experiences can provide a foundation for targeted prevention and intervention programs aimed at supporting the occupational well-being of teachers in pre-service and in-service settings. This, in turn, might lead to lower attrition rates and increased workplace satisfaction. Recommendations for school administration include creating a work environment that facilitates the autonomy, competence, and relatedness of teachers. For teachers to experience psychological wellness, administration would benefit from creating opportunities for vitality and learning while ensuring that it does not add pressure to the existing overwhelming responsibilities of teaching. The participants in this study experienced autonomy and competence when engaged in workplace learning and when they viewed teaching as a process of lifelong learning, which contributed to their overall thriving. Administrators emphasizing a school culture that supports learning from colleagues and classroom experiences may in turn support the wellness of teachers. In the context of teachers working with exceptional
learners, burnout did not emerge as essential to the experiences of the participants. Although working with students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom may add to the volume of work for a teacher, it is the relationship with students with exceptionalities and the impulse of the teacher to help them that contributed to experiences of psychological distress for participants. Considering the significance of teachers’ relationships with students, teachers struggling with psychological distress may benefit from reflecting on the nature of their social-emotional interactions with students. As Grace suggested, recognizing your limitations as a teacher in meeting all of the needs of every student can help protect teachers from the elements of psychological distress reflective of burnout and compassion fatigue. Future research on the social-emotional experience of teachers working with exceptionalities may be better situated using the construct of compassion fatigue.

**Conclusions**

The constructs of thriving, burnout, and compassion fatigue are interrelated yet independent elements of social-emotional experience. Considering the root of burnout as being workload conditions and compassion fatigue as being social-emotional relationship with clients, it is possible that compassion fatigue and burnout are two parallel trajectories of psychological distress. Although the data from this study did not suggest that participants were experiencing burnout or compassion fatigue, elements of the two constructs did emerge as relevant to the social-emotional experiences of the teachers. A possible explanation for the limited psychological distress is that four of the five participants were not current in-service teachers, and had left the profession to pursue graduate studies. An alternate explanation is the clear presence of thriving in all five participants. The participants were not in psychological distress as a result of their experiences, but they had achieved psychological wellness from being a teacher.
The findings from this study suggest that there is a need for future research to consider the continuum of experience that teachers working with exceptional learners may experience.
References


Appendices

Appendix A – GREB Approval

January 05, 2016

Ms. Newsha Ziaian-Ghafari
Master’s Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Duncan McArthur Hall-Room A106
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-791-15; Romeo # 6017342
Title: "GEDUC-791-15 Exploring the Experience of Teachers Working with Exceptional Learners"

Dear Ms. Ziaian-Ghafari:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-791-15 Exploring the Experience of Teachers Working with Exceptional Learners" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/ROMEO.Researcher.Admin; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/ROMEO.Researcher.Admin; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for Amendment of Approved Studies". Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

John B. Freeman
Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Derek Berg, Faculty Supervisor
   Dr. Liying Cheng, Chair, Unit REB
   Ms. Erin Wiseman, Dept. Admin.
Appendix B – Interview Questions

What is your sex?
What is your age?

1. What is your educational background?
2. What grades to you have you taught?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. How many years did you teach at your most recent school?
5. What is the average classroom size that you taught?
6. In general, how many students with identified or unidentified exceptionalities did you teach in your classroom?
7. Describe the resources that you had available to you to support students?
8. Why did you choose to become a teacher?
9. Describe your professional identity as a teacher? What kind of teacher do you label yourself as?

10. What makes a classroom inclusive?
11. What do you think about integrating students with exceptionalities into the general classroom?
12. What are the benefits, if any, of having students with exceptionalities in a general classroom?
13. What are the challenges, if any, of having students with exceptionalities in a general classroom?
14. What are the resources that you need to support students with exceptionalities in a general classroom?

15. Describe your classroom.
16. What range of exceptionalities have you worked with in your classroom?
17. What is satisfying about being a teacher?
18. What is challenging about being a teacher?
19. Describe your experience as a teacher working with students with identified or unidentified exceptionalities?
20. What did you enjoy as a teacher that works with students with exceptionalities in a general classroom setting?
21. What frustrated you as a teacher that works with students with exceptionalities in a general classroom setting?
22. Describe a specific challenging experience you have had as a teacher working with students with exceptionalities?
23. Describe recurring obstacles that you may face in working with exceptional learners in the general classroom?
24. Describe a specific rewarding experience you have had as a teacher working with students with exceptionalities in the general classroom?
25. What has lead to your successes working with students with exceptionalities?
26. What has lead to your challenges working with students with exceptionalities?
27. How comfortable did you feel talking about your frustrations with your colleagues and
administrators?
28. Who, outside of your workplace, were you comfortable talking about your frustrations with?
29. How did you separate your life as a teacher from your personal life?
30. How, if at all, have the successes and challenges you have faced impacted who you were as a teacher?
31. What factors helped to keep you in the profession?

32. What does it mean to you to be good at your job?
33. What specific factors helped you succeed as a teacher?
34. What specific factors hindered your ability to succeed as a teacher?
35. How stressful did you find your professional role?
36. What specific factors do you think affected your emotional wellbeing?
37. How did your relationship with your students affect your emotional wellbeing?
38. Did you ever feel that you did not have the emotional resources to care for your students?
39. Have you ever taken time off or felt the need to take time off from work because of your experiences as a teacher?
40. What specific factors affected your physical health?
41. Describe your experiences, if any, of emotional or physical exhaustion resulting from work?
42. How do you personally cope with the challenges of being a teacher?
43. How would you describe the experience of a teacher that may be struggling in their role?

44. Describe the freedom you feel as a teacher?
45. What specific factors affect how much autonomy you feel as a teacher?
46. Describe an experience regarding your ability to make choices that stands out to you?
47. How important is feeling autonomous to you as a teacher?
48. Describe the effectiveness you feel as teacher in an integrated classroom?
49. What specific factors affect how competent you feel as a teacher?
50. Describe a specific experience regarding your ability as a teacher that stands out for you?
51. How important is feeling competent to you as a teacher? Why?
52. How important is it for you to be able to make a difference as a teacher?
53. What relationships are important to you?
54. Describe the relationships you have as a teacher working in an integrated classroom?
55. How important are close relationships with your colleagues to your working life?
56. How important is it to have a mentoring relationship in your work environment?
57. What specific factors affect how you feel about your relationships at work?
58. Describe an experience regarding belonging that stands out for you?
59. How important are relationships with your students to you as a teacher?
60. In what ways do your personal and professional relationships support you as a teacher?
61. If you had a magic wand, what would you change about your work, your role and your responsibilities?
Appendix C – LOI/Consent Form

LETTER OF INFORMATION

“EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS WORKING WITH EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS”

This research is being conducted by Newsha Ziaian-Ghafari (Master of Education, Candidate) under the supervision of Dr. Derek H. Berg in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s University policies.

What is this study about? The purpose of this study is to explore the social and emotional experience of teachers working with exceptional learners in general classrooms. The first objective is to describe the elements within teachers’ professional roles that they report contribute to their social and emotional experiences. The second objective is to describe teachers’ social and emotional experiences, with particular emphasis on understanding teachers’ self-perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in working with exceptional learners.

What is involved to participate in this study? The study will require one 60-minute interview session and one optional 30-minute follow-up individual interview session. In total, participating in this study will require 1.5 hours of your time. Your contribution will be recorded using an audio device. There are no known physical, economic, or social risks associated with this study. Some participants may feel uncomfortable discussing their emotional experiences due to the sensitive nature of this topic. Participants will be provided with information on how to access help if the conversation causes any psychological or emotional distress.

Is participation voluntary? Yes. You should not feel obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your role as a teacher. If you wish to withdraw, contact Newsha Ziaian-Ghafari at newsha.ghafari@queensu.ca or Dr. Derek H. Berg at 613-533-6000 ext 77413 or at derek.berg@queensu.ca. If you withdraw, you may request removal of all or part of your data from the study.

What will happen to your responses? Your responses will be kept confidential. Only Newsha Ziaian-Ghafari and Dr. Derek H. Berg will have access to this information. Your anonymity and the confidentiality of the data will be maintained to the extent possible. You have the option to receive and review a copy of your transcripts from both the 60-minute interview and the optional 30-minute follow-up interview to determine if there is any part you are uncomfortable with that you would like to have excluded from the study. Results from this study may be used for completion of a Master’s thesis, published in professional journal, or presented at academic conferences, but any such presentations will maintain individual anonymity. In accordance with the Faculty of Education’s policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years. If data are used for secondary analysis they will contain no identifying information. You are entitled to a copy of the findings, if you are interested. If you would like a copy of the findings, please contact: Newsha Ziaian-Ghafari at newsha.ghafari@queensu.ca.

What if you have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Newsha Ziaian-Ghafari at newsha.ghafari@queensu.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Derek H. Berg, at derek.berg@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77413. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study.
CONSENT FORM

“EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS WORKING WITH EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS”

Name (please print clearly): _______________________________________________________

1. I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called “Exploring the Experience of Teachers with Exceptional Learners.” I understand that this means that I will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded 60-minute individual interview session and an audio-recorded 30-minute follow-up individual interview session. I understand that participating in this study requires a total of approximately 1.5 hours of study participation.

3. I understand that I will have the option to receive and review a copy of my transcripts from both the 60-minute interview and the optional 30-minute follow-up interview to determine if there is any part I am uncomfortable with that I would like to have excluded from the study.

4. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data now and in the future. Only researchers affiliated with this study will have access to my data. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at academic conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. I understand that I am entitled to a copy of the findings, if I am interested.

I am aware that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints, I may contact Newsha Ziaian-Ghafari at newsha.ghafari@queensu.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Derek H. Berg, at derek.berg@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77413. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.

Please sign one copy of this Letter of Information/Consent Form and return to the researcher. Retain a second copy for your records.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

Signature: _______________________________ Date: ________________________________

Contact Information:

Email: ________________________________