



Self-contained classrooms: A phenomenological approach to understand instructional and emotional challenges of special education teachers

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the interplay between instructional and emotional challenges faced by special education teachers in self-contained classrooms and the impact on their professional efficacy. Seven special education teachers from the Schools Division of Laoag City participated through purposive sampling. Data were collected via open-ended interviews using Google Forms and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: pedagogical fragmentation, emotional labor as a prerequisite to instruction, cumulative emotional depletion, and the bidirectional relationship between instruction and emotion. Findings revealed that professional efficacy fluctuates situationally, shaped by behavioral crises and student regulation. Teachers employed strategic recalibration—including structured routines, collaborative debriefing, and small-success orientation—to mediate efficacy. A persistent paradox emerged: systemic workloads drive attrition, yet relational micro-wins sustain professional commitment. The study concludes that emotional labor must be formally recognized as integral to special education teaching. Reducing administrative burdens and strengthening collaborative support systems are essential to disrupt cycles of depletion and improve teacher retention.

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Introduction

Teachers in self-contained special education classes faced pressures that went beyond regular teaching responsibilities, as most of their time was spent employing extensive teaching methods and engaging in enormous emotional labor. Self-contained special education teachers interacted directly with students with disabilities, which meant they had to create individualized lessons, use behavioral intervention measures, and adapt in isolated settings. This combination of pressures resulted in teacher burnout, a

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high turnover rate among special education teachers, and reduced teacher effectiveness, as indicated in several worldwide surveys on educator pressure (Wooldridge-McCormick, 2022).

In the Philippines, especially in Quezon City, issues such as insufficient funding, an excessive caseload, and inadequate administrative support made teaching more challenging for special education teachers in the public education sector (Felipe, 2025). Special education teachers in the Philippines cited overcrowded self-contained special education classes, lack of training on emotional regulation, and discrimination against people with disabilities as sources of increased emotional pressures (Paguirigan et al., 2023; Frost et al., 2025). The shortage of special education instructors has been recognized by the Department of Education, with teachers citing exhaustion amid efforts to comply with Republic Act 11650 (Inclusive Education Act).

This research was undertaken because of the researcher's observations during her career as an educator in Laoag City, where other educators in self-contained classes expressed exhaustion stemming from unmet emotional needs despite the rigidity of instructional demands. The personal experience of witnessing qualified teachers leave the profession due to burnout highlighted the need to understand their experiences from a phenomenological perspective (Brazas, 2023). This inquiry aimed to amplify their voices, which were often sidelined in policy discussions dominated by general education challenges.

Despite extensive documentation of instructional demands (e.g., IEP compliance, paperwork, caseload size) and emotional labor (e.g., burnout, stress, empathy fatigue) as separate predictors of special education teacher attrition, existing literature has largely treated these two dimensions as independent constructs. This fragmented approach has left a critical gap: the dynamic, bidirectional relationship between instructional fragmentation and emotional depletion remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. Specifically, prior research has not adequately explained how behavioral crises disrupt pedagogical flow or how instructional failures, in turn, compound emotional exhaustion. Moreover, few phenomenological studies have captured the lived, moment-to-moment experiences of teachers navigating this dual burden in real time—particularly within the Philippine context, where cultural stigmas surrounding disability and limited systemic support intensify the struggle (Paguirigan et al., 2023).

This phenomenological research aimed to analyze the experiences of teachers working in self-contained classes, particularly the relationship between instructional and emotional demands within these classes. This investigation would shed light on the essence of such a struggle and its impact on their retention and effectiveness.

Through this study, the current body of knowledge could be enriched with relevant information about the experiences of special education teachers. Context-specific solutions might be formulated and implemented to promote more effective teaching and learning in self-contained classes in the Philippines.

Literature review

This chapter presents a review of related literature on theories and studies that form the basis for examining the lived experience of special education teachers in their own classrooms. The main topics discussed include: instructional demands, emotional work/strain, and double workload.

Instructional demands in self-contained classrooms

Self-contained classrooms require special education teachers to deliver highly individualized instruction tailored to students with significant disabilities, often involving customized lesson plans and frequent adaptations to meet their diverse learning needs. These demands exceed those in general education settings, as teachers must manage multiple Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), track progress meticulously, and integrate behavioral supports within isolated environments. Research highlights how large caseloads amplify these pressures, reducing time for one-on-one instruction and leading to instructional triage (Bettini & Gilmour, 2024; White, 2024).

Global studies, including those from the U.S. and Australia, link excessive paperwork, IEP compliance, and caseload sizes to diminished teaching effectiveness and poorer student outcomes (Jacobsen, 2025). In the Philippines, DepEd teachers face overcrowded classes and resource shortages that hinder personalized teaching (Tarraya, 2024). These instructional burdens underscore the need for policy reforms, such as reduced caseloads, to sustain teacher efficacy.

Emotional labor and strain

Special education teachers in self-contained settings engage in profound emotional labor, constantly regulating their emotions to support students with behavioral and emotional challenges while maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere. This involves empathy, de-escalation techniques, and emotional attunement, which drain personal resources over time, especially in prolonged one-on-one interactions (Wang et al., 2025; Jaikla & Piyakun, 2024). Studies show this strain is heightened by cultural stigmas around disabilities, as seen in Filipino contexts where teachers navigate family expectations alongside student needs (Flores & Eludo, 2025).

Emotional labor correlates strongly with psychological exhaustion, with teachers in self-contained rooms reporting higher stress levels than general educators due to unpredictable behaviors and limited peer support (Garwood et al., 2024). International research from China and Namibia confirms that without adequate coping mechanisms or training, this leads to chronic fatigue and mental health issues (Wang et al., 2025; Murangi et al., 2022). In the Philippines, inadequate training in emotional management exacerbates this issue, underscoring the need for targeted wellness programs.

Dual burden and burnout outcomes

The dual burden of instructional demands and emotional labor creates a synergistic stress cycle in which high workloads amplify emotional exhaustion, leading to burnout among self-contained special education teachers (Jacobsen, 2025; Thakur, 2018). Teachers juggle compliance with laws like RA 11650 while providing daily caregiving, resulting in work-family conflict and reduced job satisfaction.

Phenomenological studies reveal this interplay fosters feelings of inadequacy and isolation, distinct from general education stressors (Gomez et al., 2025; Magallanes et al., 2025).

Burnout outcomes include high turnover rates, with global data showing special educators leaving at twice the rate of peers due to unsustainable dual pressures (Berry, 2023; Walter et al., 2023). In the Philippines, DepEd reports persistent personnel shortages, exacerbated by attrition due to emotional and instructional overload (Malinao & Miano, 2025; Tarraya, 2023). This diminishes teaching quality and student progress, underscoring the urgency of interventions such as administrative support and training.

Statement of the problem

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the interplay between instructional and emotional challenges faced by special education teachers in self-contained classrooms and the impact on their professional efficacy. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the instructional and emotional challenges faced by special education teachers in self-contained classrooms?
2. How do these challenges affect the professional efficacy of these teachers?

Methodology

This chapter presents the phenomenological research design; the sources of data, including the study locale, population, and purposive sampling method; the data-gathering instrument; and the thematic data analysis process, including its ethical standards.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design rooted in the tradition of Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which focuses on describing the essence of lived experiences. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to understand how special education teachers personally experience and make meaning of the dual instructional and emotional burdens in self-contained classrooms.

Locale of the study

The study was conducted within the Schools Division of Laoag City, focusing on public elementary and secondary schools that hosted self-contained classrooms or established Special Education (SPED) Centers. These sites were purposefully selected because they represented environments in which special education teachers directly encountered the dual burden of intensive instructional demands and the profound emotional labor characteristic of isolated settings.

Population and sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Seven special education teachers currently assigned to self-contained classrooms within the Schools Division of Laoag City were included in the study. To be eligible,

participants had to be full-time educators directly managing students with significant disabilities and have at least 0-3 years of experience in a self-contained setting, ensuring depth of lived experience with the dual burden. A total of seven participants were selected to ensure data saturation, the point at which no new themes or information emerged from the shared narratives.

Data gathering instrument

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences of special education teachers in self-contained classrooms. This method enabled participants to describe their personal meanings, perceptions, and experiences of the dual burden of instructional demands and emotional labor through open-ended and flexible dialogue. The interview guide consisted of thematically aligned, open-ended questions, with opportunities for probing and follow-up to deepen the exploration of significant responses. Interviews were conducted in a private and supportive setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage authentic, reflective narratives. This approach facilitated the generation of rich, descriptive data essential for understanding the essence of the participants' shared experiences.

Data gathering procedure

Data collection was initiated after securing administrative clearance from the Divine Word College of Laoag Graduate School of Education and obtaining formal permission from the Schools Division Office of Laoag City. Potential participants were identified through coordination with school heads and coordinators of established Special Education (SPED) Centers. The purpose of the study, along with its procedures and ethical considerations, was clearly explained to each participant, and written informed consent was obtained prior to their participation.

The primary data-gathering process was conducted using an interview guide administered via Google Forms, with participants responding to open-ended questions about their lived experiences of instructional demands and emotional labor. This method allowed participants to answer at their own pace and in a comfortable setting, encouraging reflective and detailed responses. All responses were collected, organized, and securely stored for accurate transcription and thematic analysis, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences in navigating the dual burden in self-contained classrooms.

Data analysis tool

This study used thematic analysis as the primary qualitative tool to interpret the narratives collected. This method proved effective for this phenomenological inquiry, as it allowed for the systematic identification and organization of patterns, or "themes," that revealed the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Following the established six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis began with data familiarization through multiple readings of the interview transcripts, followed by the generation of initial codes to label significant instructional and emotional challenges. These codes were then collated into broader candidate themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the dual burden described by the teachers. This rigorous process ensured that the final findings were deeply rooted in the participants' authentic voices, providing a clear and credible account of their professional realities in self-contained settings.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of this qualitative study. Before the commencement of data collection, informed consent was obtained from each participant after a thorough explanation of the study’s objectives, the specific interview procedures, and their absolute right to withdraw from the research at any point without any form of penalty or prejudice. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained by utilizing pseudonyms to mask the identities of the special education teachers and their respective schools.

In adherence to the principle of beneficence, all interviews were conducted in a respectful, nonjudgmental, and supportive environment designed to minimize potential emotional discomfort or psychological strain. All collected audio recordings and transcribed narratives were securely stored in an encrypted format, accessible exclusively by the researcher. Finally, all data were managed for appropriate disposal upon completion of the study, in strict accordance with the research ethics guidelines set forth by the Graduate School.

Presentation and analysis of data

Utilizing Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, the narratives from seven special education teachers revealed four interconnected themes that illuminated the dual instructional and emotional burdens in self-contained classrooms: (1) Pedagogical Fragmentation, (2) Emotional Labor as a Prerequisite to Instruction, (3) Cumulative Emotional Depletion, and (4) Bidirectional Relationship Between Instruction and Emotion.

Problem 1: What are the instructional and emotional challenges faced by special education teachers in self-contained classrooms?

Table 1: Thematic analysis of instructional and emotional challenges faced by special education teachers in self-contained classrooms

Themes	Categories	Representative Statements
Pedagogical fragmentation – the instructional cost of managing heterogeneous needs	Simultaneous differentiation across multiple learning levels	“Teaching multiple grade levels simultaneously while documenting every minute for IEP compliance” - Teacher 4 “I often provide individual support while also managing the whole class” - Teacher 1 “Sometimes I need to reteach a lesson, assist one student individually, and guide the rest of the class all at once” - Teacher 2

	Disrupted instructional flow due to behavioral interruptions	“When students become overwhelmed or frustrated, I pause the lesson to help them calm down” – Teacher 1 “Lessons may slow down or need to be adjusted” – Teacher 6 “Instructional demands are immense... differentiation fails like an impossible weight” – Teacher 5
	Instructional autopilot under emotional exhaustion	“When you are depleted, differentiation fails... your instruction turns into autopilot rather than the heartbeat of the room” – Teacher 5 “When I feel stressed or emotionally tired, it can make teaching more difficult and reduce my energy in class” – Teacher 2
Emotional labor as a prerequisite to instruction	Constant emotional regulation of students before academic engagement	“The heaviest emotional labor occurs during transitions, where you must remain a calm external brain for students in distress” - Teacher 5 “I need to give more time and attention to help them calm down before continuing instruction” – Teacher 6 “Even before formal instruction begins, I am already balancing emotional support with classroom management” - Teacher 7
	Suppressing personal emotional responses to remain a “stable anchor.”	“Crisis management requires calm vigilance, suppressing your own ‘fight or flight’ response to remain a stable anchor” – Teacher 5 “I need to stay calm and supportive even when students are overwhelmed” – Teacher 1

		“Teachers often have to control their own emotions while helping students regulate theirs” – Teacher 2
	Emotional masking and absorption of student distress	“You perform emotional masking, absorbing a student’s distress to de-escalate the room” – Teacher 5 “It means being attentive to their triggers, helping them regulate their feelings, and reassuring them while still maintaining structure” – Teacher 1
Cumulative emotional depletion and end-of-day consequences	Physical and emotional exhaustion as a routine outcome	“By the end of the school day, this emotional labor can feel very tiring because it requires constant attention and emotional strength” – Teacher 1 “By dismissal, this feels like sensory depletion... left with profound decision fatigue and a need for absolute silence” – Teacher 5 “I often feel emotionally tired and drained because supporting students’ behaviors takes constant care” – Teacher 2
	Mixed emotional labor – draining yet fulfilling	“It is also fulfilling. Seeing little progress reminds me that the effort and emotional energy I give are meaningful” -Teacher 1 “By the end of the day, I feel tired but fulfilled, knowing that even small progress is a meaningful achievement” – Teacher 2 “This emotional labor can feel both draining and fulfilling at the same time” – Teacher 7
	Positive disposition as a deliberate coping mechanism	“I acknowledge these mixed emotional labors, but I mostly make it a point to be positive and have a happy disposition” – Teacher 4

		“I stay patient and maintain a positive attitude throughout the day” – Teacher 3
Bidirectional relationship between instruction and emotion	Emotional state directly shapes instructional quality	“When I feel calm and positive, it helps me teach better, and students become more engaged” – Teacher 2 “Your emotional regulation is the classroom’s thermostat. If you are frayed, your students lose the safety they need to learn” – Teacher 5 “My positive emotions help me remain patient when students struggle” – Teacher 7
	Instructional success as an emotional refueling mechanism	A small instructional win is a lifeline that recharges you” – Teacher 5 “Seeing students understand a concept, complete a task, or show progress brings a sense of fulfillment and motivation” – Teacher 1 “These positive moments help balance the challenges and encourage me to continue” – Teacher 3
	Instructional failure as a personal emotional weight	“When a lesson fails due to a student’s pain, it becomes a personal weight that makes things steady for the next child even harder” – Teacher 5 “When students have behavioral problems or emotional struggles, I need to pause... this requires patience, flexibility, and managing my own emotions” – Teacher 1

Source: Pascua (2026)

The thematic analysis revealed four interconnected themes capturing the instructional and emotional challenges faced by special education teachers in self-contained classrooms. The first theme, **Pedagogical fragmentation**, which comprises three subcategories: *Simultaneous*

Differentiation, Disrupted Instructional Flow, and Instructional Autopilot, shows that teachers struggle to teach multiple grade levels and IEP goals simultaneously, constantly pause lessons for behavioral crises, and revert to routine-based teaching when emotionally exhausted in self-contained classrooms. This finding is consistent with research documenting that special education teachers experience greater role overload than general educators, and that challenging student behavior is a predominant factor contributing to burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Aloe et al., 2014).

The second theme, **Emotional labor as a prerequisite to instruction**, which comprises three subcategories: *Emotional regulation Before Academics, Suppressing Personal Responses*, and *Emotional Masking*, reveals that teachers must stabilize students' emotions before any learning can occur, hide their own stress to remain a "stable anchor," and absorb student distress to de-escalate the self-contained classroom. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) proposed the "prosocial classroom" model, emphasizing that teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC) is essential for developing supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and creating a classroom climate conducive to learning.

The third theme, **Cumulative emotional depletion**, which comprises three subcategories: *Physical and Emotional Exhaustion, Draining Yet Fulfilling*, and *Positive Disposition as Coping*, explains that teachers in self-contained classrooms end each day feeling drained and experiencing decision fatigue, yet they find deep meaning in small student gains, deliberately choosing positivity as a survival strategy. Research confirms that teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) have a higher risk of burnout than their special education and general education colleagues, with challenging student behavior being a predominant factor affecting the degree of burnout in self-contained settings (Brunsting et al., 2014; Park & Shin, 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

The fourth theme, **Bidirectional relationship between instruction and emotion**, which comprises three subcategories: *Emotion Shaping Instruction, Instructional Success as Refueling*, and *Instructional Failure as Emotional Weight*, demonstrates that a teacher's emotional state directly affects instructional quality, small wins recharge motivation, and lesson failures add a personal emotional burden within self-contained classrooms. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argue that teachers' SEC and well-being play a key role in developing and sustaining positive teacher-student relationships and effective classroom management, and note that teachers with higher emotional competence are better equipped to manage the profession's increasing demands.

These themes demonstrated how teachers in self-contained classrooms constantly balance differentiated teaching with behavioral crises, suppress personal emotions to serve as stable anchors for students, and experience end-of-day exhaustion that can reduce instructional quality. At the same time, the findings highlighted that small instructional successes serve as emotional refueling, revealing a cyclical dynamic where teaching and teacher emotion continuously shape each other in high-needs self-contained special education settings.

Problem 2: How do these challenges affect the professional efficacy of these teachers?

Thematic analysis of the narratives from special education teachers revealed three interconnected themes that illuminate how instructional and emotional burdens affect professional efficacy in self-contained classrooms: (1) *Efficacy as situational and emotionally contingent*, (2) *Strategic recalibration as a mediator of efficacy*, and (3) *Dissonance between systemic demands and relational rewards*.

Table 2: Thematic analysis of how challenges affect the professional efficacy of special education teachers

Themes	Categories	Representative Statements
Efficacy as situational and emotionally contingent	Perceived loss of instructional control during crises	“I sometimes feel less effective because it becomes harder to focus on teaching while managing behavior and emotions at the same time.” – Teacher 2 “I had to stop the activity to calm the student... at that moment, I felt less effective because the lesson was interrupted.” – Teacher 3
	Efficacy restored through the emotional regulation of students	“When the student calmed down and rejoined the activity, I felt effective again.” – Teacher 2 “After a few minutes, the student was able to return to the activity... Moments like this remind me that success is not only about finishing lessons.” – Teacher 1
	Questioning competence under dual demands	“I sometimes question my effectiveness as a teacher, especially when I feel that my students are struggling despite the strategies and support I provide.” – Teacher 7
Strategic recalibration as a mediator of efficacy	Structured predictability to offset unpredictability	“Having clear routines, visual schedules, and well-prepared differentiated activities helps reduce unpredictability.” – Teacher 7 “Using visual schedules, step-by-step instructions, and hands-on activities helps reduce confusion.” – Teacher 1
	Collaborative tag-teaming and professional debriefing	“Strong rapport with your paraprofessionals allows for tag-

		teaming, where you can step out for a two-minute sensory reset while they maintain the room's rhythm." – Teacher 5 "Sharing experiences and strategies with other teachers gives me guidance and reassurance." - Teacher 1
	Emotional reframing and small-success orientation	"I remind myself to focus on the little progress my students make each day. Celebrating these small successes helps me stay motivated." – Teacher 1 "Progress often comes in small steps, so I remind myself to celebrate even the smallest improvements." – Teacher 7
Dissonance between systemic demands and relational rewards	Systemic stressors reduce efficacy.	"What pushes me toward leaving are stress, lack of resources, and too many responsibilities." – Teacher 2 "Heavy workloads, paperwork, and emotional stress from supporting students with complex needs often cause burnout." – Teacher 1
	Relational micro-wins as efficacy anchors	"Feeling most effective in the quietest victories... sitting in silence during a meltdown until a student mirrors your calm." – Teacher 5 "That moment made me feel that my patience and support helped the student learn and feel safe." Teacher 6
	Purpose-driven persistence despite exhaustion	"My passion for helping students with special needs continues to motivate me to stay in the field." Teacher 1 "What keeps me here is love for my learners and knowing I make a real difference." – Teacher 6

Source: Pascua (2026)

The first theme, **Efficacy as situational and emotionally contingent**, comprised three subcategories: *Perceived loss of instructional control during crises*, *Efficacy restored through emotional regulation of students*, and *Questioning competence under dual demands*. Findings indicated that within self-contained classrooms, professional efficacy fluctuated moment-to-moment in response to behavioral crises, with teachers feeling least effective when instruction was interrupted but regaining efficacy once students were emotionally regulated. This aligned with Friedman (1995b), who found that special education teachers' efficacy was more vulnerable to behavioral disruptions than to academic setbacks, and with Klassen & Chiu (2010), who reported that emotional exhaustion directly predicted lower efficacy in demanding classroom environments such as self-contained settings.

The second theme, **Strategic recalibration as a mediator of efficacy**, included *Structured predictability to offset unpredictability*, *Collaborative tag-teaming and professional debriefing*, and *Emotional reframing and small-success orientation*. Teachers in self-contained classrooms actively restored their efficacy through visual schedules, collaboration with paraprofessionals, and redefining success as behavioral stabilization rather than academic completion. Related studies by Betoret (2009) demonstrated that social support and classroom structure mediated the relationship between stress and teacher efficacy, while Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2014) found that reappraisal of professional goals buffered against emotional exhaustion in special education contexts, particularly within self-contained classrooms where behavioral intensity is highest.

The third theme, **Dissonance between systemic demands and relational rewards**, consisted of *Systemic stressors that reduce efficacy*, *Relational micro-wins that anchor efficacy*, and *Purpose-driven persistence despite exhaustion*. A paradox emerged in self-contained classrooms, where heavy workloads and limited resources pushed teachers to leave, yet small relational breakthroughs—such as a student calming down or completing a task—anchored professional commitment and sustained retention. This finding corroborated Cancio et al. (2013), who found that intrinsic rewards, such as student progress, were stronger predictors of special educator retention than administrative support, and Brunsting et al. (2014), who reported that emotional connection with students mitigated burnout even under high systemic pressure in self-contained classroom environments.

The findings indicated that by maintaining a supportive and inclusive classroom climate through structured routines and emotional modeling within self-contained classrooms, teachers were able to provide a "bridge" for students during moments of distress. This process fostered psychological resilience and work sustainability, as educators leaned on collaborative support systems to manage the physical and emotional exhaustion inherent in the field. Ultimately, the ability to find joy in small breakthroughs transformed daily hurdles in self-contained classrooms into meaningful and purpose-driven teaching-learning processes, ensuring that teachers remained dedicated to their learners despite the dual burdens they faced.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study revealed that special education teachers in self-contained classrooms faced pedagogical fragmentation, teaching multiple grade levels while managing behavioral crises. This

finding supported Brunsting et al. (2014), who found that special education teachers experienced higher role overload than general educators, and Aloe et al. (2014), who reported that challenging student behavior was a primary cause of teacher burnout. Additionally, Gilmour and Wehby (2020) confirmed that teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders in self-contained settings faced the highest attrition rates, and Friedman (1995b) noted that behavioral disruptions harmed teacher confidence more than academic setbacks.

Building on this fragmentation, the findings showed that teachers in self-contained classrooms acted as emotional first responders, stabilizing students' emotions before academic instruction could begin. This aligned with Jennings and Greenberg (2009), who proposed that teachers' emotional competence was essential to classroom climate, and with Park and Shin (2020), who reported that special educators working with students with behavioral disorders in self-contained settings faced a higher risk of burnout. Klassen and Chiu (2010) also found that emotional exhaustion directly reduced teacher efficacy, while Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) demonstrated that emotional labor in special education self-contained classrooms consistently exceeded that in general education classrooms.

Given this demand for emotional labor, the findings revealed that teachers in self-contained settings experienced cumulative emotional depletion, leaving them exhausted at the end of each day and facing decision fatigue. Brunsting et al. (2014) confirmed that emotional exhaustion was the most reported burnout symptom among special education teachers in self-contained classrooms, while Aloe et al. (2014) linked student misbehavior directly to emotional depletion. Gilmour and Wehby (2020) added that this exhaustion accumulated over time, leading to attrition, and Friedman (1995b) noted that special education teachers in self-contained settings reported higher daily emotional fatigue than general education colleagues.

Building on this depletion, the findings demonstrated that professional efficacy in self-contained classrooms varied from moment to moment depending on student behavior. Friedman (1995b) found that teachers' confidence in self-contained settings was more adversely affected by behavioral disruptions than by academic failures, while Klassen and Chiu (2010) reported that efficacy fluctuated with daily classroom events rather than remaining stable. Betoret (2009) added that teacher efficacy was highly sensitive to classroom stress, and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) confirmed that moment-to-moment student behavior in self-contained classrooms directly shaped how effective teachers felt.

This fluctuating efficacy led to another insight, as the findings revealed a bidirectional cycle between instruction and emotion within self-contained settings: positive feelings improved teaching, and teaching success recharged emotions, while failures compounded depletion. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) described this as a recursive process in which teacher well-being and classroom quality continuously shaped each other, and Park and Shin (2020) found that instructional failures in self-contained classrooms increased exhaustion, which in turn reduced teaching quality. Cancio et al. (2013) added that small teaching wins served as emotional refueling that sustained retention, and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) noted that this cycle was stronger in special education self-contained settings due to higher emotional demands.

In response to this demanding cycle, the findings showed that teachers in self-contained classrooms used strategic recalibration to protect their efficacy, including visual schedules, teamwork with aides, and redefining success as small behavioral wins. Betoret (2009) found that social support and classroom structure reduced the negative effects of stress on teacher efficacy in self-contained settings, while Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) reported that reappraising professional goals buffered against emotional exhaustion. Cancio et al. (2013) added that collaborative debriefing strengthened teacher resilience, and Gilmour and Wehby (2020) confirmed that structured routines were effective protective factors against burnout in self-contained classrooms.

Despite these recalibration efforts, the findings revealed a critical paradox in self-contained settings: heavy workloads pushed teachers to leave, but small relational moments kept them committed. Cancio et al. (2013) found that intrinsic rewards, such as student progress, were stronger predictors of retention than administrative support in self-contained classrooms, while Brunsting et al. (2014) reported that emotional connection with students mitigated burnout even under high systemic pressure. Park and Shin (2020) added that purpose-driven persistence distinguished teachers who stayed in self-contained settings from those who left, and Klassen and Chiu (2010) confirmed that relational micro-wins were the primary source of professional renewal in high-needs self-contained classrooms.

Building on the paradox that heavy workloads push teachers toward leaving while relational moments sustain their commitment, this study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends the transactional model of teacher stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) by demonstrating that pedagogical fragmentation and emotional first response function as simultaneous, mutually reinforcing stressors, thereby refining the conceptualization of burnout in special education contexts. Practically, the findings highlight the need for policy reforms that reduce grade-level span in self-contained classrooms and institutionalize collaborative debriefing time with aides, while also emphasizing the integration of emotion regulation training into teacher preparation programs, in line with the bidirectional relationship between instruction and emotion (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). From a policy perspective, the persistence of teachers despite systemic strain suggests that retention strategies should move beyond financial incentives and instead recognize intrinsic rewards, such as small behavioral and relational successes, as key drivers of professional commitment (Brunsting et al., 2014; Park & Shin, 2020).

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations, including its focus on self-contained classrooms, which limits generalizability to other educational settings; its cross-sectional design, which does not capture changes over time; and its reliance on participants' narratives, which may be influenced by subjective interpretation. Future research may address these limitations by employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine how instructional and emotional dynamics evolve, conducting comparative studies across different teaching contexts, and testing targeted interventions, such as structured debriefing or emotional support programs, to better understand their impact on teacher retention and efficacy.

Conclusion

This study concludes that special education teachers in self-contained classrooms navigate a complex, dynamic interplay between instructional and emotional demands that fundamentally shapes their professional practice. The findings demonstrate that pedagogical fragmentation, emotional labor as a prerequisite to instruction, cumulative emotional depletion, and the bidirectional relationship between teaching and affect are not isolated challenges but mutually reinforcing conditions that define high-needs special education environments. Within this context, teachers function not only as instructors but as emotional first responders, whose professional roles are deeply intertwined with the co-regulation of student behavior and distress.

Furthermore, professional efficacy among these educators emerges as a fluid, context-dependent construct rather than a fixed trait. It fluctuates in response to immediate classroom realities, particularly behavioral disruptions and moments of student regulation. Teachers actively sustain their sense of effectiveness through strategic recalibration, including structured routines, collaborative support, and intentional reframing of small relational successes. However, this adaptive process operates within a persistent paradox: systemic pressures, such as workload and resource limitations, contribute to emotional strain and attrition, while relational micro-wins simultaneously reinforce commitment and professional purpose.

These findings underscore the need for systemic and institutional shifts in how special education teaching is understood and supported. Emotional labor must be formally recognized as integral to pedagogical work, and evaluation frameworks should extend beyond traditional academic metrics to include indicators of emotional co-regulation and behavioral progress. Additionally, reducing administrative burdens while strengthening opportunities for collaboration and reflective debriefing is essential. Future research should further investigate integrated support mechanisms—such as instructional coaching and peer-based interventions—that can enhance both instructional effectiveness and emotional resilience, thereby disrupting the cyclical pattern of depletion and diminished teaching quality.

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