

Fall 12-16-2021

Strategies to Overcome Special Education Teacher Burnout

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Strategies to Overcome Special Education Teacher Burnout

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SPED 696: Capstone Project

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July 23, 2021

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Abstract

Special education teacher burnout has been a topic of concern dating back to the 1970s when it was first identified and conceptualized and has since been a growing trend in the field of education (Embse, 2019). With the everchanging world of education, the demands of a special education teacher have grown and are causing new triggers that are contributing to their burnout. Research is showing that 40% of new teachers are leaving the profession within the first five years of teaching with stress and burnout at the top of the list contributing to their departure (Herman, 2020). Since researching about what stress and burnout is, what the signs are, what causes it, and what some coping skills are to help overcome special education teacher stress and burnout, they never brought up strategies to help but instead talked about coping strategies or interventions to help before the stress become chronic. Active coping strategies allow everyone to participate and reflect on the skills and tools they have learned about and participated in. One main strategy that was a common theme in many studies was mindfulness. Some other strategies that help with minimizing stress and overcome burnout are practicing meditation, journaling, finding hobbies, making time for oneself and family, collaborating with colleagues, forming support groups within the professional setting, finding yourself spiritually, and living a healthy lifestyle. When stress is minimized, the retention of teachers is done, and school districts can ease the financial burden of high turnover rates of teachers leaving the field due to burnout.

Keywords: special education teacher, burnout, stress

Strategies to Overcome Special Education Teacher Burnout: Literature Review

Special education teacher burnout has been an issue in the education world for years. It was first defined and conceptualized in the 1970s and has since been a growing trend in the field of education (Embse 2019). As the education world has changed tremendously since the 1970s, so has the demands of the special education teacher which in return has caused new triggers contributing to special education teacher burnout. In 1998, it was recorded that teacher working conditions contributed to the high rate of special education teachers leaving the field (Fore, 2002). Recently, it was noted that the high rate of teachers' attrition is due to policies that have changed at all levels, including local, state, and federal levels (Embse, 2019). According to Herman (2020), 40% of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching, with stress and burnout being the top of the list contributing to their departure. In this review we will look at what teacher burnout is, the signs and causes of it, the consequences of burnout for special education teachers and the coping skills needed to be able to overcome the stress to allow for teachers to remain in the education field.

What is stress and burnout?

Stress and burnout go hand-in-hand with each other when looking at the demands of a special education teacher. Stress is defined as the immediate effect of specific situations such as difficult students, colleagues, etc. (Cancio, 2018). In other words, it is an imbalance between risk and protective factors, which can in return cause a person to have negative feelings, behaviors, and thoughts (Prilleltensky, 2016). Risk factors are the characteristics of the person or environment that increase the changes of the negative outcomes for the person or system; protective factors are what attribute to the positive outcomes for the person or system (Prilleltensky, 2016). Burnout is the outcome of chronic stress and has a long-term natural consequence (Canico, 2018).

Dimensions of Stress and Burnout

Everyone shows signs of stress or burnout in different ways but most of the time the signs fall under one or more of the three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. The first dimension, emotional exhaustion, is when an individual has drained emotional resources and experiences a lack of energy and fatigue (Canico, 2018). This is characterized by physical deterioration (weight gain or loss), depression or anxiety, the lack of energy or enthusiasm to teach a lesson in the classroom, run a meeting or communicate with parents in an appropriate and engaging way (Williams, 2015).

The second dimension is depersonalization. This is when an individual distances themselves from others, especially from students and teachers they must interact with regularly in order to complete their job performance (Canico, 2018). Depersonalization is also when a person will make a conscious effort to detach and distance themselves from others both at work and in their personal lives (Williams, 2015).

The last dimension, the lack of personal accomplishment, is a result from a reduced sense of effectiveness and reduction of one's work overload, social conflicts, and insufficient personal resources - especially coping skills (Canico, 2018). The lack of personal accomplishment may be displayed when the person is expected to conduct a self-evaluation because they may feel they are no longer qualified or successful at their job through feeling ineffective and hopeless. They may also perceive minimal satisfaction regarding their job outcomes and may give themselves negative feedback in the self-evaluation (Williams, 2015). When utilizing the three dimensions to identify one's own feelings, it is helpful to know what could be causing them so you can work on identifying the protective factors.

What are the causes of stress and burnout?

Special education is a high-demand career and shortage area. Various factors including overloaded job expectations and unfavorable school climates can cause teacher attrition and leave schools in the difficult position of filling the open positions (Canico, 2018).

Special education teachers are expected to complete many tasks within their job description, more often than not these responsibilities are different than general education teachers. Below is a short list:

- Special education teachers must conduct all meeting that are associated with the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP).
- Maintain student files to meet the federal, state, and local government expectations (Williams, 2018).
- Along with writing the IEP, the special education teacher must complete all the associated forms such as the re-evaluation (every 3 years), the Fundamental Behavior Analysis (FBA), and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIPs).
- Special education teachers are also to teacher or support the general education curriculum in multiple settings the students on their caseloads, which in turn may be co-teaching, or helping with accommodations for the students in the general education classroom to help them be successful (Williams, 2018).
- They must also be proficient in multiple platforms of technology because they must be able to use what the classroom teacher us using, the supplementary programs to help their students in the resource room and know how to use and find documents for both documentation and the online database for the IEPs for each student (William, 2018).

- Special education teachers may have additional meetings that are needed whether a parent or teacher has requested one for the student, workshops or professional development, as well as completing their paperwork following the special education laws and completing within the given days and sending out the paperwork to all family members that are in need (Williams, 2018)
- Special educators must supervise paraeducators who are in the general education classroom with the students helping them be successful, ensure accommodations are being provided, and providing support and documenting on behaviors for progress reports and instructional changes.

Additionally, special education teachers must teach individualized academic lessons to either small groups or individual students, support students with needs from the general education classroom, and help administer tests.

Another cause of stress for special education teachers is the unfavorable working conditions and/or the school climate (Canico, 2018). Stress inducing variables include role conflict, role ambiguity, and levels of support. The first one is role conflict; this is when a person has a larger workload and must manage it independently with minimal support. This can be one cause of exhaustion for the teachers (Brittle, 2020). The next one is role ambiguity which is when the job description and expectations are vague, possibly causing the teacher to not understand what they should be doing or completing their daily tasks *and* cause a lack of personal accomplishment (Brittle, 2020). The last one pertains to the levels of support that the teachers receive in the school district. With minimal support, the teacher may lose interest and feel they are not supported, especially when working with students with disabilities when new supplies are needed and there is not any funding to support them (Brittle, 2020).

Yet another area of cause for stress is the ever-changing policy changes at the federal and state level which, in turn, have intensified the demands on all teachers (Embse, 2019). Many states require teachers to implement a new set of instructional practices that are aligned with the implementation of common and standardized curriculum. Many of the changes came about since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2002 Act was implemented (Embse, 2019). When this change came, it changed how teachers were evaluated which was linked to how well the students did on their state standardized test scores (Embse, 2019). This way of evaluation can cause more stress for teachers as it may change their instructional practices as they begin teaching to the test instead of the state standards (Embse, 2019). With the causes of stress, there are effects that come with them.

What are the consequences of stress and burnout?

Stress and burnout not only affect the person who is experiencing the feelings but also those around them - whether it is their family, friends, coworkers, or employers. In the education system, schools who have a high burnout rate may experience chronic understaffing which can cause a loss of high-quality instruction for students (Embse, 2019). With that, the school can have high turnover rates which results in a loss of financial and occupational resources that are needed to support the staff, students, and the school (Embse, 2019).

Yet, keeping teachers in the school system when they are feeling stressed and burned out can cause negative effects on the students and coworkers. Teachers who are stressed could end up with an altered teacher perception of students' externalizing and internalizing disorders. In other words, they may initiate more behavioral referrals for students and report a lower level of self-efficacy (Embse, 2019). Teachers who are stressed also allow it to negatively influence their teaching quality and student engagement in the classroom (Canico, 2018). The stress in the classroom can also cause a decreased

feeling of accomplishment in meeting the needs of students and feel less successful in dealing with crisis intervention (Canico, 2018).

A teacher may also have trouble with personal or professional relationships and begin to isolate themselves due to work overloads and few opportunities for collaboration with colleagues. Often, teachers who are feeling traits of burnout are not interested in socializing with colleagues in or out of the work (Canico, 2018).

Another consequence of stress in teachers is they begin to neglect their other responsibilities, such as completing paperwork on time. This can ultimately cause chronic stress because they are not able to complete tasks and it is easier to put off the task (Canico, 2018). A lack of time management skills, and their diminishing of the structure and consistency in the classroom can also cause stress (Canico, 2018).

Lastly as explained previously, emotional exhaustion is a consequence because the teacher may feel exhausted after work, no longer be interested or feel the want to participate in hobbies or socialize with their friends after work or on the weekends (Canico, 2018). When a teacher does not have the sufficient coping skills to overcome stress or burnout, it can exacerbate the consequences, thus making things worse for them.

What are some coping skills to help overcome Stress and Burnout?

Just as teachers are often trying to better their students in their own social skills, they should take care of themselves - learning coping skills is important. Coping skills are an individual's efforts to master demands that are deemed as exceeding or exhausting their resources to overcome stress *and* are important in how they respond to stressful events (Brittle, 2020). There are many ways coping skills can be presented and utilized in supporting the teacher's mental wellbeing.

One way is through active coping. This is when people view potential stressors as challenges, not as threats and losses (Canico, 2018). Some methods for active coping are exercise, practicing meditation, pursuing free-time activities (hobbies, family time, etc.), and seeking a support network to help with struggles, both in and out of the classroom setting (Canico, 2018). Specific interventions that can help the teacher be successful include knowledge-based interventions, behavioral interventions, and cognitive-behavioral interventions.

Knowledge-based interventions consists of informational or psychological training for teachers to help with problem behaviors and learning about the stress risk they pose for themselves (Embse, 2019). Behavioral interventions incorporate the practice of a defined skill or strategy to reduce teacher stress (Embse, 2019). Some strategies are meditation/relaxation practice, journaling, and learning to give positive and supportive feedback to self and others (Embse, 2019). Finally, cognitive-behavioral intervention which merges cognitive training and strategies with behavioral practice to support teachers with both the knowledge *and* the skills they need to manage work-related stress (Embse, 2019).

Mindfulness, defined as a state of consciousness that is reached by individuals intentionally and nonjudgmentally attending to the current moment, is a common strategy for coping skills for stress and burnout (Sun, 2019). Mindfulness is used by less than 5% of Americans but it has been shown to improve health, reduce burnout, improve employment retention, and increase attentiveness both at work and at home (Sharp Donahoo, 2018). According to Reiser (2016), mindfulness will also increase a person's perceptions of control and their ability to regulate their emotions.

Being mindful of the current events also include self-acceptance, which is a positive sense of oneself that allows for one to accept both good and bad aspects of themselves (Son, 2019). Self-acceptance is known as being a mediator between mindfulness and burnout because it supports the positive thoughts and moments a person has each day. For teachers, being mindful has demonstrated

an increase in adaptive coping skills and their ability to perceive students as a positive instead of a negative (Sharp Donahoo, 2018).

Each teacher is different, which in turn, can cause the need for many different stress reducing strategies to support them in overcoming the burnout of teaching. In several studies meeting your own personal needs, whether it is spiritually through prayer, or finding a social network online or in person can be of support for people experiencing burnout (Canico, 2018; Sharp Donahoo, 2018; Sun, 2019). Prayer can enhance the spiritual, emotional, and mental health offering support and guidance from a high power (Sharp Donahoo, 2018). Teachers have stated that prayer helped them reach a higher resiliency, new coping skills, improved teaching effectiveness, and job satisfaction when they took time daily for themselves (Sharp Donahoo, 2018). Social support or close relationships can also be effective in facilitating coping skills for teachers. They can seek support from colleagues through collaboration or support which can then lead to an improved sense of accomplishment and decreased burnout in the workplace (Sharp Donahoo, 2018). When seeking support online, it is hard to build a relationship with the people especially when the group is large and there is minimal meeting, but it does support when a teacher needs help with behavior management or knowing what kind of goal to write for a student, or just seeking support with something personally (McLeskey, 2017).

Conclusion

Special education teachers work in a changing world on a regular basis. Although it is a tough field to work in, it is also so rewarding to see student achieve and master their goals or even be dismissed from the program altogether. Students are only successful when their teachers are present, and they utilize their resources to provide their fullest support in the classroom. Learning to overcome the stress and burnout of the special education career, you must know and understand what stress and burnout is, what the signs and causes are, their consequences on both professional and personal levels,

and develop coping skills to help overcome the stress and burnout in our daily lives. “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” Lao Tzu (Ashley, 2017).

Appendix A: Mindfulness

Overall description:

Mindfulness is a state of consciousness reached by individuals intentionally and nonjudgmentally attending to the current moment (Sun, 2019). It is a form a meditation that creates a nonjudgmental concentration and a heightened awareness of what is happening in the now. Being mindful of what is happening in your classroom or with the school is a way that you can take the now and focus on the process of creating a feeling of a positive result instead of thinking about the given content and how you can or could have changed it.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

When a person gets stressed, we tend to think about the past and begin to let that linger in our minds. With the use of meditation and learning to be mindful of the current situation, we can quickly turn a negative into a positive. It can be helpful when a student is acting out in the classroom, when a parent is frustrated with you or a support staff member, or when you are overwhelmed with a heavy workload. Meditation can create a calm and can be done using deep breathing and relaxing the mind.

Reference:

Sharp Donahoo, L. M., Siegrist, B., & Garrett-Wright, D. (2018). Addressing Compassion Fatigue and Stress of Special Education Teachers and Professional Staff Using Mindfulness and Prayer. *The Journal of School Nursing, 34*(6), 442–448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840517725789>.

Sun, J., Wang, Y., Wan, Q., & Huang, Z. (2019). Mindfulness and special education teachers' burnout: The serial multiple mediation effects of self-acceptance and perceived stress. *Social Behavior and Personality, 47*(11), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.8656>.

Appendix B: Scheduled Family Time**Overall description:**

Family time is important whether it is just for you or for your family. The reason for this is because we can get into a rut of just laying around and not get anything done which can cause stress at home. To combat this, we can make a certain time and day to get laundry done, wash dishes, clean, etc. but also, schedule fun activities such as going to a park, going for a walk, watching a movie, etc. Scheduling this ensures that it doesn't get pushed off and forgotten about but, instead, is done and allows you to prioritize your family.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Scheduling family time is important to help us escape our job and engage with the ones we love and want to enjoy for years to come. When we ensure that we don't work all weekend lesson planning or grading papers, it helps us create the barrier between work and home. The scheduled time also helps us begin to build a stronger relationship with our children who we see minimally during the week, and we can engage in fun family activities together.

Reference:

Ashley, J. (2017). *The Balanced Teacher Path: How to Teach, Live, and Be Happy*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Appendix C: Collaboration with General Education Teachers**Overall description:**

Collaboration is when teachers work together to identify what their needs are, how to plan and teach, and then evaluate their effectiveness (McLeskey, 2017). Working with the general education teachers can not only support them in the classroom but also allow for the accommodations and modifications to be effectively utilized. This can eliminate a second or third step from the special education teacher regarding the lessons in the general education classroom. Collaboration is a great way to ensure open communication between the team, allow for the problem solving, and provide resources for maximum student learning. It can take place in short periods of time and allow for data collection between meetings. Collaboration isn't limited to the general education teachers and special education teachers but also the paraprofessionals, and any other support staff that is needed (McLeskey, 2017).

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Collaboration should be used when there are initial concerns for students in possible referrals to the special education department, when behaviors arise in the classroom to allow for the student to learn in the room instead of being pulled out, and when deciding on what may be needed to help a student be successful and remain in the classroom. It is also a great tool to help when there is a concern and they general education teacher may need interventions for the student to help them before a referral is sent to the team. Collaboration helps the teachers be successful with minimizing the pull-out time, allowing for the student to learn to be independent, trying first in the classroom, and being given tasks that are appropriate for their level of need.

Reference:

McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., Brownwell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy, M., Lewis, T., Maheady, L., Rodriguez, J., Scheeler, M.C., Winn, J., & Ziegler, D., (2017). High-Leverage practices in special education. Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center.
www.highleveragepractices.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Collaborationfinal.pdf.

Appendix D: Support Groups (Professional and Personal)**Overall description:**

Support groups consist of finding people who are in the same scenario as you (and possible in need of similar support) are an effective strategy to overcome the stress or obstacles that are happening. As a teacher, you can seek support from colleagues, especially those in the same field, which will help you improve your sense of accomplishment and decrease your stress and burnout and you will find satisfaction in your career again.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Support groups are helpful in finding people you can relate with and they will understand what you are going through. They will also be able to understand your vocabulary when you are needing to talk about your stressors, and they can either give advice or they can help you brainstorm ways to help you be successful. This can be helpful when you are overwhelmed with paperwork, behaviors that you have exhausted all your resources, or if a negative communication comes from a parent or another coworker. Support groups are there to help, but not judge, because they can help you with thinking rationally and reminding you of the positives that you have.

Reference:

Sharp Donahoo, L. M., Siegrist, B., & Garrett-Wright, D. (2018). Addressing Compassion Fatigue and Stress of Special Education Teachers and Professional Staff Using Mindfulness and Prayer. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 34(6), 442–448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840517725789>.

Appendix E: Organizational Skills

Overall description:

Being organized is more than just keeping your workspace clean, it is keeping track of meeting dates and times, it is having your lessons prepped and ready at your fingertips and keeping student resources at your fingertips. Utilizing task lists and sticky notes to help you remember when you need another resource or supplies for a lesson or if you need to contact a parent about setting up a meeting; you can write down the task and you won't have to try to remember it after you have had a busy day. If it is a date and time sensitive item, you will want to utilize a digital calendar that can allow you to create a reminder and it will help you arrive on time or turn in a form on time.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Organizational skills are important in keeping your days, and that of your students, running smoothly. If the classroom is always cleaned up and everything put away in their correct locations, the students know where to find their supplies and it will help them remain on task, especially when there are multiple students coming and going in the resource room. Also, when you utilize the digital aspects of a calendar for meeting reminders or knowing when to complete paperwork it is helpful to keep you on track for positive completion. Another aspect that is helpful is going digital for work. If the students are to read a book, they can turn in their summaries or expected work online which eliminates the excess papers around the room and the need to correct the large stacks. Keeping the classroom organized is helpful for a busy resource room.

Reference:

Ashley, J. (2017). *The Balanced Teacher Path: How to Teach, Live, and Be Happy*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Appendix F: Remove School Reminders at Home**Overall description:**

This strategy is about turning off the email notifications, texts from colleagues, and focusing on your personal time whether it is decompression time alone, or with your family. Notifications have been happening all day and when it is brought home, you are not able to relax from the day but instead you are still invested in your daytime job instead of home life.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Removing the school reminders will be helpful when you are spending time with your family and wanting to relax and restart before the next day. If you are needing to get a few things done for school on the weekend it is fine but make sure it doesn't take your whole weekend and try not to take work out until you are ready to complete it. If the work is sitting within sight all weekend, you will never forget about it. If you are planning a shopping trip and need to get a few things for the classroom, that is fine because you may not be able to get it done during the work week. In the end, your emails and notifications can wait until you arrive at school.

Reference:

Ashley, J. (2017). *The Balanced Teacher Path: How to Teach, Live, and Be Happy*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Appendix G: Journaling

Overall description:

Journaling is something that can be done to reflect on your day and document what happened and how people responded or reflect on your lessons and what you thought went well and what you would have changed. It also allows you to look back at things that you were successful at, lessons you are learning from or about, and what your goals are and how they are progressing. It can be a simple task that can be done in a few minutes before you leave work or completed when you are ready to recap the day.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Journaling has been shown to help you release the stress and frustrations from the day but also uplift you to start the next day differently, so you do not recreate the stress again (Ashley, 2017). By writing about your goals, you are breaking them down into steps rather than trying to achieve the goal in one large step which can cause more stress. With manageable changes, it is helpful to release and feel the positives easier with journaling and you can look back at previous days to help you see and feel the accomplishments in your life.

Reference:

Ashley, J. (2017). *The Balanced Teacher Path: How to Teach, Live, and Be Happy*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Appendix H: Spirituality

Overall description:

Spirituality is a way for our mind, body, and soul to communicate with our higher power to seek guidance and support. We can always entrust our lives into them, and they will always support our needs. One form of spirituality is through prayer which can enhance the spiritual, emotional, and mental health while offering support and guidance to our needs.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Using prayer, teachers who work with high-risk students have reported an increased resiliency coping skills, improved teaching effectiveness, and job satisfaction (Sharp Donahoo, 2018). It is also shown to help parents manage their stress as well. Prayer can be helpful to bring yourself to read scripture or find calm in the stories that have created the person you are and want to be. It is helpful to complete prayer in any down time or finding peace before bed to help you rest and feel ready for the next day.

Reference:

Sharp Donahoo, L. M., Siegrist, B., & Garrett-Wright, D. (2018). Addressing Compassion Fatigue and Stress of Special Education Teachers and Professional Staff Using Mindfulness and Prayer. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 34(6), 442–448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840517725789>.

Appendix I: Hobbies**Overall description:**

Hobbies are activities in which you enjoy doing and participating in. They can be a physical or social activity that helps bring a sense of fun and freedom to your life, which in turn, helps minimize the effects of stress. Hobbies also allow you to look forward to going home after a stressful day to participate in the activity and it is relaxing. It can be quiet or something that allows you to get lost in the world around you, such as running or walking outside.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

Hobbies should be utilized as a part of your daily life because if there is never any enjoyment in your day, you will begin to feel bogged down and begin to have higher stress and it will turn chronic and cause more negative feelings. Everyone is different in their interests, but it can be a simple hobby of putting puzzles together, doing artistic projects, baking or cooking, exercise, or doing something hands on that make you dirty like gardening or farming. Hobbies help you find an internal peace for you and helps you release the stress that could be building up.

Reference:

Scott, Elizabeth, M.S., (2020). *The Importance of Hobbies for Stress Relief*. Retrieved from verywellmind:

<https://www.verywellmind.com/the-importance-of-hobbies-for-stress-relief-3144574>.

Appendix J: Healthy Lifestyle**Overall description:**

A healthy involved getting better sleep, exercise, and eating healthier. Exercise doesn't have to be an intense workout but instead it could be a simple movement that can be done for 20-30 minutes. Examples are walking, doing push-ups, sit-ups, etc. By creating that routine if movement it can increase the ability to sleep and feel rested because you aren't tossing and turning all night. Healthy eating also supports your sleep. Eating sugary food or drinking caffeinated beverages can cause your sleep to be disrupted, but when making healthy choices of drinking water or decaffeinated beverages and healthy food choices, it can help you sleep restfully at night. Sleep is important to help you have energy, stay healthy and keep a positive mindset.

Why should you use this? When will it be helpful?

As a teacher, we must get as much rest as we can to help our bodies refresh and prepare for the following day. If we end up eating something bad for us or not exercising it can cause a negative affect on our bodies and mind. Seeking the right amount of sleep can help your brain release the stress hormone to help you think on your feet and learn to overcome daily stressors. It is helpful to be healthy and happy when working with students with high needs and behaviors. It can also help us be ready when a crisis arises in our day.

Reference:

Ashley, J. (2017). *The Balanced Teacher Path: How to Teach, Live, and Be Happy*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

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Ashley, J. (2017). *The Balanced Teacher Path: How to Teach, Live, and Be Happy*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

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<https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2002.0017>.

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www.highleveragepractices.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Collaborationfinal.pdf.

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