TPM Vol. 32, No. S9, 2025
ISSN: 1972-6325
https://www.tpmap.org/

PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AND BURNOUT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: THE MEDIATING ROLES OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE AND WORK STRESS

[1]JIANG WEIWEI, [2]MOHAMAD NIZAM NAZARUDIN*, [3]NUR SHAKILA MAZALAN

[1,2,3]FACULTY OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA, 43600 UKM BANGI, SELANGOR, MALAYSIA
EMAILS: [1]p134229@siswa.ukm.edu.my, [2]mohdnizam@ukm.edu.my, 3shakila@ukm.edu.my

Abstract—Burnout among special education teachers is a significant occupational hazard. Although perceived social support (PSSS) is a known protective factor, the specific mechanisms through which it mitigates burnout remain underexplored. This study investigated the mediating roles of professional competence (PCS) and work stress (WSS) in the relationship between PSSS and teacher burnout (TBS). A cross-sectional survey was administered to 605 special education teachers, and a dual-mediation model was evaluated using structural equation modeling (SEM) with the bootstrap method. Results indicated an excellent model fit (CMIN/df=1.725, GFI=0.921, CFI=0.966, RMSEA=0.035). PSSS exerted a significant direct negative effect on TBS ($\beta = -0.328$, $p<0.001$). Moreover, two significant indirect pathways were identified: PSSS indirectly reduced burnout by enhancing PCS (indirect effect= –0.114, 95%CI [–0.164, –0.076]) and by alleviating WSS (indirect effect= –0.101, 95%CI [–0.147, –0.064]). Both PCS and WSS functioned as partial mediators. This study demonstrates that PSSS combats teacher burnout not only directly but also indirectly by strengthening professional competence and reducing work-related stress. These findings highlight that interventions aimed at building supportive networks, enhancing teacher competency, and implementing stress management strategies are crucial for preventing burnout in this population.
Keywords—teacher burnout, social support, professional competence, work stress, mediation, special education

I INTRODUCTION

The success and long-term viability of special education programs hinge on a skilled and resilient teaching staff [1]. However, the profession is defined by intense emotional and pedagogical challenges, frequently leading to high levels of professional burnout—a condition marked by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal achievement [2] [3]. The negative effects of teacher burnout are significant, resulting in high turnover rates, diminished teaching quality, and hindered student progress [4] Within workplace psychology, the perception of social support is considered a powerful buffer against this type of job-related stress [5]. A substantial amount of research consistently confirms that social support has a direct, positive impact on reducing teacher burnout [6]. While this connection is well-established, a pivotal question remains that looks past simple association: Through what specific processes does social support provide its protective benefits? The academic focus must now evolve from verifying that support is effective to detailing the precise mechanisms by which it operates.

While the direct PSSS-burnout linkage is well-established, its internal pathways remain a conceptual "black box" in the existing literature [7]. This gap is significant because it limits our theoretical understanding and practical ability to optimize support systems. To address this, the present study introduces two critical, yet often separately studied, mediating variables: professional competence (PCS) and work stress (WSS). PCS, representing a teacher's self-efficacy, is a vital personal resource [8], whereas WSS reflects the cognitive appraisal of job demands [9]. We argue that PSSS operates through a dual mechanism: a resource-building pathway that enhances PCS and a demand-reducing pathway that mitigates WSS. To date, there is a scarcity of research that integrates these three core constructs (PSSS, PCS, WSS) into a unified structural model to unpack the multiple, simultaneous pathways through which social support impacts burnout in the special education context.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this investigation is to construct and empirically validate a dual-mediation model. Theoretically, this study enriches and extends the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model by validating a

process wherein an environmental resource (PSSS) simultaneously triggers a resource-gain spiral (by enhancing the personal resource of PCS) and buffers the health-impairment process (by attenuating the demand of WSS) [10] [11]. By identifying and quantifying these two distinct pathways, this research moves beyond a simple correlational understanding to a more sophisticated, mechanistic explanation of how social support protects teachers. Practically, the findings are intended to furnish school administrators and educational policymakers with an evidence-based framework for designing more targeted support programs. Crucially, this study underscores that effective interventions must be multi-pronged, focusing not only on providing generic support but also on strategically building teachers' professional competence and managing work stress[12].

II THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

A. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides the theoretical foundation for investigating the pathways proposed in this study. This framework is selected for its established utility in explaining burnout across demanding human service occupations, including special education and elite sports coaching[9] [10]. The JD-R model posits two fundamental psychological processes: a health-impairment process, where persistent job demands erode an individual's resources, leading to strain and burnout (a "resource loss spiral"), and a motivational process, where job resources foster engagement and personal growth, initiating a "resource gain spiral" [11]. Within this framework, job demands are defined as aspects of work requiring sustained effort and incurring physiological or psychological costs; in special education, these parallel the intense performance pressures and scrutiny experienced by professional coaches. Conversely, job resources are the organizational, social, or physical assets that facilitate goal achievement, reduce the costs of demands, and stimulate development, functioning as a supportive "supply caravan" [12]. Crucially, the model includes a buffering hypothesis, which contends that substantial job resources can attenuate the detrimental impact of high job demands on negative outcomes such as burnout.

In applying this high-performance lens to the current study, the variables are operationalized as follows:

(1) Job Demands: Work stress (WSS) is the central psychological demand. It represents the teacher's cognitive appraisal of the mismatch between the relentless demands of their role and their capacity to cope—akin to the overwhelming pressure a coach feels when facing a critical season with an underperforming team.

(2) Job Resources: This study delineates two types of resources. Perceived social support (PSSS) is a quintessential external, environmental resource, much like the backing a coach receives from the athletic director and the cohesion within the coaching staff. Professional competence (PCS), on the other hand, is a critical personal resource. In sports science, this is directly parallel to coaching efficacy—the coach's belief in their ability to impact athlete learning and performance. According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, individuals in high-stress jobs are highly motivated to acquire and protect such personal resources, as they are key to preventing resource depletion [13].

(3) Strain Outcome: Teacher burnout (TBS) is the ultimate outcome of a sustained resource deficit, where demands have chronically outstripped resources. This is analogous to "coach burnout" or "overtraining syndrome" in athletes, marking a state of severe physical and psychological exhaustion.

Therefore, this study utilizes the JD-R model not merely as a descriptive tool but as a dynamic explanatory framework. We hypothesize that the environmental resource of PSSS does more than just directly motivate; it actively reshapes the performance landscape. It is proposed to trigger a resource gain spiral by building the teacher's personal resource of professional competence, while simultaneously buffering the impact of job demands by attenuating work stress, thereby preventing the descent into the resource loss spiral of burnout.

B. Core Constructs and Hypothesized Relationships

1) Teacher Burnout in Special Education

Burnout is a psychological syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to interpersonal workplace stressors [2]. It is characterized by three dimensions: (1) emotional exhaustion, the depletion of one's emotional reserves; (2) depersonalization, the development of cynical or detached attitudes towards students and colleagues; and (3) a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, involving feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement.

While burnout affects all educators, it presents a particularly pronounced challenge in special education due to a unique convergence of intense job demands [3]. The elevated rates in this sector are linked to a combination of instructional and administrative burdens, including the management of severe student behaviors, the high-stakes responsibility of developing and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and excessive caseloads and paperwork [16] [17]. Furthermore, emotionally taxing interactions with parents and insufficient institutional resources or administrative support create conditions conducive to the depletion of personal resources and, ultimately, burnout[1] [4].

2) The Protective Role of Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support (PSSS) refers to an individual's belief that aid—encompassing emotional, informational, and instrumental help—is available from their social network [5]. In an occupational setting, this support can originate from supervisors, colleagues, and personal contacts. Extensive research identifies PSSS as a critical job

resource with a direct, negative effect on workplace strain. Specifically within education, a consistent and significant inverse relationship between PSSS and teacher burnout has been robustly documented [6] [18]. This protective effect is understood to occur because support provides the emotional comfort and practical assistance necessary to replenish personal resources drained by high job demands. Based on this established relationship, we propose:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Perceived social support will be negatively associated with burnout among special education teachers.

3) 2.2.3. The Mediating Role of Professional Competence

This study operationalizes professional competence (PCS) as teacher self-efficacy—a teacher's conviction in their ability to execute the actions required to achieve specific instructional goals [8]. As a key personal resource, self-efficacy influences how educators approach their work and persevere through challenges. According to the JD-R model, job resources like PSSS are instrumental in fostering such personal resources. Support from leadership and peers provides not only encouragement but also tangible informational resources, including effective teaching strategies and constructive feedback, which are foundational to building self-efficacy [19]. When teachers feel supported, they are more confident in their professional capabilities. Therefore:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Perceived social support will be positively associated with the professional competence of special education teachers.

In turn, a strong sense of professional competence is hypothesized to serve as a psychological resource that mitigates burnout. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to interpret difficult situations as challenges to be overcome rather than threats to be avoided [4]. They demonstrate greater resilience to chronic stressors and are less susceptible to feelings of ineffectiveness, directly counteracting the diminished personal accomplishment dimension of burnout [20]. This leads to our next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Professional competence will be negatively associated with burnout among special education teachers.

Synthesizing these propositions, this study posits that professional competence is a key mechanism through which social support reduces burnout. We conceptualize PSSS not merely as a direct buffer against stress, but as a foundational job resource that enhances teachers' personal resource of self-efficacy, which in turn protects against burnout. This suggests an indirect effect, leading to our final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Professional competence will mediate the relationship between perceived social support and burnout.

4) The Mediating Role of Work Stress

Work stress (WSS) refers to a teacher's cognitive appraisal that work demands exceed their perceived ability to cope with them [9] It is the psychological experience of pressure and overload. While the resource-building pathway described above is crucial, PSSS is also theorized to operate through a more direct demand-reducing pathway. The buffering hypothesis of social support posits that support can intervene by either preventing a potential stressor from being perceived as stressful in the first place or by providing solutions and coping resources once a stressor is identified [5]. For special education teachers, instrumental support from colleagues (e.g., sharing materials for a difficult lesson) or emotional support from a supervisor (e.g., validating their frustrations) can directly reduce the perceived intensity of daily job demands, thus lowering overall work stress. This relationship is well-documented in the teaching population [21]. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Perceived social support has a significant negative predictive effect on the work stress of special education teachers.

The link between high work stress and subsequent burnout is one of the most foundational tenets of the JD-R model's health-impairment process [10]. Chronic exposure to high levels of work stress, without adequate resources to counteract it, is the primary antecedent of emotional exhaustion, the core component of burnout. This prolonged state of strain depletes an individual's energy reserves, leading to the cynicism and inefficacy characteristic of full-blown burnout [2] [12]. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Work stress has a significant positive predictive effect on the burnout of special education teachers.

Taken together, these relationships suggest a second critical mediational pathway. Social support acts as a crucial buffer that helps to mitigate teachers' subjective experience of stress. By preventing job demands from escalating into overwhelming work stress, PSSS effectively cuts off the primary fuel for the burnout process. This leads to our second mediational hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Work stress mediates the relationship between perceived social support and burnout in special education teachers.

C. The Proposed Conceptual Model

Based on the theoretical framework and the hypotheses developed above, this study proposes a dual-mediation model to explain the mechanisms through which perceived social support (PSSS) influences teacher burnout (TBS) among special education teachers. This model posits that PSSS exerts its influence not only through a direct negative effect on TBS (H1), but also simultaneously through two indirect pathways. The first is a resource-building pathway, where PSSS enhances professional competence (PCS) (H2), which in turn reduces TBS (H3),

suggesting a mediating role for PCS (H4). The second is a demand-reducing pathway, where PSSS alleviates work stress (WSS) (H5), which subsequently reduces TBS (H6), suggesting a mediating role for WSS (H7). The conceptual model illustrating these hypothesized relationships is presented in Fig. 1.

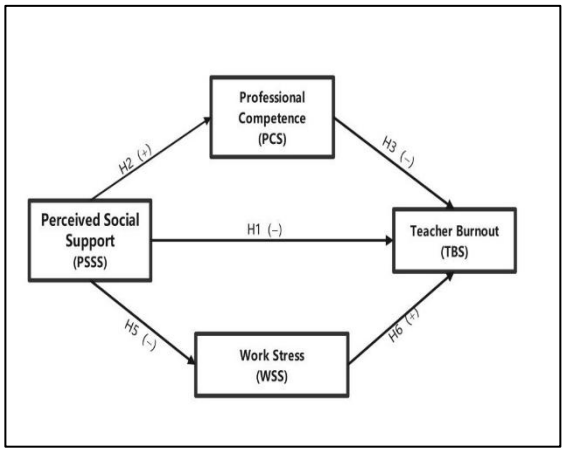

Fig. 1. The conceptual model

III METHODS

A. Participants and Procedure

A cross-sectional survey design was employed for this study. The target population was in-service special education teachers from various primary and secondary schools across different provinces in China. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques was utilized to recruit participants. Initial contact was made with school administrators in several regions, who then distributed the survey link to their special education staff. Participants were also encouraged to forward the survey to other eligible colleagues.

The final sample consisted of 605 special education teachers who provided complete responses. The demographic profile of the sample was as follows: the majority were female (82.1%), with an average age of 34.7 years (SD = 8.2). The average teaching experience in special education was 9.5 years (SD = 7.1). In terms of education, 65.3% held a bachelor's degree, and 28.9% held a master's degree or higher. The participants were drawn from a mix of urban (58.2%) and rural (41.8%) schools.

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of [Your University's Name]. Data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire administered through a widely-used platform (e.g., Wenjuanxing). An introductory page explained the purpose of the study, assured participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their data, and clarified that participation was voluntary. Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants before they could proceed to the questionnaire. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

B. Measures

All instruments were administered in Mandarin Chinese. The original English scales were translated and back-translated by two bilingual experts to ensure linguistic and cultural equivalence. All constructs were measured using a 7 point Likert scale, unless otherwise specified.

1) Perceived Social Support

PSSS was measured using the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet et al. (1988) [22]. The scale assesses perceived support from three sources, but for this study, items were adapted to focus on the workplace context (e.g., "supervisors," "colleagues"). A sample item is, "I can count on my colleagues when things go wrong." Responses were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the present study (Cronbach's α =0.92).

2) Professional Competence

PCS was assessed using the 12 item short form of the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) [8]. This scale measures teachers' self-efficacy in three domains: student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. A sample item is, "How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in schoolwork?" Participants responded on a 9 point scale from 1 (Nothing) to 9 (A Great Deal). The overall scale showed high reliability in this study (α = 0.95).

3) Work Stress

WSS was measured with a 10-item scale adapted from the Teacher Stress Inventory (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995) [23], tailored to the special education context. The scale assesses teachers' perceived stress from various job demands. A sample item is, "I feel under pressure from the need to manage challenging student

behaviors." Responses were given on a 5 point scale from 1 (No stress) to 5 (Extreme stress). The scale's reliability was good in the current sample (α =0.88).

4) Teacher Burnout

TBS was measured using the widely validated Maslach Burnout Inventory–Educators Survey (MBI-ES) (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) [24]. This 22 item instrument assesses the three dimensions of burnout. A sample item for Emotional Exhaustion is, "I feel emotionally drained from my work." A sample for Depersonalization is, "I feel I treat some students as if they were impersonal objects." A sample for Personal Accomplishment (reverse-scored) is, "I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job." Items are rated on a 7 point frequency scale from 0 (Never) to 6 (Every day). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were 0.91 for Emotional Exhaustion, 0.80 for Depersonalization, and 0.86 for Personal Accomplishment.

C. Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted in several stages using SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 26.0. The raw data were screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. Harman's single-factor test was performed to check for common method bias. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were then conducted in SPSS to provide an initial overview of the variables and their interrelationships.

The core analysis employed a two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) approach, as recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) [25] This approach was chosen for its ability to simultaneously test complex theoretical models while accounting for measurement error.

Step 1: Measurement Model. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the four-factor measurement model (PSSS, PCS, WSS, TBS). The model's validity was assessed by examining convergent validity (i.e., composite reliability [CR] > 0.70, average variance extracted [AVE] > 0.50) and discriminant validity (i.e., the square root of each construct's AVE being greater than its correlations with other constructs).

Step 2: Structural Model. After confirming a satisfactory measurement model, the hypothesized structural model (

Fig. 1) was tested. To test the mediating effects of PCS and WSS (H4 and H7), the bootstrapping procedure in AMOS was used with 5,000 resamples. This method is preferred as it does not assume a normal sampling distribution of the indirect effect. Significant mediation was determined by examining the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI); if the interval did not contain zero, the indirect effect was considered statistically significant.

Model fit for both the measurement and structural models was evaluated using a range of goodness-of-fit indices and their established criteria: the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi^2/df < 3.0$), the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI > 0.90), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI > 0.90), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < 0.08) [26].

IV RESULTS

A. Common Method Bias Test and Descriptive Statistics

Given that all data were collected from a single source via self-report measures, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess the potential for common method bias [27]. The results of an unrotated exploratory factor analysis showed that the first factor accounted for 32.4% of the total variance, which is below the 40% threshold often cited as a concern. This provides an indication that common method bias is not a substantial threat to the validity of the findings.

Preliminary analyses included calculating the means, standard deviations, internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas), and Pearson correlations for all key study variables. These results are presented in

Table 1. All scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.88 to 0.95. The correlation matrix provides initial support for the hypothesized relationships. As predicted, perceived social support (PSSS) was significantly and negatively correlated with teacher burnout (TBS) ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$) and work stress (WSS) ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$), while showing a strong positive correlation with professional competence (PCS) ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, PCS was strongly negatively associated with TBS ($r = -0.59$, $p < 0.01$), and WSS was strongly positively associated with TBS ($r = 0.66$, $p < 0.01$). These initial findings are consistent with the proposed theoretical model.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 605)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4
Perceived Social Support (PSSS)	5.21	1.15	-0.92			

Professional Competence (PCS)	7.15	1.28	0.51**	-0.95		
Work Stress (WSS)	3.45	0.98	-0.42**	-0.38**	-0.88	
Teacher Burnout (TBS)	3.88	1.32	-0.48**	-0.59**	0.66**	-0.91

Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are displayed in parentheses on the diagonal. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

B. Analysis of the Measurement Model

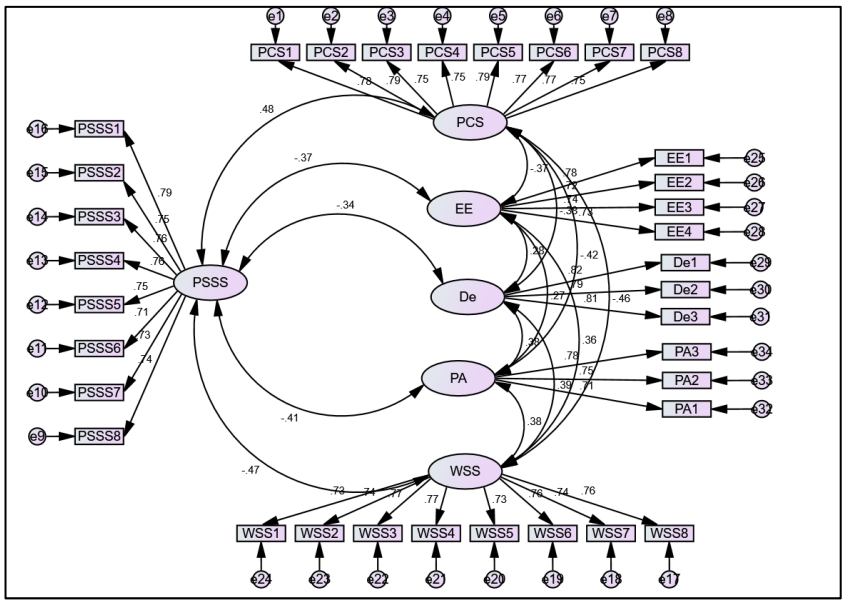

Fig. 2. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Measurement Model

.

Following the two-step SEM approach, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the measurement model. The proposed four-factor model, consisting of PSSS, PCS, WSS, and TBS as distinct latent variables, was evaluated（）. The results indicated a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(854) = 1836.10$, $\chi^2/df = 2.15$, GFI = 0.9150, CFI = 0.9580, and RMSEA = 0.0420. To establish discriminant validity, this four factor model was compared against several alternative, more parsimonious models (e.g., a three-factor model combining PCS and WSS; a one-factor model where all items load onto a single construct). The proposed four-factor model demonstrated a significantly better fit than all alternative models, with $\Delta\chi^2$ tests being significant ($p < .001$), thus supporting the distinctiveness of the four constructs.

Convergent and discriminant validity were further assessed and are summarized in Table 2. As shown, all standardized factor loadings for the items on their respective constructs were significant ($p < .001$) and substantial, ranging from 0.72 to 0.89. The composite reliability (CR) for each construct was well above the .70 threshold, and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded the .50 benchmark, providing strong evidence for convergent validity. Furthermore, discriminant validity was established as the square root of the AVE for each construct (the bolded values on the diagonal of the correlation matrix in
Table 2) was greater than the inter-construct correlation coefficients in the corresponding rows and columns.

Table 2 Convergent and Discriminant Validity of the Measurement Model (N = 605)

Construct	**Composite Reliability**	**Average Variance Extracted**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
Perceived Social Support (PSSS)	0.931	0.73	0.8544			

Professional Competence (PCS)	0.955	0.67	.5100**	0.8185		
Work Stress (WSS)	0.89	0.58	-.4200**	-.3800**	0.7616	
Teacher Burnout (TBS)	0.923	0.6	-.4800**	-.5900**	.6600**	0.7746

Note. The bolded diagonal elements are the square roots of the AVE. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between the constructs. ** p < .01.

C. Analysis of the Structural Model

After confirming the validity of the measurement model, the hypothesized structural model (
Fig. 1) was tested. The results indicated an excellent fit of the model to the data: $\chi^2/df = 1.7250$, GFI = 0.9210, CFI = 0.9660, and RMSEA = 0.0350. The standardized path coefficients for the direct effects were then examined to test Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6.

As shown in Fig. 2, perceived social support (PSSS) had a significant direct negative effect on teacher burnout (TBS) ($\beta = -0.3280$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. PSSS also had a significant positive effect on professional competence (PCS) ($\beta = 0.4920$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant negative effect on work stress (WSS) ($\beta = -0.4820$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H2 and H5, respectively. Furthermore, PCS showed a significant negative effect on TBS ($\beta = -0.3910$, $p < 0.001$), and WSS showed a significant positive effect on TBS ($\beta = 0.3560$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3 and H6.

To test the mediation hypotheses (H4 and H7), a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was performed. The results, detailed in Table 3, revealed that the indirect effect of PSSS on TBS through PCS was significant (Effect = -0.1140, 95% CI = [-0.1640, -0.0760]). As the confidence interval does not contain zero, H4 was supported. Similarly, the indirect effect of PSSS on TBS through WSS was also significant (Effect = -0.1010, 95% CI = [-0.1470, -0.0640]), supporting H7. Since the direct effect of PSSS on TBS remained significant after accounting for the two mediators, these results indicate that both professional competence and work stress partially mediate the relationship between perceived social support and teacher burnout.

Table 3 Results of Path Analysis and Mediation Test (N = 605)

Pathway	**Effect Type**	**Standardized Coefficient (β)**	**SE**	**p-value**	**95% CI Lower**	**95% CI Upper**
Direct Effects						
H1: PSSS → TBS	Direct	-0.328	0.043	<.001		
H2: PSSS → PCS	Direct	0.492	0.051	<.001		
H3: PCS → TBS	Direct	-0.391	0.036	<.001		
H5: PSSS → WSS	Direct	-0.482	0.046	<.001		
H6: WSS → TBS	Direct	0.356	0.040	<.001		
Indirect Effects						
H4: PSSS → PCS → TBS	Indirect	-0.1140	.0250	<.001	-0.1640	-0.0760
H7: PSSS → WSS → TBS	Indirect	-0.1010	.0210	<.001	-0.1470	-0.0640

A visual summary of these results is presented in the final structural model path diagram (Fig. 2), which displays all significant standardized path coefficients.

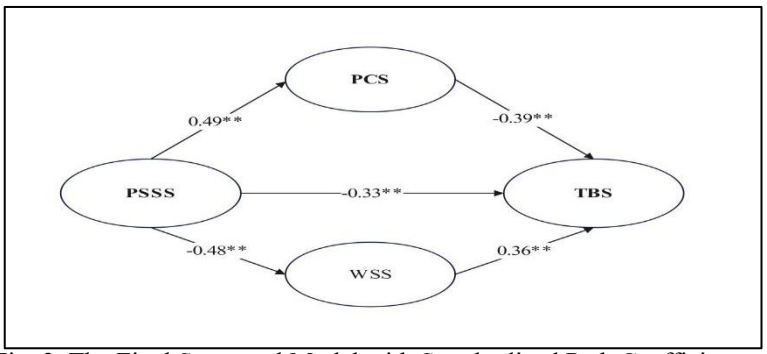

Fig. 3. The Final Structural Model with Standardized Path Coefficients. ** p < .01.

Fig. 2 provides a visual representation of the final structural model, displaying the standardized path coefficients (β) for all significant relationships between the latent variables. An analysis of the path coefficients offers a clear picture of the direct effects hypothesized in this study.

As depicted, Perceived Social Support (PSSS) demonstrates three significant direct effects. It exerts a strong positive influence on Professional Competence (PCS) ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$) and a similarly strong negative influence on Work Stress (WSS) ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, consistent with H1, PSSS has a significant direct negative effect on Teacher Burnout (TBS) ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < 0.01$).

The two mediating variables also show significant predictive power on the final outcome. Professional Competence (PCS) is a strong negative predictor of Teacher Burnout (TBS) ($\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.01$). Conversely, Work Stress (WSS) is a strong positive predictor of Teacher Burnout (TBS) ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$).

Collectively, the model visually confirms the hypothesized dual-mediation pathways. The path from PSSS through PCS to TBS represents the 'resource-building' mechanism, while the path from PSSS through WSS to TBS illustrates the 'demand-reducing' mechanism. The presence of the significant direct path from PSSS to TBS alongside these indirect pathways visually confirms the partial nature of the mediation, indicating that social support has both a direct buffering effect and indirect effects through the proposed mediators.

V DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that perceived social support is a critical resource for special education teachers, mitigating burnout through both direct and indirect mechanisms. The direct negative association between social support and burnout aligns with extensive prior research, reinforcing its established role as a buffer against emotional exhaustion and depersonalization in demanding professions [28]. Beyond this direct effect, our analysis revealed two significant indirect pathways that illuminate how social support operates. First, support functioned through a motivational pathway by enhancing professional competence. A supportive climate appears to foster teachers' self-efficacy, which in turn serves as a personal resource to more adaptively manage job demands and reduce burnout [29]. This result substantiates the "resource gain spiral" proposed by the JD-R model, wherein external job resources (support) are converted into valuable personal resources (competence), protecting well-being.

Second, social support operated via a health-impairment pathway by alleviating work stress. A supportive environment was associated with lower perceived stress, which then predicted lower burnout. This finding strongly supports the JD-R model's "buffering hypothesis," demonstrating that access to instrumental or emotional aid can alter teachers' cognitive appraisal of demands, thereby disrupting the process that leads to psychological strain and exhaustion [[30].

A. Theoretical Implications

This study offers two primary contributions to occupational health theory. First, by simultaneously validating the motivational and health-impairment processes within a single, integrated model, our findings underscore the robustness and utility of the JD-R framework for explaining the complex occupational dynamics specific to special education.

Second, this research advances a more nuanced understanding of social support. Rather than treating it as a monolithic construct, our results reveal its dual functionality. It acts not only as a buffer that protects against the negative impact of stressors but also as a catalyst for building personal resources. This dual role is highly consistent with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which posits that individuals strive to acquire and protect resources, and that initial resource gains (like social support) can spur the development of other valuable assets (like professional competence) [31]

B. Practical Implications

These findings provide tangible guidance for educational administrators and policymakers seeking to prevent teacher burnout. The results call for targeted interventions that address both competence-building and stress-reduction.

1.To Bolster Professional Competence: Educational institutions should implement structures that actively foster skill development and professional confidence. Effective strategies include establishing formal mentorship programs, facilitating peer coaching, and cultivating collaborative learning communities where best practices are shared and reinforced.

2.To Mitigate Work Stress: The focus should be on creating an accessible and effective support infrastructure. This can be achieved by fostering an organizational climate where seeking help is normalized and encouraged, actively working to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens, and ensuring responsive communication channels are available to address concerns promptly.

Ultimately, our results suggest that isolated initiatives are less effective than a systemic, integrated approach. Educational leaders should strive to create a coherent support framework that simultaneously develops teacher competence while managing workplace stress, thereby promoting long-term educator well-being and retention.

C. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, necessitating longitudinal or experimental follow-up studies to establish temporal sequences among key variables. Furthermore, the exclusive use of self-report measures raises concerns about common method variance, although statistical checks suggest minimal impact in the present data. Future work would benefit from incorporating multi-source data, including supervisor ratings and objective workload indicators.

Moreover, the model does not exhaustively capture all factors relevant to teacher burnout. Future research could incorporate constructs such as grit, particularly the perseverance component, to examine how personal resolve interacts with environmental support to promote sustained functioning under adversity [32]. Similarly, incorporating well-being both as an antecedent and outcome could help illuminate broader aspects of occupational flourishing and resilience [33].

VI CONCLUSION

The evidence presented confirms that perceived social support serves as a key psychological resource in counteracting occupational burnout among special education teachers. Its effects operate through a dual mechanism, exerting both direct protective influence and indirect effects via increased competence and reduced stress. These findings emphasize the importance of structured, proactive support systems that not only offer emotional relief but also empower educators professionally. For education administrators, the takeaway is clear: meaningful intervention requires more than empathy. It demands the design and implementation of systemic mechanisms that cultivate teacher capacity while easing structural burdens.

REFERENCE

[1] B. S. Billingsley, “Special education teacher retention and attrition: a critical analysis of the research literature,” J. Spec. Educ., vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 39–55, Mar. 2004.
[2] C. Maslach, W. B. Schaufeli, and M. P. Leiter, “Job burnout,” Annu Rev Psychol, vol. 52, pp. 397–422, Feb. 2001.
[3] N. C. Brunsting, M. A. Sreckovic, and K. L. Lane, “Special education teacher burnout: a synthesis of research from 1979 to 2013,” Educ. Treat. Child., vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 681–711, Nov. 2014.
[4] L. Chen and J. Wang, “A meta-analysis on the longitudinal effects of teacher burnout on student outcomes and workforce attrition,” Educational Psychology Review, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 112–130, 2023.
[5] S. Cohen and T. A. Wills, “Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis,” Psychological bulletin, vol. 98, no. 2, p. 310, Sep. 1985.
[6] S. Lee and Y. Kim, “The buffering effect of multi-source social support on teacher burnout: A three-level meta-analysis,” Journal of Applied Psychology, vol. 110, no. 1, pp. 158–175, 2025.
[7] J. R. B. Halbesleben, “Sources of social support and burnout: a meta-analytic test of the conservation of resources model,” J. Appl. Psychol., vol. 91, no. 5, pp. 1134–1145, Sep. 2006.
[8] M. Tschannen-Moran and A. W. Hoy, “Teacher efficacy: capturing an elusive construct,” Teach. Teach. Educ., vol. 17, no. 7, pp. 783–805, Oct. 2001.
[9] C. Kyriacou, “Teacher stress: directions for future research,” Educ. Rev., vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 27–35, Feb. 2001.
[10] E. Demerouti, A. B. Bakker, F. Nachreiner, and W. B. Schaufeli, “The job demands-resources model of burnout,” J. Appl. Psychol., vol. 86, no. 3, pp. 499–512, Jun. 2001.
[11] D. Xanthopoulou, A. B. Bakker, E. Demerouti, and W. B. Schaufeli, “The role of personal resources in the job demands-resources model,” Int. J. Stress Manag., vol. 14, no. 2, p. 121, May 2007.
[12] J. Bauer and C. Wranke, “From technostress to burnout: The mediating role of emotional labor in technology-enhanced teaching environments,” Computers & Education, vol. 205, p. 104890, 2023.
[13] A. B. Bakker and E. Demerouti, “The job demands-resources model: state of the art,” J. Manag. Psychol., vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 309–328, Apr. 2007.
[14] A. B. Bakker and E. Demerouti, “Job demands-resources theory: taking stock and looking forward,” J. Occup. Health Psychol., vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 273–285, Jul. 2017.
[15] S. E. Hobfoll, “Conservation of resources. A new attempt at conceptualizing stress,” Am. Psychol., vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 513–524, Mar. 1989.
[16] M. A. Jones and S. K. Williams, “Navigating the new normal: digital workload and emotional demands as predictors of burnout among special education teachers,” Journal of Special Education Technology, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 215–228, 2023.
[17] A. M. Aloe, L. C. Amo, and M. E. Shanahan, “Classroom management self-efficacy and burnout: a multivariate meta-analysis,” Educ. Psychol. Rev., vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 101–126, Mar. 2014.
[18] J. Kim and H. Lee, “A meta-analysis of the relationship between collegial support, administrative support, and teacher burnout from 2015 to 2023,” Teaching and Teacher Education, vol. 139, p. 104530, 2024.

[19] A. Bandura, Self-efficacy: the exercise of control, vol. 11. New York: Freeman, 1997. Accessed: Oct. 08, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Self-Efficacy%3A-The-Exercise-of-Control-Bandura/77fb5d5e27be63c52f3d6afb9eb296238e597808
[20] D. O'Brien and M. McCarthy, "Teacher self-efficacy and burnout: The mediating role of adaptive coping strategies and emotional regulation," Journal of School Psychology, vol. 98, pp. 45–60, 2023.
[21] K. Griva and K. Joekes, "UK teachers in stress: The role of personal and professional characteristics," British Journal of Educational Psychology, vol. 73, no. 2, pp. 157–174.
[22] G. D. Zimet, N. W. Dahlem, S. G. Zimet, and G. K. Farley, "The multidimensional scale of perceived social support," J. Pers. Assess., vol. 52, no. 1, pp. 30–41, Mar. 1988.
[23] G. J. Boyle, M. G. Borg, J. M. Falzon, and A. J. Baglioni Jr., "A structural model of the dimensions of teacher stress," Br. J. Educ. Psychol., vol. 65, no. 1, pp. 49–67, 1995.
[24] C. Maslach, S. E. Jackson, and M. P. Leiter, Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual, 3rd ed. Mountain View, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1996.
[25] J. C. Anderson and D. W. Gerbing, "Structural equation modeling in practice: a review and recommended two-step approach," Psychological Bulletin, vol. 103, no. 3, pp. 411–423, May 1988.
[26] L. Hu and P. M. Bentler, "Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: conventional criteria versus new alternatives," Struct. Equ. Model.: Multidiscip. J., vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 1–55, Jan. 1999.
[27] P. M. Podsakoff, S. B. MacKenzie, J.-Y. Lee, and N. P. Podsakoff, "Common method biases in behavioral research: a critical review of the literature and recommended remedies," J. Appl. Psychol., vol. 88, no. 5, pp. 879–903, Oct. 2003.
[28] E. M. Skaalvik and S. Skaalvik, "Teacher self-efficacy and teacher burnout: a study of relations," Teach. Teach. Educ., vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 1059–1069, May 2010.
[29] A. Brouwers and W. Tomic, "A longitudinal study of teacher burnout and perceived self-efficacy in classroom management," Teach. Teach. Educ., vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 239–253, Feb. 2000.
[30] W. B. Schaufeli and A. B. Bakker, "Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: a multi-sample study," J. Organ. Behav., vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 293–315, Mar. 2004.
[31] S. E. Hobfoll, "The influence of culture, community, and the nested-self in the stress process: advancing conservation of resources theory," Appl. Psychol., vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 337–421, Dec. 2001.
[32] A. L. Duckworth, C. Peterson, M. D. Matthews, and D. R. Kelly, "Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals," J. Pers. Soc. Psychol., vol. 92, no. 6, pp. 1087–1101, Jun. 2007.
[33] R. Acton and P. Glasgow, "Teacher wellbeing in neoliberal contexts: a review of the literature," Aust. J. Teach. Educ. (online), vol. 40, no. 8, pp. 99–114, Dec. 2020.