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Citation style: Ling Guo, Potměšil Miloň, Bo Xu, Thi Phuong Thao Huynh, Potmesilova Petra. (2020). A Review Of Research On Professional Burnout Of Special Pedagogues In China. W: P. Besedova, N. Heinrichova, J. Ondráková (eds.), "Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY2020)" (S. 93-105), doi 10.15405/epiceepsy.20111.9



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The International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology
A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT OF
SPECIAL PEDAGOGUES IN CHINA

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Abstract

In order to provide references for further studies, this study attempts to summarize and present the current research situation regarding professional burnout among Chinese special education teachers on the basis of bibliometric analysis of academic articles about this topic in mainland China from 2007 to 2017. The findings are as follows: (1) there has been a significant increase in the number of articles and centralized distribution of research results; (2) limited research subjects and the lack of a research team are problems to be solved in the future; (3) there are limited research methods and constant expansion of the research content in the current research. According to the research situation, the following suggestions are proposed for follow-up research studies: (1) accelerating the construction of a research team and forming a stable research force; (2) expanding multidisciplinary and cross-system cooperation in research; (3) enriching research content and paying more attention to job burnout among special education staff in different areas and intervention strategies to improve the situation concerning SETs' professional burnout.

2672-8141 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Special education teacher, professional burnout, bibliometric analysis.

1. Introduction

Occupational stress has always been a hot topic among researchers and teachers themselves. Evidence has been obtained in earlier studies that working in education involves continuous periods of tension and may lead to professional burnout (Zakrizevska, 2015). The factors involved include a heavy workload, a diversified working environment, tremendous emotional and physical loads, complex communication requirements and interpersonal relationships, strict regulation and supervision by the administrative system, insufficient respect, and unsatisfactory salaries (Zakrizevska, 2015). Special education teachers (SETs) are people who work with children and adolescents who have any kinds of disabilities or special educational needs in inclusive schools, public special schools, or private institutions. In consideration of the complex possibilities of teaching learners who may have a wide range of special educational needs, including intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairments, autistic spectrum disorder, ADHD, emotional and behavioral problems, etc., special education teachers have to face more instructional difficulties and behavioral management challenges than general teachers, which inevitably subjects special education teachers to enormous stress. As a result, professional burnout and the resultant attrition among special education teachers have become risks to the maintenance of sufficient SETs of high quality since attrition is the major factor causing a shortage (Billingsley, 1993). Recent estimates indicate that there is a critical shortage of SETs in China; for example, about 1180 SETs will be needed in just one province in the southwest of China and the teacher-student ratio is 1:5.4, which is much lower than the government requirement of 1:3 (Zhang, 2012). In practice, almost every teacher experiences some kind of stress in the process of carrying out their professional responsibilities and has more or fewer negative feelings about their profession. But some teachers experience these negative feelings more acutely or with greater frequency, which is described as professional burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014). As a term, burnout was first identified by the psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger to denote one particular mental state of exhaustion and was promoted by Christina Maslach, a social psychology researcher (as cited in Schaufeli et al., 2017). According to Maslach, professional burnout means a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stress on the job, which includes three key dimensions: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). These three dimensions are also the critical differences from occupational stress, although stress always correlates closely to professional burnout.

2. Problem Statement

Professional burnout is not only a frequent phenomenon among teachers, but also has far-reaching effects, with an impact on more than just the teachers experiencing this syndrome. Recent studies indicate that the impacts of teachers' professional burnout affect teachers' health and student outcomes. Specifically speaking, professional burnout could directly lead to teachers experiencing physical symptoms including chronic fatigue, colds, recurrent flu, musculoskeletal pain, and even mental illness, as teachers with burnout experience eight out of nine symptoms of depression (Armon et al., 2010; Bianchi et al., 2013). Besides this, as the recipients of teachers' instruction, students are another group of victims of teachers' professional burnout, on the evidence of related research. Teachers' social and emotional competence contributes to creating a classroom climate that is more conducive to learning and that promotes positive developmental

outcomes among students. On the contrary, students with disengaged or exhausted teachers are frequently disruptive, struggle socially and emotionally, and attain their IEP goals less frequently, all of which impact on students' academic development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Even through the research about job burnout has a history going back more than 40 years in western countries, research about SETs' professional burnout only started about 10 years ago. From 2007, researchers in China started to focus on this topic and published many articles. In recent years, with more attention being paid to teachers' mental health, SETs' professional burnout has become a research hot spot in mainland China. Hence, in order to provide references for further studies, this paper attempts to summarize and present the current research situation concerning professional burnout among SETs in China by conducting a bibliometric analysis of related articles about this topic from 2007 to 2017.

3. Research Questions

- (1) Whether is there a significant increase in the number of articles and centralized distribution of research results.
- (2) Whether is enough needed research subjects and the research teams for solving problems
- (3) How is the situation in the field of research methods and constant expansion of the research content in the current research.

4. Purpose of the Study

In order to provide references for further studies, this study attempts to summarize and present the current research situation regarding professional burnout among Chinese special education teachers on the basis of bibliometric analysis of academic articles about this topic in mainland China from 2007 to 2017.

5. Research Methods

The subjects of this study are Chinese articles published between January 1, 2007 and June 30, 2017. By using the Leshan Normal University node of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and VIP Journal integration S Platform (VIP) as databases of article sources and "Special Education Teachers" and "Professional Burnout/Job Burnout" as the subject terms for our search, we have found 45 useful articles, including three master's theses. The research procedures include two steps: first, sorting the initial articles found and removing the useless ones, which means articles with inconsistent or non-highly-correlated contents and topics, and second, determining the areas and specific dimensions of analysis, and then encoding all of the articles according to their year of publication, journal source, article type, authorship, research method, research topic, etc.

6. Findings

Overview of the articles

6.1 Annual Distribution of Articles

The number of articles is an indicator of researchers' attention to a given topic, so the annual distribution of articles reveals the general research situation regarding that topic. So first, we counted the number of articles about SETs' professional burnout in mainland China according to years, which is shown in Figure 1.

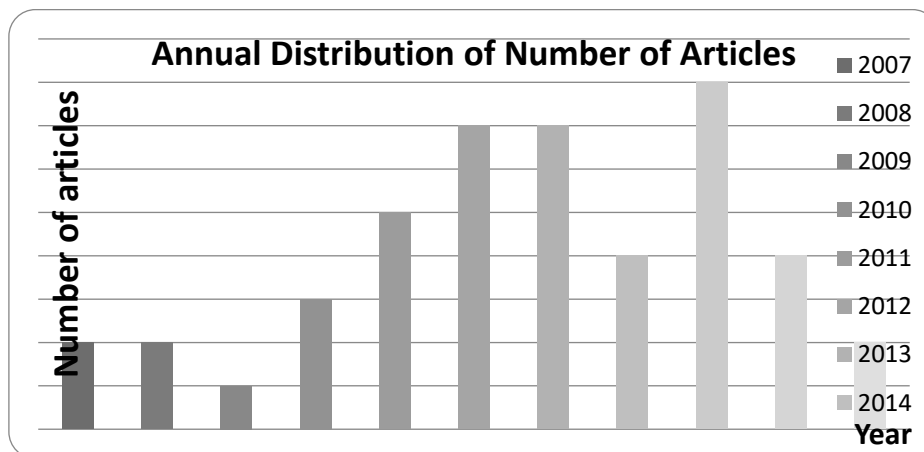


Figure 01. Annual distribution of articles about SETs' professional burnout in mainland China

According to Figure 1, a generally increasing tendency can be seen among articles about SETs' professional burnout in the past 10 years, which can be divided into three phases. The first one is the initial period of research on this topic, with the same or even smaller numbers of articles at a low level in the first three years. From 2010, along with the spread of theories about positive psychology and people's attention to teachers' mental health, the following five years witness a dramatic increase in the numbers of articles about SETs' professional burnout, which means about three or four times the numbers of articles in comparison to the initial period and reaching its highest point in 2015, with eight articles. In the last two years, an obvious drop in the numbers of articles can be seen in Figure 1, which shows some kind of cooling down of researchers' enthusiasm. Combined with the research content from articles in the previous phrases, a bottleneck period emerges in the third phrase, which means that after a hot period of research on the topic of SETs' job burnout by using empirical methods to investigate the situation of burnout among special educational teachers, new research points need to be found for further study and more in-depth research worth doing in the future.

6.2. Information about Article Sources

The relevant articles come from a wide range of sources. When the 45 articles are classified according to the type of journal, the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 01. Number of articles according to different types of journals

Journal Type	Number of 3.3s (NJ)	Percentage of NJ	Number of Articles (NA)	Percentage of NA
Special Education	3	10.0	14	31.1
General Education	9	30.0	10	22.2
Journals of Colleges or Universities	13	43.3	16	35.6
Theses	3	10.0	3	6.7
Other types	2	6.7	2	4.4
Total	30	100	45	100

According to Table 1, the 45 articles about SETs' professional burnout are from several kinds of journals, including special education, general education, other types (Physics' and ' Engineering Research and Clinical Rehabilitation in China, journals of universities, etc, thus five types and 30 journals in total. Among them, journals of universities and colleges are the most important source of relevant articles, with the highest percentage of numbers of articles (specifically 35.6%), but the number of journals is also correspondingly the highest, with a percentage of 43.4. It means the majority of related articles are from journals of universities and colleges, but the distribution is decentralized; a partial reason is that there are many journals of this kind in China and it is comparatively easy to publish articles in these journals. Moreover, a similar situation can be seen in journals focusing on general education. On the other hand, the situation regarding journals focusing on special education is different, with the second highest proportion of articles numerically (specifically 31.1%) but with only three journals in this type. Other types of journals (above mentioned) dealing with and theses also deal with concerns about SETs' job burnout as well, but without high awareness.

Further, we counted the main source journals which have published two articles or above in total. Among the 30 journals, only three journals, the Chinese Journal of Special Education, Journal of Suihua College, and Journal of Bijie College have published two or more than two relevant articles, and the Journal of Special Education is the most important source of articles, with 12 articles published there.

Furthermore, we classified the 43 published journal articles (but not the three theses) by journal level, which means core journals or non-core journals, and counted the numbers. The results are shown in Figure 2. More than one half of all the articles are from core journals, with 22 articles, and 47.6% of the articles are from non-core journals, which indicates that research studies about SETs' professional burnout are of high quality.

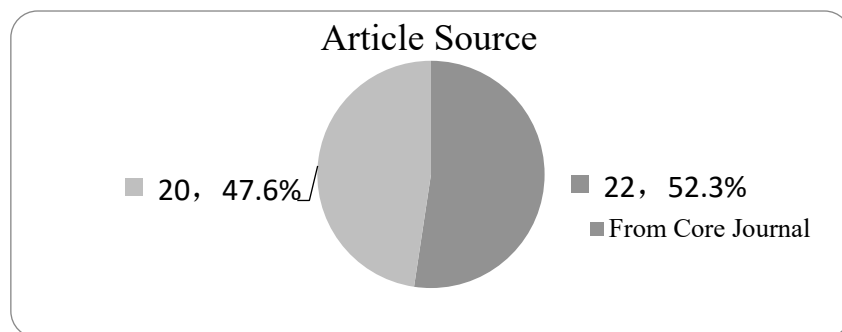


Figure 02. The level of articles' source journals (excluding theses)

6.3. Research Force

(1) Researcher Identity

The identities of the researchers involved in the 45 articles were categorized according to the workplace of the first author into the following three kinds: full-time research staff (including the staff of specialized research agencies, teachers in universities and colleges, and undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students), grassroots teachers (including staff in rehabilitation centers), and hospital personnel. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 02. Identities of researchers writing articles about SETs' professional burnout in China

Researcher Identity	Number of Articles	Percentage
Full-time Research Staff	40	88.9
In-service Teachers	4	8.9
Hospital Personnel	1	2.2
Total	45	100

Note: In-service teachers mean teachers who work directly with students with special needs

On the evidence of Table 2, the vast majority of current relevant research studies come from full-time research staff, with the high ratio of 88.9%. To be specific, the main researchers on SETs' professional burnout are teachers or researchers in higher education institutions, especially faculties of education in teacher training colleges or universities, for example Chongqing Normal University, Leshan Normal University, etc. What is more, teachers who work directly with students with special needs and hospital personnel are also important researchers on this topic and comparatively, the former made a larger contribution to the number of articles, with a proportion of nearly 10%.

(2) Main Research Unit

On the basis of the institution where the first author works, the number of articles published by research units which had published three or more articles about were counted. These units are the main research institutions dealing with in mainland China.

Table 03. The numbers of articles published by the main research units

Unit	CNU	LNU	BNU	AU	SU
No. of Articles	5	5	3	3	3
percentage	11.1%	11.1%	6.7%	6.7%	6.7%

Notes: CNU=Chongqing Normal University; LNU=Leshan Normal University; BNU=Beijing Normal University; AC= Anshun University; SC=Suihua University

As shown in Table 3, the main research units involved in research about SETs' job burnout are all universities with a focus on special education. Among them, CNU and LNU are the leaders in terms of relevant research and both of these two universities and SU are in the southwest of China, with a long history of cultivation and training of SETs. BNU and SU are also important actors in research on SETs' professional burnout in the northern part of China.

(3) Authors with Different Numbers of Articles

The numbers of articles by different authors among the 45 articles were counted by regarding the leading author as the criterion. The results are shown in Figure 3. Only one researcher has published the largest number of relevant articles (three, specifically) and just three authors have published two related articles. The authors with only one article number 36 persons, which represents 90% of the entire number of authors. This figure is much higher than the estimated number of 60% according to Lotka's law (Luo, 1986) and indicates that the contingent conducting research on SETs' professional burnout in mainland China is unformed and needs to be improved.

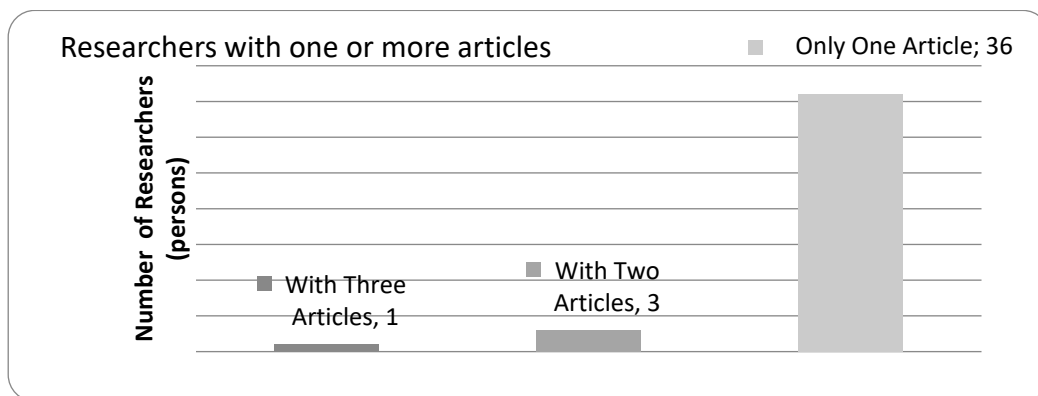


Figure 03. Number of researchers with one or more articles

Generally speaking, the research force working on SETs' professional burnout is centralized, which means the researchers are mostly from similar research fields or institutions. It helps facilitate convenient communication among researchers, but may also lead to restrictions on research cooperation across different departments and individuals.

6.4. Research Method

As different research methods can be used to study SETs' professional burnout, the number of articles according to different research methods was counted by regarding the main method as the criterion for classification. The result is shown in Figure 4.

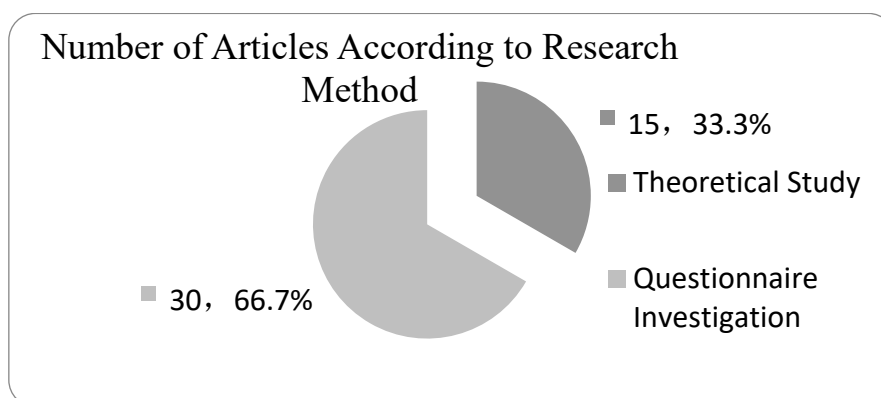


Figure 04. The number of articles according to different research methods

According to Figure 4, the research methods used in the relevant articles are very limited: theoretical study and questionnaire investigation. Undoubtedly, the research methods used by studies about SETs' professional burnout are limited and need to be expanded. Furthermore, about two-thirds of the relevant studies are conducted by using questionnaires to ascertain the current situation regarding SETs' professional burnout and its correlations to other factors, for example professional stress, self-efficiency, etc. Theoretical studies account for one-third of the current research. Generally speaking, there is a need to enrich the research methods used and use empirical methods more frequently.

6.5. Research Content

The research content of the 45 relevant articles was analyzed and the main content according to different research themes was summarized as follows: the current situation regarding SETs' professional burnout (including a comparison with general teachers), correlation with other factors involved in teachers' professional psychology, exploration of reasons and response strategies, analysis of factors that have an influence, and a summary of basic theory and related research. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 04. Number of articles according to different research topics

Research Theme	Number of Articles	Percentage
Current Situation	15	33.3
Correlation Factors	14	31.1
Summary	8	17.8
Reasons & Strategies	6	13.3
Influencing Factors	2	4.4
Total	45	100

(1) Current situation regarding SETs' professional burnout

As shown in Table 4, the current situation regarding SETs' professional burnout is the most popular research theme, with the highest number of articles, 15. Going into the research content in detail, we find that the related research studies aim at revealing the general situation regarding SETs' professional burnout and the differences in demographic variables such as gender, age, marital situation, length of teaching career, etc. Comparative research between SET and general teachers is another type. According to the recent research about this theme, (a) the research tool used for the investigation of the current situation regarding SETs' professional burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which was designed by Maslach and Jackson in 1982, or the revised inventory in its Chinese version; (b) job burnout exists universally among special education staff and is of medium intensity (Liu et al., 2011; Yi, 2009); (c) significant differences exist between SETs in terms of professional burnout and depending on several demographic variables, which means SETs of a young age, with a teaching career of a short length, from a non-special education background, with a higher education degree (master's), and single teachers are more vulnerable to job burnout (Ma, 2011; Zhou, 2016); (d) professional burnout among general teachers is different from that of SETs in terms of certain demographic variables, with no significant differences in terms of burnout according to teachers' age or marital situation among general teachers (Linghu & Lu, 2017).

(2) Correlation with other factors involved in teachers' professional psychology

According to Table 4, studies about the correlation of SETs' professional burnout with other factors involved in teachers' professional psychology attract the greatest attention from Chinese researchers, as this account for one-third of all the articles. By performing further analysis of the articles, we can find that most research studies about this theme are about exploring the relations between professional burnout and other psychological factors, including teaching efficacy, social support, coping strategies, job stress, psychological capital, and professional development, the demands of the job, job characteristics, and personality traits. Recent research indicates that: (a) there is a significant negative correlation between professional burnout and teaching efficacy or social support, which means teaching efficacy can significantly predict and effectively eliminate SETs' professional burnout (Fu & Zhang, 2011; Zhen & Shen, 2010, 2013); (b) job stress could help positively predict the job burnout of SETs, and such coping strategies as problem-solving, attention-transferring, and rationalization could negatively predict job burnout (Wang, 2010); (c) psychological capital helps significantly negatively predict SETs' job burnout, which means it can be taken as a factor to effectively prevent and ease their job burnout (Wang & Zhang, 2015), and SETs' psychological capital also has a significantly moderating effect on the relationship between their occupational stress and job burnout (Li, 2014); (d) there is a close and complex relationship between job burnout of special education teachers and their job characteristics which is mediated by the locus of control (Chen & Li, 2014; Guo, 2008); the teacher's personality has a certain significance with regard to job burnout, and specifically speaking, job burnout shows a significant positive correlation with the spiritual quality in personality and a negative correlation with introversion and extroversion (Song et al., 2013). Beside this, there are also some articles about the relations between job burnout and general well-being, quality of life, mental health state, and professional development. The research results indicate that (a) SETs' general well-being is negatively correlated to professional burnout (Yang & Chen, 2015); (b) but two factors involved in professional burnout – emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishments – are significant predictive variables for special education teachers' quality of life, and that social support plays a partial intermediary role in this relationship (Ban & Liu, 2012); (c) professional competency has a negative effect on their job burnout and the three dimensions of the job burnout of teachers from schools for the deaf are positively related to the state of their mental health (Wei & Zhang, 2013; Zhou, 2012).

Other research themes

As shown in Table 4, about 18% of the articles aim at summarizing basic theory and related research on SET's professional burnout, including explanation of the definition and characteristics of professional burnout, research tools for SETs' burnout, new advances in research into SETs' burnout abroad, etc. (Tang, 2013; Yang & Li, 2016). With regard to the reasons for professional burnout and strategies related to it, the relevant research indicates that the reasons for burnout include personal factors, school factors, and social factors: (1) teachers' personality traits, such as an attributive style, affect their job burnout, as do certain demographic variables including gender, age, length of teaching career, etc.; (2) the school factor is mainly about SETs' job characteristics, especially the complexity of the subjects they teach and the professional stress caused by an excessive workload; (3) social factors are mainly about emotional support and

knowledge or technical support from the school manager, colleagues, and students' parents and family members (Zhao & Huang, 2017). Besides that, social expectations and an unsatisfying salary and social status are also social factors involved in SETs' burnout (Qin, 2012). As for the strategies for improving SETs' burnout, there are just some abstract suggestions from the three domains of personal, school, and social factors, but there is much more focus on teachers' inner enthusiasm for their job and the social atmosphere (She, 2015). Teachers' reflection is also an important factor influencing job burnout. Research shows that SETs' self-reflection, as well as cognitive, meta-cognitive, and emotional factors, has a negative effect on job burnout (Chen et al., 2014).

7. Conclusion

According to the bibliometric analysis above, research about SETs' burnout made substantial progress in the decade from 2007 to 2017, from an average annual number of two articles in the beginning to about six in the later period. Apart from the obvious growth in the average number of articles, the depth and breadth of research have also witnessed substantial developments. Specific developments in the research about this topic are as follows:

(1) Significant increase in the number of articles and centralized distribution of research results

According to the number and yearly distribution of articles, there is an overall upward tendency in research about SETs' job burnout in mainland China. Among the 10 years, the years from 2010 to 2015 represent the vintage years of research, with a palpable increase in the number of articles. As for the reason for this increase, it is mainly because of the general attention to teachers' mental health and the influence of Positive Psychology. With the development of society, researchers have come to realize the importance of special education staff's mental health and to explicitly regard professional burnout as an intersectional research field of special education and social psychology. In terms of the source journals of the relevant articles, the current research results have a centralized distribution, especially from five research institutions in the area of special education. Professional special education journals and the journals of some universities and colleges are the main sources of articles about SETs' professional burnout. As for the quality of the research, the majority of the articles are from core journals, which means the research results of this topic are of comparatively high quality.

(2) Limited research subjects and lack of a research team

In terms of the condition of the research force, the researchers paying attention to SETs' professional burnout in mainland China are mostly limited to full-time researchers in higher education institutions, with a high proportion nearing 90%. Grassroots teachers and hospital personnel are an inactive research force in the research of this field and cross-system cooperation in research seldom occurs. On the other hand, a stable and mature research team is still unformed, and there is a lack of core authors. This reality is very likely to become an important limitation on the future study in this field. Hence, how to expand the research force and form a stable research team is a problem that needs to be solved urgently.

(3) Limited research methods but constant expansion of research content

In terms of the research methods used by relevant researchers, the methods used in the research on SETs' job burnout are limited to two kinds: theoretical studies and questionnaire investigations, in a ratio of frequency of 1:2. Comprehensive use of various research methods will promote the further development of this area. And there should be some efforts to gradually change the current situation of the too-frequent use of a single empirical method, a questionnaire investigation, in consideration of its limitations. In terms of the research content, various topics have been focused on, including the current situation, correlation with other factors involved in teachers' professional psychology, exploration of reasons and response strategies, analysis of influencing factors, and a summary of basic theory and related research. Among them, research related to the current situation regarding SETs' professional burnout and its correlation with other professional psychological factors is the most popular research theme, with more than half of the articles dealing with this. On the contrary, research about intervention strategies to deal with SETs' burnout is rare and superficial and lacks empirical studies. Moreover, the subjects of the current research studies are limited to special education teachers in public special schools. But there are also many special education staff working in private schools or institutions and public schools as resource teachers, and whether their professional burnout will be different from that of SETs in public schools is an unsolved question for future research. Meanwhile, the job burnout of special education staff from minority groups and in rural areas also needs to be taken into account in the future.

Suggestions for follow-up research

Research on the professional burnout of special education teachers in mainland China in the past decade has achieved fruitful results, as well as facing many problems. On the basis of the analysis above, the following suggestions are proposed for follow-up research: (1) accelerating the construction of a research team and forming a stable research force; (2) expanding multidisciplinary and cross-system cooperation in research; (3) enriching research content and paying more attention to the job burnout of special education staff in different areas and intervention strategies to improve the situation regarding SETs' professional burnout.

Acknowledgments

This article was made with support of grants: Sichuan Federation of Social Science Associations&Leshan Normal University Co-building project:SC16XK082; project TL03000679, projects Palacky University Olomouc IGA_PdF_2020_007, IGA_CMTF_2020_008.

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