

Relationship between Empathy and Burnout Levels of Professionals Working in Special Education and Rehabilitation Centers

Özel Eğitim ve Rehabilitasyon Merkezlerinde Çalışanların Empati ve Tükenmişlik Düzeyleri Arasındaki İlişki

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between empathy and burnout levels of professionals working in special education and rehabilitation centers.

Method: The sample of this descriptive-correlational study included 120 employees who agreed to participate in the study and worked in three special education and rehabilitation centers located in a city center in Northern Turkey in the 2022–2023 academic year. Data were collected using an employee identification form, the Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).

Results: Empathic tendency increased the level of emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .558$) and depersonalization ($\beta = .516$) but decreased the level of sense of personal accomplishment ($\beta = -0.655$). There was a significant positive moderate relationship between the ETS score and the MBI emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subdimension scores and a significant negative moderate relationship between the feeling of personal accomplishment subdimension of MBI.

Conclusion: High empathy in employees can improve the quality of support provided to students with special needs, but it can also bring challenges such as emotional exhaustion and decreased personal accomplishment.

Keywords: Tükenmişlik, empati, özel eğitim ve rehabilitasyon merkezi

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışmanın amacı özel eğitim ve rehabilitasyon merkezlerinde çalışanların empati ve tükenmişlik düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır.

Yöntem: Çalışma tanımlayıcı ve ilişki arayıcı desende yapılmıştır. Araştırmanın örneklemini 2022-2023 eğitim öğretim yılında bir ilin merkezinde bulunan üç özel eğitim ve rehabilitasyon merkezlerinde çalışan ve araştırmaya katılmayı kabul eden 120 çalışan oluşturmuştur. Verilerin toplanılmasında çalışmanı tanıtıcı form, Empatik Eğilim Ölçeği ve Maslach Tükenmişlik Ölçeği kullanılmıştır.

Bulgular: Araştırmada çalışanların empatik eğilimleri eğitim durumu değişkeninden, Tükenmişlik düzeyleri ise yaş, gelir durumu, medeni durum, eğitim durumu ve çalışma yılı değişkenlerinden etkilenmektedir. Empatik eğilim duygusal tükenme düzeyini ($\beta=0.558$) arttırmakta, duyarsızlaşma düzeyini ($\beta=0.516$) arttırmakta ve kişisel başarı hissi düzeyini ($\beta=-0.655$) azaltmaktadır. Çalışanların Empati Eğilim Ölçeği puanı ile Maslach Tükenmişlik envanteri duygusal tükenme ve duyarsızlaşma alt boyutları puanları arasında anlamlı düzeyde pozitif orta ilişki, kişisel başarı hissi alt boyutu arasında anlamlı düzeyde negatif orta bir ilişki bulunmaktadır.

Sonuç: Çalışanlarda yüksek empati, özel gereksinimli öğrencilere sağlanan destek kalitesini artırabilirken, aynı zamanda duygusal tükenme ve kişisel başarıda azalma gibi zorlukları da beraberinde getirebilmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Burnout, empathy, special education and rehabilitation center

Introduction

Special education is a method that allows to privatize educational services due to individuals' special needs when they cannot benefit from general education services due to their functional insufficiencies (Özsoy et al. 1992). Currently, the number of institutions and organizations providing services in the context of education, health, and social services to support individuals with special needs and their families is rapidly increasing. In Turkey, these institutions are called "special education and rehabilitation centers."

The centers are established under the Turkish Ministry of National Education in accordance with the Special

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Education Services Regulation and the Norm Staffing Regulation of the Turkish Ministry of National Education. In addition to administrators, teachers providing vocational training, guidance counselors, speech and language therapists, and physiotherapists work in these schools. According to the Regulation on Special Education Services, special education employees have duties such as participating in family education and counseling activities in the institution, planning and conducting family education activities for families together with a psychologist, counselor, or social worker, in addition to individualized education for individuals with special needs (Official Gazette 2018). Individuals with mental, physical, hearing, speech, vision, emotional, social, and spiritual problems, those with autism or learning disabilities, or individuals with special/exceptional abilities benefit from special education services (Mengi 2020). Most children with special needs require the support of individuals in all aspects of their lives from birth to death, including daily life, self-care, social life, education, health, etc. (Diğer and Yıldız 2021).

Considering the characteristics specified in the regulation and those of the group they serve, the staff working in special education institutions are expected to have specific characteristics. In addition to catering to the needs of children, they are also expected to understand and support families (Aydın and Karkaç 2015). However, these professionals also experience some difficulties. First, they directly deal with the educational and personal needs of the children and the results may not be in line with reality and expectations. Second, they are in cooperation with parents who are usually more concerned and have greater expectations for their children due to their children's special needs. Third, they serve in private institutions with special status, which may put unconscious pressure on the staff because the management is sometimes incompetent in special education (Aydın and Karkaç 2015, Diğer and Yıldız 2021, Özcan 2023). Empathic tendencies of the employees towards individuals with special needs and their families come to the fore while overcoming these difficulties. Empathy is the process of putting oneself in another person's shoes, looking at events from their perspective, understanding and feeling that person correctly and conveying this situation to them.

Empathy is an effective way of communication in understanding human beings (Kılıç 2005). Individuals with high empathic tendencies are more likely to understand emotions, to be affected by emotional experiences and to help others (Stephan-Finlay 1999). The empathic approach of the staff in special education and rehabilitation centers is important in making children with special needs and their families feel valued, reducing social and internalized stigmatization, and helping families cope with difficulties such as health, education, and childcare (Sakız and Kaçan 2024). Like every individual, children with special needs want to be understood and accepted (Aydın and Karkaç 2015). Especially considering that not all segments of society always have a positive and accepting perspective towards people with special needs, it is important for individuals with special needs to see these positive behaviors from their teachers and, therefore, feel understood (Diğer and Yıldız 2021). A teacher who understands and cares about the students can help them relax and strengthen their communication (Sakız 2024). A teacher with good communication skills understands students better and can help them adapt more easily. Accordingly, students develop positive attitudes and behaviors toward their teachers, peers, and learning conditions (Jones and Jones 2001). For communication to be effective, special education staff should have the ability to empathize. However, high expectations from the employees of special education centers may lead to a loss of interest, a lack of positive emotions, and a loss of respect for students with special needs (Göç 2021). A low level of empathy among employees makes it difficult to understand the feelings of the individuals they educate and prevents them from providing the desired support. High levels of empathy may expose employees to compassion fatigue or feelings of secondary trauma because of exposure to students' traumas and experiences (Koenig et al. 2018, Maytum et al. 2004). The decrease or increase in employees' empathic tendencies may turn into fatigue over time and become a risk factor for burnout (Figley 2002, Wilkinson et al. 2017).

Considering that burnout is a syndrome that can develop gradually, this situation, which can be prevented through different approaches, may lead to many negative consequences (Kapçak and Sakız 2022). As burnout progresses, behaviors such as not caring about the job may develop and lead to quitting the job. The problems that occur because of burnout are not only limited to the individual but can also be reflected on the people they serve (Edelwich et al. 1980). A study found that a high level of burnout in special education employees decreases their work performance (Tarakci et al. 2012). Therefore, timely recognition and proper management of burnout are important in coping with and recovering from it.

For employees working in institutions for children with special needs to cope with stressful situations and solve the problems they face without experiencing burnout, it is important that the staff is aware of their emotions and able to control them, have empathy, motivate themselves and others, and have social skills to develop effective methods to negotiate with others. Therefore, it is important to examine the levels of empathy and burnout and the relationship between them in employees who are in contact with individuals with special needs and who are expected to employ an empathic approach (Sarıçam and Sakız 2014). No study examining empathy

and burnout together was found in the literature. Therefore, this study will fill this gap by presenting suggestions to increase the quality of services. Accordingly, the positive mental health of employees who serve children with special needs and the increase in their work efficiency will be positively reflected in the quality of life of the children and their families. It is thought that this original study, which aims to examine the relationship between empathy and burnout levels of employees working in special education institutions, will guide future studies in this field and contribute to the relevant literature. The hypotheses of the study are as follows: (H0) There is a significant relationship between empathy and burnout levels of professionals working in special education and rehabilitation centers. (H1) There is not a significant relationship between empathy and burnout levels of professionals working in special education and rehabilitation centers.

Method

This study was prepared in a descriptive-correlational design. First, a correlational survey was conducted between dependent and independent variables. In survey research, relationships between measured variables can be examined. The independent variables of the study were gender, age, education, income, years of employment and marital status, while the dependent variables were empathic tendencies and burnout levels. A correlational survey was conducted to examine the co-variance between each of the two dependent variables. Correlational survey models aim to determine the existence or degree of co-variation between two or more variables (Karasar 2009).

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The ethical approval was obtained from Kastamonu University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Date: 08.06.2023, Decision no: 24/7). The necessary written permissions were obtained from the three special education centers with decision numbers, 99953757-100-199/91, 99949685/600/100, and 9923507-410-07/119, respectively. Written informed consent was also obtained from the participants.

Sample

The population of the study included special education and rehabilitation center employees working in three different special education and rehabilitation centers in Kastamonu province in the Western Black Sea Region of Turkey that were affiliated with the Directorate of National Education in the 2022-2023 academic year. The children in the centers had different types of disabilities (hearing impaired, visually impaired, intellectually disabled, autistic). The 250 professionals in the three centers constituted the potential study sample. Employees who were in direct contact with children with special needs and their families were included in the sample. The participating employees worked as classroom teachers, speech and language therapists, psychological counselors, expert instructors, education coordinators, psychologists, and physiotherapists.

Power analysis was conducted to determine the number of participants to be included in the study. The power of the test was calculated using G*Power 3.1 software. An effect size of 0.15 was chosen as moderate according to multiple regression analysis determined by Cohen (1988). To exceed the power of the study at the 95% confidence level, it was necessary to reach 107 participants with a significance level of 5% and an effect size of 0.15 ($df=2$; $F=3.086$). However, to increase the reliability of the study, it was completed with 120 participants. Criteria were set for participation, including working in one of the three special education rehabilitation centers in a province and volunteering to participate. Those who did not fill out the data collection tools themselves or did not agree to participate were excluded from the study. The professionals completed the surveys used for data collection in 20 minutes in the training rooms of their institutions. All professionals were given questionnaires, and the 120 who completed the questionnaires completely were included in the study. The research participation rate is 48%.

Measures

Employee Information Form

This form was prepared by the researchers to obtain information about the personal and professional characteristics of the participants. The form includes 11 questions about gender, age, educational status, income, marital status, and years of employment.

Empathic Tendency Scale (TDS)

This Likert-type scale was developed by Dökmen (1988) to assess the potential of individuals to empathize with other individuals. Measuring the emotional component of empathy, the TDS includes 20 items, and each

statement is given a score from 1 to 5. Items 3, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 15 express negative tendency, while the other statements express positive tendency. Positive statements in the scale are forward-scored, and the negative items are reverse-scored. The minimum and maximum scores that can be obtained are 20 and 100, respectively; a high score indicates a high empathic tendency, and a low score indicates a low empathic tendency. In the reliability study, the scale was administered to a group of 70 university students twice, with an interval of three weeks, and a correlation coefficient of .82 was found between the two applications. In the validity study, TDS and the understanding of feelings subdimension of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) were administered to a group of 24 university students and a correlation coefficient of .68 was found between the scores obtained from both applications. The understanding of feelings subdimension of the EPPS assesses the extent to which individuals can put themselves in the shoes of others and have the need to understand their feelings. Empathic Education Cronbach's alpha value is 0.846.

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The MBI was developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) to determine the level of burnout; it was adapted into Turkish by Ergin (1992). The scale has three subdimensions and 22 statements: emotional exhaustion (nine items: 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 13, 14, 16, and 20), depersonalization (five items: 5, 10, 11, 15, and 22), and personal accomplishment (8 items: 4, 7, 9, 12, 17, 18, 19, and 21). The MBI is a five-point Likert-type scale on which the responses are given as 1 = never, 2 = very rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most of the time, and 5 = always. High values of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion subdimensions indicate high levels of burnout, while high personal accomplishment scores indicate low levels of burnout. The scores that can be obtained from the subdimensions of the MBI vary between 0 and 36 for emotional exhaustion, 0 and 20 for depersonalization, and 0 and 32 for personal accomplishment (Çimen 2002, Pınar et al. 2004). In this study, Emotional Exhaustion is 0.824, Depersonalization is 0.806, and Feeling of Personal Accomplishment is 0.812.

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained in the study were examined using the SPSS 22.0 statistical program. Frequency and percentage analyses were used to analyze the descriptive characteristics of the participants and mean, and standard deviation statistics were used to analyze the scales. Research variables were normally distributed. Kurtosis and skewness values were calculated to determine the normal distribution (Tabachnick and Fidell 2013).

The relationships between the subdimensions that showed the scale scores of the employees were examined using Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses. T-tests, ANOVA and post-hoc tests were utilized between the descriptive characteristics of the employees including age, gender, educational status, marital status, income, work experience and status of participation in training on special needs (Karasar 2007). A model was developed using regression analysis to determine the predictive factor effect of empathic tendency on burnout sub-dimensions.

Results

Of the employees, 53.3% were 31 and years old and older, 86.7% were female, 80.0% had a bachelor's degree, and 55.8% had an income less than their expenses. In addition, 55.8% were currently working as classroom teachers, 64.2% had been working for 1–5 years, and 52.5% had attended conferences on special individuals (Table 1). The empathic tendency scores of the participants with associate's degree ($X = 68.917 \pm 5.785$) were higher than those who had bachelor's degree ($X = 64.625 \pm 6.421$) ($t = 2.984$; $p = .003 < .05$; $d = .681$; $\eta^2 = .070$). There was no significant difference ($p > .05$) between the empathic tendency scores of the employees and the variables of age, gender, perceived income, marital status, working time, and participation in education (Table 2).

Emotional exhaustion scores of participants in the 20–30 age group ($X = 9.571 \pm 7.147$) were lower than those aged 31 and over ($X = 13.797 \pm 6.037$) ($t = -3.510$; $p = .001 < .05$; $d = .642$; $\eta^2 = .095$). The depersonalization scores of the participants in the 20–30 age group ($X = 4.750 \pm 4.707$) were lower than those aged 31 and over ($X = 7.891 \pm 5.164$) ($t = -3.463$; $p = .001 < .05$; $d = .634$; $\eta^2 = .092$). The associate degree graduates' personal accomplishment scores ($X = 12.875 \pm 7.781$) were lower than those of the bachelor's degree graduates ($X = 17.073 \pm 6.565$) ($t = -2.697$; $p = .008 < .05$; $d = .616$; $\eta^2 = .058$). The married participants' depersonalization scores of ($X = 7.556 \pm 5.360$) were higher than those of the single participants ($X = 5.175 \pm 4.710$) ($t = 2.572$; $p = .011 < .05$; $d = .470$; $\eta^2 = .053$). The married participants' personal accomplishment scores ($X = 14.714 \pm 6.962$) were lower than those of the single participants ($X = 17.912 \pm 6.701$) ($t = -2.558$; $p = .012 < .05$; $d = .468$; $\eta^2 = .053$).

Table 1. Participants' characteristics		
Groups	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
20-30	56	46.7
31 and over	64	53.3
Gender		
Female	104	86.7
Male	16	13.3
Educational Status		
Associate degree	24	20.0
Bachelor's degree	96	80.0
Marital Status		
Married	63	52.5
Single	57	47.5
Perceived Income Status		
Income < expenses	67	55.8
Income = expenses	44	36.7
Income > expenses	9	7.5
Specialty		
Classroom and Preschool Teaching	57	47.5
Speech and Language Therapy	13	10.8
Psychological Counseling	16	13.3
Child Development	12	10.0
Social Services	8	6.7
Psychology	2	1.7
Physical Education	3	2.5
Physiotherapy	2	1.7
Special Education	6	5.0
Occupational Therapy	1	0.8
Current role of employees		
Classroom Teacher	67	55.8
Speech and Language Therapist	2	1.7
Psychological Counsellor	4	3.3
Expert Tutor	33	27.5
Education Coordinator	3	2.5
Psychologist	8	6.7
Physiotherapist	3	2.5
Work experience		
1-5 years	77	64.2
6-10 years	22	18.3
11-20 years	21	17.5
Like the job		
Yes	115	95.8
No	5	4.2
Participated in an education conference on special needs individuals		
Yes	63	52.5
No	57	47.5
Has special needs individuals in the immediate vicinity		
Yes	56	46.7
No	64	53.3
Total	120	100.0

There was a significant difference between the participating employees' depersonalization scores and their perceived income ($F = 6.119$; $p = .003 < .05$; $\eta^2 = .095$). The mean empathic tendency, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement scores of the employees were 65.483 ± 6.508 (min = 45; max = 81), 11.825 ± 6.884 (min = 0; max = 28), 6.425 ± 5.180 (min = 0; max = 19), and 16.233 ± 6.997 (min = 3; max = 29) respectively (Table 3). There was a positive moderate correlation between emotional exhaustion and empathic tendency ($r = .558$; $p = .000 < .001$), a positive moderate correlation between depersonalization and empathic tendency ($r = .516$; $p = .000 < .001$), and a negative moderate correlation between sense of personal accomplishment and empathic tendency ($r = -0.655$; $p = .000 < .001$).

Demographic Characteristics	N	Empathic tendency	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal accomplishment
Age		Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
20-30	56	65.179±6.058	9.571±7.147	4.750±4.707	16.964±6.915
31 and over	64	65.750±6.914	13.797±6.037	7.891±5.164	15.594±7.059
t =		-0.478	-3.510	-3.463	1.071
p =		.633	.001	.001	.286
Gender		Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Female	104	66.087±5.607	11.750±6.758	6.500±5.114	16.135±6.797
Male	16	61.563±10.060	12.313±7.880	5.938±5.744	16.875±8.405
t =		2.654	-0.303	.403	-0.393
p =		.097	.762	.688	.695
Educational status		Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Associate	24	68.917±5.785	13.833±9.154	7.167±4.752	12.875±7.781
Bachelor	96	64.625±6.421	11.323±6.148	6.240±5.289	17.073±6.565
t =		2.984	1.609	.783	-2.697
p =		.003	.213	.435	.008
Marital Status		Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Married	63	65.794±6.970	12.524±5.382	7.556±5.360	14.714±6.962
Single	57	65.140±5.998	11.053±8.215	5.175±4.710	17.912±6.701
t =		.548	1.171	2.572	-2.558
p =		.585	.254	.011	.012
Income		Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Income < expenses	67	64.955±6.031	11.508±6.666	5.970±5.158	16.896±7.106
Income = expenses	44	66.205±6.691	12.205±6.681	5.977±4.727	15.955±6.665
Income > expenses	9	65.889±9.158	12.333±9.823	12.000±4.664	12.667±7.382
F =		.504	.160	6.119	1.517
p =		.605	.852	.003	.224
Post-Hoc=				3>1, 3>2 (p < .05)	
Work experience		Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
1-5 years	77	65.675±5.423	10.546±6.459	5.364±4.058	15.714±6.641
6-10 years	22	63.318±2.009	13.636±5.350	8.136±5.185	18.864±2.587
11-20 years	21	67.048±11.320	14.619±8.675	8.524±7.527	15.381±10.356
F =		1.885	4.015	4.833	1.953
p =		.156	.021	.010	.146
Post-Hoc=			3>1 (p < .05)	2>1, 3>1 (p < .05)	
Participation in training on special needs		Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Yes	63	64.492±7.320	12.714±6.962	6.524±5.828	17.159±7.030
No	57	66.579±5.325	10.842±6.721	6.316±4.404	15.211±6.876
F =		-1.770	1.495	.219	1.532
p =		.075	.137	.825	.128

F: ANOVA test; t: Independent group t-test; Post-Hoc: Tukey. LSD

Scales	N	Mean	SD	Range	Min-Max	Kurtosis	Skewness	Alpha
Empathic tendency	120	65.483	6.508	45-81	0-100	1.178	-0.196	.846
Emotional exhaustion	120	11.825	6.884	0-28	0-36	-0.510	.555	.824
Depersonalization	120	6.425	5.180	0-19	0-20	-0.572	.623	.806
Personal achievement	120	16.233	6.997	3-29	0-32	-0.847	-0.309	.812

Regression analysis was performed to investigate the cause-and-effect relationship between empathic tendency and emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, a significant difference was found between these variables ($F = 53.370$; $p = .000 < .05$). The total change in the level of emotional exhaustion was explained by empathic tendency at a rate of 30.6% ($R^2 = .306$). Empathic tendency increased the level of emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .558$). Similarly, according to the results of the regression analysis conducted to examine the cause-and-effect relationship between empathic tendency and depersonalization, there was a significant difference between these two variables ($F = 42.891$; $p = .000 < .05$). The total change in the depersonalization level was explained by empathic tendency at a rate of 26% ($R^2 = .260$). Empathic tendency increased the level of depersonalization ($\beta = .516$).

Finally, the regression analysis conducted to analyze the cause-and-effect relationship between empathic tendency and personal accomplishment found significant differences between these two variables ($F = 88.525$; $p = .000 < .05$). The total change in the level of personal achievement was explained by empathic tendency at a rate of 42.4% ($R^2 = .424$). Empathic tendency decreased the level of personal accomplishment ($\beta = -0.655$) (Table 4).

Dependent variable	Independent variable	β	t	p	F	Model (p)	R ²
Emotional exhaustion	Constant	-26,831	-5,046	0,000	53,370	0,000	0,306
	Empathic tendency	0,558	7,305	0,000			
Depersonalization	Constant	-20,488	-4,961	0,000	42,891	0,000	0,260
	Empathic tendency	0,516	6,549	0,000			
Personal achievement	Constant	62,326	12,661	0,000	88,525	0,000	0,424
	Empathic tendency	-0,655	-9,409	0,000			

Linear Regression Analysis

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between empathic tendencies and burnout among employees working with individuals with special needs. Comprehensive findings obtained from demographics, correlations, and regression analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of this dynamic interaction. The results make important contributions to the existing literature and include implications for practice and future research.

Previous research has highlighted the diverse composition of educators within various samples, emphasizing the significance of demographic characteristics. Maslach and Leiter (2016) observed a correlation between professional tenure and experiences of burnout, suggesting that as professionals gain more experience, their susceptibility to burnout may vary. Additionally, global trends in education, as noted by OECD (2019), illustrate a predominance of women in teaching roles, underscoring the importance of considering gender-related distinctions in empathic tendencies and responses to burnout (Salanova et al. 2005). The breakdown of demographic characteristics within our sample reinforces these established trends. Notably, 53.3% of participants were aged 31 years and over, indicating a significant presence of experienced professionals. Furthermore, the sample predominantly comprised females, accounting for 86.7% of participants. These findings suggest that our sample aligns with previous research regarding the relationship between professional tenure, gender, and experiences of burnout and empathy. Understanding the demographic composition of educators is crucial for tailoring interventions and support systems effectively. Furthermore, the overrepresentation of experienced professionals underscores the need for targeted strategies to mitigate burnout among this demographic. Additionally, the gender imbalance highlights the importance of exploring potential gender-related distinctions in empathic tendencies and responses to burnout, informing more nuanced approaches to support and intervention programs in educational settings.

Research suggests that individuals with higher levels of education may exhibit heightened empathic tendencies due to the enrichment of cognitive and socio-emotional skills through enhanced learning experiences (Winefield et al. 2008). This aligns with studies indicating that higher education fosters exposure to diverse perspectives and opportunities for critical thinking (Levett-Jones et al. 2019). Furthermore, further education is often associated with the acquisition of skills necessary for effective communication and relationship-building, particularly with individuals with special needs (Sin et al. 2019). The results concerning educational background within our study support this notion. It appears that individuals with higher levels of education exhibit potentially increased empathic tendencies, reflecting the enriching effects of advanced learning experiences. These findings imply that investing in higher education among professionals in the field may contribute to fostering more empathic responses, particularly in contexts such as special education and rehabilitation centers. This underscores the importance of ongoing professional development and educational opportunities for enhancing empathic skills among educators and practitioners. Additionally, recognizing the potential impact of education on empathic tendencies highlights the need for tailored training programs that integrate socio-emotional learning and communication skills development, particularly for those working with individuals with special needs. Such initiatives can ultimately improve the quality of care and support provided in these settings.

The relationship between education level and empathic tendencies aligns with the theoretical framework of social cognitive development theory proposed by Bandura (1986). This theory posits that higher levels of

education contribute to the development of greater self-awareness, perspective-taking abilities, and understanding of others' emotions, all of which are fundamental components of empathy (Swickert et al. 2010). Moreover, the positive correlation between empathic tendencies and educational level reflects the influence of learning environments that prioritize experiential learning, collaborative group activities, and inclusive teaching practices (Barnett et al. 2010). Within our study, we found that associate degree graduates exhibit higher empathic tendencies compared to bachelor's degree graduates. This finding prompts considerations regarding the individual characteristics of employees and the potential influence of their educational backgrounds on empathic tendencies. It suggests that while higher levels of education may generally contribute to enhanced empathic abilities, there may be nuances related to specific educational paths and their impact on empathic development. Understanding these nuances is crucial for designing targeted training and professional development programs that cater to the diverse educational backgrounds of employees. Additionally, this finding underscores the importance of fostering a culture of empathy within educational and professional environments, irrespective of individuals' educational attainment levels.

It is commonly observed that professionals working in special education receive intensive and specialized training focusing on the development of skills necessary for working with individuals with special needs. Such training programs often prioritize experiential learning and direct interaction with individuals with special needs, thereby fostering greater empathic understanding among practitioners (Touloupis and Athanasiades 2022). Our study supports this notion, as we observed a notable presence of individuals with high empathic tendencies among professionals working in the field of special education. These findings highlight the efficacy of specialized training programs in cultivating empathic skills among professionals in the field of special education. It emphasizes the importance of experiential learning and direct interaction with individuals with special needs in fostering empathic understanding and responsiveness. Therefore, investing in specialized training initiatives tailored to the unique demands of working in special education can further enhance the quality of care and support provided to individuals with special needs.

The transactional stress model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) offers a theoretical lens through which to understand the relationship between an individual's perceived income and their empathic tendencies, suggesting that individuals' perceptions of their financial situation significantly impact their emotional well-being and coping strategies. Within this framework, the finding that individuals with lower perceived income exhibit higher empathic tendencies can be interpreted as individuals facing economic difficulties using increased empathy as a coping mechanism to deal with their own stressors, potentially leading to heightened sensitivity towards the needs and emotions of others (Karniol et al. 2019). Our study corroborates this understanding, revealing that individuals with lower perceived income indeed exhibit higher empathic tendencies. This finding underscores the need to consider the socio-economic context when examining empathic tendencies and emotional well-being. It highlights the potential role of empathy as a coping mechanism among individuals facing financial strain, indicating that empathy may serve as a crucial resource for navigating challenging circumstances.

Research conducted on prosocial behavior suggests that individuals facing challenges often exhibit tendencies to help others and demonstrate empathy as a means to enhance social connections and support networks (Piff et al. 2010). In the context of educators working with individuals with special needs, our study indicates a similar trend, wherein increased empathy among educators may stem from a personal understanding of the challenges associated with financial difficulties, motivating them to provide holistic support to their students and colleagues. These findings underscore the importance of establishing supportive financial structures within educational institutions to mitigate the impact of financial stress on educators' psychological health and their capacity for empathic engagement. Schools and organizations should acknowledge the potential effects of financial stress on educators' well-being and empathic abilities. Implementing financial support programs, such as grants for professional development and continuing education, can help alleviate economic pressures faced by educators, enabling them to allocate more mental and emotional resources to their roles (Ford et al. 2019).

The concept of the "honeymoon" phase identified by Goodyear and Casey (2015) means that individuals in new roles often display heightened levels of enthusiasm, empathy, and motivation. In line with this notion, our study indicates that educators in the early stages of their careers exhibit increased empathic tendencies, possibly driven by the idealism and dedication they bring to their work. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing the evolution of empathic tendencies throughout educators' professional journeys. Understanding that emotional attachment tends to be elevated in the early stages of individuals' professional lives, as indicated by previous studies (Luthar 2003), underscores the need for ongoing support and development opportunities to sustain empathic engagement over time. Educational institutions should implement strategies to nurture and maintain educators' enthusiasm and empathy throughout their careers, fostering a positive and supportive work

environment that sustains their commitment to empathic care. However, as educators gain experience and face the challenges of working with individuals with special needs, they may experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization over time. This can contribute to a decline in empathic engagement and burnout (Hakanen et al. 2008). The emotional demands of the job, combined with the potential burden of managing different needs and expectations, can undermine the initial enthusiasm and empathy displayed during the “honeymoon” phase. This result is consistent with those of the literature examining the emotional support needs of professionals experiencing sustained emotional attachment (Hochschild 1983).

Providing continuous support and enhancing professional development initiatives are important for employee wellbeing and performance (Aguinis et al. 2020). In this study, the decline in empathic tendencies over time among educators reflects the potential challenges associated with long-term exposure to emotional demands in the field of education. Educational institutions can address these challenges by implementing strategies aimed at promoting emotional resilience and well-being among experienced educators. This may involve providing regular reflection opportunities, peer support systems, and training in emotional regulation techniques. Additionally, mentoring programs that pair experienced educators with newcomers can facilitate the transfer of empathic skills and coping strategies, ultimately helping educators sustain high levels of empathy throughout their careers (Kaçan et al. 2022).

The interplay between empathic tendencies and dimensions of burnout is delineated by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) among employees. Specifically, our study reveals a moderate positive correlation between empathic tendencies and emotional exhaustion, suggesting the potential emotional burden associated with heightened levels of empathy, particularly in professions such as special education. These findings echo existing literature highlighting the relationship between empathy and burnout (Wilkinson et al. 2017). These findings underscore the importance of acknowledging and addressing the emotional challenges faced by individuals in professions that require deep emotional engagement. Educational institutions and organizations should implement strategies to mitigate the risk of emotional exhaustion among employees, such as providing adequate support systems, fostering a culture of self-care, and offering training in stress management techniques. Additionally, recognizing the link between empathy and emotional exhaustion highlights the need for targeted interventions aimed at promoting emotional resilience and well-being among employees in emotionally demanding roles.

High emotional attachment, characteristic of empathic individuals, often leads to an increased sense of responsibility for the well-being of their students, potentially contributing to emotional exhaustion over time (Barnett et al. 2019). This is particularly challenging in special education, a field that encompasses a wide range of needs and emotional challenges. Empathic educators' strong desire to alleviate their students' difficulties and provide optimal care can result in progressively mounting emotional fatigue and, consequently, emotional exhaustion (Kaçan et al. 2022). This understanding underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the emotional toll experienced by educators in special education and similar fields. Educational institutions should implement strategies to support educators in managing their emotional burdens, such as providing access to counseling services, fostering a culture of peer support, and offering training in stress management techniques. Additionally, recognizing the unique challenges faced by empathic educators highlights the need for targeted interventions aimed at promoting self-care and emotional resilience.

The relationship between empathic tendencies and personal achievement has a potential for a high degree of empathy to negatively impact personal well-being and satisfaction (Maslach and Leiter, 1997). In this study, empathic individuals often expend significant emotional energy to support their students, potentially leading them to prioritize others' well-being over their own achievements. This finding highlights the importance of achieving a balance between prioritizing the well-being of others and maintaining personal satisfaction and growth (Corral-Verdugo et al. 2021). Educational institutions and organizations should emphasize the importance of self-care and personal development among empathic educators to prevent burnout and enhance overall well-being. Providing opportunities for self-reflection, setting boundaries, and fostering a supportive work environment can help educators maintain this balance, ensuring that they can effectively support their students while also nurturing their own personal growth and achievement.

Barnett et al. (2019) suggest that trainer training programs could integrate modules on emotional resilience and coping strategies to assist educators in balancing empathic engagement with personal well-being. Moreover, Aguinis et al. (2020) propose institutional interventions such as peer support networks and mentoring programs to create a supportive environment for educators to process their emotions and seek guidance amidst emotional demands. In this research, the relationship between empathy and burnout reflects the critical need to equip educators with tools to manage potential consequences while fostering empathy. In practical terms, these results

underscore the importance of developing comprehensive training programs tailored to the needs of the special education context. While fostering empathic attachment is crucial, it is equally vital to equip educators with emotional regulation strategies to effectively manage potential emotional exhaustion associated with increased empathy (Barnett et al. 2019). Additionally, interventions like peer support networks and mentoring programs can provide students with an environment to process their emotions and seek support when needed (Aguinis et al. 2020). These findings highlight the necessity for educational institutions to prioritize the well-being of both educators and students in the special education environment. Implementing comprehensive training programs that integrate emotional resilience and coping strategies can better equip educators to balance empathic engagement with personal well-being.

Although this study provides valuable results, it has several limitations that need to be taken into account. First, the cross-sectional nature of the research design limits the possibility of establishing causal relationships between variables. Accordingly, longitudinal studies are needed to determine the dynamic interaction between empathic tendencies and burnout subdimensions over time. Second, self-report assessments suggest that social favorability biases may occur. Future research could benefit from including multiple data sources such as observational data and peer evaluations to increase the reliability of the findings. Furthermore, the study's focus on a specific group of educators in a specific cultural context makes it difficult to generalize the results to extended educational settings and diverse cultural contexts.

The results of this study have several implications for educational practice, policy, and research. First, they revealed the need for comprehensive training programs that both foster empathic attachment and equip educators with effective emotional regulation strategies. It is necessary to include mindfulness-based interventions and emotion regulation techniques that facilitate the development of emotional resilience and the prevention of burnout in educator training. Second, educational institutions and policy makers should recognize emotional demands of special education settings unique to these centers and allocate resources for targeted support systems. Initiatives that promote peer support, counseling services, and wellbeing programs can contribute to sustaining educators' emotional well-being. Third, the results encourage consideration of curricular changes that emphasize emotional intelligence development, empathic communication, and self-care practices as integral components of teacher education programs.

Conclusion

Consequently, this study demonstrates the relationship between empathic tendencies and burnout dimensions among employees in special education settings. The results highlight the effect of multifaceted nature of empathy on emotional well-being and illustrate potential pathways linking empathy with different burnout dimensions. High empathy can improve the quality of support provided to students with special needs, but it can also bring challenges such as emotional exhaustion and decreased personal accomplishment. It is recommended to improve the emotional resilience of employees in private educational institutions and organize awareness training to prevent burnout. It is also recommended to conduct studies on professionals working in private educational institutions in different cities and on a larger sample.

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