

ENHANCING TEACHER MORALE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

**School Leaders Implementing Initiatives for Enhancing Teacher Morale and Self-Efficacy
in Special Education Programs**

by

Don Zhang

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**School Leaders Implementing Initiatives for Enhancing Teacher Morale and
Self-Efficacy in Special Education Programs**

APPROVED:



Dr. Gloria Antifaiff.

Faculty Supervisor



Dr. Heather Henderson,

Canadian Director, Master of Education in Leadership Program

Dedication

I dedicate this capstone project to the people in my life. Their sacrifice and unconditional support for the past three years have made an impossible dream a reality. To Charlene, Nathaniel, Thea, Lisa, Frank, Cynthia, and Noel—thank you.

Abstract

In inclusive education, teacher motivation, initiative, skills, and confidence are essential factors that influence effective practice. Special educators who are motivated and possess a strong sense of self-efficacy are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students. Conversely, low morale and self-efficacy may produce negative outcomes for both special educators and the students they support. Therefore, it is worthwhile for school leaders to recognize the contributing factors to the challenges of low morale and self-efficacy among special education teachers. Subsequently, principals and department heads may utilize specific strategies to introduce, implement, and sustain change initiatives to solve those challenges. This capstone project examines research on teacher well-being and organizational change to develop an amalgamated framework. The findings reflect a sustained, multi-year initiative over successive stages: communication, feedback, collaborative planning, recruiting, iterating, adapting, celebrating, and problem-solving. If successfully adopted, the recommended framework would help school leaders sustainably promote special education teacher morale and contribute to improved outcomes for staff and students.

Keywords: special education, morale, self-efficacy, implementation, change initiative

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	2
Statement of the Issue	3
Purpose of the Study	4
Research Questions.....	4
Significance of the Study	5
Scope of the Study	6
Summary.....	6
Outline of the Remainder of the Paper	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	8
Introduction.....	8
Definition of Terms.....	9
Factors Contributing to Low Morale and Self-Efficacy in Special Education Teachers.....	10
Excessive Workload.....	10
Lack of Leadership Support.....	11
Lack of Collaboration	12

Implementation Practices.....	12
Create Conditions That Support SET Well-Being.....	13
Establish a Shared Vision	14
Embedding Change Over Time	15
Overcoming SET Resistance to Change.....	16
Established Implementation Frameworks.....	18
The Satir Growth Model.....	18
McKinsey 7S Model.....	19
Lewin’s Three-Step Model.....	20
Kotter Change Model.....	21
Transformational Leadership.....	22
Sustainability.....	23
Intentionality in Planning.....	23
Iterative Design.....	24
Strategic Foundations for Sustainable Change	25
Summary	27
Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions.....	29
Summary of Findings.....	29
Implications.....	29
SETs.....	29

Diverse Learners	30
School Leaders.....	30
Recommendations.....	30
Recognizing Factors Contributing to Low SET Morale and Self-Efficacy	31
Preparing Staff for Change Initiatives	32
Implementing Change Initiatives	33
Sustaining Change Initiatives	35
Conclusions.....	36
References.....	37

School Leaders Implementing Initiatives for Enhancing Teacher Morale and Self-Efficacy in Special Education Programs

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

School leaders play a crucial role in promoting teacher morale and self-efficacy in special education programs. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, an observable trend has emerged among teachers: to “remain in their roles but quietly disengage from their work,” a phenomenon known as “quiet quitting” (Palad, 2023, p. 1). This behaviour has been characterized as a form of passive resistance or silent protest by educators who feel disillusioned, unsupported, or overwhelmed. This disengagement “can have significant implications for students’ learning outcomes, as well as the overall morale and culture of educational institutions” (Palad, 2023, p. 1). Meanwhile, the demands and challenges inherent in special education are contributors to high stress and low motivation among staff, with commensurately adverse effects on student outcomes (Adigun et al., 2021; Tahar et al., 2023). Certainly, “the nature of services provided by special educators ... contribute [*sic*] to significantly higher rates of turnover, burnout, and disengagement among special educators as compared to their general education counterparts” (Fitzpatrick, 2022, p. 9). With its reliance on team-based approaches to achieve student success (Urbani et al., 2024), special education is also susceptible to factors that disrupt team cohesion. Factors that prompt educators to distance themselves from their colleagues and detach themselves from responsibilities could have deleterious effects on special education communities (Auer, 2023). For their part, school leaders are positioned to act “as a catalyst for school effectiveness, teacher morale, and student achievement” (Issah et al., 2025, p. 146).

Therefore, school leaders should be provided with actionable frameworks to help improve conditions for special education teachers.

Background

Similar to other industries, the education sector has experienced a movement toward quiet quitting. Tsemach and Barth (2023) found that, to overcome their work-life stresses during and after the pandemic, “teachers are actively reshaping their work lives, and ‘quiet quitting’ is seen as a constructive approach to alleviating burnout” (p. 15). Such efforts, however, may prompt teachers to reduce their “contributions to the school atmosphere beyond their formal obligations” (Tsemach & Barth, 2023, p. 2). The decision to withdraw from duties outside one’s formal obligation can manifest in a multitude of behaviours among special education staff. In my recent observations, these behaviours include refusing to perform duties of care, devoting entire prep blocks to online shopping, nonstop cellphone usage while purportedly supporting students, leaving one’s classroom to “hang out” with colleagues, or using sick days to avoid working with challenging students. These minimalist behaviours impact team dynamics and safety, as well as student success. In my school, year-end meetings and staff interviews have revealed commonly perceived causes of the minimalist trend: gaps in leadership, communication, and training. These perceptions highlight the “impact of work-related factors, such as excessive workload, lack of support, limited autonomy, and inadequate professional development opportunities, on educators’ motivation and commitment” (Palad, 2023, p. 2).

A recent conflict among staff at a Canadian high school highlighted the minimalist work trend and its implications for special education. In this case, an education assistant (EA) rushed through the door to find a special education teacher at their computer. Observing that no students were present and no lesson was underway, the EA asked the teacher for assistance. The EA’s

assigned student was experiencing a medical event that required first aid attention. However, the teacher refused the request to call for first aid, stating that it was not in their job description. When confronted afterwards by the affected EA and questioned by the school administration, the teacher held fast to the belief that one should not, and must not, perform any tasks outside the strict definition of their job description in their collective agreement. When pressed, the teacher revealed that a perceived lack of leadership support was the root cause of their minimalist attitude. For much of their career, the teacher had proposed initiatives for special education support, only to be met with silence or noncommittal responses. Consequently, the teacher elected to cease taking the initiative and relegate all extraneous responsibilities to the school leadership. This pattern parallels the experiences of other special educators who, due to disillusionment and a perceived lack of administrative support, likewise disassociated themselves from responsibilities (Devers et al., 2024). Clearly, “lack of administration support, poor interpersonal relationships, role ambiguity, and heavy workloads are just some of the many factors that lead special education teachers to feel ... burned out” (Auer, 2023, p. 34).

Statement of the Issue

Often attributed to the added stress of working during the pandemic, there has been a recognized trend of “ceasing to be fully committed to one’s job and doing just enough to meet the requirements of one’s job description” (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023, p. 9). In the education sector, this trend toward reduced morale and self-efficacy is reflected in teachers’ “decrease in commitment to their profession” (Özen et al., 2024, p. 121). Participants in Özen et al.’s (2024) study expressed that they would focus only on their primary duties and avoid doing extra tasks: “We only do what our profession requires. I don’t feel like doing anything extra” (p. 121). According to a 2024 study on teacher burnout, “quiet quitting” is “a term birthed during the

pandemic due to the extra duties assigned and people not feeling their voices were heard” (Devers et al., 2024, p. 13). To be effective, special education teachers “depend on other educators to work with them to provide students with well-coordinated instruction, and they depend on administrators to create contexts (e.g., schedules, school cultures) that facilitate coordination with other educators” (Gilmour et al., 2023, p. 173). Without their school leaders providing “social and material supports” and “in-service training,” special education teachers may find themselves disinclined to fully “address the demands of their roles” (Gilmour et al., 2023, p. 172).

Purpose of the Study

Set against the effects of quiet quitting in special education, this capstone project seeks to identify actionable solutions. Specifically, the study conceptualizes an implementation framework to support school leaders in reversing low morale, motivation, and self-efficacy among special education teachers. By reviewing relevant literature, this capstone project proposes a multi-year approach for principals and department heads to develop relationships, introduce changes, problem-solve, sustain momentum, and celebrate success to displace organizational cultures that encourage quiet quitting behaviours among special educators.

Research Questions

This capstone project is centred around the implementation of change initiatives to transform cultures of low teacher morale and self-efficacy in special education departments. As such, it addresses three research questions:

1. What are the factors contributing to low morale and self-efficacy among special education teachers?

2. How can school leaders prepare their staff for change initiatives aimed at reversing cultures of low morale and self-efficacy?
3. How can school leaders implement and sustain such change initiatives?

Significance of the Study

The repercussions of decreased morale and self-efficacy in special education cannot be overstated. When placed under teachers exhibiting signs of burnout, students with diverse needs have “a high risk of poor outcomes,” such as “externalizing behaviours (e.g., defiance), internalizing behaviours (e.g., anxiety),” and lower achievements in academics and individualized education programs (Brunsting, Bettini, et al., 2023, p. 45). Special education, which encompasses academic, social-emotional, and behavioural domains, requires teachers who are willing and able to provide specialized support. Sufficiently motivated teachers, able to utilize specialist skills, are more likely to improve outcomes in both learning and safety. Conversely, teachers experiencing burnout may contribute to “less optimal” student outcomes, such as less positive behaviour and lower classroom engagement (U.S. Department of Education, 2023, p. 18). With decreased motivation, teachers may also be disinclined to learn or apply specialized interventions, with commensurate implications for staff and student safety. A recent study found that, within schools, “injury claim rates were highest among special educators,” who must contend with “elevated risk of compensable injuries resulting from assault” (Al Afreed et al., 2022, pp. 2, 15).

For the students themselves, being supported by motivated and skilled teachers could lead to greater freedoms both within and outside school. Under teachers who take the initiative to replace problem behaviours with socially adaptive equivalents and offer multiple alternatives for demonstrating learning, students with special needs could see their opportunities and lifestyles

significantly expanded. If fully realized and implemented, this research may help produce positive outcomes for students, staff, and other stakeholders involved in special education programs.

Scope of the Study

Designed to meet diverse student needs, special education departments are staffed with multi-tiered supports. Education assistants, counsellors, psychologists, principals, and itinerant specialists are all integral to student success. To narrow the scope, this study primarily focuses on recent research related to school leaders implementing effective change initiatives for enhancing teacher morale and self-efficacy in special education programs.

Summary

The post-COVID trend of minimal commitment and effort is pervasive across industries and sectors, including education (Yildiz, 2023). This minimalist work ethic among some special education teachers can directly impact student outcomes and employee health and safety. Furthermore, gaps in school leadership may exacerbate cultures of low morale and self-efficacy, with potentially severe repercussions for staff and students. Therefore, it is imperative that school leaders are equipped to address the factors affecting morale and self-efficacy among special education teachers. Principals and department leaders need effective strategies for implementing and sustaining the necessary change initiatives.

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

Following Chapter 1, the next chapter will define terminology specific to special education leadership and transition directly to an examination of relevant scholarly studies. In Chapter 2, the literature review will examine recent research that addresses the following topics in special education: teacher burnout and attrition, teacher motivation, effects on students,

workplace safety and injuries, collaboration with support staff and generalist teachers, the roles and impact of school leaders, and best implementation practices. Chapter 3 begins with a brief summary of the literature review, followed by an assessment of implications for all stakeholders (e.g., special education staff, students, and administrators) and then a recommended framework to meet the identified needs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The value of morale and self-efficacy in special education cannot be overstated. The teaching profession is widely associated with constant pressure, under which teachers struggle to “cope with challenges such as workload, limited support, and classroom management” (Dilekçi et al., 2025, p. 1). As a result, teachers are at high risk for burnout, reduced “professional commitment,” and “low sense of personal accomplishment” (Dilekçi et al., 2025, p. 1). Reflecting recent workplace trends, “quiet quitting among teachers typically arises from the cumulative stress and pressures inherent in the teaching profession, leading to a decline in emotional commitment ... with negative consequences for both individuals and organizations” (Dilekçi et al., 2025, p. 2). In the special education context, reductions in teacher morale and self-efficacy are even more consequential. When supporting students with diverse needs, teachers are required to act with initiative to consistently apply strategies to behavioural, relational, and other challenges (Johnson & Jones, 2021). In special education, belief in one’s capacity is a crucial determinant of teacher well-being, as well as student success (Alsawalem et al., 2023; Fu et al., 2021). Therefore, school leaders should work toward remediating challenges to special education teacher morale and self-efficacy, including disproportionate workloads, limited support, and lack of collaboration.

To address such challenges, school leaders may utilize a range of implementation practices and frameworks. This chapter reviews relevant literature on the topics of teacher well-being and human-centred leadership. Beyond recognizing the challenges to special education teacher well-being, school leaders need tools to introduce, establish, and sustain cultures that support high morale and self-efficacy. At the same time, a cross-sector review of implementation

frameworks outside of special education or school leadership can also yield valuable insights. Of particular interest are insights that may aid school leaders in planning and implementing selected implementation strategies.

Definition of Terms

Quiet Quitting: Characterized “by a gradual erosion of motivation, reduced enthusiasm, and decreased commitment to teaching” (Palad, 2023, p. 1). Teachers engaged in quiet quitting “continue to fulfil their primary obligations, but are less likely” to contribute “to the school atmosphere beyond their formal obligations” (Tsemach & Barth, 2023, p. 2). Quiet quitting “is frequently associated with job burnout” (Tsemach & Barth, 2023, p. 2).

Burnout: Defined as “a syndrome of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced Accomplishment which is a special risk for individuals who work with other people in some capacity” (Leiter & Maslach, 1998, as cited in Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008, p. 155). Burnout is reflected by “overt signs of resignation or withdrawal,” at times leading educators to “openly express their decision to leave their positions” (Palad, 2023, p. 1).

Self-Efficacy: Defined as “confidence in one’s coping ability across a wide range of demanding or novel situations” and “a broad and stable sense of personal competence to deal effectively with a variety of stressful situations” (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008, p. 154). Teacher self-efficacy “manifests itself in the form of high effort, great endurance and success in situations encountered” (Yazici, 2021, p. 70).

Special Education Teachers (SETs): Teachers who work with “students who have learning, mental, emotional or physical disabilities. [They] adapt general education lessons and teach various subjects to students with mild to moderate disabilities, but also may teach basic skills to students with disabilities that are more severe” (Fikes, 2022, para. 2).

School Leaders: Principals and vice principals who lead “change and improvement processes” and “are part of the school’s top management team” (Bento et al., 2023, pp. 1, 10). Working alongside principals are teacher leaders—subject or department heads with “teaching responsibilities in addition to their leadership roles” (Bento et al., 2023, p. 10).

Factors Contributing to Low Morale and Self-Efficacy in Special Education Teachers

Special education teachers (SETs) play a vital role in supporting students with diverse needs and promoting inclusive communities in schools. However, persistent challenges within their professional contexts have contributed to declining levels of morale and self-efficacy. Research has increasingly documented how factors such as excessive workload, insufficient leadership support, and limited opportunities for collaborative decision-making negatively impact special educators’ motivation, well-being, and professional effectiveness. The following sections explore these contributing factors, drawing on research to highlight their significance and implications for educational leadership and practice.

Excessive Workload

Research has shown that

special educators rate their workloads as more demanding than their general education peers, and these workloads in turn predict higher rates of burnout (Bettini, Jones, et al., 2017). Workloads are conceptualized as both the tangible tasks required for the job and the responsibility taken on in performance of duties. (Brunsting, Cumming, et al., 2023, p. 19)

Park and Shin (2020) found that “special education teachers’ increased workloads (e.g. managing classrooms, working as case managers for Individualized Education Program meetings, student progress monitoring) are positively associated with their burnout levels” (p. 2). Furthermore,

teaching “more students who exhibit or are at-risk of more challenging behavior is associated with higher rates of burnout” (Gilmour et al., 2023, p. 172). At the same time, Palad (2023) noted the negative effects of “work-related factors, such as excessive workload, lack of support, limited autonomy, and inadequate professional development opportunities, on educators’ motivation and commitment” (p. 2). This finding was corroborated by Tahar et al. (2023): “Special education teachers often experience exhaustion and reduced motivation due to inadequate handling of job demands and an overwhelming workload, which may lead to chronic burnout and a decrease in work productivity” (p. 15).

Lack of Leadership Support

Another factor contributing to reduced SET morale and self-efficacy is a perceived lack of leadership support. Correlations have been found between structural failures in leadership and burnout among special educators (Sims et al., 2023). In fact, one of the most common causes of burnout and low self-efficacy is “feeling unsupported” by school leaders who are unaware of special educators’ challenges and needs (Traylor, 2024, p. 72). Moreover, despite compounding workload challenges, “numerous special education teachers did not feel they received sufficient support from their principals and resources in schools to manage their academic responsibilities” (Park & Shin, 2020, p. 2).

The need for leadership involvement is well-recognized. Research has shown that school leadership “significantly affects morale, self-efficacy, stress management, and commitment of the teachers for achievement of targets within school” (Ali et al., 2021, p. 683). In other words, “school-level leadership can directly influence the behaviors and motivations of their teachers” (Jones, 2020, p. 21). School-level leadership is well-positioned to support teacher “well-being, leading to greater job satisfaction, reduced stress levels, and improved overall quality of life”

(Palad, 2023, p. 3). Nevertheless, “special education teachers have voiced concerns for the need of support from leadership” (Traylor, 2024, p. 72).

Lack of Collaboration

The constraints on agency, in the form of collaborative decision-making, also contribute to low morale and self-efficacy among special educators. According to Gilmour et al. (2023), SET burnout can be attributed to limitations on collaboration and development. Certainly, the morale of special educators is negatively impacted when school leaders make “unilateral decisions regarding their roles and work environment” (Sims et al., 2023, p. 231). Studies have shown that, instead of working collaboratively to reduce burnout, some administrators unilaterally mandate additional responsibilities for SETs (Eddy et al., 2024). At the same time, reductions in self-efficacy among SETs are likewise linked to bureaucratic leadership at the school level (Sims et al., 2023), wherein educators are excluded from “decision-making processes that impact them and their classrooms” (Eddy et al., 2024, p. 77). It is recommended, therefore, that principals and department leaders involve SETs in decision-making processes, examining “the essential and non-essential demands” of the latter’s role in achieving equitable workloads (Eddy et al., 2024, p. 77). Furthermore, “as principals are responsible for scheduling teachers’ class times, they can allocate time slots” to facilitate collaboration between special education teachers, their colleagues, and paraprofessionals (Gilson & Biggs, 2023; Meyer et al., 2022, p. 429).

Implementation Practices

The persistent challenges to SET morale and self-efficacy cannot be adequately addressed by individual teachers. Teacher workload, leadership support, and collaborative decision-making opportunities are determined and shaped at the administrative level. As

instructional and organizational leaders, principals and department heads are better positioned to prepare the school culture for change and introduce initiatives that improve SET morale and self-efficacy.

Create Conditions That Support SET Well-Being

To mitigate the effects of low morale and self-efficacy among special educators, a key consideration for school leaders is teacher well-being. Berger et al. (2022) noted that well-being directly affects “teaching competence, which in turn has implications for students’ academic achievement and wellbeing” (p. 2920). For SETs, teaching competence extends beyond teacher–student interactions and into a myriad of responsibilities, skills, and challenges. Unsurprisingly, the ability to meet those challenges is integral to SET well-being. Indeed, SET self-efficacy, supported by opportunities to enhance educators’ skills in managing diverse and challenging situations, is positively linked to well-being (Sawatske et al., 2024). It is important for school leaders to provide development opportunities to support SET self-efficacy. As a guiding principle in school leadership, the prioritization of well-being can be “a decisive factor” in maintaining the health and quality of SETs. When SETs are given “strong school connection and self-efficacy, are provided meaningful professional development, and work in an environment with leaders who understand their specialized work, wellbeing thrives” (Sawatske et al., 2024, p. 73). A school leader who understands SET perspectives intentionally promotes “connectedness,” which “refers to feelings of being supported and having positive relationships at school (Mankin et al., 2018; Renshaw et al., 2015). This psychosocial phenomenon has been positively correlated with higher levels of teacher wellbeing and negatively correlated with decreased motivation” (Sawatske et al., 2024, p. 69).

Within this framework, school leaders also “attend to teachers’ sense of justice regarding their administrative decisions as a strategy for promoting environmental antidotes to teacher stress” (Herman et al., 2023, p. 122). Herman et al. (2023) found, “Workload, interpersonal conflicts, and lack of organizational fairness were among the most consistent predictors of teacher stress across world context” (p. 122), further highlighting the need to consider teacher perspectives in administrative decision-making. Fox et al. (2020) emphasized that “transparency from leadership and greater teacher involvement in decision making processes was critical to [teachers’] well-being” (p. 238). For school leaders, connections to colleagues, support from administrators, and a sense of community within their school are actionable steps toward promoting teacher well-being. Lastly, school leaders may also enhance teacher and SET well-being by modifying the physical environment. Research has shown the value in creating shared learning spaces, such as “a design lab, an art studio, and a plethora of natural light and bright, clean aesthetics,” to enable “teachers to collaborate more frequently and have ‘space [for] sharing’” (Fox et al., 2020, p. 237). Where practical, leaders “should prioritise physical spaces that promote teacher connectedness” along with “collegiality and a stronger sense of belonging” (Sawatske et al., 2024, p. 69).

Establish a Shared Vision

To effectively mitigate conditions that contribute to reduced morale and self-efficacy among SETs, it is necessary to achieve a cohesive, universally adopted vision toward change. Weber (2021) attributed effective change initiatives to school leaders “who communicate their shared vision with all stakeholders, embrace collaboration, and encourage the involvement of all teachers” (p. 33). Specifically, “participating in shared decision making” and

having a mutual understanding of the goals of a school and the path to which the goals can be reached can have a positive impact on self-efficacy because it includes a shared investment in the work that needs to be done to achieve those goals. (Weber, 2021, p. 33)

According to Billingsley et al. (2020), effective school leaders are those who “support teachers by facilitating a shared vision, involving teachers in decision-making, and demonstrating concern for teachers” (p. 11). Billingsley et al. also noted,

Studies consistently demonstrate the powerful effect that principals have on varied aspects of SETs’ working conditions (e.g., a positive school culture, shared sense of purpose, PD, colleague support, appropriate roles), which are related to teachers’ job satisfaction, commitment, and their intent to stay in teaching. (p. 11)

Shared values in joint decision-making (Weber, 2021), collaborative professional development, and shared responsibilities contribute directly to teacher agency and teacher efficacy (Carrington et al., 2024). To elicit investment toward change among teachers, school leaders are encouraged “to create time and opportunity to live the expectations outlined in that shared vision” and “to optimize schedules that create opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other and relevant support staff throughout the year” (Weber, 2021, p. 34).

Embedding Change Over Time

Effective and sustainable change is the end result of long-term, strategic endeavours that encompass multiple years. Adolfsson (2024) found that a three-year timeframe is necessary to collect and analyze data, formulate interventions and activities, implement an improvement plan, and evaluate its effectiveness. Hubbart (2023b) concurred, noting that “instituted organizational changes ... can take three–ten (or more) years. Instituted organizational changes must become embedded in the social culture of the organization. This takes time and ongoing diligence” (p. 3).

The complex process of “planning, enacting, and evaluating school improvement [is] a continuous long-term process rather than as an end product of any singular initiative” (Koh et al., 2023, p. 298). When implementing change initiatives, such as those intended to mitigate the causes of quiet quitting among SETs, school leaders need to acknowledge the necessity of a long timeframe, with short-term milestones, or “interim wins,” to help “boost morale and energize the team” (Hubbart, 2023b, p. 3).

Overcoming SET Resistance to Change

As organizations and leaders implement change initiatives, they may encounter overt or passive resistance. Hubbart (2023a) observed that “people may prefer change they choose for themselves rather than mandated change, and in either case (resistance or aversion), they may avoid that change” (p. 1). Hubbart (2023a) further explained, “Change aversion (resistance to change) may be a response to some form of new programming (or expectation) that, while reasonable in concept, may be uncomfortable in application simply because it is not a cultural norm” (p. 2). Employees may “fear losing their routines, experience negative emotions from imposed changes, and be unable to adapt to new situations, focusing too intensely on short-term outcomes” (Hubbart, 2023a, p. 2).

To overcome change aversion, school leaders must emphasize communication and collaboration in their implementation plan. Nadeem (2024) suggested,

Resistance to change can be transcended through transparent communication that unveils the compelling rationale for embracing a collaborative model. Ambiguity and role confusion can be mitigated by investing in professional development and equipping individuals with the skills needed to navigate their leadership roles effectively. (p. 8)

Regarding transparency and agency, organizational leaders are more likely to achieve their intended outcomes by modelling open communication and enabling employees to contribute to the change initiative. According to Hubbart (2023a), the “job of leadership is to create a vision for the organization and communicate it clearly (and often) to employees. They must also ensure employees understand why changes are necessary and how change mandates will benefit the organization” (p. 4). In effect, leaders “must foster a culture of openness and encourage employees to share their thoughts and ideas. They must create a safe space for employees to ... provide feedback, and be willing to listen and make changes based on that feedback” (Hubbart, 2023a, p. 5). For leaders and change agents, it is essential to establish a “clear and consistent communication pathway, ensuring all stakeholders receive relevant and timely information about the change initiative” (Hubbart, 2023a, p. 5). By prioritizing transparent and honest communication, and building trust through active listening and meeting commitments, organizational leaders are better positioned to enlist and sustain support for their change initiatives. Furthermore, organizational leaders should

train managers to become effective communicators, equipping them with the necessary skills to engage employees in meaningful conversations about the change initiative. ... Lastly, leaders should adopt small practices that encourage and reinforce employee motivation, such as recognizing and celebrating successes and providing incentives for good performance. (Hubbart, 2023a, pp. 5–6)

Additionally, resistance to change can be mitigated by providing professional development opportunities. Hubbart (2023a) recommended that leaders address change aversion by arranging “necessary resources and support to help employees adapt to change,” such as “training programs, mentoring, coaching, and other forms of support that help employees

develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the new environment” (p. 4). In addition to providing training, leaders themselves should model a mindset of growth and adaptability for their team members. As a result, leaders are more likely to “create a culture of transparency and adaptability essential for managing organizational change and achieving long-term success” (Hubbart, 2023a, p. 5).

Established Implementation Frameworks

The following sections examine existing models for organizational change. Emphasis is placed on practices that support the introduction and sustainment of change initiatives. The collated recommendations will help conceptualize an amalgamated framework in Chapter 3.

The Satir Growth Model. The Satir growth model (SGM) “emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing emotions and promoting a supportive and understanding environment during change initiatives” (Bhavani & Mahalakshmi, 2023, p. 4). Originally conceptualized for family therapy, this framework “highlights the emotional and psychological aspects of change (Burnes, 2004). This model suggests that change often leads to chaos and resistance before reaching a new, transformed state” (Bhavani & Mahalakshmi, 2023, p. 4). SGM predicts that, upon introducing a “foreign element” to a homeostatic system, a change initiative must accommodate for the inevitable “chaos” as the system attempts to reorder itself. An effective change initiative is able to facilitate intentional adaptation, whereby stakeholders are actively incorporating the “new status quo. New behaviours, feelings, relationship dynamics etc.” (Maxey, 2020, p. 56). Central to the SGM approach is the acknowledgement of employee perspectives by the leadership. Kamarova et al. (2024) explained, “Acknowledging negative feelings about the change can make people feel that their concerns are taken into consideration in decision-making and has been shown to be important to build trust, internalization, and

acceptance of organizational change” (p. 275). The SGM framework is noteworthy for its attention to the relational domains of organizational change.

McKinsey 7S Model. The 7S model is distinctive for its categorization of leadership elements that influence organizational goals. This framework allows leaders to examine themselves and their staff and helps them plan toward achieving their desired goals via hard and soft elements (Suwanda & Nugroho, 2022). To contextualize, hard elements are factors “that can easily be influenced by organizational management,” such as strategy, structure, and system, while soft elements, such as shared values, staff, and styles, “change based on the conditions of individuals in the organization” (Suwanda & Nugroho, 2022, p. 3). These hard and soft elements come together in an iterative process with the leader as the driving force for change. Utilizing their positional influence on systems and structures and through their own management style, the leader selects personnel best suited for the organization’s goals. The selection of key personnel informs the overall strategy, which in turn reflects the shared values and priorities of the wider organization (Suwanda & Nugroho, 2022). Within the 7S framework, the leadership is responsible for creating, clearly communicating, and promoting a shared vision around change and sustaining that change through rewards and staff training opportunities (Phillips & Klein, 2023). The focus is on changing the organizational culture over time. Less emphasis is placed on collaborative decision-making, leveraging the support of “opinion leaders” among staff, listening to concerns throughout the change process, celebrating success, or distributing implementation responsibilities to employees with leadership skills (Phillips & Klein, 2023, p. 191). The 7s model identifies the leader as the driving force for change and highlights the competencies essential to that role.

Lewin's Three-Step Model. This framework in change management “emphasizes the importance of understanding the current state, creating motivation for change, and reinforcing the change to sustain it” (Bhavani & Mahalakshmi, 2023, p. 4). Lewin’s model is distinctive for its focus on mitigating resistance to change, by “unfreezing the existing state, making the desired change, and then refreezing the new state to make it stable” (Bhavani & Mahalakshmi, 2023, p. 4). The initial unfreezing phase “emphasizes the need for change due to a significant gap between goals and reality” (Al Basthomi et al., 2023, p. 203). During this phase, leaders review “the status quo within the institution to identify aspects that need to be changed” and provide an “understanding to members about the essence of the changes” (Al Basthomi et al., 2023, p. 207). Subsequently, the leadership responds to the identified gaps by introducing changes, such as professional development opportunities to enhance employee self-efficacy. In the final “refreezing” phase, “all aspects of the organization are allocated to sustain and further develop the changes that the organization has achieved” (Al Basthomi et al., 2023, p. 209).

Under Lewin’s framework, leaders must clearly communicate their change initiative to affected staff and maintain open dialogue throughout the implementation process (Phillips & Klein, 2023). Within this framework, leaders are encouraged to change the organizational culture to align with their change initiative without committing to an overarching organizational vision. The leadership includes staff in the decision-making, celebrates successes, and creates attainable, short-term milestones to enhance morale. Notably, the Lewin’s three-step model lacks mechanisms for professional development, creating cohesive visions toward change, and recruiting stakeholders among staff to help facilitate change. Lewin’s model prioritizes analyzing and identifying areas of need, with change introduced incrementally and deliberately.

Kotter Change Model. Widely used in healthcare and education, Kotter’s eight-step model relies on leadership competencies to enact change (Mouazen et al., 2024). In this paradigm, change occurs by instilling a sense of urgency, recruiting a large, powerful coalition, developing and communicating a cohesive vision, removing obstacles, celebrating milestones, building on successes, and integrating changes into the organizational culture (Ha & Thanh, 2024). The implementation of this framework presupposes numerous competencies at the leadership level. As change agents, organizational leaders are required to communicate, recruit, plan, actualize, and inspire, while possessing the skills to sustain a culture of change over time. While a clear strategic vision is crucial to communicate urgency and generate staff buy-in, leaders may lack “effective management training,” resulting in diversion or outright failure for the overall change initiative (Ha & Thanh, 2024, p. 93). Additionally, Kotter’s model calls for leaders to intentionally and authentically celebrate short-term victories, as this would “strengthen the credibility of the change process, helping to sustain acceleration” (Ha & Thanh, 2024, p. 83). Such celebration “aims to encourage staff by offering complimentary comments on their achievements throughout the early stages of change, as well as recognizing and rewarding them for their efforts” (Mouazen et al., 2024, p. 3). To avoid change fatigue or complacency, “short-term successes must be leveraged into broader initiatives, and change must be constantly assessed and modified to ensure that everyone is enthusiastically engaged” (Ha & Thanh, 2024, p. 84). Applied to the school context, “Kotter’s top change priorities included building an environment of change . . . , involving teachers in the change process, and executing and sustaining change” (Ha & Thanh, 2024, p. 94). All in all, the Kotter framework requires change agents to be adept in transactional and transformational leadership styles, with the former emphasizing setting goals and paths and the latter geared toward inspiring and teambuilding

(Mouazen et al., 2024). Essentially, the ability of leadership to promote the “grassroots participation of workers” is essential “in promoting and implementing change” (Najjar & Ascione, 2020, p. 1). Under the Kotter model, the leader assumes the responsibilities of inspiring and recruiting support for change.

Transformational Leadership. Transformational leadership underscores the relational aspects of organizational change. This framework emphasizes the “time and commitment involved in implementing a shared vision,” whereby leaders listen to and connect with members of the organization (Carrington et al., 2024, p. 2). Heenan et al. (2023) defined the core of transformational leadership as “relational and social engagement, embodying a human-centred approach and involving followers in the change process” (p. 3). Specifically, communication, a shared vision, and the empowerment of all stakeholders are priorities for transformational leaders engaged in organizational change. In the educational context, the “transformative leadership approach requires collaboration amongst the school community,” with leaders who “listen to people as part of the process of leading significant change in their school” (Carrington et al., 2024, p. 2). As change agents, school leaders must establish a shared vision and consensus among staff, nurture a network of trusting relationships and shared beliefs, redesign systems and procedures to better enable teachers to perform their day-to-day responsibilities, connect teachers with improved resources and methodologies, and throughout the process, continue to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders. Notably, the relationship-centric praxis of transformational leadership correlates with teacher self-efficacy, well-being, and motivation. Heenan et al. (2023) identified strong links between “transformational leadership and organisational learning, which ... would positively impact school staff and culture” (p. 14). By realigning the “underlying norms and values that shape attitudes, patterns of behaviour, and

expectations of stakeholders in the school,” transformational leadership can improve teacher motivation, “organisational commitment” and “teacher retention” (Heenan et al., 2023, pp. 5, 13-14). Transformational leadership underscores the necessity of relationship-building and collaboration throughout change implementation.

Sustainability

Successful change initiatives require planning, adapting, and problem-solving (Christie & Tippman, 2024; Meyer et al., 2023). Conditions that adversely affect SET morale and self-efficacy may have been entrenched and normalized in school cultures, thereby requiring sustained and intentional efforts to resolve. Beyond introducing and implementing change initiatives, school leaders must dedicate time toward continuous, detailed planning. In addition, mechanisms are required for disseminating feedback and applying lessons learned. To maintain efforts that improve SET morale and self-efficacy, school leaders should practice intentionality in planning and iterative design, while considering the strategic foundations for sustainable change.

Intentionality in Planning

Change initiatives are deliberate processes that emphasize sustained analysis and planning. Organizational and school-based change initiatives are unlikely to succeed if viewed as “technical challenges with quick fixes” (VanGronigen et al., 2023, p. 700). The quick-fix mentality may divert change leaders from design-centric, planning-based approaches. As a result, essential steps may be overlooked in the implementation process (Errida & Lotfi, 2021). These steps include establishing milestones and monitoring mechanisms to assess implementation progress. Indeed, “establishing metrics” and “using milestones and tools for tracking change progress” are “critical to keeping the change project on track” (Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 7).

Conversely, lacking milestones or other means to measure progress is “a leading cause of failed change projects” (Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 7). Meyer et al. (2023) found that initiatives toward improving teacher well-being often fail due to inadequate planning.

Positive organizational change is more likely to be achieved through intentional planning with milestones, goals, and clear strategies. In particular, intentional planning “refers to the use of objectives and means, which are usually formalized in a documented plan with targets, timeframes, and assigned responsibilities” (Christie & Tippmann, 2024, p. 2). Without formalized plans, organizational change initiatives may falter as intentions and realities diverge (Christie & Tippmann, 2024). As change agents, organizational leaders are “responsible for planning, developing, leading, evaluating, assessing, supporting, and sustaining a change implementation” (Phillips & Klein, 2023, p. 189). Thus, sustainable school change initiatives must be supported by thorough planning.

Iterative Design

There are no universally applicable approaches to enact organizational change. Rather than relying on singular frameworks to meet the goals and requirements of their initiatives, change leaders need to “consider various approaches for different implementations” (Phillips & Klein, 2023, p. 190). One such approach is centred around iterative design, whereby leaders plan and enact mechanisms for assessment, analysis, and refinement. This approach focuses on “identifying organizational members’ specific challenges and then understanding potential root causes, collaboratively generating solutions, and iteratively testing and refining solutions to address those challenges” (VanGronigen et al., 2023, p. 700). VanGronigen et al. (2023) stressed that “design thinking is iterative, solution-oriented, and evidence-based” (p. 706). In this approach, change leaders are asked create conditions to “assess patterns and trends in employee

performance, create awareness through continuous feedback, provide learning experiences, allow opportunities for reflection, and collaborate in planning actions and identifying critical steps to achieve goals” (Joaquim et al., 2023, p. 28).

The design thinking approach emphasizes deliberation and analysis as preconditions for implementation. Design thinking “front loads a deep consideration of a challenge’s root causes” and compels leaders to acquire a “rich understanding of the needs of organizational members” (VanGronigen et al., 2023, pp. 706–707). This deep analysis is reinforced by a process of “collective sensemaking,” in which leaders invite stakeholders to verify the initial findings and ideate potential solutions. These collaborations, known as the “ideate” stage, are guided by the “nothing is off the table” and “yes, and” stances, in which “all strategies that might address the challenge, especially novel ideas, are considered” (VanGronigen et al., 2023, p. 706). The result of such deliberations is a prototype action plan, which would further evolve based on feedback. The subsequent prototype stage involves the continual design and redesign of an initial range of strategies to collectively address identified challenges. Key to design thinking is a robust and collaborative analytical system: Staff are actively encouraged, through feedback, to affect the design and implementation of the change initiative (VanGronigen et al., 2023). Beyond its utility to educational leaders engaged in change planning and implementation, the focus on “measurements, employee satisfaction, and feedback mechanisms” is also beneficial for workplace cultures impacted by quiet quitting (Yildiz, 2023, p. 3185). Notably, the design thinking approach integrates planning, collaboration, and adaptation within one framework.

Strategic Foundations for Sustainable Change

While working to improve SET working conditions through change initiatives, school leaders must also consider sustainability. Good intentions alone may not be sufficient to enlist

long-term commitment among stakeholders. Namely, the goals of SET well-being, morale, and self-efficacy need to be coupled with specific mechanisms for sustainability. Koh et al. (2023) found that “leading and sustaining change in schools is extraordinarily difficult, with marginal effects observed in various settings. ... Fullan (1992) observed that school improvement initiatives fail more often than they succeed” (p. 299), despite “substantial investments of time, staff enthusiasm, and economic resources” (p. 298).

The success of a school change initiative is proportional to the leadership’s willingness to continually adapt. Koh et al. (2023) noted that “initiatives might fail to sustain in schools due to the inability of designers and implementers to adapt to emerging and continuous change” (p. 300). To facilitate implementation success, school leaders need to account for shifts in policy, practices, physical and social environments, allocation of resources, and other changes “as the school system organises and re-organises in response to feedback until the school is able to continue with its day-to-day operations that have adapted to the change initiative” (Koh et al., 2023, p. 300). According to Koh et al., without deliberate long-term adaptive mechanisms to anticipate and integrate inevitable system changes upon implementation, school leaders may see their initiatives falter under “wasted ... resources, staff change fatigue, and stagnant organisations” (p. 303). Studies have shown that successful school initiatives are iterative processes, wherein data is continually collected, change is monitored, and adaptations are made to accommodate change. To make this process viable, Koh et al. recommended a distributed leadership approach to change initiative implementation. Under distributed leadership, administrators, department leaders, SETs, and other stakeholders may “interact formally and informally to solve sets of problems due to change, perturbations, or the introduction of a new event (e.g., new initiative)” (Koh et al., 2023, p. 303). In the end, school leaders must be

prepared to problem-solve successive technical challenges that result from change implementation efforts.

Summary

Chapter 2 reviewed relevant literature in teacher well-being, change management, and organizational planning to help inform an implementation framework toward improving SET morale and self-efficacy. The chapter identified school leaders as the primary change agents to address factors contributing to SET burnout (Ali et al., 2021; Eddy et al., 2024; Gilmour et al., 2023; Jones, 2020; Palad, 2023; Park & Shin, 2020). To enact organizational reform, a multi-year timeframe and a continued focus on SET well-being are key considerations (Adolfsson, 2024; Berger et al., 2022). During the change process, collaborative decision-making, distributed responsibilities among stakeholders, and transparent communication are essential for long-term success (Billingsley et al., 2020; Koh et al., 2023; Nadeem, 2024).

The chapter also examined several implementation models for organizational change. The Satir growth model anticipates “chaos” elements as changes inevitably unbalance an organization’s status quo and requires leaders to empathetically acknowledge stakeholders’ resistance to change (Kamarova et al., 2025; Maxey, 2020). Next, the McKinsey 7S model defines the precise management, interpersonal, and intrapersonal elements that leaders must effectively leverage while implementing change initiatives (Suwanda & Nugroho, 2022). In Lewin’s three-step model, leaders must clearly and intentionally articulate the rationales for change and maintain continual dialogue with stakeholders throughout the implementation (Al Basthomi et al., 2023; Phillips & Klein, 2023). Lastly, the Kotter and transformational leadership models prioritize the establishment of a shared vision and a strong community during change implementation (Ha & Thanh, 2024; Heenan et al., 2023; Mouazen et al., 2024).

Additionally, a design-centric mindset may benefit school leaders engaged in change planning. Intentionally designing short-term milestones, long-term goals, and clearly articulated strategies can be critical to the overall success of a school change initiative (Christie & Tippmann, 2024; VanGronigen et al., 2023). Leaders are encouraged to design mechanisms to garner feedback and diagnose specific challenges faced by team members (Joaquim et al., 2023). This feedback, along with strategic planning decisions, would place all stakeholders in the decision-making process of change planning and promote an iterative approach to implementation.

These findings will inform the design of a consolidated framework in Chapter 3. The final framework will specifically recommend actions for school leaders working to improve SET morale and self-efficacy.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

Recent trends toward quiet quitting have had deleterious effects on special education (Alsawalem et al., 2023; Dilekçi et al., 2025; Fu et al., 2021). Negative social and academic outcomes among students with diverse needs corresponded to the declining motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being of the teachers. For special educators, the challenges associated with low morale and self-efficacy can be attributed to systemic factors, such as imbalances between workload and support, that the school leadership is better equipped to address. In response, it is necessary for school leaders to undertake deliberate and sustained action in the form of long-term change initiatives. By using change management strategies, school leaders can normalize cultures that prioritize SET well-being and agency. To this end, it may be beneficial for principals and department heads to utilize an implementation framework that draws upon existing models.

Implications

The articulation of a practical, codified model to improve morale and self-efficacy among special educators presents notable implications for SETs, as well as their students and school leaders.

SETs

For special education teachers, well-being and work engagement are closely interlinked (Fu et al., 2021). The motivation to go above and beyond in supporting diverse students and applying best practices may contribute to teachers' sense of fulfillment, accomplishment, and well-being. With improved morale and self-efficacy, SETs are less likely to experience job-related stress and leave the teaching profession (Johnson & Jones, 2021).

Diverse Learners

The improvement of SET morale and self-efficacy may directly lead to improved student outcomes. When special education teachers are demoralized, unwilling to invest in “evidence-based instructional practices and classroom management techniques,” and deprioritize engagement, their students may become “less motivated, meet individualized education program goals less often, and have lower academic achievement” (Brunsting, Bettini, et al., 2023, p. 45). Reversing these trends would likely produce positive outcomes for students with diverse needs.

School Leaders

The portfolios of school leaders can be highly complex, encompassing both technical and relational dimensions. Undoubtedly, school “leadership significantly affects morale, self-efficacy, stress management, and commitment of the teachers for achievement of targets within school” (Ali et al., 2021, p. 683). The responsibilities of instructional leadership while attending to the well-being of all staff may pose a significant challenge. An implementation framework for improving morale and self-efficacy may serve to alleviate some of that challenge.

Recommendations

The organizational challenges to SET morale and self-efficacy are best addressed at the school leadership level through the implementation of change initiatives. With the tools and influence inherent to their positions, such as the ability to shape schedules, convene meetings, and introduce initiatives, school leaders are well placed to enact change. Nevertheless, positional influence does not permit quick solutions to deep-rooted challenges. It is more probable that change occurs “as a continuous long-term process rather than as an end product of any singular initiative” (Koh et al., 2023, p. 298). Therefore, the recommendations in this chapter are not “quick fixes” (VanGronigen et al., 2023, p. 700) but rather components of a multi-year process.

Recognizing Factors Contributing to Low SET Morale and Self-Efficacy

Before undertaking initiatives aimed at improving SET well-being, leaders must have an understanding of the underlying issues. School leaders should be able to recognize the indicators for and the causes behind low morale and self-efficacy among their special educators. To gather this information, principals and department leaders need to engage with their SETs. Efforts should be made to normalize a culture of communication and collaboration, wherein employees feel safe providing feedback and leaders encourage them to share their thoughts and ideas (Nadeem, 2024). As part of a long-term change strategy, this preparatory phase asks leaders to invest time toward “relational and social engagement” (Heenan et al., 2023, p. 3), prioritizing the establishment of a listening culture. Throughout this phase, school leaders clearly communicate their commitment to well-being and their readiness to incorporate SET perspectives in decision-making processes (Herman et al., 2023; Kamarova et al., 2024; Sawatske et al., 2024).

Once normalized, the enculturated paradigm of transparency would facilitate a better “understanding of the needs of organizational members” (VanGronigen et al., 2023, p. 706), whereby the leadership would be positioned to identify the specific challenges faced by their employees. At this stage, school leaders may utilize one-on-one interviews presented as wellness checks. Once again, leaders focus on connecting with and listening to the perspectives of their special education teachers. Rather than data gathering, these interviews would only invite SETs to self-reflect on their wellness, morale, and perceived efficacy in their role. Through these steps, school leaders can help SETs feel connected and supported, which may lead to “higher levels of teacher wellbeing” (Sawatske et al., 2024, p. 69).

Following the interviews, the leadership would allocate time and resources for SETs to complete a self-assessment survey. This survey would complement the anecdotal and reflective

interviews by gathering data on points of stress for SET morale and self-efficacy. Through this endeavor, principals and department leaders may acquire the “rich understanding of the needs of organizational members” necessary to take further action (VanGronigen et al., 2023, p. 706). Specifically, the survey would ask SETs to assess (a) their inclination to go above and beyond in their duties, (b) their “personal competence to deal effectively with a variety of stressful situations” (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008, p. 154), (c) their workload relative to generalist teachers, (d) the level of support from school leadership, and (e) their sense of agency in shaping their roles.

Preparing Staff for Change Initiatives

Once the successes and pervasive challenges facing SETs have been identified, the foundational work to address those challenges may begin. To create conditions conducive to organizational change, school leaders should first promote a culture that enables and prioritizes SET well-being. Specifically, principals and department leaders should involve SETs in decision-making processes (Sawatske et al., 2024). Sustained and normalized over time, such collaboration would improve well-being by promoting a sense of connectedness and the understanding that SETs are supported by their leadership. Additionally, the leadership should take opportunities to modify or create physical spaces that enhance teacher connectedness and sense of belonging.

With SET well-being widely acknowledged as a leadership priority, staff may be more receptive to the subsequent preparatory phase. Beyond modelling a well-being-centric leadership paradigm, principals and department heads need to inculcate similar values in staff. Namely, intentional steps should be taken to establish a shared vision toward change, which would then facilitate successful further implementation strategies (Weber, 2021). This final phase of

preparation sees the establishment among leaders and special educators a mutual investment in SET well-being, specifically SET morale and self-efficacy. At this juncture, leaders would “communicate their shared vision with all stakeholders, embrace collaboration, and encourage the involvement of all teachers” (Weber, 2021, p. 33). Furthermore, school leaders may utilize their scheduling prerogative to “create time and opportunity to live the expectations outlined in that shared vision” to achieve “a mutual understanding of the goals” (Weber, 2021, pp. 33–34). Whether through creative timetabling, scheduling, or allocating relief teachers, once SETs are provided with opportunities to understand and adopt the shared vision toward change, the leadership will be able to proceed with implementation.

Implementing Change Initiatives

The introduction of change initiatives to improve student outcomes by addressing challenges to SET morale and self-efficacy requires an amalgamated framework. This implementation framework combines long-term planning with human-centric and change management approaches. An implementation plan must reflect the understanding that change is implemented over a minimum of three years and must account for the likelihood of staff resistance, or “change aversion” (Hubbart, 2023a, p. 2). The following framework suggests sequential implementation steps based on collaborative design and distributed responsibilities:

1. Communicate to stakeholders a clear vision of the end goal to create conditions that support SET morale and well-being (Phillips & Klein, 2023).
2. Review the collected survey data and interview anecdotes from the preparatory phase to identify gaps between the end goal and the current reality (Al Basthomi et al., 2023).

3. Based on the collected data and review, prepare a formal, “documented plan with targets, timeframes, and assigned responsibilities” that clearly indicates the strategy’s objectives (Christie & Tippmann, 2024, p. 2).
4. Formally introduce the change initiative document to stakeholders. Emphasize to SETs that their participation—through collaboration and feedback—is essential, as it will help improve the plan’s development and implementation (VanGronigen et al., 2023).
5. Collaborate with stakeholders to formulate the success metrics and milestones for achieving the end goal (Errida & Lotfi, 2021).
6. Establish and agree upon “tools for tracking change progress” (Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 7). Design and input mechanisms that enable continuous feedback throughout the implementation process (Joaquim et al., 2023).
7. Establish mechanisms to enable SETs, school leaders, and families to assess the impact on diverse learners throughout the implementation process.
8. Distribute the implementation workload among motivated stakeholders. Recruit one or more leaders among SETs to help implement the change initiative. Allocate time and training resources to develop these co-implementers into effective communicators, equipping them with the necessary skills to engage employees in meaningful conversations about the change initiative (Nadeem, 2024).
9. Revisit the formalized plan with the co-implementers. Get ideas and input on targets and timeframes; then, allocate responsibilities to the co-implementers.
10. Invite stakeholders to share their negative feelings toward the change with the leadership or co-implementers. Ensure that SETs “feel that their concerns are taken

into consideration in decision-making ... to build trust, internalization, and acceptance of organizational change” (Kamarova et al., 2024, p. 275).

11. Work with co-implementers to identify the effects of the change initiative on student outcomes and progress toward Individualized Education Plan goals.
12. Continuously celebrate implementation successes, such as meeting milestones, to enhance morale and maintain focus on the initiative (Phillips & Klein, 2023).

Sustaining Change Initiatives

The success of a long-term change initiative requires continued attention to staff and organizational needs. As change agents, school leaders need to invest time and resources toward celebrating short-term wins, and thus “strengthen the credibility of the change process, helping to sustain acceleration” (Ha & Thanh, 2024, p. 83). Working with co-implementers, school leaders may identify meaningful rewards and training opportunities for SETs engaged in the change initiative (Phillips & Klein, 2023). To avoid “change fatigue” or burnout, implementation responsibilities should be distributed (Koh et al., 2023, p. 303), so all stakeholders may remain invested in the initiative.

Throughout implementation, shifts in resources and procedures to improve conditions for SETs would likely manifest gaps in other domains of school operation. In their roles as change agents and administrators, school leaders should expect successive technical challenges as the “school system organises and re-organises in response to feedback until the school is able to continue with its day-to-day operations that have adapted to the change initiative” (Koh et al., 2023, p. 300). Having already distributed responsibilities, school leaders should encourage stakeholders to continuously “interact formally and informally to solve sets of problems due to change” (Koh et al., 2023, p. 303). Ideally, the distribution of problem-solving responsibilities

among leaders, co-implementers, and other SETs would remove implementation challenges and hurdles and help sustain the momentum of the change initiative.

Conclusions

The well-being of special education teachers should be a leading priority for school leaders. Like generalist teachers, special educators are susceptible to burnout symptoms stemming from workload–support imbalances, which can manifest as quiet quitting. Left unaddressed, the repercussions of low morale and self-efficacy can be far-reaching and severe. In their dual roles of teachers and personnel managers, SETs not only create specialized programming for diverse learners but also inspire teams of paraprofessionals to implement that vision. To effectively balance these diverse but essential responsibilities, far more than technical or pedagogical knowledge is required. In their everyday work among other teachers, paraprofessionals, and outside agencies, SETs must present motivation, initiative, and a collaborative mindset. The positive impact of SETs with high morale and self-efficacy cannot be overstated. There is a world of difference between special education communities staffed by self-efficacious teachers and those that are not. From a school leadership perspective, the value of supporting the morale and self-efficacy of special education teachers can only be quantified in better outcomes for students, teachers, and other stakeholders.

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