

Double Burnout: Exploring the Experiences of Autistic and Educator Burnout Among Autistic  
Educators in the United States

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Double Burnout: Exploring the Experiences of Autistic and Educator Burnout Among Autistic Educators in the United States

This study explored the intersection of Autistic burnout and educator burnout and its impact on mental health and wellbeing for Autistic educators in the United States. Through collaboration with five Autistic Community Partners (ACPs), the research team interviewed five Autistic Educators (AEs) who had left the field of education about their experiences with burnout, flourishing, mental health, and quality of life. Reflexive and template thematic analysis were used to understand the differences between Autistic and educator burnout, barriers and facilitators to Autistic mental health and flourishing, and recommendations to support Autistic mental health. Six themes were co-constructed by the research team and then sent back to the AEs for review and member checks. Results indicated that Autistic and educator burnout are separate but intertwined phenomena that deeply affect the mental health and wellbeing of Autistic educators, even after leaving the teaching profession. Recommendations provided by AEs included rejecting neuronormative and heteronormative standards in education, creating neuroinclusive spaces that allow all educators to feel psychologically safe, and fostering spaces for Autistic flourishing within school environments. Limitations of the study and future research is discussed, as well as recommendations for promoting Autistic flourishing and mitigating barriers to educator mental health.

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## DEDICATION

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There is growing concern in the area of teacher mental health and wellbeing in the United States and globally (Borrelli et al., 2014; Farley & Chamberlain, 2021; Schonfeld et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2019). Teachers are reporting high levels of daily and chronic stress leading to mental health concerns (Carroll et al., 2021; Lever et al., 2017a). Research details that common sources of stress include large class sizes, workload, paperwork, student behavioral challenges, inadequate resources, and gaps between pre-service and training expectations and actual work experiences (Borrelli et al., 2014; Haydon, 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Lever et al., 2017; Naegeli Costa et al., 2021). Stress from these factors has led to increased absences from work (Ferguson et al., 2022), decreased enthusiasm for teaching and job satisfaction (Lever et al., 2017), and decreased self-efficacy (Capone & Petrillo, 2020). Jerrim and colleagues (2020), found that teachers do not have worse mental health and wellbeing outcomes as compared to other professions; however, mental health continues to be a main reason why educators leave the profession. Supports for educators need to consider factors related to mental health and wellbeing to improve job satisfaction and systems-level stressors (Capone & Petrillo, 2020).

A new stressor in the field of education is the COVID-19 pandemic. While the main throes of the pandemic are, hopefully, in the past, the impact of the collective trauma on teaching is still present. A survey completed by Baker and colleagues (2021), found that teachers in the United States experienced significantly increased demands related to online teaching and hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, teachers reported higher levels of stressors, depleted mental health, and difficulty coping with stress while also teaching. These findings are supported by Kush and colleagues (2022), who explored mental health outcomes for

K-12 teachers before and during the pandemic. Their results suggest that teachers reported higher rates of anxiety and distress, especially for those who were teaching remotely during the pandemic. Without space to collaborate with fellow teachers, work directly with students, and receive direct support from administrators, educators have reported feeling disconnected and unsupported (Baker et al., 2021; Kush et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2022).

To combat these feelings, researchers have found common facilitators for improving teacher mental health. At a pre-service level, teachers can receive social-emotional learning instruction focused on adults gaining fluency in classroom management strategies that can decrease overall stress (Murano et al., 2019; Owens et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Once onboarded into their positions, studies have shown positive effects for educators who receive quality mentorship (Cornelius et al., 2020; Trahan et al., 2015), on-site mental and health care (Engberg et al., 2018), and supportive school teams (Billingsley et al., 2020; Haydon, 2018). Systems-level approaches like school-wide wellness initiatives or mental health literacy training for staff have promising positive impacts on wellbeing leading to educators who have the ability to thrive in their positions (Kutcher et al., 2016; Lever et al., 2017b).

Unfortunately, not all teachers are provided those supports and are left to languish (Capone & Petrillo, 2020). Teachers have reported that lack of time, lack of differentiated resources and supports, lack of collegial and administrative support, and increased student mental health and behavioral needs as common barriers (Carroll et al., 2021; Farley & Chamberlain, 2021; Lever et al., 2017b; Weiland, 2021). These stressors are more salient for special education teachers, teachers of color, and teachers from historically minoritized groups with rates of burnout and mental health diagnosis ranging from 5-12 times more than “normative” adult samples (Ansley et al., 2016; Cancio et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Mc Grew



et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Furthermore, these groups can have limited access to collaboration and connection with the larger school community leading to issues of miscommunication and mistrust between groups (Gist, 2018; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2022).

### **Teacher Burnout**

Teacher burnout is a major issue in education leading to nationwide issues in retention and job performance. Recent surveys show that teachers have higher levels of stress, are more likely to leave or retire from teaching, and have increased levels of occupational burnout as compared to previous years (NEA, 2022). Polls by Gallup found that K-12 educators have the highest levels of burnout as compared to other occupations and this burnout gap has only increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (Gallup, 2022). These heightened levels of burnout among educators are a prominent issue in K-12 schools creating serious concerns in retention and job performance. According to García & Weiss (2019) from the Economic Policy Institute, the current national estimates of the teacher shortage likely underestimate the extent of the problem with the issue being more severe than previously acknowledged. In a recent systematic review of current teacher shortages in the United States, Nguyen et al. (2022) found that there are over 35,000 vacant positions open with over 160,000 teacher positions being held by educators who are underqualified or on emergency licenses. This level of strain on the school systems and overworked educators contributes to the cycle of burnout (Nguyen et al., 2022; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

Schwab et al., (1986), Maslach et al., (1997), and others explain that educator burnout is a condition marked by three constructs: 1) emotional exhaustion, 2) depersonalization, and 3) weakened sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is described as feelings of

being emotionally drained, overextended, and overwhelmed. Depersonalization is explained as the feeling of being disconnected and detached from oneself and others leading to negative or apathetic attitudes. A weakened sense of personal accomplishment is defined as the experience of dissatisfaction or inability to recognize one's achievements. These three constructs are commonly used as the dimensions measured in burnout surveys like Maslach's Burnout Inventory and the Teacher Burnout Scale (Maslach et al., 1997; Seidman & Zager, 1986). These measures have supported the concept that burnout directly affects the wellbeing of the teaching workforce through increased stress, lower levels of self-efficacy, and mental health impacts (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottiani et al., 2019; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). Many studies have cited reasons for burnout among teachers including lack of resources, increased student need and behaviors, secondary traumatic stress, and lack of collegial and administrative support (Lanza, 2020; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Pas et al., 2010; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

Burnout can also be a contributing factor to teacher attrition. In a meta-analysis conducted by Madigan and Kim (2021), data indicated that the increased levels of the three constructs of burnout had a positive relationship with teachers' intention to quit. Additionally, levels of overall burnout often predicted teachers' intention of leaving the profession, with this attrition risk increasing over time. Teacher turnover has increased since the pandemic, especially in urban districts, Title I districts, and districts mainly serving BIPOC students (Black, Indigenous, and people of color; Dilberti & Schwartz, 2023). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2023) most recent survey found that eight percent of educators in public schools left the profession, and this percentage was higher for those who had less teaching experience. The most common reasons for leaving teaching were retirement, personal life reasons, pursuing a position outside of K-12 teaching, and finding a position with a higher salary

(NCES, 2023). Many of those reasons have been directly related to feelings of burnout for educators, further solidifying the connection between attrition and burnout (Coyle et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2019; Kreuzfeld and Seibt, 2022; Li and Yao, 2022).

Burnout can also contribute to feelings of decreased psychological safety and educator voice. Psychological safety is the concept from organizational behavior literature focused on the ability for individuals to feel safe to take risks, voice new ideas, collaborate, ask for feedback on mistakes, and experiment with new teaching approaches (Bas & Tabanali, 2020; Edmondson, 1999; Kassandrinou et al., 2023; Kramer & Cook, 2004; May et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2017). Educator voice can be defined as an educator's ability to express their opinions, feedback, thoughts, or suggestions to the organization or group (Bas & Tabanali, 2020; Kassandrinou et al., 2023). Kassandrinou and colleagues (2023) created a conceptual model focusing on the interaction between burnout, psychological safety, and educator voice. Their analysis indicated that there are "robust relationships" between burnout, psychological safety, and educator voice (pg. 12). Specifically, educators feel psychologically unsafe, they are more likely to be quiet about their struggles with burnout and the impact it has on their lives.

Although it may seem that teachers are the only individuals impacted by burnout, students are also affected through higher use of discretionary discipline and exclusionary practices. Research has shown that teacher burnout can lead to negative emotions and attitudes toward students, parents, and the school at large (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). These negative feelings can affect student-teacher connections, classroom management ability, and greater referrals for discipline (Pas et al., 2010) Aspects of burnout, like emotional exhaustion, can lead to increased discipline of students and issues with classroom behavior management (Tsouloupas et al., 2010). Research has indicated that teachers with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and

burnout were associated with increased use of Office Discipline Referrals (ODR) and In-School Suspension (Eddy et al., 2020).

While teacher perceptions of student misbehavior were shown to be “directly and positively associated” with emotional exhaustion, there are other factors to consider (Tsouloupas et al., 2010). Lanza (2020) reported that teachers may have more of a “deficit mindset” when they feel unsuccessful with students due to the overall increase in student need and trauma, reduction in support and resources, and increased work demands and expectations. Educators can feel that they are ill-equipped to handle disruptions in the classroom due to a lack of training either in their preservice or in-service training. This can result in exclusionary reactions during vulnerable decision points leading to disproportionate disciplinary action (McIntosh et al., 2014; Smolkowski et al., 2016) To best meet the needs of students, reduce discretionary discipline, and restore teacher wellbeing, there is a necessity to provide sufficient support for educators throughout their journey through the school system.

Preventative measures to support educators include providing educators with clear and explicit expectations, role definitions and responsibilities (Maslach, 1999), space for teacher autonomy and input (L. C. Pearson & Moomaw, 2005), social and personal connections with the school community (O’Brennan et al., 2017), and providing the necessary materials and resources to seek out mental health supports (Gray et al., 2017). These efforts can be thwarted by barriers related to role conflict or ambiguity, lack of social networks, and COVID-related stress (Baker et al., 2021; Bermejo-Toro et al., 2016; Bettini et al., 2017).

Researchers explored multiple interventions to combat burnout in teachers with various levels of success. Iancu and colleagues (2018) completed a meta-analysis to investigate the effectiveness of six different interventions on the three areas of teacher burnout. The

interventions reviewed were cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness and meditation, social-emotional learning, psychoeducation approaches, social supports, and professional development. The analysis showed that the overall effects of the burnout interventions were small and only addressed emotional exhaustion and a sense of personal accomplishment. Additionally, interventions that lasted less than one month, as compared to one to three months, were not effective for educators. A meta-analysis conducted by have found similar results when specifically looking at social-emotional learning interventions.

Recently, research has investigated how teacher personality contributes to teacher burnout to see if individual or situational characteristics of educators affect the implementation and success of interventions. A meta-analysis by Roloff et al. (2022) measured the relation of the three burnout dimensions with the Big Five personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness). Results indicated that neuroticism was positively related to all three burnout dimensions, with all other significant associations being negative. The authors recommend identifying the strengths and weaknesses of teachers' personalities and providing pre-service training around prosocial teacher behaviors to assist in reducing burnout. While these suggestions can be useful for generalizing support, more work needs to be done to look at how individual groups of teachers are impacted by burnout and ways to intervene properly and compassionately.

### **Autistic Educators**

According to the 2022 Bureau of Labor Statistics monthly "Current Population Survey", 3.5% of those working in education are disabled. While this percentage is not disaggregated by disability type or neurodivergence, it represents a large constellation of educators who have a formal identification of a disability. This includes individuals who identify and have been

diagnosed as Autistic but excludes those who are not medically or formally identified, suggesting that the number may be higher as women, those with historically marginalized identities, and culturally and linguistically diverse individuals are under-identified or misdiagnosed (Davis et al., 2022; Hillier et al., 2020; Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021; Malone et al., 2022; McAuliffe et al., 2022). Disabled educators are often overlooked in research leading to misconceptions about what Autistic educators can accomplish and how to view disability as an identity that should be represented, celebrated, and honored within the educational setting (Baird, 2020).

In a literature review of disabled pre-service teacher candidates, Strimel et al., (2023) found that individuals were subjected to differential treatment because of their disability, had lack of access to accommodations and supports needed to be successful, and received deficit ableist perceptions of their ability and competency. Most of the disabled candidates in the review did not complete their program due to these barriers and were left with a damaged sense of identity and purpose. A study by Siuty and Beneke (2020) uncovered disabled teacher candidates' experiences of pre-service programs varied depending on their background, comfortability disclosing their disability, and challenges assimilating to the dominant constructions of normalcy. Disabled teacher candidates struggled due to structural barriers like lack of accessible accommodations, disconnections between faculty perceptions and disabled student need, and having to navigate ableist systems, highlighting the need for inclusive teacher preparation programs that recognize disability as an important identity and source of lived experience. While more research must be done on this topic, these findings support the idea that disabled and neurodivergent teacher candidates are required to overcome and navigate exclusionary and harmful spaces that are not being addressed by current DEI or systems-level initiatives (Edwards, 2022; Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021).

Research has suggested that underrepresentation and resulting discrimination appear in the pre-service process as well as the recruitment and retention of disabled educators (Neca et al., 2020). In a literature review examining the most common issues relating to disabled teachers, Neca and colleagues (2020) found that there was an underrepresentation of teachers with disabilities in the educational literature and within the teaching profession. The authors suggest that this lack of representation contributes to the lack of knowledge, information, and understanding about disabled teachers. They noted that the inclusive education community and movement does not pay enough attention to disabled educators despite supporting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) which specifically address the importance of recruiting and supporting disabled individuals in education. In their review, Neca and colleagues (2020) found that disabled educators were successful in teaching when they had networks of social and family support, opportunities for empowerment, confidence in their professional skills, and displayed self-reliance and resistance to barriers. Often cited barriers include lack of resources (Damiami and Harbour 2015; Riddick 2003), lack of disability awareness (Burns and Bell, 2010; Grenier, Horrell, and Genovese, 2014; Parker and Draves, 2018) fear of disclosure (Clayton, 2009; Gilbert, 1998), and issues with teacher training programs (Antilla-Garza, 2015, Baldwin, 2007; Parker and Draves, 2018).

Many of the challenges and barriers listed in the Neca et al., (2020) review can be true for Autistic educators. For example, Wood and Happe (2021) surveyed Autistic educators to better understand their views and experiences while in schools. Teachers reported that there was a lack of understanding and support from administrators and school peers leading to mental health concerns and burnout as well as issues with sensory and social expectations found in school

environments. This was further studied by Wood et al., (2022) who asked UK Autistic educators to share their experiences during COVID with findings detailing how the change to online education impacted Autistic educators. Themes related to sensory issues, communication and social barriers, stresses with technology, navigating home/school boundaries, and dealing with change were described as negatives from the experience.

However, positives from both studies were also reported by teachers. Wood and Happé (2021) described teachers' positive experiences in revealing their diagnosis to peers, mentoring neurodivergent and disabled students, and assisting in inclusion efforts in their schools. Wood et al., (2022), found similar themes with teachers expressing comfort in working in their home, strengths in using technology to teach and communicate, freedom to communicate and be social in more affirming ways, and seeing neurodivergent and disabled students thrive in home environments. Both projects by Wood and colleagues were conducted through a partnership titled the "Autistic School Staff Project" (ASSP). The ASSP was created to understand the needs, strengths, and experiences of Autistic educators through a multi-phase research project located in the United Kingdom. The project is guided by the principles of facilitating diversity and inclusion across school communities and supporting the rights of school staff members to equitable access and inclusion in the workplace.

There are a handful of other articles that report the lived experiences of Autistic educators in the workplace. Lawrence (2019) investigated the voices of Autistic educators by interviewing an Autistic pre-service teacher about his experiences and challenges in training, supporting Autistic students, and being a part of the school community. The Autistic teacher candidate found that while there were issues with time and meeting the requirements of a trainee, he also expressed profound positivity around working with Autistic students and making sure they were



included in addition to opportunities to collaborate with colleagues to create an affirming environment for Autistic individuals. O'Neill and Kenny (2023) recently explored the experiences of Irish Autistic teachers in education systems. They utilized Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a framework to research the minority stress experiences of Autistic educators, as well as themes such as monotropism (a person's tendency to focus their attention on a small number of interests at any time), school relationships, and barriers to being an educator within traditional school systems. They found that monotropism was an integral aspect of Autistic educators' experiences in the educational system that allowed individuals to make sense of their environment and work positively with students. The barriers experienced by the educators were related to stress, high levels of attunement (awareness of others' needs), and visceral feelings and emotions leading to burnout, meltdowns, and shutdowns. StEvens (2022) reviewed the literature focusing on Autistic educator experiences and stated that Autistic teachers reported feeling that their neurodivergence allowed them to connect with students, gave them greater empathy, allowed for creative problem-solving, and was beneficial to inclusion efforts and skills. StEvens' review spotlights the large gap in the literature detailing the experiences of Autistic teachers, especially from Autistic researchers. StEvens called for the amplification of Autistic voices in this research area to address the lack of inclusive education and barriers to Autistic flourishing.

This call for action is supported in the book *Learning from Autistic Teachers: How to be a Neurodiversity-Inclusive School* edited by Dr. Rebecca Wood and others. This collection of stories from numerous Autistic educators details their experiences, reflections, and perspectives as they navigate topics like intersectionality, leadership, mentorship, and inclusion. Autistic educators like Kieran Rose, Pete Wharmby, Lucy Coward, and others describe that while being

an Autistic teacher can bring its challenges, it also can be a source of Autistic joy and a calling. Their stories highlight the unique abilities, insights, and strengths of Autistic educators while challenging the ableist assumptions, discriminatory stereotypes, and harmful practices that push Autistic educators out of schools and contribute to negative mental health.

### **Autistic Mental Health**

According to a systematic review and meta-analysis completed by Lai et al., (2019), co-occurring mental health needs are more prevalent for Autistic individuals as compared to allistic groups. Six mental health challenges were found to have a higher prevalence in Autistic individuals: ADHD, Anxiety, OCD, Depression, Sleep-wake conditions, and Schizophrenia. While the underlying reason for these high prevalence rates is still being examined, McMillan and Jarvis (2013) explain that we must continue to examine the relationship between the environment and individual characteristics as there are numerous variables and influences from genetics, trauma, culture, gender, language, race and more. They explain that there are gaps in understanding these variables as disability or autism status is often missing in demographic data focusing on mental health.

Researchers at York University, through the Autism Mental Health Literacy Project (AM-HeLP), co-created the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism with Autistic individuals to share information and knowledge about Autistic mental health. The guide is a free downloadable resource that reviews understanding mental health within the context of autism, identifying mental health problems in Autistic people, promoting well-being, and supports for family and caregivers. The researchers also created a six-part series of videos to go along with the guides that are in French and English as York University is in Canada. Topics covered in the

videos include autism and diversity and understanding mental health literacy as well as explaining terms like alexithymia, Autistic meltdowns, and masking.

Masking, an aspect of camouflaging, is “the conscious or unconscious suppression of natural response and adoption of alternatives across a range of domains including social interaction, sensory experience, cognition, movement and behavior” (Pearson & Rose, 2021, p. 53). In other words, it is when Autistic people hide aspects of themselves to avoid harm, discrimination, or stigma (Miller et al., 2021). Masking for Autistic individuals can look like people-pleasing behaviors, suppressing stims, changing vocal patterns, changing appearances (clothes, hair, makeup), and forcing eye contact all to fit in with neurotypical peers and society. A review by Cook and colleagues (2021) found that individuals who identify as female mask more often than individuals who identify as male, individuals with higher self-reported Autistic traits mask more frequently, and that higher self-reported masking was associated with worse mental health outcomes. These results are supported by McQuaid et al., (2022) who also uncovered that gender-diverse individuals and those who were identified as Autistic later in life experienced higher levels of masking. This is concerning for historically marginalized groups considering emerging research suggests that masking can lead to higher psychological distress and mental health needs (Beck et al., 2020; Bradley et al., 2021; Pearson & Rose, 2021).

Autistic individuals with mental health needs are also at high risk for self-injury and suicide, with suicide being the second leading cause of death for Autistic people (Camm-Crosbie et al., 2019; Cassidy, Bradley, et al., 2020; Cassidy, Robertson, et al., 2020). Camm-Crosbie and colleagues (2019) surveyed Autistic people to understand why the risk is so high and found that Autistic individuals reported experiencing difficulties accessing appropriate treatment and support and that mental health providers lacked understanding and knowledge of Autistic mental

health. These challenges add to the already high levels of trauma experienced by Autistic individuals due to Autistic-specific stressors such as social confusion and isolation, bullying and peer rejection, limited opportunities for employment, stigmatization of preferred behaviors or passionate interests, and sensory sensitivity to daily stimuli (Allely & Faccini, 2019; Faccini & Allely, 2021; Fuld, 2018; Wood & Gadow, 2010). The continual exposure to trauma, stress, and lack of support can often lead to Autistic burnout, which is why Autistic individuals have reported burnout as a top priority in mental health research (Benevides et al., 2020).

One particular group of Autistic individuals that experience higher levels of trauma and minority stress are those within the LGBTQIA+ community (Dewinter et al., 2023; George & Stokes, 2018a; Hillier et al., 2020). The literature documents that a large proportion of Autistic individuals in Western countries identify as sexual and gender diverse (SGD) (George & Stokes, 2018b, 2018a; Hillier et al., 2020; Koffer Miller et al., 2022; McAuliffe et al., 2022). Recently, McQuaid and colleagues (2023) found that in their sample of 651 Autistic adults, over 41% identified as SGD, and these participants also reported lower subjective quality of life scores and worse mental health outcomes as compared to their heterosexual peers. One aspect that often contributes to decreases in wellbeing and mental health for SGD Autistic individuals is employment issues. Schmidt et al., (2024) used participatory methods to understand the barriers and facilitators to employment for this group. Through interviews, they found that participants were concerned about safety, stereotyping, communication challenges, and accessibility issues when seeking and securing employment. This led to exclusion, lack of disclosure, and needing to compartmentalize their identities, negatively impacting their mental wellbeing and contributing to Autistic burnout.

## **Autistic Burnout**

Raymaker and colleagues first defined Autistic burnout as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports. It is characterized by pervasive, long-term exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus” (Raymaker et al., 2020; pg. 140). Higgins and colleagues (2021) further explained Autistic burnout as a “severely debilitating condition with onset preceded by fatigue from masking autistic traits, interpersonal interactions, an overload of cognitive input, a sensory environment unaccommodating to autistic sensitivities and/or additional stressors or changes” (pg. 2365). They describe Autistic burnout as different from a depressive episode, mainstream burnout, and Autistic meltdowns, due to severity, duration, and variables related to onset. Mantzalas et al. (2021) proposed a conceptual model of Autistic burnout that provided theoretical hypothesized relationships between risk and protective factors which include personal demands, personal resources, mental strain, wellbeing, and demographic information. Autistic burnout, when compounded with occupational burnout, can lead to further loss of skills affecting job performance, mental health, and overall wellness (Higgins et al., 2021; Mantzalas et al., 2021; Phung et al., 2021). Burnout can last from hours to years depending on the severity of symptoms, available supports and coping skills, and recovery time allowed (Arnold et al., 2023; Higgins et al., 2021)

The measurement of Autistic burnout is an emerging field with a few recent articles working on creating and validating measures. Arnold and colleagues (2023) first explored the content validity of the definitions using the Autistic Burnout Survey that was co-created with Autistic researcher input. Their findings support the Higgins et al., (2021) definition with emphasis on social withdrawal, masking, executive functioning difficulties, and both short-term and long-term effects. The qualitative data from the study also addresses the issue of the double

empathy problem or perspective disconnect as a possible contributing factor to Autistic burnout. The double empathy problem is described as the mutual miscommunication and misunderstanding between Autistic and allistic individuals due to a lack of perspective-taking and empathy from both parties (D. E. M. Milton, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2021a). Historically, research has blamed Autistic individuals for a lack of empathy and theory of mind; however, new research suggests that Autistic people can communicate, empathize, and perspective take with others, especially if they are from the same neurotype (Crompton et al., 2022; Crompton, Hallett, et al., 2020; Crompton, Ropar, et al., 2020).

Arnold and colleagues (2023b) continued their work towards the measurement of Autistic burnout by completing an exploratory factor analysis and scale reduction to access the AASPIRE Autistic Burnout Measure tool and the Autistic Burnout Severity Items. Their findings suggest that the Autistic Burnout Measure may not be as robust of a measure as compared to the Autistic Burnout Survey due to issues surrounding the relationship to depression. The authors suggest that further testing and development needs to be conducted to delineate Autistic burnout from the experiences of Autistic shutdown and Autistic inertia. Autistic shutdown is described as internal experiences of withdrawal and emotional pain while Autistic inertia is the experience of the inability to engage in wanted activities due to feelings of being stuck (Phung et al., 2021a). These findings were further supported by Mantzalas and colleagues (2024) recent examination of the AASPIRE measure and Copenhagen Burnout Inventory Emotional Exhaustion subscale to be valid screening tools for Autistic burnout, with some potential overlap between burnout, depression, and fatigue. The authors suggest that Autistic burnout could be considered “Autistic depression” due to the correlations measured. Within their sample of Autistic individuals, Mantzalaes and colleagues described that 69% of participants self-reported experiencing Autistic

burnout at least once and 46% indicated they had experienced Autistic burnout four or more times in their lifetime. Due to this field of inquiry being new, there are little to no studies documenting the Autistic burnout, shutdown, or inertia experiences of specific subgroups or how these experiences interact with occupational burnout or other co-occurring mental health needs.

### **Autistic Flourishing**

Autistic flourishing is even less studied than burnout within the Autism literature. Although no single definition of Autistic flourishing exists, Hone and colleagues (2014) describe the four current conceptualizations of flourishing as detailed within positive psychology literature. Common attributes include positive relationships, competence, purpose or meaning, self-acceptance, engagement, positive emotions, and social contribution or social involvement. Recently, Pellicano and Heyworth (2023) provided, what they describe as, the foundations of Autistic flourishing. They outline five ways that research can promote Autistic flourishing: 1) Making Autistic wellbeing more prominent in research, 2) highlighting Autistic autonomy, 3) focusing on everyday experiences of Autistic individuals, 4) acknowledging context, and 5) working in partnership with Autistic people and their community to ensure they are at the center of decision making within Autistic research. These five guidelines support a shift from traditional medical models towards more holistic definitions of wellbeing and quality of life, defined by the Autistic community.

Measures have been created, like the PERMA Profiler, which accesses 5 subscales (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) to better understand aspects of flourishing for individuals (Butler & Kern 2014; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Hill et al., 2019; Park, 2015; Seligman & Schulman, 1986). The PERMA Profiler has been used in mental health settings, workplaces, and schools to address flourishing within a variety of

populations and has recently been adapted to evaluate the mental health and wellbeing of Autistic adults. Initial findings from Grosvenor et al., (2023) indicate that the 5 subscale model may not work for Autistic populations. Instead, a “unidimensional factor of overall wellbeing” needs to be considered to conceptualize Autistic wellbeing (pg. 406). To do this, Grosvenor and colleagues (2023) suggest including a diverse group of Autistic adults in the revision process to ensure their perspectives are incorporated into all aspects of item creation, selection, and measurement.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Studies focusing on the broader lived experiences of Autistic teachers, do not explicitly address the intersection and effects of Autistic burnout and teacher burnout and have mainly occurred in the United Kingdom (Lawrence, 2019; Wood et al., 2022; Wood & Happé, 2020, 2021). Additionally, there is little focus on Autistic educators’ experiences and perspectives on burnout once they have left the teaching profession or those who identify as sexually or gender diverse. Thus, there is a critical need to gain understanding of this intersection and the impact on mental health and wellbeing for Autistic educators in the United States in collaboration with the Autistic community. With that in mind there are three specific aims for this project:

- 1) Promote the inclusion and participation of Autistic Community Partners by co-creating and co-producing research through emancipatory participatory research design. ACPs will be provided training and education focusing on the research basics as well as skills relating to teamwork, communication, problem solving through formal training opportunities, team meetings, and a Community of Practice.
- 2) Explore experiences of Autistic educators who have left the field due to Autistic burnout and educator burnout to understand the interaction and interconnection of the two



phenomena on mental health and wellbeing. We will use interviews and surveys to understand the perceptions and perspectives of Autistic educators in the United States.

- 3) Determine a set of recommendations to support Autistic educators' mental health and wellbeing through preventing and reducing the negative impacts of Autistic and educator burnout. We will take the themes from the interviews in phase one and ask Autistic educators to review them in terms of their importance and significance to the community while providing recommendations to amplify supports and mitigate barriers to Autistic mental health.

The research questions that will be explored in this study are as follows:

- 1) How do Autistic educators who have left the field describe their experiences with Autistic burnout and educator burnout?
- 2) What are Autistic educators who have left the field perceptions of barriers and facilitators to positive mental health and Autistic flourishing?
  - 2a) Do these differ based on intersecting identities?
- 3) What recommendations do Autistic educators who have left the field have to support Autistic mental health?

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

#### **Participants**

Participants for this study included two main groups: Autistic Community Partners (ACPs,  $n = 5$ ) and Autistic Educators (AEs,  $n = 5$ ). These two groups participated in unique activities as explained below.

#### ***Autistic Community Partners (ACPs)***

**Sample.** Five Autistic Community Partners (ACPs) participated in this study. Table 1 provides the demographic data for the ACPs. ACPs were predominantly White (100%), English-speaking (100%), worked as a high school or middle school special education teacher (60%) and preferred identity-first language (60%).

**Recruitment.** ACPs were recruited through social media social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). The PI is connected to various Facebook groups specifically catering to Autistic autism researchers, Autistic/Neurodivergent teachers, and Neurodivergent educators. Additional recruitment activities occurred in partnership with autism researchers and Autistic advocates (see Appendix A for a timeline of recruitment activities). These individuals had access to the accessible flyer/graphic to post on their respective websites, social media accounts, and send to their networks via email. Flyers were posted and reposted across these social media accounts for two months before the recruitment window closed. Accessible flyers/graphics were created in accordance with University of Oregon rules, approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and included a basic description of the study with a link to an initial survey to gain basic demographic information needed for inclusion in this study (see Inclusion Criteria below).

**Inclusion Criteria.** ACPs were required to have access to the internet to attend Zoom meetings with the research team, live in the United States, and have a medical or self-diagnosis of autism. Other co-occurring neurodivergences, disabilities, or diagnoses were welcome. ACPs were not expected to have had prior research experience but needed experience in education. This could include currently being classified or certified educator, currently enrolled as a teacher candidate or in a teacher preparation program or have been an educator or in a prep program in the last 10 years. Recruitment of Autistic individuals with historically marginalized identities (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, cultural or linguistic differences etc.) were prioritized to allow for various perspectives, representation, and intersectional ideas. This selection process occurred through a pre-screening survey to assess if ACPs met basic inclusion criteria and to collect demographic information about possible participants. Information provided during the demographic screen survey was used to determine eligibility, but all information was voluntary.

**Accessibility.** All meetings with the research team occurred online through the Zoom platform to reach ACPs throughout the United States. Zoom is a communications platform that allows users to connect with video, audio, phone, and chat online. These online interactions allowed for partners to communicate verbally or through text in addition to creating a transcript and video of the meeting to reference. Additional accommodations were available for partners but never utilized. Meeting minutes were created for each research team meeting and available on a secure shared drive (e.g., DropBox) to ensure that main points, updates, links, and next steps were explicitly written down and addressed. ACPs were individually onboarded with the PI to review how to access the shared drive, review communication preferences, and clarify any questions about the research project. With the assistance of Dr. Jackie Ryan, all ACPs received training through online modules about the basics of research. These modules, made with Autistic

partners, were created in collaboration with Dr. Sue Fletcher Watson to increase Autistic individuals understanding of the research process, language, and methods. Dr. Ryan consulted with the PI to co-present the modules and trainings to the ACPs. Modules took a total of approximately 6 hours, which were compensated. ACPs were expected to complete these trainings prior to starting data collection to familiarize themselves with the language, methods and processes that occur in research. The goal was to create increased opportunities for power-sharing, empowerment, and shared decision making between researchers and ACPs that is not stymied by specified lingo or lack of understanding. For more information see Research Training in Procedures section.

**Compensation.** ACPs received an hourly rate of \$30 for a total of approximately 40 hours' worth of work. The PI assisted ACPs with logging their hours. Dr. Jackie Ryan received \$1000 for her consultation services towards the ACPs. Other disabled and Autistic consultants received a flat rate of \$500 for their consultation services related to content and research expertise.

### ***Autistic Educators (AEs)***

**Sample.** Five Autistic Educators (AEs) participated in this study. See Table 2 for demographic data for AEs. AEs were predominantly White (100%), non-binary (60%), queer (60%), English-speaking (100%), elementary school teachers (40%), and preferred identity-first language (100%). AEs age ranged from 26 to 42 with an average age of 32.4.

**Recruitment.** AEs were recruited through social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn). Consistent with the recruitment procedures for the ACPs, the AEs were recruited through social media. Further dissemination of recruitment occurred in partnership with autism researchers and Autistic advocates as described above. Appendix A shows the

recruitment timeline and log for ACPs and AEs in this study. Accessible flyers/graphics were created with the ACPs and research team to be posted and shared on the PI and partners common social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn). Direct messages and posts were posted on message boards in Autistic educator/neurodivergent educator Facebook groups that the PI is in as well as emailed to school districts and universities that have teacher preparation programs. Teacher preparation programs were asked to share the recruitment flyer with current and former Autistic students. The flyer had a basic description of the study with a link to an initial survey to gain basic demographic information needed for inclusion/exclusion criteria seen in participant section. The PI, in collaboration with the ACPs, tried to select a diverse sample of Autistic educators with attention to demographic variables, education setting, and co-occurring neurodivergences and diagnoses through maximum variation sampling or purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). This selection process occurred through a pre-screening survey to assess if educators meet basic inclusion criteria and to collect demographic information about possible participants. Information provided during the demographic screen survey was used to determine eligibility, but all information was voluntary. Intentional recruitment went towards Autistic individuals with other historically marginalized identities (e.g. SGD, BIPOC, co-occurring disabilities, cultural or linguistic differences etc.) to create a more representative sample and be mindful of how those identities are systemically stigmatized leading to increased levels of mental stress (Botha & Frost, 2020; Meyer, 2003).

**Inclusion Criteria.** Autistic educators were defined as current or former certified or classified educator in K-12 settings in the United States. This included educational assistants/paraprofessionals, general education teachers, special education teachers, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, Title I teachers, and those who were multiply licensed or have

specialized roles. Educators had to live in the United States and have taught in the United States in any of the above-mentioned roles and have a medical or self-diagnosis of autism. Other co-occurring neurodivergences, disabilities, or diagnoses were welcome.

**Compensation.** Autistic educators received a \$25 gift card for completing the interview and \$15 gift card after completing the follow-up survey. Gift cards were sent to the email provided during the recruitment demographic survey after the completion of each task.

### **Setting**

All phases of this research project occurred online. Surveys were sent on Qualtrics, and interviews occurred on Zoom. Qualtrics is an online survey platform where users can build and distribute surveys, collect responses, and analyze survey data. Online interactions allowed for more Autistic participants to be included in the sample while also increasing accessibility of the research opportunity.

### **Measures**

Three measures were used to collect the necessary data to answer the research questions: 1) Initial Screening Survey, 2) Semi-Structured Interview, and 3) Survey for Recommendations. Details for each measure are provided.

#### ***Initial Screening Survey***

AEs completed an 18-question screening survey on Qualtrics that included open-ended and multiple-choice questions designed to provide demographic information and eligibility of possible participants. The survey was researcher created to address questions like “Do you prefer identity-first or person-first language?”, “What best describes your race/ethnicity”, “Describe your current/last teaching position”. The survey took approximately 5-15 minutes to complete.

#### ***Semi-Structured Interview***

AEs were asked to complete a semi-structured interview via Zoom that lasted between one hour to one hour and thirty minutes depending on length of responses. The interview was administered once. AEs had the option to respond verbally or through the chat feature in Zoom, with options to expand on answers later via email. The interview questions were adapted from prior research focusing on Autistic educators, Autistic burnout, and educator burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020; Vermeulen, 2021; Wood & Happe 2020). The interview protocol and questions can be found in the Appendix B.

### ***Survey for Theme Development and Recommendations***

AEs completed a 28-item survey on Qualtrics that included open ended and Likert scale questions. The survey allowed AEs to provide feedback on the themes generated from AE interviews and input on possible recommendations to support Autistic educator mental health. The survey was created with the ACPs and research team and took respondents approximately 10-30 minutes to complete. See Appendix E for example questions.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized an emancipatory participatory research design that involved community partners throughout the research process. Emancipatory participatory research allows for the continuous collaboration with community partners to inform every step of the research process, and in this study the partner were involved with all activities from theoretical development to data analysis to the development of recommendations (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2019; Chown et al., 2017; Ramcharan et al., 2004). Participatory methods in autism research are defined as “incorporating the views of Autistic people and their allies about what research gets done, how it is done and how it is implemented” (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019, p. 1). Researchers have noted that participatory methods create opportunities for increased inclusion,

accessibility, and meaningful input from Autistic individuals (den Houting et al., 2021; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Pickard et al., 2022). Autistic individuals have stated that they favor participatory methods, especially when conducted by Autistic researchers, as they feel more acknowledged, understood, and supported as compared to traditional methods (Pellicano et al., 2021). Additionally, participatory methods have been shown to improve contextual fit, relevance, and increase effectiveness of translating ideas into practice (Ashworth et al., 2020; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Forsythe et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Pellicano, 2020; Warner et al., 2019).

### **Procedures and Data Analysis**

The exploratory sequential order started with assembling the ACPs and research team for bimonthly meetings. Next, qualitative semi-structured interviews with five selected AEs occurred, as described below in Phase 1. Finally, qualitative methods were utilized to review survey data from the same AEs, as described below in Phase 2, in addition to the feedback scores from ACPs. For this study, we focused on five AEs who identified as SGD and had left the field of teaching. This decision was made by the ACPs, research team, and PI to allow for a deeper understanding of this often-overlooked subgroup, and to ensure completion of the study within the timeline. Emancipatory participatory methodologies were utilized to co-create research with the ACPs around the intersection of Autistic burnout and educator burnout in the United States. This combination of methodologies somewhat mirrors Raymaker et al. (2020) original research on Autistic burnout. The research was influenced by the constructivist philosophy in addition to the principles of social justice, disability critical studies, and the neurodiversity paradigm (Annamma & Handy, 2019, 2021; Berne et al., 2018; Kapp, 2020). Positionality statements are provided for the research team involved in the work to promote transparency of conceptual and



theoretical frameworks as shown in Phung et al., (2021) and Jones (2022) (see the last section of the Method).

The project also took into consideration the recommendations of researchers, Autistic individuals, and professional organizations, which detailed how participatory approaches, as described by Nicolaidis et al. (2019), in autism research are more meaningful, respectful, and aligned with improving overall quality of life for the community. Through the incorporation of Autistic perspectives throughout all phases of the project, this study allowed for inclusive and transparent research created with (not on or for) the Autistic community. The PI recognizes that the Autistic community has been historically taken advantage of and harmed through feelings of tokenization (Pellicano et al., 2014), the use of deficit and stigmatizing language (Botha, 2021; Botha et al., 2023), and feelings of pathologization and “normalization” (Ashworth et al., 2020). To combat this, the team reviewed Cascio et al., (2020) suggestions for “person-oriented research ethics”, Bottema-Beutel et al., (2020) guidelines for avoiding ableist autism research, Nicolaidis et al., (2020) guidelines for accessible surveys for Autistic individuals, and Nicolaidis et al., (2019) guidelines for Autistic co-researchers and participants.

### ***Team Meetings***

ACPs met with the research team twice a month, with opportunities for involvement in data analysis of interviews, creation of recommendation survey, and analysis of survey data. ACPs were able to choose their level of involvement to promote their self-determination and build trust among team members. Twice during the project, the PI sent a revised Quality Involvement Questionnaire (Morrow et al., 2010) to assess ACPs perceptions of personal and research experiences related to the Community Based Participatory Research process. These data were used to address any issues, problems, and successes occurring during the project. The

survey was administered in November and March. Table 3 provides the list of questions as well as the mean scores from November to March for Quality Involvement Questionnaire survey data. Overall Quality Involvement scores improved between the two time points for administration (mean improvement of .32); however more participants completed it in November than in March (see Table 3). Informal assessments, like check-in surveys via Qualtrics using the Stop, Start, Continue method found in Hoon et. al., (2015), were used to address any issues, problems, or successes. The survey was administered approximately once every other month to allow the PI to provide response guided adjustments to the collaboration and continually assess the experiences of the ACPs. ACPs also had the opportunity to meet with the PI 1:1 via Zoom to discuss any questions, ideas, or comments that they felt uncomfortable sharing with the larger group. The PI provided the link to her Calendly at each team meeting and met with all partners at least once throughout the project with meetings ranging from 10 minutes to 1 hour.

**Research Training.** Five ACPs received training on understanding the basics of research, positionality, and analysis through modules created by Dr. Jackie Ryan and Dr. Sue Fletcher Watson through work at the University of Edinburg. These online modules are based the in-person trainings that were facilitated in the DART lab that focus on data management, the research process, statistics, introduction to ethics, and outcomes, publications and implementation. The original work was made accessible to those with intellectual disability with the emphasis on “Research 101” or the basic language and ideas used in research. The training occurred in October and November over 4 weeks. Each module took approximately one and a half hours to complete, for a total of approximately 6 hours. To provide necessary feedback to the PI and Dr. Ryan, and to allow ACPs to practice the taking surveys via Zoom, the ACPs were given the option to complete the Stop Start Continue survey after each session. The

recommendations and comments specified assisted in administration of the subsequent modules and future iterations of the training. If ACPs wanted additional training or information, the PI provided resources like AIR-P Networks Community Based Training which includes three units cover basic concept of research with an instructor manual, participant handouts and slides. The modules and training fostered an environment of equal power sharing, self-determination, and inclusivity, which is a priority of the community (Pellicano et al., 2014; Roche et al., 2021). Additionally, ACPs had opportunities to gain and practice employability skills (i.e., problem solving, communication) that can be transferable to other research or work environments.

### ***Phase 1 Interviews***

Once selected, a total of 30 Autistic educators were contacted via email to schedule a time for the interview over the Zoom platform. An email was sent prior to the interview with consent forms, a secure Zoom link, a list of the questions that were asked, any accessibility needs, and how to access compensation once the interview is complete. AEs were asked to send back the consent form signed and use the Calendly link to schedule a time to meet that best fit their needs. Interviews happened over the course of January and February 2024.

Using “romantic conception of interviewing” (Roulston, 2010 p. 217), the interview focused on the lived experiences, perceptions, and desires of AEs. The interview protocol was reviewed by the ACPs and research team in team meetings and through email correspondence. The team created definitions for main terms like Autistic Burnout, Educator Burnout and Flourishing to ensure that AEs had a concrete example of concepts discussed in the interview. These definitions were included at the top of the interview protocol for increased visibility and reviewed with each AE during the interview process. See the Appendix B for the Interview Protocol with questions. The PI conducted the interviews with an Autistic research assistant to

reduce instances of the double empathy problem and miscommunication between allistic and Autistic individuals (Crompton, Hallett, et al., 2020; Crompton, Ropar, et al., 2020; D. E. M. Milton, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2021b). The research assistant took descriptive notes during each interview, assisted the PI by putting questions in the chat for AEs and provided general technology support. Interviews lasted an average of 1 hour to 1 hour 15 minutes. AEs were given opportunities to take breaks, but most were able to make it through the entire interview. After each interview was complete, the PI stopped recording and did a member check with the AE. The AE was provided a curated list of Autistic Educator resources created by the ACPs and research team (see Appendix F). The AEs were able to add their own resources to the list which included spaces for mental health resources, Autistic Educator online communities, peer-reviewed papers and books, and resources specific to Autistic Burnout and Flourishing.

All interview data were gathered in password-protected Zoom meetings, audio recorded into a MP3 file, and transcribed verbatim using the Zoom transcribe feature, Otter.ai, and reviewed by researchers. To ensure confidentiality and to reduce potential harm, all personal information including name, location, school name etc. was de-identified during the cleaning process. Transcriptions, audio, and video of the interview were housed in a password protected DropBox folder and deleted once the analysis was complete.

### ***Phase 1: Qualitative Analytic Plan***

Interview transcripts were cleaned by the PI and research assistant and uploaded to DropBox. All five interviews were thematically analyzed through a social justice critical paradigm similar to methods used in Raymaker et al. (2020). A combination of reflexive thematic analysis and template analysis was chosen as it uses an inductive approach that allows for an insider perspective and creating codes based on what participants have said, while also

allowing for the creation of a general codebook to guide the analysis process (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2020). Analysis followed the six-sequence guide out by Braun and Clarke (2006) with consideration for the 20-step guidelines by Braun & Clarke (2020) (see Appendix C and D for detailed lists). Analytic memoing and bracketing were used to track justification for codes, ensure rigor and transparency, and recognize personal biases based on experience, culture, or ideology (Nowell et al., 2017; Saldaña, 2021). Interviews were independently analyzed by the PI and other team members (i.e., ACPs, researchers, research assistant) and then discussed as a group to refine and create explicit definitions (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2020). This was an Iterative process where the ACPs had opportunities to provide input on ideas, themes, and subthemes. Once finalized the themes were thematically mapped and be used to report the qualitative findings of the study. The themes from the five qualitative interviews were used as the foundation to co-develop a survey with ACPs in a Community of Practice (CoP). A CoP can be defined as a group of individuals with the shared goal or concern and then engage in collective learning around that shared domain (Hoadley, 2012; Wenger, 2011).

### ***Phase 2: Survey of Themes and Recommendations***

The survey was sent to AE's via Qualtrics with options for Likert scale and open-ended responses. AEs were given two weeks to carefully review the themes found in Phase 1 interviews as well as provide specific recommendations to address the barriers and enhance the facilitators to Autistic mental health. This process follows the basic considerations of participatory-social justice design laid out by Creswell & Clark (2017) and Creswell (2009) in addition to increasing methodological soundness through triangulation, member checks, and collaboration as recommended by Creswell and Miller (2000). Bringing the data back to the participants aims to

enhance the feedback loop and follow the guidelines of emancipatory participatory research methods (den Houting, 2021).

### ***Phase 2: Qualitative Review***

Understanding which themes are significant to the AEs was captured through basic frequency counts and descriptives (mean, median, mode) of common phrases, ideas, and topics reported in survey. This was done using the reports visualization feature and basic descriptives provided by Qualtrics in addition to the COP reading individual responses. The COP reviewed Qualtrics visualization in addition to the open-ended responses to form a condensed list of recommendations to share using the direct words from AEs. A list of common barriers and facilitators to Autistic mental health and burnout was created to supplement the recommendations. These lists were written in laymen's terms and made accessible for easy dissemination to a wide audience of educators, Autistic individuals, researchers, community members, and school teams.

### **Positionality Statement**

***PI:*** The Principal Investigator identifies as a White, cisgender neurodivergent and disabled woman. Her interest in this research stems from her experiences as a late identified Autistic special educator who experienced teacher burnout and Autistic burnout. She has seen the importance of discussing Autistic mental health in her personal and professional life. Through this research, she aims to foster collective change considering the intersecting issues of mental health, ableism, and stigma within education. As an educator and researcher, the PI hopes to bridge the gap in current educational systems to better empower practitioners to be disrupters in their communities while moving towards systems level change.

*ACPs and Research Team:* We are a 12 person team consisting of five Autistic Community Partners and seven Autistic, neurodivergent or disabled researchers and scholars with lived and living experience teaching in K-12 settings. The team is international with members living across the United States, Canada, and the UK. All team members identify as white and as such we recognize that we hold spaces of privilege while also living at the intersections of marginalization due to living within a neuronormative society. Our goal is to demonstrate inclusive research practices by fundamentally reimagining the roles within research projects to honor and leverage the insights, experiences, and contributions of Autistic individuals throughout the research journey.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

There were two phases to this research project. The first was thematic analysis of the five interviews conducted with SGD Autistic Educators completed by the PI and team. The six themes are factors that can either be facilitators or barriers to Autistic mental health. The second phase results included a survey sent out to the five AEs to access their thoughts on the six themes selected and recommendations related to said themes. The team then provided their input on common broader ideas that were present in the open-ended responses to the survey.

#### **Themes**

##### ***Theme 1: Sensory Experiences***

Sensory experiences refer to the immediate sensations that Autistic educators perceive and must process as they encounter them in their everyday environment. This includes all eight senses including sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, temperature, proprioception, interoception, and exteroception. Educators expressed both hyper and hypo sensitivities to their individual sensory input with many sensory experiences reported as “visceral” and sometimes “exhausting”. The most often reported were noise, fluorescent lights, repetitive sounds, and strong scents.

**RQ 1: Autistic and Educator Burnout.** Maureen described her burnout resulting from the “overstimulation” from “feeling too many things happening at once”. This was supported by Sage who reported that there were days were they “just couldn’t handle the number of stimuli that they were experiencing” leading to crashes and the inability to work.

Most classrooms and educational spaces were not sensory friendly for educators but were not recognized as such while teaching. Kade mentioned that: “I think for me the sensory needs not being met is a huge one that I like... not that I downplayed it that I did not... It took me many,



many, many years to realize just how important that was for me to have, to be well, to have an overall quality of life.”

Jess had similar feelings of understanding that they struggled with noise but had “worked in a super loud environment for so long”. It was when the noise became “noise overlap” or where “voices from intersecting classrooms intersected with one another” that it became overwhelming. Jess noted that the noise made them “physically lock up and feel like screaming” or “crying” and that some days “no amount of earplugs would help”. It wasn’t until they was in a more controlled environment at home that they realized how “harmful” being in a classroom had been for them sensory wise. This retrospective outlook was mirrored in responses from other educators who now enjoy a “carefully curated” space in which they can meet their sensory needs and take time to recognize when their bodies need regulation.

**RQ 2: Positive Mental Health and Autistic Flourishing.** Educators did their best to make the classrooms work for them whilst teaching by “putting lamps in every corner”, “playing classical music”, wearing ear plugs, or taking frequent breaks to move around and “wiggle” or rest. This helped with some of the sensory overwhelm, but not all as they were still in an environment that did not accommodate their interoception needs. Jess mentioned that they often forgot to eat due to poor interoception. This led to them not eating for 10-12 hours or not going to the bathroom for most of the day. They stated: “I know I am struggling. I know I struggle with knowing when to eat... and knowing when to take a break. So, like knowing that and then still not being able to even help myself at all, because of the circumstances and the environment was really hard.” Kade spoke of their experience with migraines and not having a space to go when they were feeling immense amounts of pain. They had to go into a coat closet and come out with sunglasses and lavender oil to be able to continue teaching. When Kade got home, they would

“fall apart” and realize they “hadn’t eaten dinner” or that they had “been playing video games for many hours” and missed important phone calls or someone knocking at their door. When the burnout built up and got worse, Kade described “forgetting how to cook”, “not being able to put meals together”, “not realizing they hadn’t peed all day” and feeling like a “puddle” who struggled with taking care of themselves.

Many educators discussed how they had to continued working even though they felt sensory overwhelm. This was especially difficult when there were “competing sensory needs”. Luna provided an example of “when you are listening to a kid playing his iPad at full blast for eight hours straight” that it is “exhausting”. Jess noted how the sensory environment is shared by educators and “a whole bunch of little humans” so it is easy to go from things being under control to the space moving towards chaos and sensory nightmares. Maureen noticed that Autistic burnout felt like “too many things were happening at once” with things becoming “too loud” and needing to have space from others.

### ***Theme 2: People and Interactions***

In this theme, People and Interactions refer to two main groups: 1) Students and 2) Staff (i.e. teachers, administrators, school staff). This theme does not refer to the Climate and Culture of the school, district, or larger community. Instead, it includes individual interactions or experiences with students or staff that either supported (e.g., felt cared for, appreciated, and valued for their authentic selves) or unsupported (e.g., discriminated, excluded, or discouraged). Examples can include workplace bullying, individual power dynamics, administrator support related to disability or identity, significant connections with students while teaching, opportunities to collaborate, co-teach, co-plan with colleagues, and receiving valuable or helpful feedback.

**RQ2: Positive Mental Health and Autistic Flourishing.** All five educators expressed how they felt engaged, excited, and effective when they were working directly with students. The glimmers, or moments of flourishing, that they experienced were, as Jess put it, “100% because of the kids”. Many educators felt they were able to connect with the kids due to shared neurotypes and saw a reduction in the double empathy problem. It should be noted that in no way did educators blame students for their burnout or lack of flourishing.

Maureen discussed how much joy she experienced when seeing the “eureka moment” or “lightbulb” with students, especially because of her ability to “really connect with kids” due to shared neurodivergence. She detailed how she would assist students from escalating by sharing Pokémon facts, discuss random topics, or going on tangents that were funny or interesting. Sage also noted how important it was for them to help students have things “click in their brains” and realize that “their voices actually matter even if their talking about some of the most random stuff”. They detailed how much “power” comes from witnessing students find their voice when explaining how one of their students was an expert on United Nations Law Sea Treaties. Sage went on to say they felt most engaged when they were “able to figure things out with their students” and felt that while flourishing they can make “really hard things digestible and accessible for everybody” in the space.

Kade made sure to not only have space to deep dive into ways for students to learn and hear random facts, but also to intently focus on knowing each of their students. They mentioned “I knew what they liked, and I knew what their favorite shirt was, and I knew when their parents were going away and when they were gonna need to bring a stuffy to school”. When they were in the classroom “that was the whole world” where they could deep dive into finding the best resources, videos, explanations, and ways of learning for their students. The flourishing or “the

best feeling” of being with students in the classroom could last all day for Kade, but they also attributed those experiences to “masking” and “hyperfocus”. This focus on deep knowledge about students “puzzled other people” but became a “game” for Kade to get to know all their students intentionally.

Jess would take the knowledge about student preferences and included those in reading lessons and other learning opportunities. They mentioned they liked to “encourage (student) curiosity” and have them contribute “input” to build lessons together. Luna expressed a similar sentiment of getting to work closely with students to understand “who they are as individuals and how (they) can help them grow”.

These types of supportive environments allowed neurodiverse students to thrive academically and behaviorally. Maureen spoke about her principal noting how she made students feel safe to ask questions and call out mistakes. This made it so students were engaged in respectful discussion and provided space for Maureen to authentically communicate and engage as well. Jess described how they would understand what Autistic students were feeling when they melted down or didn’t want to sit crisscross applesauce while Luna felt kinship with students because they were able to have a “high level of connection” around “shared disability and mental health experiences”.

**RQ 1: Autistic and Educator Burnout.** All five educators did not have the same positive experiences when connecting with colleagues, administrators, and other school staff. There were common experiences of bullying, rejection, discrimination, or not fitting in.

Maureen shared an example of working with a co-teacher who had different educational, philosophical, and lived experiences than her which led to problems. The co-teacher disagreed with Maureen’s teaching style, ways of communicating with students, and sharing and reporting

information. Near the end of the year the co-teacher “blindsided” Maureen with peer mediation where she was accused of being “hostile”, and “not smiling and saying hi”. Maureen’s response was “a) I am not a morning person, and b) I didn’t even know you were saying hi to me”.

Maureen also felt singled out because she identifies as asexual and was constantly asked about a significant other or set up with “other weird people”. This made her feel further like an outsider and discriminated by her peers.

Luna provided their experience with workplace bullying from a classroom teacher while they were a paraeducator and disclosed they were Autistic. The “discrimination and bullying” that they faced was “severely traumatizing” leading to panic attacks in their car, and frequent smoke breaks to get away from the frequent switch in expectations, disrespectful comments, and being “cornered” by the lead teacher. When they sought support from administrators, Luna felt they did “nothing about it” making them believe that they “had to get out of there” if they wanted a career at all, and there “was no way to thrive”.

Kade mentioned also not feeling support from administrators. They recalled a moment where they were called into the office of the principal for not staying past contract time like many of the other kindergarten teachers. The principal mentioned that “it looked really bad” and that Kade was not “putting in the extra work” like everyone else. Kade was eventually able to find educational spaces that were more affirming of their identity and boundaries. They explained that flourishing can be when they are “holding space in a way where I can tell that the people that I am with are like happy and safe and feel like a community”. Sage described feeling like a “full person” when they can flourish and have conversations with individuals around accessibility and inclusion. They expressed that being a trans person has increased their flourishing as they are able to deeply connect to themselves, “feel more secure” in who they are,

and radically accept that things will be okay. Kade was able to find this level of flourishing in their current job, where they feel “very seen as a nonbinary trans person” and are provided care from their colleagues around clients misgendering them. Kade mentioned that this sense of “not having to think how I am going to respond” or of it “being taken care of” so they can be present in conversations as a “huge” support.

Luna was also able to find a supportive boss outside of their K-12 position. The boss would take time to get to know Luna and not make assumptions around their identity or disability. An example provided was when they disclosed they were Autistic, Luna’s boss asked, “what does that look like for you” and “how can I support you”. This level of empathy and understanding from those in leadership has been “wildly healing” for Luna, especially because their boss has disabilities and is willing to share in understanding with them. Luna mentioned flourishing can feel like they “have room to be supported” and where things do not feel “like the end of the world” which can be hard with their co-occurring mental and physical health needs. They noted that if a “flare up” happens and things are not going the best, flourishing can occur if people, like their boss, support them and give them the opportunity to “take the space to do what I need without feeling like everything is going to come apart”.

### ***Theme 3: Agency***

Agency refers to an educators’ ability to have control over their actions, decisions, time, schedule, and other aspects of their teaching responsibilities. Educators who have agency feel like they have the power and resources to achieve their goals and meet their needs. Examples can include feelings of autonomy, control, and need for empowerment.

**RQ 1: Autistic and Educator Burnout.** Educators discussed the importance of being seen as a professional who could make important decisions around curriculum, instruction,

programming, and classroom management. Luna expressed that they feel most engaged when they have the “autonomy to develop (their) own programs and methods for working with students”. They went on to say they prefer a “high level of autonomy” but with the ability to ask questions and receive support when requested as they recognize different Autistic educators need different levels of support.

Kade also mentioned the importance of autonomy or “being able to have control over what I’m teaching, how I’m teaching it, if there’s going to be breaks, if someone is going to be standing on one foot or sort of sitting crisscross applesauce on the rug”. Furthermore, they wanted that autonomy to “be valued” and to not be seen as the “weird teacher” who created a different space in the school. When they experienced a lack of control, they faced feelings of “helpless and hopelessness” where little things felt “overstimulating and overwhelming”. Kade detailed that it became an experience of “racing to catch up to something that (they’ll) never get to”, exhaustion, mental fog, and eventual burnout where they didn’t feel “control of their body and mind”.

**RQ 2: Positive Mental Health and Autistic Flourishing.** Kade also worked within the confines of what was expected but made it work for them by “hacking” the system. This was done by organizing visual posters on a ring stacked together instead of showing them all at once or providing expectations around flexible seating. These “accommodations” were needed to “survive” the system that did not provide a lot of affirming choices. Jess did a similar accommodation for her students by “normalizing” fidget toys “from day one” so students would know that it was okay to stim and they did not have to go to a separate room to be comfortable. Sage noted that many veteran educators that they had seen often developed their own

curriculums and routines to “hack” the system. They did this in their own classroom by changing prompts so that they did not have to do the “exact same thing every semester”.

The ability to control or rework expectations were not always feasible for educators. Jess and Sage mentioned feeling like they had to mask to get through aspects of teaching, especially those moments where they were trying to do it all and still like they were “failing”. Jess specifically stated that Autistic people can be very good about “holding things in”, “not complaining or not voicing things” to “not stand out, seem weird or be different”. This can be extremely difficult especially if the complaints are related to the “justice aspect of Autism”. Whether it was a “meaningless” and “sketchy” assessment, a harmful behavior management strategy, or a redundant task, educators felt the injustice of it all make them ask questions and be critical of choices that were forced upon them. Maureen discussed how many of those making choices and taking control away from teachers “have no knowledge of how children operate”. Jess described how they often were the person who “actually did a search of the assessments” they were doing. This led to questions of “why are we doing this”, “do you even know what you are talking about” and “why should I take your word”. These questions were often met with little answers leading to educators not feeling they were “treated as professionals” or had agency over what happened to their students and in their classrooms.

To counter this lack of autonomy and control, many educators moved towards spaces of advocacy. Jess stated that they became the “noisy, annoying, loud one to administration” in hopes to make changes for themselves and their students. This level of advocacy continued after they left teaching by attending IEPs for caregivers as a parent advocate. Sage specified that not only are they a “self-advocate” for themselves but that they aim to be an advocate for students and a disrupter in the system. They recognized that “sometimes you have to work within the



system to disrupt the system” which is why they try to stay within the education spaces even though they have left the teaching profession. Luna also identified as needing to self-advocate, especially around respect. Their advice to educators was to not “let others define for you what success and professionalism must be. Self-respect can come in a lot of forms... Don’t let others walk all over you”. They went on to say, “you know who you are and what you need” and that if you are not being supported it is okay to leave. Jess reiterated this point by expressing that teaching can be seen as someone’s purpose or life goal, but at the end of the day it is “still a job that you are paid for”. Jess’s advice to Autistic educators was that if they feel they are not getting what they need, feel like they lack autonomy or control, or feel powerless to “move” or “find a school that is better if you can’t quit or work from home”.

#### ***Theme 4: Climate and Culture***

Climate and Culture refers to the shared perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and values of the school and/or district, larger community, or society. This can include descriptions of school and/or district climate and culture (ex. school expectations, district mission), state climate and culture (ex. southern states being perceived less tolerant of SGD individuals) or the societal climate and culture (ex. ableism, homophobia, capitalism) that directly or indirectly impact the lives of Autistic educators. Climate and Culture does not focus on individual interactions as described in People, but the overall experience in which educators worked or inhabited.

**RQ 1: Autistic and Educator Burnout.** For the overall school climate and culture, educators described spaces that were “chaotic” or “very high stress”. Many felt overworked and duped by what was told to them when they started teaching. For example, Jess explained how they were excited to work at a school that focused on “experiential learning and social justice” and where everyone received “individualized instruction”. They felt “they could actually do”

teaching because their school had units on Black Lives Matter with first graders and “read all those books that people ban”. Unfortunately, as they continued teaching, they saw the incongruence between the mission of the school, and what was happening in real time for their students. Jess opened up about students “not getting the services they needed” or having to “jump through hoops” to get student accommodations, even in what they had thought it would be “the ideal environment for Autistic students and Autistic teachers”. They mentioned that many students left the public-school spaces because it was “not working” for kids as it was “trying to fit a square into a circle”. The charter school was “supposed to be for us weirdos”, but they were left disillusioned and “disappointed”.

Kade echoed Jess’s feelings by stating that “even as progressive as any of those schools claim to be with regards to inclusion, there’s just none of that for teachers”. They went on to say it took them awhile to see this and realize that “no one ever flipped” the idea of inclusive classrooms for educators to say, “is this an inclusive workplace?”. Kade recalled their experiences with “unrealistic expectations”, “no leeway” or flexibility to talk about what educators needed, and “no flexibility” in the ways teachers were expected to work with students.

**RQ 2: Positive Mental Health and Autistic Flourishing.** Kade also noticed the different expectations of school culture when retelling their many experiences as an educator. Some school communities saw students as just “behavior problems” while others saw students “as adults” who were equal members of the “unschooling” community. In terms of educator support, Kade grappled with the school cultures that didn’t talk about the struggles educators were facing every day. They mentioned it was a “huge barrier” to not talk about mental health that recognized educators as “humans” who experience “ups and downs”. Kade noted there needs to be ways to “support each other and take breaks”. They described how they can flourish

when they see a school culture where educators, Autistic and non-Autistic, “visibly take care of themselves in public spaces”. They provided examples of Zen doodling, using fidgets, and crocheting as well as not “agonizing” when educators took days off for physical or mental health reasons.

Maureen also noted the lack of support for teacher mental health within their school culture. In her recommendations to administrators, she stated that “you got to work on your teachers’ mental health and you can’t pretend that they’re robots” only there to serve children. She added that the “toxic positivity” is not helpful, and it is okay to “embrace dissent” and not “be a marigold” because everything is not fine. Maureen expressed that teachers are people who should be treated the same as folks who work in offices or non-helping professions. Maureen also mentioned feeling “isolated” due to her role as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. She described that the expectations for collaboration or teamwork with general education colleagues depended on the school and district. Some districts “were cutthroat” and were not interested in communication, while others left Maureen feeling “burned” or “dismissed” for not communicating enough.

Luna found that in K-12 teaching they were often looked down upon because of their status as paraeducator and lack of experience. They mentioned that the culture of schools is that “educators needs are not being met”. In their current position, the culture is different – they rely on one another, recognize individual expertise, and offer helpful input when needed. Many other educators found spaces outside of K-12 teaching to have cultures and climates that supported them and allowed them to meet their basic needs. Kade was the only educator to provide an example of a somewhat positive school climate and culture. They stated they felt “so accepted as both a non-binary person and as a neurodivergent person” by the program that they kept the

position even when it was “not healthy” for a variety of different reasons. Kade described the climate as an “accommodation fest” where “everyone was saying what they needed” and “giving accommodations to one another”. They felt the community was “accepting and receptive” and provided them with a “wonderful experience” even though other aspects of the position were limiting. As Kade mentioned “I think there’s something to be said for what it feels like basic needs being met being a reason to stay somewhere”.

Luna did not feel as accepted as an Autistic and SGD educator and person in their school due to the overall state climate. They described that they have “not been open about their gender or sexuality in the professional setting” and felt the need to leave K-12 spaces because they live in a southern state. They went on to say, “I live in a southern state that you know, I could easily get rejected or parents could view me as a threat to their children if I was open about my gender or sexuality in any capacity”. Luna noted that in their current job it hasn’t been much of an issue, but that it is a K-12 “cultural thing” that makes them feel scared to share their identities.

Sage mentioned K-12 and community climates but was a systems thinker in expressing the larger culture and climate of American neuronormative society. They explained that burnout can happen because “we are so painfully entrenched in capitalism that you don’t really get the opportunity” to feel flourishing or get fully out of a state of burnout. Sage described that this capitalism is an institutional barrier to quality of life as “there’s literally not an education system designed for someone that they are not trying to like, breed to a nine to five”. Sage went on to express that society is also “incredibly, incredibly ableist” that forces “a whole lot more internalized ableism”. This makes the school environment difficult to thrive in leading a lot of educators to leave the profession. This is especially true for Autistic educators who “try to be high performing or fit with a neurotypical society” and are “conditioned to mask as high as

possible” to fit in with everyone else. Sage shared that there is a “lack of acceptance” of Autism because there is a “strong social narrative” about it being only “seven-year-old boys” who are “obsessed with trains”. They went on to say that they have thought a lot about “why it is so hard for people to just like, be chill with Autism”.

Maureen agreed with Sage in noting that the lack of acceptance was a major barrier to their quality of life as an Autistic person. In their recommendations, they wanted professional development on communication differences and understanding how differences within people are okay. This professional development would be led by Autistic folks to “correct any misconceptions” people have and learning that “we don’t need to infantilize people” who are Autistic. Kade thought it was important to have this type of training early in teacher preparation programs to ensure that folks had exposure to “disability studies and disability justice”. This would provide future educators and professionals an “understanding of disability and disability rights” and “universal design” before entering schools.

Jess’s recommendations for changing culture and climate also center around universal design and making the space work for all educators and students. They wanted to advocate for a “system that could actually help kids... not just to be educated but to be decent humans and to thrive”. They felt like society puts this pressure to “just get through the day” rather than have spaces of flourishing and joy. For educators, Jess expressed that they wanted to “normalize” the concept of all educators writing out plans for what they need. They said it would be like if teachers had “504 plans” listing out “here’s how you can help me best, here are the things I need extra help with” and “whatever little things come up”. Jess shared that “asking for accommodations can be such an othering experience and can be such a difficult experience” but

it doesn't have to be in a culture that allowed educators from the start to "share and advocate" for their needs and for them to be met.

### ***Theme 5: Environmental Factors***

Environmental Factors are working conditions and settings in and outside of school that would affect all teachers regardless of neurotype. As compared to Climate and Culture, Environment includes more material aspects like building structure, air conditioning, working hours, transportation, student to teacher ratio, and salary. These are factors that have a more pronounced effect on Autistic educators as compared to their neurotypical peers leading to experiences of burnout or flourishing. Educators may have described some of their immediate responses to the Environmental Factors in Sensory Experiences described to Theme 1. However, this theme reviews the elements of that experience that cannot be easily changed. For example, being forced to work in classroom that was too hot with no solution or having to drive across the district to through rush hour traffic.

**RQ 1: Autistic and Educator Burnout.** All educators had aspects of the physical or structural environment that contributed to their burnout. Maureen discussed how she was required to switch schools which added "20 minutes of incredibly stressful driving". Due to a recent car accident at their previous district because of "infrastructure that did not keep up with population demands" Maureen felt increasingly stressed and at her "breaking point" and "derailed" when having to drive "halfway across the district" to her job. The "structural issues" of moving buildings, changing caseloads, and commuting made Maureen feel the "need to get out of here" and was a barrier to flourishing within the school environment.

When asking Jess about their dream school, they "literally wrote down real walls". This was because Jess was in a classroom space that had four 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classrooms without any

separation. There were some “IKEA cubbies” as dividers but the space was not large enough for each classroom teacher to have their own space. This led to issues when COVID hit as they felt “crammed into that little first and second grade room” in “an old building” without proper ventilation and “no social distancing happening”. Jess recalled that outbreaks happened frequently causing a disruption to instruction and planning. In their reflections, Jess stated, “it became more obvious, like wow, I literally worked for most of my life in environments that were absolutely terrible for me”.

The lack of structured breaks and planning time was also noted by Jess, Maureen, and Kade who all felt like they did not have enough time to do basic things like eat lunch, grade papers, and go to the bathroom. Kade even mentioned how they “felt proud” while teaching that they were able to find a way to work around their period. Maureen added that they “did not really have a classroom a lot of the time” due to being an ESL teacher which made it hard for them to find space to take breaks or work. If they did have a room, it was “poorly constructed and only had a small window”. This became an issue when the warmer months came, and the classroom got to “over 90 degrees”. Maureen took it upon herself to go to the office and ask for a fan, as the offices in the school were airconditioned. It wasn’t until she moved to a richer district, that she was able to have enough resources like air conditioning.

Kade also mentioned how the school budget changed what resources were available to them. They recalled working at a school “where many many celebrities and like wealthy people sent their kids”. At the school the “PTA had a like a 5-million-dollar budget” making it easy to take kids on trips or do other fun activities because “money was flowing”. On the flip side, Kade also worked in schools that were Title I and had no resources. They explained that they were “once in a school that didn’t have a library”. They felt the “stress of having to source resources”

that they assumed would be given in a school leading to “burning out”. The absence of a library made Kade feel “stressed and overwhelmed” and like they “had the whole world on their shoulders”. They were worried about ruining the kids’ lives and if they were “gonna loose a year of learning” if they didn’t find them a library.

**RQ 2: Positive Mental Health and Autistic Flourishing.** This level of “overwork and underpay” was felt by many of the educators. Educators like Sage, Maureen and Jess felt like remote teaching or online teaching options should be available to assist educators in creating boundaries and breaks and promote flourishing. In describing their dream program, Sage carefully considered education modalities and increased staffing to support both students and educators. Luna noted that if there were increases in staffing that all educational staff should be paid fairly. In their experience as a substitute teacher and paraeducator they felt “they did not get paid well” but were expected to work beyond their contract hours. Maureen expressed that they also felt compelled to be “up until 2-3 am” because they were tasked with so much during the day. She stated that she would have preferred remote teaching “because (she) didn’t have to deal with the environment that (she) hated.”

### ***Theme 6: Embodied and Lived Experiences***

Embodied Autistic Identity refers to how Autistic educators view and feel about being Autistic and their journey to identification. As these are the embodied experiences of educators, there is some overlap with other themes like Sensory and Agency. However, Embodied Autistic Identity focuses more on the educators’ lived experiences and individual conceptualizations of identity as Autistic and SGD people while also being educators.

**RQ 1: Autistic and Educator Burnout.** All educators expressed that being an Autistic educator can be this “rollercoaster of emotions” that is taxing and can lead to “conditioned



masking” or a “recipe for masking”. Sage noted that Autistic educators seek “moments of spontaneity and novelty” to experience flourishing, but it happens in glimmers rather than sustainable patterns. Four out of five educators were identified with Autism later in life which made it difficult for some to understand how their Autistic identity related to aspects of burnout or flourishing. This created space for both disappointment and appreciation when looking at their lives and identities over time.

When discussing her Autistic identity journey, Jess described the high level of masking they experienced in school. They felt the need to be the “perfect student” who was an “overachiever” by taking AP classes, honors, and graduating a year early from high school. They described how teachers would tell their mom how amazing they were in school, and their mom’s response was “can you send that child home”. At home, Jess had “full on meltdowns” where they “didn’t speak for two days”, would “bang my head against things”, and just “yelled and screamed”. It got to the point their mom had to “literally drag” them to a psychiatric hospital to receive help where they were given the diagnosis of depression and anxiety. Jess explained that the doctors “didn’t even consider Autism or ADHD”. It wasn’t until Jess did their own digging through therapy, that they realized they could be Autistic. They described it as a “revelation” that made their history with socialization, writings about “being an alien”, burnout in college, and “constant sensory overload” all make sense and was more than just being a SGD person. As an Autistic educator, Jess was unsure of their burnout as they saw many other “teachers feeling burnout too”. They questioned their experience but realized “they were feeling it too but in different ways” than they were as an Autistic educator. Jess described that there were shared overwhelm of struggling every day, feeling like they were failing the students, and depersonalization, but their experience was “this other level”.

**RQ 2: Positive Mental Health and Autistic Flourishing.** Many educators found relief in having a name or concept that explained the differences they had felt most of their lives. Kade stated that “there is something very like grounding and satisfying for just having a name for how (their) brain works and knowing that other people’s brains work similarly”. They noted that people had “repeatedly” told them that they are “weird”, or the issue was just in their head. Now that they know they are Autistic, they expressed “there are so many things that makes sense” and they can now understand themselves better. They detailed how “it is so interesting to look back” on their experiences of “huge burnouts” as a teacher and be like, “Oh that was also because I was Autistically burnt out”. Kade provided many positive aspects of being Autistic like their ability to “pull apart social situations and analyze”, “finding patterns”, and “figuring things out and understanding the linear connections” between things and how things work. There were also obstacles in terms of being “hyper aware in social situations”, figuring out how to get out of conversations that “feel crappy”, the need to infodump, and general executive functioning needs.

Sage similarly viewed their Autism through an affirming lens. They described that being Autistic “means approaching the world in way that is more analytical”, more systematic, and organized. They view the world as having “little boxes” but recognize that the system and procedures that they have created “do not always work”. They use this pattern seeking and recognition to “see how systems continue to function in a broken state” giving them “particular insight” on things like inclusive and accessible onboarding procedures. As an educator, Sage described how their Autistic identity allowed them to be “a whole lot more intentional” about connecting with students and predicting their needs. When talking about Autistic educators, Sage noted that many “picked the profession because they are educating about their special interests”. This makes it difficult for Autistic educators to “clock the educator burnout” because they enjoy

the topic and if they are far enough in their career, they have developed systems in their classroom and curriculum to make things work for them. It is when the “drive to be high performing or fit in with neurotypical society”, “imposters syndrome”, and “feeling like this job isn’t giving me what I need and I’m not giving students what they need” that things can “start to impact executive functioning skills”. Sage described that this combination of Autistic and educator burnout can cause issues with “perceptions of time” and “energy” making it noticeable to the educator. Sage noted that even though they identify as a low support needs Autistic, they recognize the need to “hold space” for “all disabled people” and provide opportunities for advocacy. Additionally, they acknowledged that there are many misconceptions about the Autistic experience, “especially for AFAB people” (assigned female at birth). Sage described how they are still “socially presumed female” leading to some hard conversations where they must assist people in “confronting internal biases”.

Luna also described those biases and differences in diagnosis for AFAB individuals when they explained how they felt about being Autistic. They were diagnosed when they were 13 but didn’t find out they were Autistic until college. They had experienced Autistic burnout prior to being an educator as a teenager but did not know it was related to Autism. Luna explained that they had an “episode of major depression as a teenager” stemming from “having tried so hard for so long to be normal or good enough and still not being able to quite get there as an Autistic person”. This long struggle finally cumulated in Luna “just breaking down” and burning out while teaching. While it “makes sense of things” now, this lack of understanding is something that they are “continually processing”. Luna views Autism as “more of a framework of understanding” and a “core part” of their identity. They have always known that they “operate

differently” and that their “brain is different” leading to Luna feeling comfortable disclosing that they are Autistic in their current workplace.

Maureen was most recently identified as Autistic. Being Autistic was something that she had considered in the past and was mentioned by previous therapists. However, it didn’t solidify until Maureen’s best friend, who is neurodivergent, brought it up. Having a best friend who she trusted and “just clicked” with made it easier to make sense of everything and see her past through a different lens. Maureen described being Autistic as a “beautiful unifying theory” that explained the struggles she had in childhood, the difficulty with making friends, and communicating with others. Maureen also explained that although she had worked with Autistic students with a broad range of needs in the past, she had never identified with their experiences. As an SGD woman, she did not have a lot of examples of what Autism could look like or how it could relate to her embodied perspective. This has made it harder for her to want to disclose, as she is aware of the negative perceptions people can have about Autistic individuals. As Maureen stated, “If you don’t fit the mold people kind of look at you funny. Like you are either their mascot, or like a curiosity or your ostracized”.

### **RQ 3: Recommendations for Mental Health Promotion and Survey Results**

Recommendations for mental health related to the six themes arose across all interviews with AEs. Additionally, all five AEs completed the second phase survey. The survey asked AEs to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, how well each theme aligned or resonated with their experiences as an Autistic Educator as well as a mechanism to gather further recommendations related to the six themes that may not have arisen during the interviews. The responses ranged from 1 – not well at all to 5 – extremely well. On average, AEs indicated that the six themes resonated well with their experiences, with the highest rated theme being Climate and Culture ( $M = 4.8$ ) and the lowest

rated theme being Environmental Factors ( $M = 3.8$ ). Table 4 provides the breakdown of percentage and mean for each theme based on responses.

The survey also included open-ended response questions for each theme that provided opportunity for AEs to provide recommendations or clarify their responses. Questions included ways to provide recommendations at the individual, institutional or systems level, provide recommendations for particular audiences, and personal strategies they have used to promote their own Autistic mental health. Four out of the five educators responded to the open answer questions. Their responses will be reviewed by theme and Table 5 provides a visual of the recommendations by themes that will be further discussed below.

### ***Theme 1: Sensory Environments***

Educators had no clarifications or additions for this theme. Reported recommendations to support/create sensory friendly environments for Autistic educators noted how room design and layout makes a difference. They recommended not using “open concept” setups where multiple classes were in the same room, having natural light, making sure airflow was adequate, and providing insulation for spaces. Educators focused on preventative measures like fluorescent light covers, ear defenders, planned low noise hours, and sound blocking techniques to reduce noise from outside noisy streets, or loud classrooms next door like music or PE. One educator provided an institutional recommendation by asking for sensory lists outside of every classroom to say what the entire classroom community (students and adults) need sensorily. For personal strategies to successfully support their sensory needs, AE’s reported keeping lights off or using lamps when they had their own classroom, using earplugs, scheduling decompression breaks, wearing sunglasses, requesting families do not wear scents and cleaning with unscented

products, drinking tea to feel grounded and calm, and playing instrumental or nature music in the background during class.

### ***Theme 2: People and Interactions***

One educator provided clarification of this theme. They stated that “Sometimes this is subliminal from the typical people we interact with. They can almost detect the differences in us and our behaviors and they cannot place what is different about us and that makes them act unkindly”.

Recommendations on ways to improve interpersonal interactions between Autistic and non-Autistic educators included professional development centered on communication differences, double empathy, and how to communicate across neurotypes. Communication was mentioned by all educators in recommendations with examples including providing tone notes in emails, staff meetings that encourage practicing and utilizing communication in text, verbal etc., allowing communication other than speech, allowing for processing time in conversations and meetings, and ensuring that students have access to alternative communication tools in all classrooms. Other recommendations included affinity groups for processing, structured planning time for co-teachers, and providing written agendas for meetings with comprehensive notes after each meeting.

Personal strategies used by AEs to successfully smooth, or repair interpersonal interactions ranged from not recalling anything that worked or using strategies that were not always successful, to creating explicit techniques like a template to show how they best give and receive feedback. Some strategies that were somewhat helpful included asking questions, frontloading with what they meant and saying nothing more, and not sharing their phone number.

### ***Theme 3: Agency***

Educators had no clarifications for this theme. Recommendations for ways to increase agency for Autistic educators centered on trust and teacher input. Two educators reported wanting trust from principals and other school/district staff “to do the job they trained for and were hired to do”. Two educators also reported the need for systems to take educator feedback and input on curricular changes and PD “seriously” because educators know what they are talking about. One response noted how the “micromanaging of teachers has got to stop”. Other recommendations included flex scheduling for obligations before and after school, not making abrupt job assignment changes at the beginning of the year and making time for grade levels or subject matter teams in addition to time for teachers to lesson plan.

For personal strategies that AEs have successfully used to support their sense of agency, two educators did not have any examples to share. The other two AEs reported citing research to defend choices, venting to colleagues, getting advice from more experienced colleagues, asking questions during workshops, and using the principal’s suggestion box.

#### ***Theme 4: Climate and Culture***

Two educators provided clarification or additions to this theme. They noted that there is often a mismatch between educators and climate and culture that contributes to a sense of alienation or exhaustion. One educator thought it would be “neat to look at the long-term implications of being in a workforce and masking”.

Recommendations for how to foster an affirming and supportive culture and climate for Autistic educators included mostly institutional and systems level changes. Educators suggested small changes like using pronoun pins, talking, and learning about neurodivergence/neuroinclusion, and creating safe spaces in schools. Larger suggestions included “upholding, enacting, and living” the mission created by the school for all students and

staff. One educator noted if schools are “embracing universal design” or “touting how socially justice minded” they are they should embrace and create those environments for teachers and staff alongside students. Another educator explained that “institutional changes will not happen without a national labor strike”. In the meantime, they recommended starting with how pre-service teachers are taught and recruited, having curriculum based on current research and teaching practices, getting rid of the “martyr complex and toxic positivity”, and eliminating financial barriers. Additionally, they stated that “there is a tendency to infantilize disabled people” and there needs to be a “mindset shift” in education to change and diversify the culture.

One educator had no personal strategies to provide focused on promoting an Autistic-supportive culture and climate within K-12 spaces. Two educators described how openly talking about their challenges and strengths as neurodivergent people was helpful for students and families to see neurodivergence as a positive or through a more strength-based lens. One educator brought in neurodivergent speakers and shared books and resources to assist in this effort. Another educator tried to align their special interests to projects happening in their classes to be able to “focus and fall into research and exploration”. Other strategies included gently correcting colleagues who perpetuated ableism, learning how to mask and mirror as a tool for self-preservation, and only speaking about neurodivergent students through a strength-based perspective.

### ***Theme 5: Environmental Factors***

There were no additions or clarifications for this theme. As the theme was focused on institutional level issues, there was not an option for AEs to provide personal strategies, as the team did not want to promote the concept that individual educators should be responsible for fixing or persevering their way out of systems of oppression and harm.



Recommendations on ways to create safe and sustainable working conditions for Autistic educators concentrated on the areas of intentionality, time, prioritization of the needs of educators and students in and outside school. One educator noted that environments need to be “intentional about what is needed to be done in a day vs. what would be nice to see done”, and that “knowing the levels of urgency can reduce pressure” and assist in coping with the outside factors that come into the classroom. This was supported by two other educators who focused on school staff providing input into their schedule, eating times, and prep periods to allow for spaces of “down time” or possibly a co-teacher coming into every classroom to allow one teacher to “step out if needed”. One educator provided an extensive list of recommendations that focused on large systems level changes. Their recommendations included: oversight of school districts usage of funds, qualified people reflective of the school community on school boards, transitioning into a national education system, reducing the amount of superintendents and administrators so that money is spent on infrastructure (i.e. ventilation systems), higher pay for teachers, school schedules that fit student sleep schedules, towns that more public transportation friendly, better urban planning and traffic control, and working with police and crossing guards to modify schedules to avoid rush hour traffic.

### ***Theme 6: Embodied Autistic Identity***

One educator provided the comment that they loved the “whole person focus” present in this theme. Recommendations to support positive Autistic identity and flourishing for Autistic educators took a strength-based approach. Suggestions included incorporating affinity groups for Autistic teachers, encouraging teachers to take meetings in ways that they are comfortable (i.e., sitting on the floor in a conference room), and focusing on how Autistic educators can be more effective with neurodivergent students as compared to allistic or neurotypical colleagues. One

educator poignantly wrote “Autistic teachers hear the way that you speak about autistic students. If you call an autistic student weird, difficult, annoying etc. it’s not a stretch to assume you think that of us too. It makes being our authentic selves difficult. Be mindful of what you say and how you openly judge others.”

One educator did not have any personal strategies to promote their own positive Autistic identity and flourishing. Other recommendations were similar to previous themes by describing being open with students and parents about their identity and being their authentic selves, naming things that they need, masking and mirroring at work so they “can just be me at home and with friends”, and having neurodivergent friends outside of work.

### ***Additional Comments***

The last question of the survey asked AEs about what might be missing from these themes that related to their experiences in schools. Three educators responded. One stated that everything was covered in the themes and had no additional feedback. Two educators had suggestions related to the education community. One educator noted that Autistic educators need to find the positive community or “bright spots” even if they are hard to find. One other educator explained that education is “still so based in ABA and conformity” making being Autistic still something that is “highly stigmatized”. They recommended that stigma should be addressed more explicitly in themes, possibly the Embodied Autistic Identity theme.

### **ACP Review**

The ACPs and research team reviewed responses from the survey to find common themes present in the open-ended comment section. First, the team was given a report of the survey to review individually. Next, the team spent time during their regularly scheduled meeting time to

discuss each theme and open-ended response prompt. ACPs agreed that stigma, communication, masking, power, and othering were common areas or themes that they noticed in the responses.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

This study is one of the first to actively include a large team of Autistic researchers and educators to understand the experiences of Autistic burnout and Educator burnout, flourishing, and mental health supports. Additionally, the findings from interviews and survey responses provide an intimate insight into the feelings and lived experiences of Autistic educator who identify as SGD and have left the field of teaching. The five SGD Autistic educators described how Autistic burnout and educator burnout build on one another to create a double burnout that greatly effects their overall mental health and wellbeing. Results show that aspects of the sensory, physical, social, and structural environment can create obstacles or avenues to positive quality of life and Autistic mental health. Educators were able to provide recommendations to assist in broadening the experiences of flourishing beyond the limits of the classroom by attending to what individuals, schools, and wider systems can do. These recommendations speak to the ways in which research and practice can reimagine psychological safety in schools for SGD Autistic educators.

Although the sample of Autistic educators was small, we did reach information power. Information power, as described by Malterud and colleagues (2016), moves away from the positivist conceptualizations of saturation and instead proposes that the more relevant information the sample holds, the fewer participants are needed. For high information power, a sample must follow the narrow aim of the study, be specific to the study, use established applied theory, have strong quality of dialogue, and strong analysis strategy (Malterud et al., 2016). These indicators were met in this study and follow the recommendations from Braun and Clark (2023) around the use of information power in thematic analysis work. They highlight the

importance of quality in qualitative data rather than quantity to address specific situated research questions pertinent to the community and research team.

The quality of interviews, survey data and participatory research methods has allowed this study to fill in the gaps on how Autistic educator experience wellbeing, flourishing, mental health, and burnout within the United States. As Autistic voice was centered throughout this project, Autistic educators were able to share their experiences teaching under systemic barriers that impeded their ability to be authentic and thrive. They also brought to light how, despite these barriers, they have cultivated spaces of flourishing to foster strong student relationships, create supportive classroom cultures, and advocate for those within their school communities as Autistic and SGD individuals. The following sections will discuss the results as they relate to the research questions, as well as the limitations of this study, and the implications for research and practice.

**RQ1: How do Autistic educators who have left the field describe their experiences with Autistic burnout and educator burnout?**

All educators in this study stated that they experienced both Autistic and educator burnout. How they described the double burnout they experienced; however, ranged from struggling to differentiate between the two concepts to seeing burnout as a cascading model. This range may be due to the experiences of Autistic burnout before entering the teaching profession. Work by Phung et al., (2021) showcased how Autistic youth can experience burnout as well as shutdowns, meltdowns and inertia similarly to Autistic adults. While youth described the terminology with slightly less clarity due to differences in conceptualizations, development, and vocabulary, they still felt the physical experiences and cyclical nature of Autistic burnout in their lives.

AEs also explained that Autistic burnout was exhausting, overstimulating, and totally encompassing. This mirrors the definition created by the ACPs and research team, and informed by prior research (e.g. Arnold et al., 2023, Raymaker et al., 2020), of *Autistic burnout* as an “experience of intense exhaustion, fatigue, reduced tolerance to stimuli, and loss of skills and abilities. Occurs when input, stress, and demands from life exceed the capacity of an Autistic person and adequate supports are not provided.” Many educators described that Autistic burnout was a prolonged overstimulating event that had lasting impacts on their social, physical, and mental health. While they were able to leave the field of education to pursue other endeavors, they were unable to escape the Autistic burnout symptoms. This is supported by the Autistic burnout conceptual model proposed by Raymaker and colleagues (2020) and Mantzales and colleagues (2022) which postulates that lack of external resources, inability to take breaks, dismissal and gaslighting, and poor boundaries create the inability to obtain relief from burnout symptoms. These symptoms added to rising life stressors and overall stress snowballed into experiences of Autistic burnout. For example, educators in this study discussed how the effects of Autistic burnout lasted long after leaving teaching. Kade, Maureen, Jess, and Sage described their experience of having to rebuild stamina and skills after being in a deep state of Autistic burnout that was exasperated by educator burnout. Kade noted that the only way to gain back those skills, and feel in control and comfortable, was to rest and take things slowly. While many AEs adored being educators and found teaching a calling, they were unable to access those skills readily after leaving the profession. It took time to come back to themselves and feel joy and flourishing.

This experience of rebuilding and rest is a common theme when reviewing experiences of Autistic educators in research. O’Neill and Kenny (2023) explored the embodied experiences of

Irish Autistic educators as they navigated the difficult school environments, stress, and overwhelm. One educator in their study noted that breaks were essential to her overall wellbeing and mental health. Without the breaks to reset, she experienced an attack on her sensory system leading to daily meltdowns and shutdowns, being in survival mode, and sensory overload. In their qualitative analysis to confirm the nature of Autistic burnout, Arnold et al. (2023) found that in order to recover, Autistic individuals required restorative, protective, low sensory environments that gave them space and time to heal. If Autistic people were able to create these environments through rest and boundary setting before Autistic burnout became overwhelming, participants described a decreased impact of burnout on their daily lives. This level of reset is not available to all Autistic educators unfortunately. The five AEs interviewed noted the privilege of being able to leave the profession to attend to their mental and physical health.

Educator burnout was directly tied to being in the teaching profession. In interviews, AEs were grateful for the team-created definition of educator burnout as it provided them a touchstone to conceptualize the differences between Autistic burnout and educator burnout. The ACPs and research team defined *Educator burnout* as an “experience of prolonged chronic job-related stress characterized by emotional exhaustion (feelings of being emotionally drained, overextended, overwhelmed), depersonalization (feelings of being disconnected and detached from oneself and others leading to negative or apathetic attitudes), and reduced personal accomplishment (feelings of dissatisfaction, ineffectiveness, and inability to recognize one’s own achievements). May also include a rethinking or regret over choice of pursuing or becoming an educator as a profession.” This definition was created based on the work of Schwab et al., (1986) and Maslach et al., (1997), in addition to the ACPs lived experiences. AEs noted that depersonalization and regret of choosing the profession were the most pronounced symptoms

they experienced as compared to their neurotypical peers. The regret was often rooted in misalignment with the values, expectations, and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) work being done by the school. AEs described that they felt a strong sense of justice or fairness that contributed to the regret and misalignment they experienced. The emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishments coincided with their experiences of Autistic burnout, thus it was difficult to delineate those experiences from one another. This may be due to the similar nature of the two burnout constructs as they both capture feelings of exhaustion, decreased motivation, increased negative self-perception, decreased self-efficacy, increased overwhelm, and decrease in executive functioning (Arnold et al., 2023b; Beames et al., 2023; Iancu et al., 2018; Mantzalas et al., 2021; Park & Shin, 2020)

One AE, Sage, had an interesting theory about educator burnout for Autistic educators. They believed that educator burnout triggered Autistic burnout due to Autistic educators' inability to "clock the educator burnout". They explained that many educators see teaching as a passion or special interest. A special interest can be described as a passionate interest for a topic that is highly specific or intense (Grove et al., 2018; Long, 2024; K. P. Nowell et al., 2021; Stockwell et al., 2021). It can be related to monotropism, which is the theory that Autistic minds can focus their attention on a smaller range of interests with a higher level of intensity (Murray et al., 2005). This can lead to experiences of hyperfocus where Autistic individuals can experience a flow state as they are highly engaged in activity or interest, making it difficult to switch tasks or reallocate attention. As Sage explained, educators can become highly immersed and focused on teaching and lose the ability to sense poor mental health or onset of symptoms. Rapaport and colleagues (2023) qualitatively examined the experiences of task immersion for Autistic people. Autistic participants within the Rapaport et al., (2023) study, described how being immersed and



totally absorbed into an activity had both positive and negative effects. While having the ability to intensely focus on a topic of interest was affirming and could bring joy, there could also be a lack of balance and control in Autistic individual's ability to get out of the intensity of task immersion.

For the AEs in this project, the focus or flow state that came with teaching and interacting with students often masked the negative symptoms of burnout. It was when they went home after a day of teaching, that they noticed their symptoms more acutely leading to meltdowns and the inability to cope. For some Autistic educators, the content area of teaching is a special interest or area of focus. In *Learning from Autistic Teachers: How to be a Neurodiversity-Inclusive School* (Wood, 2022), Autistic educators viewed teaching as a complex craft motivated by a passionate interest for history, literature, art, or music. In this study, AEs specified that interacting with students, providing engaging lessons, seeing the “lightbulb go off” and curating resources was a source of passionate focus or flourishing. This passion for teaching sustained them, much like research has shown that special interests can be a source of increased wellbeing and life satisfaction (Grove et al., 2018; Long, 2024). It is when the physical manifestations of burnout begin to affect their teaching and focus, that Autistic educators noticed the dual nature of their burnout.

When recalling their experiences with educator burnout, AEs noted that their symptoms and feelings were more intense than that of their colleagues. AEs did not say that their colleagues did not have educator burnout, but rather that everyone was dealing with burnout, and they felt it more acutely and viscerally. When asked about how they were able to deal with educator burnout during school breaks, AEs explained increased executive functioning, energy, and ability to plan for the future due to decreased burnout symptoms. This is different from the Autistic burnout

experiences described by AEs that seemed to persist during breaks in school or after leaving the profession. Research by Virtanen (2021) found that disconnecting from work and relaxing during breaks or free time was connected to vitality and life satisfaction for all educators. Additionally, breaks during the workday were connected to fewer symptoms of educator burnout and a reduction in the need for recovery from said symptoms. If breaks were not meaningful; however, educators felt increased negative feelings later in the day and lower overall wellbeing. This research supports what AEs were sharing around the universal need for meaningful breaks to increase wellbeing and decrease the onset of educator burnout symptoms. AEs noted that while they did worry about their students over the summer, they mentioned that the ability to step away from the professional responsibilities, power dynamics, and school environment provided the necessary break from having to perform and mask. These breaks are different for educator burnout as they gave immediate relief to AEs rather than the prolonged struggle described in Autistic burnout.

A few AEs struggled to find the difference between Autistic and educator burnout. While the definitions were helpful for basic conceptualization between the two concepts in interviews, AEs found it difficult to delineate what burnout was present in their lived experiences. One educator, Luna, explained that logically they knew that educator burnout happens exclusively to educators and Autistic burnout happens exclusively to Autistic people, but the combination of the two intermesh and interweave as someone who inhabits both identities. In their study of burnout for Autistic employees, Tomczak and Kulikowski (2023) detailed how mechanisms for burnout are similar leading to issues in distinguishing the constructs. They proposed a job demand/resources model that attunes to the needs of neurodivergent employees, while supporting the idea that all people, neurotypical and neurodivergent, can have similar experiences of

burnout. Furthermore, they suggest that the concept of “autistic burnout” should be instead labeled “autistic exhaustion” as overusing the word burnout could “diminish our understanding of autistic experiences” and “impede development of appropriate support interventions” (pg. 1591). It should be noted that these authors do not identify as neurodivergent or Autistic.

AEs in this study did not go as far as Tomczak and Kulikowski in their abhorrence of the concept of Autistic burnout. Some educators knew of the groundbreaking work of Raymaker and colleagues (2020) or of the general concept from Autistic advocates and scholars on social media. All supported what the Autistic community described as Autistic burnout. One AE who was more recently diagnosed, struggled with the concept of Autistic burnout as they were newer to the community and still delving into their personal relationship to Autism. AEs did explain the challenge in relaying their often-personal descriptions of their experiences of burnout and teaching. Many apologized for not being clear enough, for using curse words, or not knowing how to answer a question. Once they were affirmed and supported in the interview process, they expressed gratitude at the ability to unmask and have space to process around other Autistic people without stigma. Kaplan-Kahn and Caplan (2023) provided a co-interview guide for centering Autistic voice in Autism research. They outline how meaningfully engaging and including Autistic people in research can allow for higher quality and valid research that does not actively harm the community. AEs in this study remarked how they felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences, no matter how jumbled, because the PI was Autistic and had experience as an educator. The inclusive and safe environment made way for AEs to feel comfortable enough to delve into their burnout experiences and feelings when speaking about their time teaching. Feelings ranged from expressions of anger at the system to joy from working with students. In the end, Sage summed it up best by stating that the two burnouts are different in

the same way “squares and rectangles are different” and that it is all up to individual interpretation.

***RQ2: What are Autistic educators who have left the field perceptions of barriers and facilitators to positive mental health and Autistic flourishing? Do these differ based on intersecting identities?***

As all the AEs in this study left the profession, there is a distinctive perspective or viewpoint that is present when discussing barriers and facilitators. For example, when asked what supports or strategies they have seen while teaching that promote Autistic flourishing and reduce burnout, many educators had nothing to share. Moreover, when asked to describe their experiences with Autistic flourishing, many struggled to come up with an answer and needed additional clarification from the definition ACPs and research team created or examples for context. On the other hand, AEs were quick to provide a list of barriers to their quality of life and overall mental health that considered individual, classroom, school, and systems level issues. Most educators noted that systems level changes were needed to facilitate significant change for SGD Autistic educators rather than putting the onus on individual changemakers. This mirrors the work done by O’Neill and Kenny who used Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model to theorize the different contingencies and systems at play for Irish Autistic educators.

In our study’s thematic analysis of the barriers and facilitators to Autistic educator mental health and flourishing, the team created our own conceptual model based on the SPACE model (Doherty et al., 2023), Job Demand-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2000) (see Appendix G for our conceptual model). This was done to describe factors that can either facilitate spaces of flourishing or generate barriers to Autistic mental health and wellbeing. They include: Sensory experiences, People and

Interactions, Agency, Climate and Culture, Environmental Factors, and Embodied Autistic Identity (see Results section for descriptions). For this project's model, the team was careful to understand how power plays a role into the facilitators and barriers Autistic educators experience while in K-12 spaces. The team wanted to ensure that power and subsequent experiences of disempowerment were addressed throughout our conceptual model with a focus on systems level factors. This was done by centering the lived experiences of SGD Autistic educators through a member check of all themes as well as attuning to the ACPs own experiences as Autistic educators. This led to a discussion of overarching topics that contribute to each factor of this project's conceptual model, which focuses on the concept of psychological safety, which is the ability for individuals to feel safe to learn, contribute ideas, make mistakes, and challenge the status quo all while being included and connected to the community (Bas & Tabancali, 2020; Kassandrinou et al., 2023; May et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2017).

In the book *The Four Stages of Psychological Safety*, Clark (2020) provided a roadmap of the four stages of psychological safety by utilizing Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>1</sup>. Clark stated that psychological safety includes security, belonging and fulfillment needs within Maslow's hierarchy. As people's needs around the four stages of safety are being met, they can go from a space of exclusion to inclusion, and eventually innovation. The four stages of psychological safety outlined by Clark are: Inclusion Safety, Learner Safety, Contributor Safety, and Challenger Safety (further discussed below).

### ***Inclusion Safety***

Inclusion safety is when individuals feel like they belong as a part of a team, know they are accepted, feel like their experience matters, and are treated fairly. For AEs in this study,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that some believe that Maslow's hierarchy was influenced by the Blackfoot Nation (Bear et al., 2022; Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020).

inclusion safety was rarely present with their intersecting identities. As seen in the Climate and Culture, People and Interactions, and Agency themes, educators expressed that they were not often treated as professionals or leaders within their field. They felt denied opportunities to be accepted and valued within their school community by individual colleagues and larger groups due to stigma leaving them feeling left out and exhausted from trying to fit in.

As Autistic people, AEs described the struggle of disclosing their identity due to the stigma that surrounds Autism. Maureen poignantly stated how you are either a mascot, a hero, or an outcast, never to be seen as a full person and Sage expressed exasperation at the idea Autism is only seen as something that happens to little white boys who like trains. The stigma surrounding Autism is a struggle for many within the Autism community (Botha et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2022; Heyworth, 2024; A. Pearson & Rose, 2021; Turnock et al., 2022), including Autistic educators who have left the field. Wood (2024) analyzed the discourse of twelve former Autistic educators in the UK to understand the intersecting issues and experiences that made them want to leave teaching. Educators expressed that they felt “effectively silenced or rendered invisible” by the stigmatization and ableist language of their colleagues and superiors leading to many being unable to disclose their Autistic identity (pg. 45). The negative narratives that were present were proliferated by colleagues in schools leading to many masking or suppressing their Autistic characteristics to survive. This is echoed in the comments in the survey and interview responses from this study. Jess specifically stated “Autistic teachers hear the way you speak about Autistic students. If you call an Autistic student weird, difficult, annoying etc., it is not a stretch to assume you think that of us too. It makes being our authentic selves difficult”.

The inability to be authentic was a common barrier to AEs as they tried to belong within their school community. AEs were not only forced to mask their Autistic characteristics, but their

sexuality and gender identities. Luna clearly stated that they had to leave the K-12 space because they felt like they would be disrespected and harmed if they were to share their sexual and gender identity to families and peers. They mentioned that this was due to living in a southern state where there have been political and social attacks on SGD populations with legislation banning gender affirming care and LGBTQIA+ safe spaces. While this unsafe environment was prevalent throughout state, Luna noted that it was heightened within the K-12 climate and culture. They felt that outside pressure from community members created a concentrated burden to conform to heteronormative societal expectations. New research has shown that many SGD educators have difficulty disclosing their identities and feel the weight of heteronormative expectations within the workplace (Bizjak, 2017; Bower-Phipps, 2017; Lynch, 2023; Perez, 2024). Although there is a dearth in literature about SGD Autistic educators, it is safe to say that if these educators are unable to be their authentic selves within school spaces, there is a lack of basic psychological safety at the inclusion level.

AEs in this study mostly found inclusion safety after they left the profession, apart from Kade who felt inclusion safety in both settings. Kade was able to find a school environment that facilitated their mental health and wellbeing as an Autistic and SGD educator after disclosing their identities and advocating for accommodations. They described that once they began to ask for accommodations, their school team started an “accommodation fest” where all staff were able to voice what they needed to be successful. Unfortunately, the other AEs had to leave the K-12 spaces in order to find climates and cultures that fostered inclusion safety. Maureen noted that while she doesn’t love her new job, it is easier because she doesn’t have to care as much about what people think or how she is perceived. Luna expressed that their boss’s ability to empathize due to shared diagnoses and supportive work environment was extremely healing. Jess also

found peace in their new job and reflected how wild it was that they were able to be in a space for so long that was “harmful”. These reflections from AEs denote that schools need to shift from spaces of harm to spaces that allow all educators to flourish and feel accepted.

### ***Learner Safety***

Learner safety is defined as the ability for individuals to learn by asking questions, experiment, and make mistakes. Educators who are at this stage can ask basic questions, but not necessarily challenge or provide their own ideas to the space. AEs in this study expressed that they often had questions around procedures and policies of their schools or for their colleagues but were seen as confrontational or disrespectful. Furthermore, AEs voiced that the difference in communication between themselves and their colleagues made it difficult to even ask questions without being dismissed or seen as the issue.

For example, Maureen described her experience being brought to mediation by her co-teacher due to miscommunication and differences in communication styles. Maureen and other AEs thought this may be attributed to what is called the Double Empathy problem. The Double Empathy Problem was theorized by Dr. Damian Milton in 2012 to describe the disconnect that often happens between neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals when communicating with one another. He stated rather than placing the onus for miscommunication solely on the Autistic person, researchers need to examine how social contexts are co-constructed by Autistic and neurotypical people. When Autistic and neurotypical people communicate, it becomes a bad game of Telephone where both parties are misinterpreting and misunderstanding the communicational cues of one another leading to a mutual problem. Milton (2012) goes on to ask researchers to stop prioritizing the neurotypical perspective and instead ask questions about why neurotypical people are unable to understand neurodivergent people. When researchers prioritize



neurotypical perspectives, this can lead to further disabling and harming neurodivergent folks and reinforcing neuronormativity.

For AEs in this study, the combination of having to mask and fit within the narrow constraints of neuronormativity and heteronormativity while teaching, contributed to their burnout experiences. As seen in the Embodied Autistic Identity theme, Sage described how there are many misconceptions about the Autistic experiences for those who are AFAB or are “socially presumed female”. While Autistic people are three to four times more likely to identify as SGD, there are still issues in providing supports and safe spaces for this population (George & Stokes, 2018a; Hillier et al., 2020; McAuliffe et al., 2022). In education, qualitative research with LGBTQIA+ identifying teachers has revealed that many of these educators struggle to feel safe and affirmed within their workplace rendering them unable to questions and participate fully without fear of microaggressions, negative attitudes and homophobia (Bizjak, 2017; Lynch, 2023).

### ***Contributor Safety***

Contributor safety encompasses the feelings that allow individuals to contribute their ideas with colleagues, have mutual discussion and dialogue, have access to information in an unconstrained way, and space to foster constructive feedback. Individuals are seen more as equal partners who can provide insight into issues and have knowledge to share. In this study, the five AEs tried to enact aspects of being a contributor in their school communities, but hit roadblocks related to the Agency, Climate and Culture, and Environmental Factors themes. AEs received pushback on ideas because of discrepancies between their values and those of the schools, were not given opportunities to contribute due to time or role constraints and felt invalidated and excluded when attempting to interact on a larger scale with colleagues. Some of this pushback

came from their job position, with Maureen detailing the difficulty in understanding the climate and culture as an ESL teacher who was asked to switch schools frequently with little notice.

Luna explained their experiences as a paraeducator who was bullied and “cornered” by the lead teacher when they endeavored to share their perspectives. Luna went on to say that the belittlement and disregard became worse when they disclosed that they were Autistic, leading to meltdowns and increased symptoms of burnout while actively teaching.

The disregard for Autistic perspective is, regrettably, common in research and practice. This is evidenced by the lack of Autistic perspective in social validity measures, interventions, and research practices in Autism research (Ashworth et al., 2020; Bastable et al., 2021; Botha, 2021; Bottema-Beutel, 2023; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024; Pellicano & Stears, 2011). The lack of inclusion and contribution to knowledge creation can stem from what is called epistemic injustice. The concept of epistemic injustice was first defined by Fricker, (2007) and refers to “the harm that relate specifically to our status as epistemic agents, whereby our status as knowers, interpreters, and providers of information is unduly diminished or stifled in a way that undermines the agent’s agency and dignity” (pg. 1, Chapman & Carel, 2022). Epistemic injustice has two main types: 1) testimonial injustice or the rejection of a person’s testimony because of harmful beliefs, stigma and prejudice around their credibility and personhood and 2) hermeneutical injustice or the dismissal of a person’s experience due to gaps in a community or societies ability to understand the vocabulary, concepts, and interpretations of historically excluded groups (Fricker, 2007). Research and books by Autistic advocates and scholars have drawn attention to how epistemic injustice serves neuronormative society by oppressing Autistic wellbeing, flourishing, and positive identity formation as it is tied closely with the medical model (Catala et al., 2021; Chapman & Carel, 2022; Yergeau, 2017). For example, Yergeau (2017) and

Chapman and Carel (2022) describe how there is a “catch-22” often present for Autistic individuals where you either can be happy and thriving or Autistic, but never both. If an Autistic person were to clearly articulate their happiness and thriving with “eloquence” and “rich use of language” then it will be presumed that they are not really Autistic or not Autistic “enough” (pg. 10, Chapman & Carel, 2022). This creates issues with Autistic epistemic agency, or a person’s ability to produce, transmit and use knowledge by exerting their own power and control over their beliefs and abilities. As described by Catala and colleagues, “epistemic agency, while ultimately exercised (or not) by individuals, is the result of a fundamentally dynamic and relational process between an individual epistemic agent, others around them, and their social, cultural, or institutional environment, rather than a fixed and inherent property of individuals” (pg. 9022).

For AEs in this study, the climate and culture of their schools, districts and communities was often a barrier to their ability to promote their own epistemic agency as Autistic educators. Their further marginalization as SGD people made it increasingly difficult to feel safe to share their perspectives and ideas in a way that would be received by their colleagues, administrators, and district leaders. While AEs had important recommendations to provide, as seen in the recommendation section, educators did not feel able to voice these while teaching. Kassandrinou and colleagues (2023) studied this silence as a mediating factor to psychological safety for educators. While they did not include disability status of educators in their model, they did discover that when educators feel psychologically unsafe, they are more likely to be quiet about their struggles with burnout, engagement, and their overall mental health. The silence can take different forms based on past experiences and coping strategies; however, it is often intertwined with feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion, fear, and burnout. This was true for the AEs in this

study who felt the need to leave the teaching profession in order to regain their autonomy and find spaces that promoted their flourishing and agency.

### ***Challenger Safety***

Challenger safety is when individuals feel safe to challenge the status quo, expose problems, suggest significant changes, and question others' ideas. This stage moves into the innovation space where new ideas can be presented that radically shift or change systems and practices. AEs in this study were driven to be challengers within their environments; however, did so out of distress, justice, and values rather than from a place of safety. Jess and Maureen stated that their heightened sense of justice made them acutely aware of injustices within education and felt called to point them out for the betterment of their school community.

Research by Cope and Remington (2022) supports the idea of Autistic strong sense of justice. In their review of Autistic strengths within the workplace, participants reported having a strong sense of justice and fairness that could be perceived as both a negative or positive depending on the situation.

Kade and Sage noted that their ability to see the larger picture and connections was an asset to the field of education as they could conceptualize issues happening within broader systems. Sadly, when AEs expressed these ideas, it was not always met with support or excitement due to themes present in Environmental Factors, People and Interactions, and Climate and Culture. For example, Jess explained that their school purported to engage in socially justice minded values and move towards neurodiversity affirming practices. In action, this was not always the case with students having to struggle to receive accommodations and staff feeling overwhelmed, leading to educator burnout for many teachers. Jess tried to point out these issues within the school to promote change but was unable to see real action leading to increased levels

of burnout and exhaustion. This inaction led Jess, and many other AEs, towards advocacy work to see systems move towards meaningful inclusion and acceptance of Autistic and neurodivergent students and staff.

Botha (2021) described this journey to advocacy in their critical reflection of their experiences of academia as an Autistic autism researcher. Although the narrative may seem different than that of the five AEs in this study, Botha described similar experiences of being discounted and dismissed as a SGD Autistic person. They delve into how they, and many others within the Autism community, experience minority stress due to the negative stereotypes, marginalization, and dehumanization that happens throughout their lifetime. They felt propelled to help and assist their community by making “space for growth, action, and striv(ing) towards a social change” (pg. 9). This call for action and need to be at the frontline of change was something that many AEs felt called to do even if they were no longer in education. Whether it was being a parent advocate in IEP meetings, holding new leadership positions focusing on inclusion and neurodiversity, or meeting with Autistic students and their families to discuss options for support, all the AEs in this study engaged in spaces of innovation to support the Autism community. AEs were also uniquely positioned to understand the intersectionality of many of those whom they were advocating for as it relates to SGD identities. For example, Sage discussed how they wanted to bring not only Autistic flourishing and joy to their community, but Trans Joy. They expressed that once they were able to be authentically inhabit their gender and sexual identity, they felt more at peace with themselves and felt like they had more opportunities to flourish.

The study of Trans Joy, or the joy of being a trans person, has recently been studied by Shuster and Westbrook (2022), who found that trans people find joy in the community support

and connection that comes from being a part of a marginalized group. They also found that trans individuals who embraced their marginalized identity had increased quality of life, self-confidence, and an overall sense of peace as they were able to make meaningful connections with other trans people. This was true for Sage and Kade, who felt more authentically themselves once they were able to be honest about their identities. In their paper, Shuster and Westbrook also discuss what they coin the joy deficit. Joy deficit is when researchers focus more on the narratives of pain and suffering when studying marginalized groups rather than concentrating on happiness, joy, flourishing, or pleasure. For the Autistic community, this can look like researchers using a pathologizing medical model lens to view Autism as a disease, problem behavior or internal deficit. When researchers instead focus on stories of joy, Shuster and Westbrook believe that new paradigms and counternarratives can emerge that may reduce the trauma, stigma, and violence that is experienced by historically marginalized groups.

New narratives are starting to recognize Autistic joy and flourishing. For example, *Stories of Autistic Joy* edited by Laura Kate Dale provides a series of 15 stories from Autistic authors that celebrate and spotlight Autistic joy in the hopes to shift the narrative. In this study we specifically asked AEs about Autistic flourishing for this very reason. As stated in the introduction, there is little research or peer reviewed papers on Autistic flourishing, leading to a gap in what is known about the subject. The ACPs felt it imperative to understand what Autistic flourishing was as it related to educators within this study, to add to the literature while also making space for joy within the research. The ACPs and research team created a definition from their own lived experiences which stated that *Autistic flourishing* was “an experience of positive physical and psychological wellbeing. Individually defined by the Autistic person but encapsulates an overall quality of life where an Autistic person can thrive and feel supported,

safe, and secure within their environment.” AEs were asked about their experiences with flourishing in addition to if burnout and flourishing can happen at the same time. All AEs noted that flourishing happened most often when they were with students and able to connect with them in meaningful authentic ways. Flourishing was a liminal space; however, that did not last beyond the confines of the classroom. The five AEs expressed that because flourishing was a momentary feeling it could easily be experienced while also in double burnout. The flourishing acted almost as a mask for the burnout, making teaching more tolerable and symptoms less severe. Unfortunately, the rollercoaster of emotions that came from experiencing the highs and joys of flourishing, and then the deep lows of burnout made it unsustainable for AEs, creating a barrier to their wellbeing and ability to teach.

**RQ3: What recommendations do Autistic educators who have left the field have to support Autistic mental health?**

Recommendations provided by the five AEs mostly centered around themes identified in the SPACEE model. Table 5 displays the recommendations provided by the AEs. As seen in the table, AEs had a broad range of recommendations that focused on individual, school and wider systems level changes.

Many of the recommendations AEs provided were not just directed at Autistic educators or even neurodivergent educators. Instead, there was a focus on offering the list of supports and recommendations to all educators regardless of neurotype. For example, AEs described how educators with sensory needs do not have to be siloed off only for those who identify as Autistic. Many educators voiced the importance of universal design (UD) and universal design for learning (UDL) in the implementation of recommendations. UD focuses on reducing the physical and structural barriers to spaces (e.g., ventilation systems, insulation, access to office spaces;

Mcguire et al., 2006), while UDL focuses on providing multiple formats and modalities to learning, instruction, and teaching (e.g., text and verbal communication, flexible seating, accessible meeting notes; CAST, 2014; Capp, 2017). When UD and UDL are implemented within schools, results suggest improved lesson planning (Courey et al., 2013), improved learning processes (Capp, 2017), increased engagement and access (Ok et al., 2017), and increased inclusion and teaming (Lowrey et al., 2017). AEs in this study believe that when all students and staff have access to inclusive practices that attend to individual differences while still allowing for community integration, all members of the school community will benefit.

Jess had the idea to have each educator in the building create their own 504 plan of sorts. They explained that when all teachers can share things they are working on, struggling with, and specific ways to help, there would no longer be an accommodation culture but an inclusive culture. The accommodation culture, as described by Cook-Sather and Cook-Sather (2023) and Schley and Marchetti (2022) is situated within the traditional medical model where the concept of neuronormativity is reinforced through law, policies, and assumptions. Instead, AEs wish to move towards an inclusion mindset (Schley & Marchetti, 2022) or equity culture (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023) that allows for individual agency and community care. This would shift accommodations from a space of consultation into a space of collaboration. Strimel (2022) describes this shift towards collaboration for educators through what is called a socially-just disability resources paradigm. When utilizing a socially-just paradigm it is not a step-by-step model, but rather “a lens through which to critically examine all aspects of disability resources and consider how to align them more closely with equity-focused work” (pg. 61). While Strimel applies this paradigm to special education teacher preparation and disabled educators in general, it could also be useful in K-12 spaces. This would look like attending to the sensory needs of



Autistic individuals, allowing multiple means of communication, or reviewing teacher schedules as a team and then brainstorming ways that the larger school community could support these issues rather than asking marginalized educators to navigate the process alone. When this is combined with neurodiversity informed practices (Chapman & Botha, 2023) that highlight the strengths of neurodivergent individuals, assume competence, promote choice, and actively reject ableism, school communities can begin to animate spaces of belonging and inclusion for all types of educators with a range of skills and needs.

Before educators enter school buildings, they often must attend a teacher education program or receive a degree from post-secondary institution. One AE, Kade, provided an extensive list of recommendations to ensure that pre-service educators can successfully complete their programs and become the new wave of educators entering the workforce. Their recommendations were influenced by the Autism Certified City project, created by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES). The IBCCES created a list of process and requirements as well as training from clinical experts and Autistic self-advocates to guarantee that communities are inclusive of Autistic people in a variety of settings including healthcare, hospitality, recreation and entertainment, and public safety. Kade utilized their innovative ideas when discussing their dream program for Autistic educators that included maps that layer in sensory and accessibility information, sensory kits, trained front office personnel, video walk-throughs of buildings, virtual introductions with staff, implementing disability cultural spaces and disability resource centers, neurodivergent-run lending libraries, socially just accommodations, staff training around power and privilege, peer support programs, neurodivergent affinity groups, inclusive orientation programs, executive function skills inventories, and courses on disability studies and disability justice. They also

mentioned that there should be a normalization and legitimization of not wanting to be the lead teacher in a space, and schools and colleagues being accepting of those who want to stay paraprofessionals or educational assistants. Kade recognized that being a lead classroom teacher can be stressful and does not have to be the “only pathway within the world of education”. More work needs to be done to understand how barriers to Autistic mental health could be mitigated and prevented at the pre-service level, so Autistic educators feel prepared to enter teaching as their authentic selves in a safe environment.

A safe environment for many educators included a sensory-friendly school space. As seen in the Sensory Experiences theme, many AEs described how sensory overload and stress contributed to their experiences of burnout. Belek (2019) described how it is common for sensory overload to be cumulative issue that leads to increased meltdowns, shutdowns, or symptoms of burnout for Autistic people. He goes on to state that “once a space has been designed for Autistic people that considers specific needs, sensitivities and vulnerabilities”, Autistic people can be free to authentically engage with themselves and others outside the realm of neuronormative expectations (p. 643). Sibeoni et al., (2022) suggest implementing a holistic approach to view the Autistic sensory experience as a “dynamic interaction between the person and environment” (p. 1040). This dynamic interaction between sensory and environment ties back to the interconnection between the Sensory Experiences and Environmental Factors themes, reported by AEs. They shared that the physical environment negatively impacted their sensory experiences, through fluorescent lights, lack of walls or insulation, no individual working space, or strong smells from cleaners. Autistic individuals can be hyper or hypo sensitive to these school and environmental triggers leading to overwhelm, disassociation, masking, and avoidance (Elwin et al., 2013; MacLennan et al., 2022). If people in the school environment recognize and

support sensory differences and reactions, this can mitigate the challenges experienced during sensory overwhelm and decrease feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and distress (MacLennan et al., 2022; Quadt et al., 2023). It is important to listen to the recommendations provided by the AEs in this study as well as other Autistic perspectives related to visual stimulus (Parmar et al., 2021), student experiences (Goodall, 2018), sensory and communication (Strömberg et al., 2022), and masking of sensory experiences (Evans et al., 2023) to better inform sensory friendly environments that attune to mental health and flourishing for all educators.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study that are important to address. The first is the lack of racial diversity within the sample of AEs and within the overall team. Although there was purposeful sampling for both the ACPs and AEs that attempted to recruit participants from racially and ethnically diverse populations, the efforts were not successful at including the perspectives of those from the BIPOC community. The absence of this standpoint is a major issue within Autism research as addressed by Malone et al. (2022) in their paper titled “*The Scholarly Neglect of Black Autistic Adults in Autism Research*”. They describe how Black Autistic individuals have been neglected, excluded, and overlooked from Autism research, making way for systemic disparities in services and supports for the community. Malone et al. (2022) and others advocate for increased partnerships with Black Autistic adults, cultural reciprocity in research methods, and for researchers to use reflexive pedagogy to interrogate their own biases, values, and experiences to be intentional in understanding intersectional perspectives (Ames et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2022; Lopez, 2022; Lopez et al., 2022). Furthermore, this lack of perspective decreased the generalizability of the themes presented as it does not include or engage with views and experiences of BIPOC Autistic educators who have left the field of

teaching. The ACPs and research team tried to address this gap in our positionality statements and analysis, however future research should endeavor to center this perspective when working with Autistic educators to ensure that all narratives are equitably showcased.

This study was the PI's first attempt at facilitating and leading participatory research with Autistic Community Partners. This meant that while there was a dedicated attempt to follow CPBR guidelines and protocols, there may be gaps or mistakes that more established researchers within the field will identify. There were also delays with funding that made it difficult to compensate ACPs and AEs in a timely manner. This created the potential for feelings of frustration and irritation among members of both groups towards the project. While member checks were implemented for both sets of participants, the mistreatment of Autistic individuals in research is not uncommon (Cascio et al., 2020; den Houting et al., 2021; D. Milton et al., 2014; Nicolaidis et al., 2019a; Pickard et al., 2022). Future research should intentionally center the experiences and contributions of Autistic individuals in research to create spaces of safety and flourishing as co-producers of knowledge.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Purposeful integration of Autistic perspective as participants and co-researchers was the cornerstone of this project. This was demonstrated using emancipatory and inclusive research practices that fundamentally reimagined the roles within the project to honor and leverage the insights, experiences, and contributions of Autistic individuals throughout the research journey. Autistic insight did not only come from the entirely neurodivergent ACPs, research team, and AEs, but from the PI leading the project. ACPs and AEs expressed that they were excited to know that the leader of this project had experience as an educator and was also a part of the Autistic community. This made them feel more comfortable sharing their experiences,

communicating their feelings, and unmasking during the research process. More research within the field of Autism needs to place Autistic people in places of leadership. While there are levels to participatory research as detailed by den Houting et al., (2021) and Nicolaidis et al., (2019), many do not get past the “doing for” models which can include consulting, advisory boards, or general informing. Autistic people may not have opportunities to be the Principal Investigator or leader of major grant funded research projects, even though their experiences are the ones being studied. This project provides an example of how to actively include Autistic educator perspective through co-production and increased community power. Researchers can create more opportunities for educators, specifically underrepresented educators, to participate and learn about how to conduct their own research or be a part of a larger team. This can be done by utilizing the Research 101 training completed in this project, or other trainings that provide context and essential background knowledge in the areas of research, positionality, grant funding, and project development. Support can also be provided by connecting Autistic educators with researchers within the field who are looking to conduct participatory research with the Autism community. This could create robust research to school partnerships that may shape policy and practices related to Autistic and neurodivergent students and staff.

As there is little research on Autistic educators, specifically within the United States, researchers need to prioritize disabled and neurodivergent perspectives when conducting and completing research on teachers and schools. While some educators may not disclose their disability due to stigma and fear (Wood, 2024), representation from this population is essential. In this study we explored not only Autistic perspectives but educators who also identified as SGD. It appears that few, if any, studies exist that investigate the experiences of SGD Autistic educators in the United States beyond this project. More work needs to be done to create a

wholistic picture of this historically marginalized groups' experiences as educators and within the school system to enact necessary changes that promote safety, inclusion, acceptance, and belonging. This is even more imperative given the current political climate in the United States which actively creates social, systemic barriers to the flourishing of this population.

Although this study included a small sample of ACPs, the data collected through interviews and surveys with AEs were robust and had information power (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016). Their perspectives were meaningfully included throughout the research process, but do not encompass the lived experiences of all Autistic educators in the United States. Autistic individuals include a population with a broad range of needs, skills, and characteristics. These profiles of needs and strengths can vary depending on an individual's interaction with the environment, mental health, trauma, and support (Allely & Faccini, 2019; Beck et al., 2020; Botha, 2021; Dodds, 2020; Evans et al., 2023; Phung et al., 2021). Many Autistic individuals are unable to become teachers due to barriers in post-secondary settings creating a larger discrepancy between the Autistic community and those who are Autistic educators (Brown et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2021; Dwyer et al., 2022; M. M. Strimel et al., 2023). Future research can focus on the lived experiences of a larger range of Autistic individuals who are currently teaching and/or attempted to become a teacher to allow for increased understanding of barriers and facilitators to mental health and flourishing.

Changes do not only need to occur in research but also in practice. AEs in this study provided numerous actionable recommendations that practitioners, administrators, district leaders and policy makers can enact to support Autistic mental health and wellbeing. These recommendations are not exclusive to Autistic and neurodivergent educators, but educators of all neurotypes as they promote authenticity, communication, sensory needs, and safety of the entire

school community. This study provides an example of why it is important to listen to Autistic educators and learn from those who have left the field. As Jess stated, Autistic educators are often the first people to notice a problem. They then try to problem solve and accommodate themselves and others over months or years before they bring it to the attention of those in power. Thus, Autistic narratives should be listened to, trusted, and included when making decisions at classroom, school, or larger systems levels. If there are no Autistic or neurodivergent educators to engage with, this may be due to a lack of comfortability or safety with publicly identifying rather than a lack of presence. School leaders need to rethink and reimagine ways to ensure that staff feel comfortable being their authentic selves without fear of harm, dismissal, or exclusion.

The process of creating psychologically safe schools begins in pre-service programs for future education personnel. Individuals in teacher preparation programs as well as those studying educational leadership, school psychology, school administration, or other related services can begin to understand basics of anti-ableist practices, the neurodiversity paradigm, and Autistic culture. This can be through exposure to disability studies, disability history, and disability justice that allow individuals to begin understanding their implicit biases around disability and creating space for more affirming and strength-based approaches. For Autistic individuals interested in becoming teachers, post-secondary programs can provide more universal approaches, including the socially-just paradigm (Strimel, 2023) and training on UDL. Such training may allow Autistic educators to feel better prepared to enter a school with strategies and skills that not only benefit student academic and behavioral outcomes but attune to their mental health and overall wellbeing.

For preservice Autistic educators who identify as BIPOC, there can be additional mental and wellbeing challenges to them entering the educational system. There are clear methods of gatekeeping opportunities to prevent BIPOC and disabled/Autistic preservice teachers from becoming certified teachers (Strimel et al., 2023; Tamerat & Lee, 2023). To disrupt these barriers to inclusion, equity, and belonging, we need to first elevate the voices of these educators and center their perspectives instead of making assumptions about their feelings, experiences, and actions. By collaborating with individuals from minoritized and underserved communities, we can collectively dismantle systematic barriers within education that produce harm, stigma, and trauma as a student goes through school from kindergarten to higher education. Not all BIPOC preservice educators may feel safe enough to partner with researchers or disclose their identities to their teaching supervisors. Within preservice programs and practice, we need to narrow in on ways to shift paradigms so that all those within school communities feel safe, included and heard. This can be done through a culture of self-reflection of implicit biases, moving away from us vs. them mentalities, and animating spaces for dialogue where individuals can learn, grow and still be engaged and accepted within their community.

The recommendations created by AEs in this study could also be used for training or professional development for schools, districts, or broader educational systems. AEs were consistent in wanting change at the systems and institutional levels, which must be done with careful implementation of Autistic perspective and ideas. Future research could utilize the recommendations presented in this study to better understand the short term and long-term impacts of Autistic educator informed recommendations on individuals, schools, and wider society. This can be done by completing a needs assessment of the K-12 environment to address what areas or themes need most attention to best support the needs of educators within spaces. In



addition, schools or districts could use the themes outlined in this study to elicit feedback on what recommendations the Autistic educators in their spaces are needing to flourish. The goal would be to animate spaces of sustainable change that promote the mental health and wellbeing of Autistic educators that will in turn create opportunities for inclusive and accepting environments for all.

### **Conclusion**

Through emancipatory participatory research design, this study endeavored to explore and understand the experiences of Autistic burnout and educator burnout for Autistic educators who have left the profession. Interviews and survey results indicate that educator and Autistic burnout are an intertwined phenomena that can linger after an individual has left teaching. Recommendations to promote positive Autistic mental health and wellbeing center on creating neuroinclusive spaces that allow each educator, regardless of neurotype, to feel like they are included and safe through a deeper understanding of psychological safety, combating neuronormative and heteronormative standards, and fostering spaces for flourishing. Future research can use the powerful stories presented in this study to co-design and co-create meaningful systems-level changes that move preservice programs and K-12 educational spaces towards dismantling systematic barriers that prevent sites from making unique changes that their community needs. We hope to enliven systems towards honoring, affirming, and celebrating the remarkable Autistic educators within their communities.

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**Table 1***Demographics of Autistic Community Partners*

Variable	%	n
<b>Gender</b>		
% Male	40%	2
% Female	40%	2
% Agender	20%	1
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
% Heterosexual	40%	2
% LGBTQIA2S+	40%	2
% Unsure	20%	1
<b>Co-Occurring Conditions</b>		
% ADHD	60%	3
% Anxiety	40%	2
% Chronic Health	40%	2
% Other	20%	1
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
% White/Caucasian	100%	5
% Jewish	20%	1
<b>Language</b>		
% English	100%	5
% French	20%	1
% Spanish	20%	1
% Portuguese	20%	1
<b>Language Choice</b>		
% Identity First	60%	3
% No preference	40%	2
<b>Teaching Position</b>		
% High school/Middle School SPED	60%	3
% Elementary Music	20%	1
% Elementary ELL	20%	1

**Table 2***Autistic Educator Demographics*

Variable	%	n
<b>Gender</b>		
% Male	0%	0
% Female	20%	1
% Non-Binary	60%	3
% Trans or Gender Queer	40%	2
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
% Heterosexual	0%	0
% Queer	60%	3
% Asexual	20%	1
% Lesbian	20%	1
<b>Co-Occurring Conditions*</b>		
% ADHD	100%	4
% Anxiety	75%	3
% Chronic Health Issues	75%	3
% Other	50%	2
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
% White/Caucasian	100%	5
<b>Language</b>		
% English	100%	5
<b>Language Choice</b>		
% Identity First	100%	5
<b>Formal Diagnosis</b>		
% Yes, formally diagnosed	40%	2
% No, self-diagnosed	60%	3
<b>Teaching Position</b>		
% High School Speech and Debate	20%	1
% SPED Paraeducator	20%	1
% Elementary School	40%	2
% ELL teacher	20%	1

*Note.* Other includes conditions relate to mental health (Bipolar, Panic Attacks, etc.)

\*One participant did not provide co-occurring conditions

**Table 3***Quality Involvement Questionnaire Results (Morrow et al., 2010)*

Question	Mean Nov. ( <i>n</i> = 7) *	Mean March ( <i>n</i> = 5)
Access research resources	4.6	4.75
Achieve own goals	4.4	4.5
Make contributions to research	4.8	5
Make decisions about how to do research	4.4	3.75
Express views about research topics	4.8	5
Discuss research issues	4.8	5
Take on new research challenges	3.4	4.25
Choose type of role you play	4	4.5
Bring own ideas and values	4.5	5
Work in ways that suit you	4.5	4.75
Gain expertise and credibility	4.75	5
Identify and organize your research ideas	4	4.25
Valued as partner	4.75	5
Enabled	4.75	5
Empowered	4.75	5
Consenting and not coerced	4.6	5
Acceptable that different people have different responsibilities and decisions	4.4	5
Researchers have right reasons to work with you	4.75	5
Sufficient funding	4.25	4
Enough information about involvement	4	5
Researchers work with you in way that is supportive	5	5
Communication is supportive	5	5
Goals of researchers are what you want	4.75	5



Clear role	4.25	5
Skills and experience for role clear	4.25	5
Responsibilities of role clear	4	5
Aware of legal and ethical rules	4.75	5
Not just a part of project, but valued as part of research team	4.5	5
Supported by research ethics and university systems	4.5	4.75
Helped by research structures	4.5	5
Noticed and recorded as part of the work in research team	4.75	5
Total Mean	4.5	4.82

*\*Note.* In November, a few members of the research team took the survey along with the ACPs. In March, only ACPs were instructed to take the survey.

**Table 4***Autistic Educator Survey Results*

Theme	%	Mean
Sensory Experiences		4.2
Not well at all	0%	
Slightly well	0%	
Moderately well	40%	
Very well	0%	
Extremely well	60%	
People and Interactions		4.4
Not well at all	0%	
Slightly well	0%	
Moderately well	20%	
Very well	20%	
Extremely well	60%	
Agency		4.4
Not well at all	0%	
Slightly well	0%	
Moderately well	0%	
Very well	60%	
Extremely well	40%	
Climate and Culture		4.8
Not well at all	0%	

Slightly well	0%	
Moderately well	0%	
Very well	20%	
Extremely well	80%	
Environmental Factors		3.8
Not well at all	0%	
Slightly well	20%	
Moderately well	20%	
Very well	20%	
Extremely well	40%	
Embodied Autistic Identity		4.4
Not well at all	0%	
Slightly well	20%	
Moderately well	0%	
Very well	0%	
Extremely well	80%	

**Table 5**

*Autistic Educator Recommendations by SPACEE model*

SPACEE model themes	AE Recommendations
Sensory Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sensory lists outside of classroom that describe sensory needs of adults and students</li><li>• Ear defenders, ear plugs</li><li>• Wearing sunglasses or tinted/polarized lenses</li><li>• Ask staff to reduce strong scents from perfumes, cleaners etc.</li><li>• Fluorescent light covers, lamps, low lights, string lights</li><li>• Schedule low noise hours</li><li>• Sound blocking and insulation to prevent cross noise</li><li>• Playing music to reduce unwanted noise</li><li>• Scheduled wiggle or movement breaks</li><li>• Reduction in use of open concept classrooms</li><li>• Different seating options for staff and students</li><li>• Social battery badge (pin that shows how much energy you have)</li><li>• Fidgets available within classroom for staff and students</li></ul>
People and Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• PD on communication differences, double empathy, neurodiversity</li><li>• Cross-neurotype affinity groups to vent and receive advice</li><li>• Accessible staff meetings (e.g. agendas sent in advance, options for participation)</li><li>• Tone notes in emails or other communication</li><li>• Allowing for processing time after communication or meetings</li><li>• Multiple means for communication in meetings or correspondence with colleagues</li><li>• Written agendas and notes provided before and after meetings</li><li>• Understand the need for transparency and accountability in communication and expectations</li><li>• Principal suggestion box</li></ul>

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Agency

- Teacher input on curriculum, PD, job assignments, policies, and practices,
- Flexible scheduling in working hours
- Planning time for teachers with PLC/grade level
- Reduction in micromanaging from administration
- Respect of work/life boundaries
- Teachers seen as professionals with expert knowledge and skills
- Support and encourage teacher autonomy in classroom management, curriculum and classroom decisions
- Teacher support networks
- Administrators listen to teacher requests and perspectives
- Speak up about challenges with trusted colleagues or friends
- Social battery pins that indicate social energy levels
- Cite research to defend choices

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Climate and Culture

- Pronoun pins
- Discussing and learning about neurodiversity
- Diversity in recruitment procedures
- Research-based curriculum that uses current teaching practices
- Moving away from toxic positivity and growth mindset
- Eliminating financial barriers to becoming a teacher
- Uphold and enact school mission for students and staff
- Normalizing asking for accommodations
- Bringing neurodivergent speakers to class
- Sharing books and resources that are strength based and neuroinclusive
- Explain the why of new changes (i.e. curriculum, policies, tests)

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Environmental Factors

- Oversight of funds
  - Diverse school board that is representative of school community population
  - Ventilation systems
  - Heating and cooling systems installed in schools
  - Fair compensation and better benefits
-

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School schedules that meet the needs of students and staff</li> <li>• Planning time with explicit expectations about collaboration across educators</li> <li>• Safe transportation to and from school</li> <li>• Co-teaching or increased staffing</li> <li>• Intentional planning of school schedule</li> <li>• Protected scheduled breaks</li> <li>• Sensory friendly schools</li> <li>• Lower student to teacher ratios</li> <li>• Universal Design considered in construction of new buildings</li> <li>• Access to offices and classrooms for educators (shared or private)</li> </ul>
Embodied Autistic Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autistic or Neurodivergent affinity groups</li> <li>• Focusing on strengths of Autistic educators</li> <li>• Accessible and supportive meeting structures that use a variety of modalities (virtual, chat, in person)</li> <li>• Discussion of implicit bias</li> <li>• Being mindful of how educators speak about Autistic students and people</li> <li>• Access to fidgets</li> <li>• Concrete and simple steps for accommodations for educators</li> </ul>
Additional Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find a positive community or “bright spots” within the day</li> <li>• Navigate around influence of ABA in education and idea of conformity</li> <li>• Find ways to reduce stigma of Autism through training and exposure to Autistic perspectives</li> </ul>

## Appendix A Recruitment Logs

### Recruitment Log: ACPs

Person	Date	Location	Notes
AN	19-Sep	Twitter	<a href="https://twitter.com/alex_newson/status/1704187930955370954">https://twitter.com/alex_newson/status/1704187930955370954</a>
AN	19-Sep	Facebook	Autistic Researchers Researching Autism Group
AN	19-Sep	Facebook	ND/Autistic Teachers and School Staff - post deleted due to "self promotion"
AN	19-Sep	Facebook	Autistic Teacher's Group
AN	19-Sep	Personal Email	Program for Inclusion and Neurodiversity Education - NYU
JD	20-Sep	Facebook	Personal page
JD	20-Sep	Facebook	Division of Autism and Developmental Disabilities group
JD	20-Sep	Other	Instagram personal page
JD	20-Sep	Twitter	Reposted Alex's post
VV	19-Sep	Facebook	Posted on TED's facebook page
VV	19-Sep	Twitter	Reposted Alex's post
AN	26-Sep	Personal Email	Lane Education District
AN	26-Sep	Facebook	Autistic-led research - Participants wanted group
AN	28-Sep	Other	BlueSky (same post as twitter)
AN	28-Sep	Listserv	College Autism Network

### Recruitment Log: AEs

Person	Date	Location	Notes
AN	12-Dec	Personal Email	Email sent to colleague
AN	12-Dec	Personal Email	Email sent to colleague
AN	12-Dec	Personal Email	Email sent to Education Director of PINE
AN	12-Dec	Personal Email	Email sent to Executive Director of PINE
AN	12-Dec	Listserv	College Autism Network listserv
HB	12-Dec	Personal Email	Emails sent to 12 colleagues
AN	13-Dec	Personal Email	AANE info email - <a href="https://aane.org/">https://aane.org/</a>
AN	14-Dec	Personal Email	Autism Chrysalis
SG	15-Dec	Personal Email	Email sent to a friend who teaches high school in Oregon who has several professionally openly autistic colleagues
JD	15-Dec	Facebook	Shared flyer and social media blurb
JD	15-Dec	Twitter	Shared flyer and social media blurb
JD	15-Dec	Other	Instagram
JD	15-Dec	Other	Blue Sky
JD	16-Dec	Facebook	CEC: Teacher Education Division group

JD	16-Dec	Facebook	Personal
EH	18-Dec	Facebook	Neurodivergent Music Educators Facebook group
AN	19-Dec	Twitter	Retweet University of Oregon COE tweet and added link to survey (not full flyer yet)
AN	4-Jan	Other	LinkedIn post
AN	4-Jan	Facebook	Autistic Researchers Researching Autism Group



## Appendix B

### AE Interview Questions

#### Reminders:

1. You can stop the interview at any time to take a break, move around, get something to drink/ eat.
2. You can pass on any question or ask to stop and leave the interview at any time with no consequence.
3. Cameras can be on or off.
4. All personal data connected to you will be de-identified, unless otherwise noted.
5. You will receive information to collect your 25\$ gift card after the interview is complete.

#### Definitions that might be useful for the interview:

**Autistic Burnout:** experience of intense exhaustion, fatigue, reduced tolerance to stimuli, and loss of skills and abilities. Occurs when input, stress, and demands from life exceed the capacity of an Autistic person and adequate supports are not provided.

**Educator Burnout:** experience of prolonged chronic job-related stress characterized by emotional exhaustion (feelings of being emotionally drained, overextended, overwhelmed), depersonalization (feelings of being disconnected and detached from oneself and others leading to negative or apathetic attitudes), and reduced personal accomplishment (feelings of dissatisfaction, ineffectiveness, and inability to recognize one's own achievements). May also include a rethinking or regret over choice of pursuing or becoming an educator as a profession.

**Autistic Flourishing:** experience of positive physical and psychological wellbeing. Individually defined by the Autistic person but encapsulates an overall quality of life where an Autistic person can thrive and feel supported, safe, and secure within their environment.

#### Demographic Questions

- Can you describe your current or past teaching position(s)?
  - Optional follow-up: If you have had multiple positions, please describe what grade level(s) or subject(s) teach/taught.
  - Optional follow-up: How long did you teach/have you taught? Are you still a teacher in K-12 or have you transitioned away?
  - Optional follow-up: Can you describe the school environment(s)?
- Why did you want to become a teacher?
- How do you feel about being autistic or what does being autistic mean to you?
  - Optional follow-up: Do you prefer [person-first](#) or [identity-first language](#)? Describe what language or words feel right to you in relating your experiences with disability and or neurodivergence.
  - Optional follow-up: Have you disclosed that you are autistic in your workplace?

#### Questions about Burnout

- When do you feel most effective/engaged as an educator?
  - Optional follow-up: Please describe, the environment, the activity, and who you were with.
- What are the differences between autistic burnout and educator burnout?

- Optional follow-up: Does your burnout change depending on whether you are working (i.e., summer vs. school year)?
- Describe your experiences with burnout as an autistic educator.
  - Optional follow-up: What aspects of burnout would affect you regardless of autism?
  - Optional follow-up: Please describe the environment, your feelings, and mental health.
- Describe your experiences with flourishing as an educator.
  - Optional follow-up: Please describe the environment, your feelings, and mental health.
  - Optional follow-up: Can flourishing and burnout happen at the same time? Explain.
- What barriers to overall quality of life (ex. positive mental health, physical health, relationships, and well-being) have you experienced as an autistic educator? Do you think that your experience is typical of other autistic people? Why or why not?
  - Barrier Examples: Lack of resources, time, sensory needs not being met, lack of acceptance etc.
  - Optional follow-up: Did these barriers affect your autistic burnout or your educator burnout? Explain.
  - Optional follow-up: Please describe the individual, classroom, school, or system barriers. Systems can include school districts, state policies, institutional or societal expectations etc. Could be related to specific identities.
- What are some supports/strategies for educators that you have seen that promote autistic flourishing and/or reduce burnout? Have these supports/strategies helped you flourish?
  - Optional follow-up: Were these individual supports or more systems-level supports? Explain.
  - If they have not seen any, ask what they would like to have or move to next question.
- If you could create a dream program/school that promoted autistic educator mental health, what would it look like? What would it not look like?
  - Optional follow-up: If you have not thought about it, what is the first thing that pops into your head of what you would want that would promote autistic mental health?

#### Last questions

- What recommendations do you have for other autistic educators? For school administrators? For those working in school settings?
- Who do you think should know about this research? What do you hope will come from this project?
- Is there anything else you would like to add? Is there something that we did not touch on or something you want to highlight?

Do you want to be cited, have a pseudonym, or remain anonymous in your responses?

## **Appendix C**

### **Six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)**

This should not be viewed as a linear model, where one cannot proceed to the next phase without completing the prior phase (correctly); rather analysis is a recursive process.

**1) Familiarization with the data:** Immersing in and actively engaged in data. The researcher intimately familiar with their data; reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to recordings if applicable. Researcher will note any initial analytic observations to enhance comprehensive understanding of data as whole.

**2) Coding:** Generating labels for important features of the data of relevance to the (broad) research question guiding the analysis. Coding is an analytic process that captures both a semantic and conceptual reading of the data. The researcher codes every data item and ends this phase by collating all their codes and relevant data extracts. There will be more codes than themes to provide context to the dataset.

**3) Searching for themes:** This ‘searching’ is an active process; themes are not hidden in the data waiting to be discovered by the intrepid researcher, rather the researcher constructs themes. The relevant data extracts, depending on research questions, are sorted through combining or splitting codes into overarching themes.

**4) Reviewing themes:** Involves checking and reviewing that the themes ‘work’ in relation to both the coded extracts and the full dataset. It may be necessary to collapse two themes together or to split a theme into two or more themes, or to discard the candidate themes altogether and begin again the process of theme development. This can be done over two phases of themes checked in relation to individual codes and then the overall data set. A thematic map can be generated to assist this process.

**5) *Defining and naming themes:*** Refining and defining themes and subthemes within the data.

Can be considered identifying the ‘essence’ of each theme and constructing a concise and informative name for each theme. Ongoing analysis is needed to further support the identified themes and to create a unified story within the data.

**6) *Writing up:*** Weaving together and transforming the analytic narrative and data extracts into a comprehensive write-up. The report must be a coherent and persuasive story about the data and contextualizing it in relation to existing literature. The reader should be convinced of the merit and validity of the analysis as it will be supported by evidence from throughout the process.

## Appendix D

### Twenty Questions to Guide Assessment of TA Research Quality (Braun & Clarke, 2020)

1. Do the authors explain why they are using TA, even if only briefly?
2. Do the authors clearly specify and justify which type of TA they are using?
3. Is the use and justification of the specific type of TA consistent with the research questions or aims?
4. Is there a good 'fit' between the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the research and the specific type of TA (i.e. is there conceptual coherence)?
5. Is there a good 'fit' between the methods of data collection and the specific type of TA?
6. Is the specified type of TA consistently enacted throughout the paper?
7. Is there evidence of problematic assumptions about, and practices around, TA?
8. Are any supplementary procedures or methods justified, and necessary, or could the same results have been achieved simply by using TA more effectively?
9. Are the theoretical underpinnings of the use of TA clearly specified (e.g. ontological, epistemological assumptions, guiding theoretical framework(s)), even when using TA inductively (inductive TA does not equate to analysis in a theoretical vacuum)?
10. Do the researchers strive to 'own their perspectives' (even if only very briefly), their personal and social standpoint and positioning? (This is especially important when the researchers are engaged in social justice-oriented research and when representing the 'voices' of marginal and vulnerable groups, and groups to which the researcher does not belong.)
11. Are the analytic procedures used clearly outlined, and described in terms of what the authors actually did, rather than generic procedures?

12. Is there evidence of conceptual and procedural confusion? For example, reflexive TA (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006) is the claimed approach but different procedures are outlined such as the use of a codebook or coding frame, multiple independent coders and consensus coding, inter-rater reliability measures, and/or themes are conceptualized as analytic inputs rather than outputs and therefore the analysis progresses from theme identification to coding (rather than coding to theme development).
13. Do the authors demonstrate full and coherent understanding of their claimed approach to TA?
14. Is it clear what and where the themes are in the report? Would the manuscript benefit from some kind of overview of the analysis: listing of themes, narrative overview, table of themes, thematic map?
15. Are the reported themes topic summaries, rather than ‘fully realized themes’ – patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept?
16. Is non-thematic contextualizing information presented as a theme? (e.g. the first 'theme' is a topic summary providing contextualizing information, but the rest of the themes reported are fully realized themes). If so, would the manuscript benefit from this being presented as non-thematic contextualizing information?
17. In applied research, do the reported themes have the potential to give rise to actionable outcomes?
18. Are there conceptual clashes and confusion in the paper? (e.g., claiming a social constructionist approach while also expressing concern for positivist notions of coding reliability, or claiming a constructionist approach while treating participants’ language as a transparent reflection of their experiences and behaviors)

19. Is there evidence of weak or unconvincing analysis, such as too many or few themes, too many theme levels, overall between themes, mismatch between data extracts and analytic claims, confusion between codices and themes?

20. Do authors make problematic statements about the lack of generalizability of their results?

## Appendix E

### Example Questions from AE Survey

- To what extent does Theme X resonate or align with your experience as an Autistic educator?
- Please provide recommendations for supporting or creating sensory friendly environments for Autistic educators. Examples can include: individual, institutional or systems level changes, recommendations for particular audiences (e.g., principals, school board officials, policy makers), or general supports and accommodations.
- Please provide personal strategies that you used to successfully support your sensory needs as an Autistic educator. If you do not have any examples, please write none or NA in the box below.
- Please provide any recommendations on ways to improve interpersonal interactions between Autistic and non-Autistic educators in K-12 spaces. Examples can include: individual, institutional or systems level changes, recommendations for particular audiences (e.g., principals, school board officials, policy makers), or general supports and accommodations.
- Please provide personal strategies that you have used to successfully smooth out or repair your interpersonal interactions in K-12 spaces as an Autistic educator. If you do not have any examples, please write none or NA in the box below.
- Please provide any recommendations for how to foster an affirming and supportive culture and climate for Autistic educators in K-12 spaces. Examples can include: individual, institutional or systems level changes, recommendations for particular



audiences (e.g. principals, school board officials, policy makers), or general supports and accommodations.

- Please provide personal strategies that you have used to promote an Autistic-supportive culture and climate within K-12 spaces for Autistic educators. If you do not have any examples, please write none or NA in the box below.

## Appendix F

### Autistic Educator Mental Health Resources

Here is a list of websites and resources that were curated by our team. Please feel free to add links to resources that have been helpful to you and share with your communities. The resources below are mainly by neurodivergent and disabled folks using a neurodivergent informed perspective. We ask that you do not add resources that see neurodivergence only as something to be fixed, cured, or changed without consent. Be careful not to delete links or rearrange the format. Please email Alex Newson ([anewson@uoregon.edu](mailto:anewson@uoregon.edu)) with any questions or concerns!

#### General Mental Health Resources:

- [Emotion Sensation Feeling Wheel Handout by Lindsay Braman - LindsayBraman.com](#)
- [Autistic Mental Health - Guidance and Topics](#)
- [Autism Mental Health Literacy Project \(AM-HeLP\) | Developmental Disabilities and Mental Health Lab](#)
- [Toolbox - Mental Health Literacy](#)
- [Resource Library - Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#)
- [Guest Post: What is monotropic split? - Emergent Divergence](#)
- [Recovering from Autistic Burnout – Autism Chrysalis](#)
- [Anxiety Reduction for Neurodivergent Humans – Autism Chrysalis](#)
- [Autistic Energy Management - Autism Chrysalis](#)
- [Dr Alice Nicholls - Burnout Support](#)

#### Helpful Websites:

- [The Autistic Advocate](#)
- [Aucademy](#)
- [Thinking Person's Guide to Autism](#)
- [Welcome to the Center for Neurodiversity](#)
- [NeuroClastic](#)
- [Autistic School Staff Project](#)
- [Epic Autism Resources Padlet](#)
- [Reframing Autism](#)
- [Resources — Authentically Emily](#)
- [Stan's Autism Resources](#)
- [More resources | Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre](#)
- [Resources | Autistic Realms](#)

#### Autistic Educator Groups:

- [NINE](#)
- [ND/Autistic Teachers and School Staff- Facebook Group](#)
- [Neurodivergent Teachers Network- Facebook Group](#)
- [Autistic Teachers' Group - Facebook Group](#)
- [Neurodivergent Educators Affinity Group](#)
- [Neuroteachers](#)

**Books/Articles about Autistic Educators:**

- List of articles: <https://autisticschoolstaffproject.com/articles/>
- Learning from Autistic Educators: <https://autisticschoolstaffproject.com/edited-book/>
- [“I Saw Things through a Different Lens...”: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Autistic Teachers in the Irish Education System](#)

# Appendix G

## Conceptual Framework

