

Project RESPECT:

Revealing Special Educators' Conditions for Teaching

Table of Specifications

Version 1, June, 2024

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Conceptual Framework & Definition of Working Conditions

What Are Working Conditions?

Working conditions are how the school's organization and social structure manifest in an individual teacher's daily work experiences. For example, a school's schedule determines the subjects and grades teachers teach, thereby shaping their instructional load and their time to teach and plan. Working conditions are experienced by individual teachers, but they are a function of how teachers' work is structured and coordinated within the school. As such, they are **amenable to intervention**.

We use **Conservation of Resources (COR) theory** as a framework for understanding working conditions. According to COR theory, individuals strategically meet job **demands** (i.e., the responsibilities assigned to them as part of their role) by deploying their available **resources**, including social resources (e.g., colleague support), logistical resources (e.g., time), and informational resources (e.g., professional development). The pursuit and protection of resources at work acts as both a stressor and motivator (Hobfoll, 1989). Stress occurs when demands exceed resources (Hobfoll, 1989); thus, resources may be more important for preventing stress and other negative outcomes when demands are high (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Meta-analyses have used COR theory to explain burnout (a consequence of prolonged stress) across varied workplaces (Alarcon, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018), and we have used COR theory to examine special education teachers' attrition and intent to stay (e.g., Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020; Bettini, Jones et al., 2017), as well as their self-reported use of effective instructional practices (Cumming et al., 2021).

Although we use COR theory as the conceptual framework for the RESPECT measure, we have adjusted COR terminology, to better align with the ways educators think about their work and to prevent misinterpretation of key constructs. Most importantly, the term “demands” is intended, in COR theory, to convey anything that requires time and energy; it is not intended to be interpreted negatively. However, it is often interpreted as implying something bad or burdensome. Some of the demands on teachers (e.g., teaching students) are highly motivating, and this term can be misinterpreted as framing those demands negatively. Thus, we instead use the term “responsibilities.”

What Are Working Conditions NOT?

Because we define working conditions as a manifestation of the school's organization, **we do not consider student or neighborhood characteristics as working conditions.** For example, we do not consider students' behavior challenges, disability categories, ethnoracial identities, poverty, or any other student characteristics to be working conditions. Which students and how many students are assigned to each teacher are a function of the school's organization; thus, working conditions may include the extent to which teachers are assigned manageable caseloads and class sizes. Similarly, working conditions may include school-level supports for managing student behavior, because these supports are a function of how teachers' work with students is structured and coordinated. However, the students themselves (e.g., their characteristics and behaviors) are not working conditions, nor are

the characteristics of the community in which the school is situated (e.g., neighborhood poverty, urbanicity, racial composition).

Teachers experience many personal responsibilities and resources outside of the school context that may also affect their work, but these are not a function of how the school is organized to structure and coordinate their work; thus, **we do not consider these personal responsibilities and resources as working conditions**. For example, teachers may have familial responsibilities that make demands on their time and may shape how they engage with their work as special educators. Similarly, they may have resources – such as prior experience with disabled people, positive dispositions, strong motivation to teach, knowledge, stress management strategies, or prior training experiences – that are important in shaping how they engage in their work. Although these are often valuable to understand when examining how teachers respond to their working conditions, they are not working conditions.

We also do not consider teachers' affective responses to work, such as their stress, burnout, or job satisfaction, as working conditions. Affective responses to work are a consequence of interactions between working conditions and teachers' personal characteristics, such as their coping strategies, job motivations, and identities. These affective responses are important, but they are not working conditions.

Finally, we do not consider salaries as a working condition. Though salaries are very important, they are not a function of how schools are organized to structure and coordinate teachers' work.

What Are the Implications of This Definition for Measuring Working Conditions?

First, **because working conditions interact with one another, they need to be measured simultaneously**. COR theory posits that resources are used to meet demands (i.e., work responsibilities), and thus they may be especially important when responsibilities are high (Halbesleben et al., 2014). For example, planning time and curricular materials (resources) may be especially important when special educators are responsible for teaching more lessons across multiple grade levels (a responsibility). Similarly, some resources may compensate for lack of other resources. For example, strong collegial support and planning time may help compensate for lack of curricular materials by providing special educators access to other teachers' resources and time to create or find materials. Conversely, strong curricular materials may help to compensate for lack of planning time by reducing the time special educators must spend finding or creating materials with which to teach (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Lillis et al., in prep). Further, resources also interact with one another. For example, administrators shape school culture, establish schedules that determine responsibilities and time, and purchase resources (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Gersten et al., 2001); thus, without measuring administrator support, studies may overestimate effects of other conditions. In short, evaluating working conditions simultaneously is essential to validity, necessitating RESPECT as a single tool to measure multiple conditions.

Second, because working conditions are experienced by individual teachers, **they are essentially perspectival in nature**. Although working conditions have objective features (such as the number of minutes of planning time, the number of students on a teacher's caseload, what curricular materials they are given), determining whether those features are manageable or adequate requires

understanding a teacher's perspective on them. Thus, we evaluate working conditions from the perspective of special education teachers.

Third, because special educators' roles in a school differ greatly, so do their demands and the resources on which they rely. For example, a special educator providing intensive reading intervention in a push-in model may have a schedule that provides planning time but limited autonomy, due to integration of their work with general educators' work (McLeskey et al., 2014). In contrast, a special educator in a self-contained class, in the same school, may be responsible for their students all day and may be relatively isolated; thus, they may have no planning time, but more autonomy (O'Brien et al., 2019). Likewise, due to differences in their roles, special educators experience substantively different working conditions than their general education colleagues. For example, unlike general education colleagues, they may be excluded from curriculum purchases (Lillis et al., in prep), and their schedules may not be specified in schools' master schedules (Youngs et al., 2011), resulting in different experiences of these conditions than their general education colleagues. Thus, **special educators' experiences of many working conditions likely vary within a school** (i.e., they are an individual, rather than a collective, experience).

Qualitative studies indicate two working conditions are likely a collective property of schools: administrator support and school culture (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014). School culture is by definition collective, defined by shared norms, values, and beliefs (Youngs et al., 2012). Administrator support refers to support an administrator provides to teachers; evidence suggests that administrators provide supports that facilitate all teachers' work (Billingsley et al., 2017). Prior research indicates administrator support and school culture predict special educators' experiences of other working conditions (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Gersten et al., 2001). If ratings of other conditions correlate with one another in a school, that may be due to effects of administrators and school culture. Thus, **we conceptualize administrator support and school culture as collective, and other conditions as individual**. However, prior research has shown that measures of school culture that have strong psychometric properties for general educators may have weak psychometric properties for special educators, if they do not address how the school culture values and is oriented towards the needs of students with disabilities (Bettini, Jones et al., 2018). Similarly, prior studies have found that generic measures of working conditions – i.e., those designed for all teachers without consideration for the specific needs of students with disabilities and their teachers – explain a smaller proportion of the variance in special educators' outcomes than in general educators' outcomes (Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020). Thus, although perspectives on school culture and administrator support may have some commonalities across all teachers in a school, they likely require at least some unique items for special educators that accurately gauge the extent to which school culture and administrator support are specifically oriented towards the needs of students with disabilities.

In Summary:

Working conditions are the job *responsibilities* special educators fulfill and the *resources* special educators experience, as a result of how their school is organized to structure and coordinate teachers' work.

RESPECT Uses and Target Population

What are the intended uses for the RESPECT Measure?

Use 1: Descriptive Research: For researchers to describe special educators' working conditions and evaluate how working conditions may be contributing to their affective outcomes (e.g., burnout) and behavioral outcomes (e.g., attrition), as well as their students' outcomes (e.g., behavioral engagement);

Use 2: Intervention Research: For researchers to evaluate the effects of interventions to improve working conditions; and

Use 3: Practice: For school and district leaders to identify areas of strength and weakness in how special educators are supported, and to inform how they prioritize allocation of resources (e.g., curricula, professional development, paraprofessionals) to schools.

Whose Working Conditions is RESPECT Intended to Measure?

RESPECT is designed to measure working conditions for special educators in any service delivery model teaching students with any disability in K12 public or public charter schools.

Although we do not consider student or community characteristics as working conditions, we do need to ensure RESPECT is valid across *Critical Groups*. Prior research indicates special educators' experiences of working conditions systematically vary depending on (a) whether they primarily serve students with behavioral vs. non-behavioral needs; (b) whether they are at an elementary, middle, or high school (Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020); (c) their school's poverty (Bettini, Nguyen et al., 2022); (d) their service delivery model (e.g., Bettini, Mathews et al., 2021); and (e) their own race/ethnicity and gender (e.g., Scott & Alexander, 2019). Further, prior research has not examined how experiences of working conditions vary by school urbanicity or region, but differences likely exist; for example, lower concentrations of students in rural areas could result in more varied demands (Rude & Miller, 2018). Based on this research we have identified several *Critical Groups*, for whom we aim to evaluate the validity of RESPECT. These include special educators who:

- (1) Serve >50% students with behavioral needs or ≤50% students with behavioral needs;
- (2) Teach in elementary, middle, or high schools;
- (3) Teach in Title 1 or non-Title 1 schools;
- (4) Work in coteaching/inclusion, resource, or self-contained service delivery models;
- (5) Work in urban, suburban, or town/rural schools;
- (6) Work in different geographic regions;
- (7) Identify as people of color or as white; and
- (8) Identify as male or as female.

We acknowledge that these critical groups are not comprehensive, and that other critical groups will be important for future research to examine (e.g., Indigenous teachers, nonbinary teachers, LGBTQIA+ teachers). Due to sample size constraints, we will only be able to evaluate validity for the groups described above, though we hope that future research will evaluate validity for other critical groups.

RESPECT is not designed to measure working conditions for special educators in residential, hospital, private, or juvenile justice schools or for itinerant special educators, as these contexts have unique features, likely requiring different items to capture all relevant responsibilities and resources.

In Summary:

Grounded in COR theory, we aim to develop RESPECT to measure special educators' perceptions of the job *responsibilities* they are responsible for fulfilling and the *resources* that support them to meet those responsibilities, for use in both *research* and *practice*.

Construct		Sub-Constructs	
Name	Definition	Name	Definition*
Responsibilities	Special educators' job duties and their experiences of those job duties	Instructional Grouping	Size and heterogeneity of students' learning needs within assigned instructional groups/classes
		Instructional Responsibilities	The total number of lessons to plan and the number of grade levels taught
		Special Education Assessment Responsibilities	Extent of special educators' responsibilities for special education assessment, including progress monitoring and 3-year re-evaluations, related to students' IEP goals and special education eligibility
		Paperwork Responsibilities	The extent of responsibilities for completing special education and other work-related paperwork
		Collaborative Responsibilities	Special educators' responsibilities for supporting and coordinating the work of other educators (e.g., related service providers, general educators) in service of students in schools.
		Extra Responsibilities	The extent of assigned tasks, that are above and beyond meeting teachers' own students' needs (e.g., bus duty, lunch duty)
		Paraeducator Supervision	The extent of responsibilities for overseeing paraeducators
		Building Family Relationships	The extent of responsibilities for collaborating with students' families
		Caseload Size & Complexity	The size and heterogeneity of student learning needs on a teacher's overall IEP caseload
		Performance Pressure	The extent to which teachers feel pressure from others (e.g., principal, colleagues, parents) to teach local and state standards and ensure student performance on standardized assessments
		Safety Responsibilities	The extent of teachers' responsibility for keeping themselves, their students, and their staff safe
		Role Ambiguity	The extent to which the job expectations for a teacher are unclear
		Role Conflict	The extent to which demands on a teacher are incompatible with one another or with the broader goal of serving students
Role Instability	The extent of instability in the nature of—or schedule for—teachers' daily responsibilities		
Social Resources	Social supports that help special educators to fulfill their roles	School-Based Administrator Support	School-based administrators' (e.g., principals', assistant principals') support for special educators' academic and behavioral instruction and care for special educators
		District Administrator Support	District administrators' (e.g., special education directors') support for special educators' responsibilities and care for special educators

Construct		Sub-Constructs	
Name	Definition	Name	Definition*
		Collaborative Supports	The extent to which special educators feel that they have adequate opportunities to communicate and work with other professionals to fulfill responsibilities
		Supports for Family Relationships	The extent to which special educators' feel their school supports their efforts to build productive relationships with students' caregivers
		Collegial Support	Special educators have a colleague or colleagues with whom they have positive and collaborative relationships, who support their work
		School Culture	The extent to which the school overall has a positive climate, characterized by a value for students with disabilities and special educators' work
		Belonging	The extent to which special educators feel a sense of belonging in their school based on their individual identity
		Systems of Support for Promoting Positive Student Behavior	The extent to which special educators perceive the school has a systematic, effective process for promoting positive behavior and responding to challenging behavior
		Paraeducator Support	The extent to which special educators feel they can rely on paraeducators who have aligned goals and clear roles/responsibilities
		Paraeducator Training	The extent to which paraeducators are well-trained for their jobs
		Autonomy	How much control the special educator has over planning and instruction
		Inclusion in Decision Making	The extent to which special educators are respected and included in school-wide decision making
Logistical Resources	Practical supports that make it possible for special educators to fulfill roles	Individual Planning Time	The adequacy and productivity of scheduled planning time for fulfilling individual responsibilities (e.g., planning instruction, completing paperwork, connecting with families), and the number of hours that the special educator spends on planning each week
		Collaborative Planning Time	The adequacy and productivity of collaborative planning time with other educators, and the number of hours that the special educator spends on collaborative planning each week
		Curricular Resources	The availability and effectiveness of instructional materials/resources that teachers are provided
		Support for Paraeducator Training	The extent of time, funding, and materials for training paraeducators
		Instructional Time	The adequacy of time scheduled with students for providing instruction in all of the assigned content areas and grade levels for which special educators are responsible
		Facilities	The sufficiency of access to professional space, and the cleanliness and safety of the classroom environment

Construct		Sub-Constructs	
Name	Definition	Name	Definition*
Informational Resources	Resources that provide special educators information about how to do the job	Professional Learning Opportunities: School	How often special educators participate in professional development and the quality and relevance of the professional development
		Professional Learning Opportunities: District	How often special educators participate in professional development and the quality and relevance of the professional development
		Coaching & Mentoring	Frequency and helpfulness of the feedback special educators receive from school personnel in support of their professional growth
Overall Assessment of Working Conditions	Special educators' overall assessment of the extent to which their job responsibilities are well-balanced with their resources		<p>The items below focus on your experience of your job and working conditions overall:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.I feel satisfied with my working conditions. 2.I have the resources I need to support student needs effectively 3.I feel like I am supported in a way that makes this job sustainable long term <p>If you could change one thing about your working conditions, what would it be and why? <i>Open ended</i></p>

*All constructs are defined as perceptions, from the perspective of the special educator.