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Special Educators' Social and Emotional Support from School Administrators to Sustain Well-Being: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract:

Special educators carry instructional, behavioural, documentation, and relational demands that can erode confidence, emotional balance, and long-term commitment. This narrative inquiry examined how four special educators in Phoenix, Arizona, United States, experienced social and emotional support from school administrators and how that support sustained their well-being. Anchored in Social Support Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Self-Determination Theory, and guided by Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place, the study asked how support was lived, what strategies administrators used, and how teachers navigated support to sustain well-being. Data were triangulated from semi-structured interviews lasting 70 to 85 minutes, metaphorical drawings with participant-led explanations, and relevant school documents. Two-layered analysis combined theory-informed coding with narrative restorying, thematic clustering, and constant comparison. Seven themes across fourteen categories emerged. Lived experience moved from anxiety to confidence, from dependence to autonomy, and toward belonging through support. Administrators' strategies were responsive supportive leadership and collaborative professional development. Teachers sustained well-being through resilience through support and growth through belonging. Support worked when it was accessible, consistent, validating, and shared, rather than merely procedural. The findings reframe administrative support as relational leadership: presence, listening, trust, recognition, shared responsibility, resources, and mentoring together created psychological safety. The study offers practical guidance for administrators seeking to retain special educators and theoretical insight into well-being as a relational, temporal, and situated accomplishment.

***Keywords**:* special educators, administrative support, social and emotional support, teacher well-being, narrative inquiry, relational leadership

Introduction:

Special education is work that asks teachers to hold many responsibilities at once. A special educator may adapt curriculum, manage challenging behaviour, coordinate with families and paraprofessionals, document Individualized Education Program (IEP) decisions, collaborate with general educators, and respond to administrative requirements, often within the same day. When these demands accumulate without corresponding support, teachers can feel anxious, exhausted, and uncertain about whether they can continue. When support is present, consistent, and genuinely relational, the same demands can become manageable, even meaningful. This study begins from that contrast. It asks not only whether administrators support special educators, but how support is lived, interpreted, and used by teachers over time.

The problem is both practical and persistent. Special educators report higher emotional labour and burnout risk than many general education peers because their work is highly relational, highly regulated, and highly visible to families and administrators (McGrew et al., 2023; Sawatske et al., 2024; Matjeni & de Jager, 2025). Workload, student behaviour, extended hours, and relational conflict with administration have been identified as recurring sources of strain. At the same time, supportive leadership has been associated with greater job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and retention. Yet much of the literature treats administrative support as a broad variable rather than a lived relationship. It is less clear which everyday practices teachers experience as supportive, how those practices acquire meaning in particular schools, and how teachers actively navigate them to protect their well-being. This gap is especially important for internationally trained educators entering a new educational system, where unfamiliar procedures, documentation platforms such as IEP Pro, cultural expectations, and language practices can intensify uncertainty.

This study was conducted with four special educators working in public schools in Phoenix, Arizona, United States, during Academic Year 2025–2026. The participants were Filipino educators, three female and one male, aged 31 to 40, with 10 to 18 years of teaching experience. Their stories are therefore situated: they speak from particular classrooms, schools, and leadership relationships, not from special education in the abstract. The purpose was to explore the experiences of special educators regarding the social and emotional support provided by school administrators and how such support contributed to sustaining well-being. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (1) What are the lived experiences of special educators regarding the social and emotional support provided by school administrators? (2) What strategies do school administrators use to provide support to special educators? (3) How do special educators navigate their experiences of social and emotional support given by school administrators to sustain well-being?

The contribution of the study is twofold. Practically, it identifies concrete, low-cost, and high-impact leadership practices that administrators can embed in daily school life: regular check-ins, visible presence, responsive communication, shared problem-solving, timely resources, mentoring, recognition, and trust. Theoretically, it shows that well-being is not only an individual trait or an organisational outcome, but a relational accomplishment that develops across time, through relationships, and within places. Support that is consistent over time, trustworthy in relationships, and visible in the school environment changes how teachers interpret difficulty, whether they ask for help, and whether they imagine a future in the profession. The remainder of this article reviews relevant literature, describes the methodology, presents and discusses the findings, and concludes with implications, limitations, and recommendations.

A note on language and voice is necessary. Participants sometimes spoke in English, Tagalog, or Taglish, and the original dissertation preserved those expressions. This article retains selected quotations in their original form because meaning, emotion, and cultural nuance often reside in the exact wording. Pseudonyms TP1 to TP4 protect participants' identities throughout.

A further reason to study support as lived experience is that teachers do not experience administrative acts in isolation. A check-in, a classroom visit, or a feedback comment acquires meaning from what came before it. A teacher who has previously been criticised for a mistake may hear a neutral observation as a warning, while a teacher who has repeatedly been trusted may hear the same observation as coaching. This study therefore treats temporality as analytically central. It asks how earlier experiences of being supported or unsupported shaped present interpretations, and how present support shaped teachers' imagined futures. That temporal lens is one reason narrative inquiry, rather than a one-time survey, was the appropriate design. It preserves sequence, turning points, and the slow accumulation of trust that cross-sectional measures can flatten into a single score.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

Three theories anchor this study. Social Support Theory, as developed through stress-buffering and relational regulation perspectives, proposes that support protects health and functioning by providing emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal resources (Lakey & Orehek, 2019; Cohen & Wills, 2023). In schools, this means that a principal's listening, reassurance, practical help, or affirmation can reduce the perceived threat of a difficult situation and increase a teacher's capacity to cope. Social Support Theory was the central framework because it names the types of support teachers described and explains why the same workload can feel overwhelming in one school and manageable in another. It also cautions against treating support as a single quantity: emotional support without practical help can feel hollow, while practical help without emotional recognition can feel transactional.

Transformational Leadership Theory, articulated by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1985), explains how leaders inspire, motivate, and elevate followers beyond transactional exchange. In special education, transformational administrators do more than monitor compliance; they articulate shared purpose, model care, provide individualised consideration, and stimulate professional growth. Recent work links such leadership to teacher welfare and performance, and to school climate as a mediator of well-being (Lee et al., 2023; Abbasi & Haque, 2024). When

administrators notice effort, invite voice, and advocate for teachers and students, they create a climate in which teachers feel safe to learn, make mistakes, and seek help. The theory therefore explains the mechanism through which support becomes leadership, not merely kindness.

Self-Determination Theory explains motivation through three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2022). Environments that support these needs foster intrinsic motivation and well-being; environments that thwart them foster disengagement and stress. For special educators, autonomy is exercised when administrators trust professional judgment, competence grows through mentoring and feedback, and relatedness deepens through belonging in a team. Zhang and colleagues (2026) and related work on psychological need satisfaction show that need-supportive conditions matter for teacher satisfaction and functioning. Together, the three theories allow the study to examine what support is present, how leadership enacts it, and why it sustains motivation. Figure 4 in the Results and Discussion presents this integration as a conceptual model.

Leadership, Educational Psychology, and Teacher Engagement

Teacher engagement is shaped by emotional demands, and emotional demands are shaped by leadership. Zhang et al. (2026) found that administrators' support practices promoted satisfaction and helped teachers manage work demands and stress. When teachers receive social and emotional support, they can channel that steadiness into classrooms that require patience, differentiation, and persistence. When support is absent, emotional exhaustion can accumulate and spill into instruction, collegial relationships, and personal life. McGrew et al. (2023) documented elevated emotional exhaustion among special educators, with a significant proportion reporting burnout symptoms at concerning levels. These findings do not imply that teachers lack resilience; rather, they suggest that resilience is ecologically supported or undermined by leadership and organisational conditions.

Leader–member exchange and relational leadership perspectives add an important nuance: the quality of the leader–teacher relationship matters as much as formal policies. Harmon and Riehl (2025) and earlier LMX work (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 2022) emphasise that high-quality exchanges, characterised by trust, respect, and mutual obligation, predict better outcomes. Razvi and Smith (2025) likewise found that teachers' perceptions of administrative support promoted emotional validation and affirmation of competence. In the present study, this relational lens is essential because teachers distinguished between administrators who merely performed supervisory routines and those who made teachers feel heard, trusted, and seen. The difference was not always in the formal act, such as a classroom visit, but in how it was enacted: whether it communicated surveillance or care, criticism or coaching, control or trust.

Organisational Context and Practices

Well-being is also shaped by organisational context: workload, staffing, resources, scheduling, and school culture. López-Avila et al. (2025) reported that administrative support and organisational climate influence teacher well-being, while Johnson and Lee (2023) found that supported teachers showed greater stress tolerance and professional fulfilment. Peterson and Cheng (2024) highlighted professional networks and organisational practices as sources of resilience. These findings converge on a practical point: emotional support cannot substitute for adequate staffing, materials, time, and clear procedures. Teachers in the present study valued both the relational gesture, such as a morning check-in, and the organisational act, such as providing a printer, paraprofessional support, or protected time. When administrators removed barriers, teachers could focus on instruction rather than logistics, and that relief was itself emotionally sustaining.

Recent reviews also caution that organisational support must be coherent. Sawatske et al. (2024) argued for a multidimensional view of special educator well-being in which supportive leadership, school connectedness, and positive relationships protect against stress and burnout. DeMatthews and Knight (2024) emphasised strategic resource allocation and inclusive leadership. McLeskey et al. (2023) showed that leadership and organisational supports enable evidence-based practice while reducing stress. The implication is that support is a system, not a single programme. A wellness activity, without responsive daily leadership, may feel performative; a caring principal, without staffing and resources, may feel well-intentioned but insufficient. The present study therefore examines support as it appears across daily interactions, meetings, documents, and artefacts.

Special Educators and Well-Being

Special educators' work extends beyond classroom instruction to include curriculum adaptation, behaviour support, family collaboration, documentation, and coordination with specialists. Empirical studies show that these roles are more demanding than many general education roles and that special educators are more prone to stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and demotivation (Matjeni & de Jager, 2025; Sawatske et al., 2024). Wang et al. (2025) and Jeon et al. (2024) situate this strain within broader concerns about educator well-being globally. Well-being here is multidimensional, encompassing physical, emotional, social, psychological, and professional dimensions. It includes satisfaction, energy, emotional balance, resilience, and the capacity to sustain engagement. It is not the absence of difficulty, but the presence of resources, relationships, and meaning that allow teachers to recover from difficulty.

For internationally trained teachers, these demands intersect with transition. Cruz and Rose (2023) found that immigrant and internationally educated teachers adjusted better when schools provided structured mentoring, collaborative opportunities, and culturally responsive leadership. Induction research similarly shows that supportive leadership during early transitions reduces isolation and strengthens confidence (Bastian & Marks, 2024; Billingsley et al., 2024). In the present study, participants' narratives of entering US schools, learning IEP procedures, and navigating new expectations make this literature directly relevant. Their growth was not simply a matter of learning technical procedures; it involved learning whom to trust, how to ask for help, and how to interpret feedback in a new professional culture.

Social and Emotional Support for Special Educators

Social support in schools includes appraisal, validation, affirmation, guidance, empathy, and trust. Relational regulation perspectives emphasise that everyday interactions, such as listening, encouragement, and open communication, regulate emotion and sustain professional engagement (Cohen & Wills, 2023; Tang & Feng, 2024). Bas and Riggio (2022) and Konstantopoulos and Hedges (2023) show that administrators' demonstrated care can function as a language of concern and transformational leadership. Uhl-Bien (2023) and Miller and Newton (2025) highlight mutual respect, open communication, and safe space for voice. Emotional support, specifically, creates conditions in which teachers can be honest about vulnerability without fear of prejudice (Becerra et al., 2023). Edmondson and Lei (2024) and Kwon and Kim (2026) link emotional well-being to instructional quality and classroom management, while Kang and Othman (2023) emphasise collaborative practices, equal footing, inclusivity, and shared governance as characteristics of emotionally supportive environments.

Despite this growing literature, gaps remain. Many studies use quantitative designs that measure support and well-being without revealing how teachers experience, interpret, and navigate support in specific schools. Others focus on general teacher well-being without attending to special education's distinctive demands. Few studies combine interviews, documents, and arts-based data to triangulate teachers' lived meanings. The present study addresses these gaps by using narrative inquiry to preserve temporality, sociality, and place, and by asking teachers themselves to explain what support meant, when it mattered, and how it changed their professional identities over time.

A final strand of literature concerns the emotional dimension of special education work itself. Teachers regularly manage grief, frustration, hope, and joy alongside instructional planning, and they do so while maintaining professional composure for students and families. Emotional labour of this kind is not a personal failing; it is a structural feature of the work. When administrators acknowledge that labour, through listening, validation, and shared responsibility, they help teachers regulate emotion rather than suppress it. When administrators ignore it, teachers may internalise strain as incompetence. This study therefore reads administrative support not as an add-on to instructional leadership, but as a core condition for sustaining the emotional work on which special education depends.

Methodology:

Research Design

This study used a qualitative narrative inquiry design grounded in constructivism and interpretivism, which hold that knowledge is socially constructed and meaning is co-created through interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Clandinin

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& Connelly, 2024). Narrative inquiry was appropriate because the phenomenon, administrative social and emotional support, is relational, temporal, and situated. It cannot be fully captured by counting acts of support; it must be understood through stories that reveal how teachers interpreted those acts, how interpretations changed over time, and how relationships and settings shaped meaning. The design followed Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional inquiry space: temporality (past, present, and future), sociality (personal and social relationships), and place (classrooms, hallways, offices, and schools).

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in selected public schools in Phoenix, Arizona, United States, during Academic Year 2025–2026. Phoenix was chosen purposively because it reflects contemporary inclusive education challenges and opportunities, and because it was accessible to the researcher. Four special educators participated, selected through purposive sampling for information richness rather than statistical representation (Palinkas et al., 2015; Marshall, 1996). Inclusion criteria were: full-time special education teacher in a US public school; at least two to three years of special education experience in the US context; currently teaching in a special education setting; and willingness to share experiences of administrative support. The small sample was intentional: narrative inquiry prioritises depth, restorying, and sustained engagement with each story. Table 1 and Figure 1 summarise participant profiles. Participants are identified only as TP1 to TP4.

Table 1. Profile of participants (n = 4). School names are withheld to protect confidentiality.

Participant	Gender / Age	Education	Years in Service	Position	Learners Served
TP1	Female, 33	Master's degree	12	Self-contained special education teacher	OHI, SLD, autism, MIID, MOID, VI, multiple impairments
TP2	Female, 34	Bachelor's degree	13	Self-contained teacher (autism class; contract completed)	Autism
TP3	Female, 40	PhD units, Special Education	18	Special education teacher, Grades 4–5	Mild to moderate learning needs
TP4	Male, 31	Doctorate units	10	Resource teacher	Specific learning disabilities (SLD)

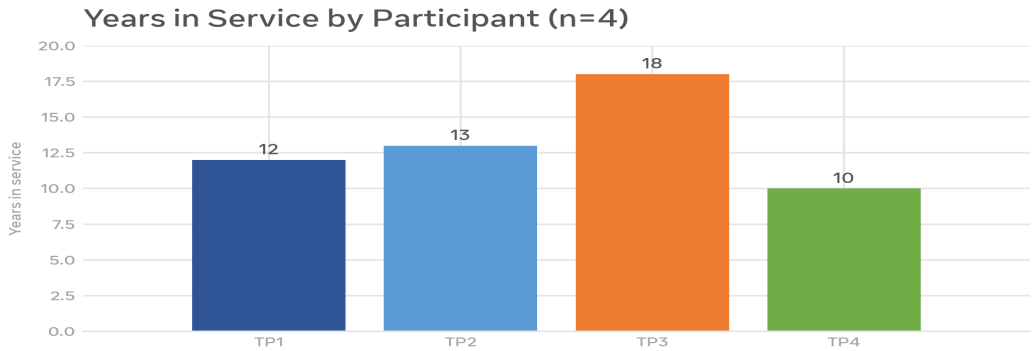


Figure 1. Years in service by participant. Experience ranged from 10 to 18 years.

Data Collection

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Three methods were triangulated. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were the primary source. An interview guide contained three research questions and eighteen interview guide questions (six per research question), aligned with temporality, sociality, and place. Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience, audio-recorded with consent, and lasted 70 to 85 minutes (Figure 2). Second, document analysis examined institutional records that contextualised narratives, including IEP-related documents, meeting minutes, mentoring and coaching records, observation and recognition documents, resource allocation logs, and professional development certificates. Documents were reviewed before or during interviews where appropriate and used to corroborate or complicate interview accounts. Third, arts-based data collection invited participants to create metaphorical drawings, such as a lighthouse, umbrella, puzzle, timeline, boat, or heart, and to explain their meanings. Drawings were treated as expressive narrative data, not as aesthetic products, and participant-led explanations were analysed. Figure 2 shows interview duration; Table 4 in the Results and Discussion summarises triangulation.

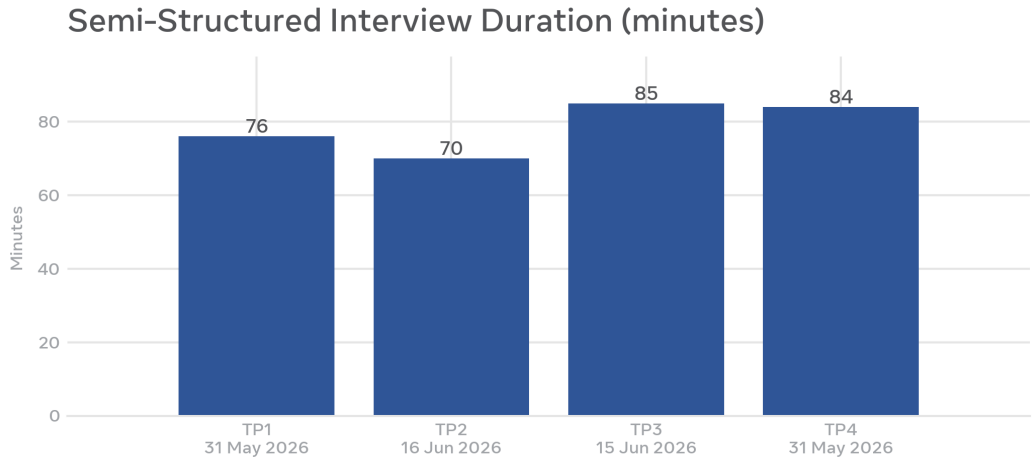


Figure 2. Interview duration in minutes. Total interview time was 315 minutes.

Data Analysis

Analysis used a two-layered process. The first layer applied Social Support Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Self-Determination Theory as a prior coding framework to categorise forms of support, leadership behaviours, and need satisfaction or thwarting. The second layer followed Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry analysis: transcription and immersion, restorying into temporally and relationally coherent narratives, thematic narrative clustering, narrative mapping of turning points, and interpretive reflection. Field texts were read repeatedly, codes were compared across participants, and themes were checked against documents and drawings. Analysis occurred concurrently with data collection, allowing emerging threads to be explored in later interviews. Data were collected during the IEP season, a period of heightened documentation demand; this temporal context was explicitly considered in interpretation rather than treated as background noise.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Trustworthiness followed Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility through prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation, and reflexive notes; dependability through an audit trail of coding and analytic decisions; confirmability through reflexive journaling and grounding interpretations in participants' words; and transferability through thick description. The researcher, a Filipino educator with leadership experience in Philippine basic education and later in Phoenix, shared cultural and professional identity with participants. This facilitated rapport and Tagalog/Taglish communication, but also required deliberate reflexivity: memoing assumptions, separating impressions from evidence, and inviting counter-narratives. Ethical clearance was secured from the university ethics board. Informed consent emphasised voluntary participation and withdrawal without consequence. Pseudonyms replaced names and schools, data were stored securely, and Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173) principles were

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observed. Psychological safety was prioritised so participants could share positive and critical stories without fear of professional consequences.

Results and Discussion:

This section presents and discusses the findings together, as is appropriate for narrative inquiry, where interpretation is inseparable from story. The findings are organised by research question. Seven themes and fourteen categories emerged (Figure 3). Each theme is presented with narrative evidence, triangulating documents and drawings, and discussed in relation to literature and theory. The discussion does not claim statistical generalisation; it claims interpretive transferability: readers in similar special education settings can judge which patterns resonate and which practices are worth adapting.

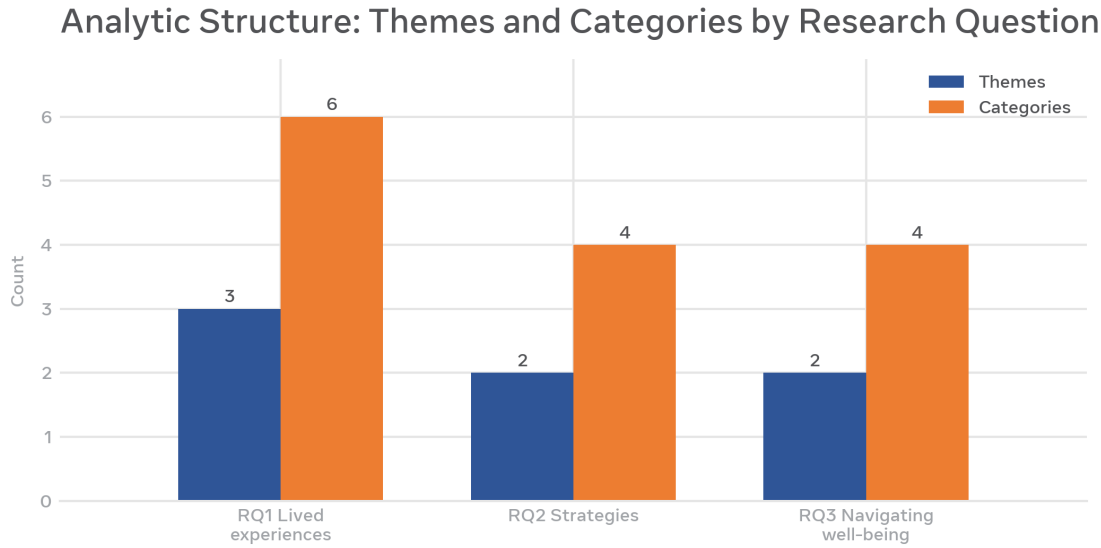


Figure 3. Analytic structure. RQ1 yielded three themes and six categories; RQ2 yielded two themes and four categories; RQ3 yielded two themes and four categories.

Table 2. Summary of themes and categories.

Research Question	Themes	Categories
RQ1: Lived experiences	From Anxiety to Confidence; From Dependence to Autonomy; Belonging Through Support	Communication and accessibility; Collaborative problem-solving; Administrative guidance; Transformative resilience; Recognition and validation; Sustaining passion and commitment
RQ2: Strategies	Responsive Supportive Leadership; Collaborative Professional Development	Resources and instructional support; Validation, trust, and advocacy; Communication, accessibility, and presence; Collaborative support and shared responsibility
RQ3: Navigating well-being	Resilience Through Support; Growth Through Belonging	Professional growth and reflective practice; Resilience and professional identity; Trust, recognition, and psychological safety; Relationship-centred leadership

Table 3. Triangulation matrix. Each theme was corroborated across at least two data sources.

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Theme	Interview Evidence	Document Evidence	Arts-Based Evidence
From Anxiety to Confidence	Check-ins, GroupMe help, listening	Communication logs, meeting minutes	Lighthouse: guidance and communication
From Dependence to Autonomy	Mentoring on IEP Pro, guidance	Mentoring logs, coaching records	Timeline: gradual adaptation
Belonging Through Support	Shout-outs, thank-you notes	Recognition certificates, newsletters	Puzzle heart: belonging
Responsive Supportive Leadership	Printer, staffing, resources	Resource logs, staffing schedules	Puzzle: multiple supports
Collaborative Professional Development	Coaching, PLTs, feedback	PD certificates, coaching notes	Timeline: continuous learning
Resilience Through Support	Encouragement, reflection	Journals, coaching records	Boat to calmer waters; umbrella
Growth Through Belonging	Trust, advocacy	Observation reports, appreciation letters	Heart: emotional wellness

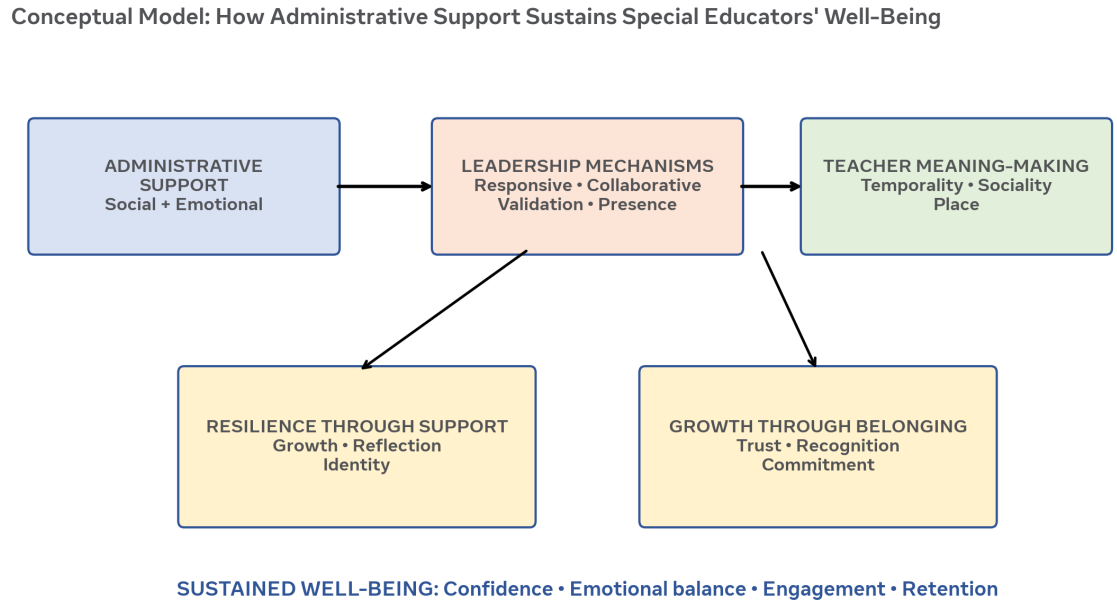


Figure 4. Conceptual model integrating Social Support Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Self-Determination Theory with the narrative findings.

RQ1: Lived Experiences of Social and Emotional Support

Participants' lived experiences were not static evaluations of administrators. They were journeys in which the same teacher, in different schools or at different times, could feel anxious, then supported, then confident, then generous toward others. Three themes capture this movement.

Theme 1: From Anxiety to Confidence

At the beginning of their journeys, particularly when entering unfamiliar schools or a new educational system, participants described anxiety, uncertainty, and professional insecurity. They worried about making mistakes, misreading expectations, or appearing weak. Support transformed that anxiety when it was consistent and relationally safe. TP1's contrast between schools is illustrative. In a previous school, check-ins felt like fault-finding: "when they check in on us it was more of seeing what we did wrong." In her current school, check-ins became quarterly rounding, morning greetings, and genuine questions about need: "sometimes they would even ask us if we need some time for

ourselves or if we need more support in the classroom." The formal act was similar; the meaning was different because the relationship was different.

Two categories explain this transformation. First, communication and accessibility as foundations of emotional security. Participants described administrators who were reachable through hallway conversations, emails, texts, MS Teams, and GroupMe, and who responded promptly, even after work or from home. TP3 said her administrator would leave a message: "whenever you need my help just give me a text or call." TP2 described calling for help during challenging student behaviour and receiving immediate support: "I would just say, I need help in room 205, and then support will be there." TP4 summarised, "Communication talaga is number one key." TP1 explained that daily interaction shaped the whole day: "whenever you see them in the front office, whenever you see them in the hallway… it will influence how your day is going to go." These moments were not grand interventions. They were ordinary, repeated, and predictable, and predictability is what allowed anxiety to soften into confidence. In narrative terms, temporality mattered: repeated positive interactions rewrote earlier expectations of criticism. Sociality mattered: communication became a relationship of psychological safety, not merely information transfer. Place mattered: hallways, front offices, and classrooms became sites of reassurance rather than surveillance.

Second, collaborative problem-solving and shared responsibility reduced stress and prevented burnout. When administrators helped during behavioural crises, backed teachers in parent meetings, consulted before assigning accommodations, and shared responsibility with co-teachers, coaches, psychologists, and translators, teachers felt less alone. TP1 valued being asked first: "The principal asked me first if I wanted to. If I'm open to accommodation, they don't just put it to me." TP2 described administrators trusting her documentation and supporting her in a difficult parent situation. TP4 described three months of sustained collaborative work with an assistant principal, coach, and translator that ended with "we did it." In each case, support was not advice from a distance; it was shared labour and shared accountability. This aligns with Collie (2023) on supportive environments, Burić and Kim (2023) on leadership support and relationships, and Madigan and Kim (2023) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2023) on workload, support, and burnout. It also illustrates Social Support Theory's buffering hypothesis: instrumental and emotional support together reduced the perceived burden of stressors.

Documents corroborated this theme. Communication logs, emails, meeting minutes, and messaging records showed regular, responsive interaction. IEP meeting records, staffing assignments, and intervention plans documented shared responsibility. Drawings added symbolic depth: TP4's puzzle showed that collaboration was necessary to complete the picture, while TP1's lighthouse represented communication as guidance that kept teachers from getting lost. The convergence across sources strengthens confidence that communication and collaboration were not merely mentioned in interviews, but enacted in school life. The practical implication is clear: accessibility must be structured, not left to chance. Administrators who are visible, responsive, and willing to share difficult work communicate that teachers are not expected to absorb special education's complexity alone.

Theme 2: From Dependence to Autonomy

The second theme traces a developmental movement from dependence to autonomy. Early in a new setting, participants depended heavily on administrators for guidance about policies, IEP procedures, documentation, and instructional decisions. That dependence was not a deficit; it was a reasonable response to unfamiliarity. What mattered was how administrators responded: whether they used dependence as an occasion for control or as a scaffold toward independence. In this study, administrators generally scaffolded. They gave ideas without removing agency, corrected mistakes without shaming, and gradually trusted teachers to exercise judgment.

The first category, administrative guidance as a foundation for professional adaptation in a new educational system, was especially salient for internationally trained educators. TP3's story of accidentally deleting a student's name in IEP Pro captures the emotional stakes of early mistakes. She texted the SPED director, who reassured her: "it's okay, no worries," and helped restore the record. The absence of negative words was itself support. TP4 described researching, asking general education teachers, coaches, and fellow J-1 teachers, and gradually moving from confusion to pride: "I'm proud to say naman na nalagpasan ko na yun." TP1 said administrators "empowered me to think" while giving ideas so she would not overthink alone. TP2 emphasised reassurance that challenges were understood and valued by leadership. These accounts align with Cruz and Rose (2023) on internationally educated teachers and with induction literature on mentoring (Bastian & Marks, 2024; Billingsley et al., 2024). They also illustrate Self-

Determination Theory: competence grew when guidance was informational rather than controlling, and autonomy grew when teachers were trusted to apply what they learned.

The second category, transformative experiences developing resilience and professional identity, shows how difficulty, when met with support, became a resource rather than only a wound. Participants reinterpreted mistakes, cultural adjustments, and emotional struggles as learning. TP3 described her experiences as a "sword" she would carry back to the Philippines: "I'm powerful now. I was able to conquer all those experiences." TP1 learned to reinterpret a missed greeting not as rejection but as administrators "handling some other stuff." TP4 learned to relax and accept that stressful parent encounters were part of the job, while still feeling supported. TP2 explicitly linked resilience to Filipino identity and to support: experiences shaped her to be "more resilient" and "more compassionate." These reinterpretations are central to narrative inquiry: identity is not fixed, but restoryed through reflection and relational feedback. Coaching records, mentoring logs, journals, and timelines corroborated this growth. TP3's timeline drawing made the trajectory visible: from clinical, intentional mentoring to targeted support to independence. TP2's umbrella drawing showed a smiling teacher sheltered during storms, a metaphor for resilience that is protected, not merely endured.

The dependence-to-autonomy movement has an important boundary condition. Autonomy did not mean abandonment. Participants valued administrators who remained available while granting trust. TP1 captured this balance: "They are just letting us do our thing, but they are there when we need them." This is autonomy support in its most practical form: freedom with a safety net. When administrators withdraw too quickly, teachers can feel abandoned; when they hover, teachers can feel controlled. The administrators in these stories calibrated presence: frequent early, targeted later, and responsive throughout. That calibration is a leadership skill that can be learned, modelled, and discussed in administrator preparation.

Theme 3: Belonging Through Support

The third theme, belonging through support, shows that well-being is not only about managing stress or growing competence; it is about feeling that one belongs in a professional community. Participants moved from feeling like outsiders, especially as newcomers, toward feeling accepted, connected, and valued. Belonging was built through recognition, appreciation, and validation, and it sustained passion, commitment, and long-term engagement.

Recognition was often small and specific: a shout-out in an email, a thank-you, a morning check-in, a nod in the hallway, praise for student progress, or trust in a professional decision. TP1 said such moments "instantly boost my morale" and made her feel "seen, safe, included, that I belong." TP2 felt encouraged when administrators recognised student progress. TP3 valued guidance, recognition, and assistance together. TP4 said, "Recognition and appreciation, ito yung nagbibigay sa akin… nagmo-motivate sa akin na magturo araw-araw." These findings align with Burić and Kim (2023) and Madigan and Kim (2023) on recognition, competence, and burnout, and with research on belonging and commitment. Recognition mattered because it answered a question that special educators often ask silently: does anyone see the work that is often invisible, such as documentation, behaviour support, and emotional labour? When administrators noticed that work, they validated professional identity.

Belonging also sustained commitment. Participants contrasted previous experiences of insufficient support, which contributed to exhaustion and thoughts of leaving, with current experiences that restored enthusiasm. TP1 said, "If we have that support… I really want to stay in the school." She explicitly linked retention to support: without it, "people will come and go." TP2 viewed support as teamwork, trust, and shared commitment to students with autism: "We are on the same boat with the same goal." TP3 felt valued and motivated to work better. TP4 described lunch-duty conversations in which administrators asked, "How was your day?" and invited sharing. These accounts support Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2023) and Davis (2023) on supportive environments, satisfaction, and intention to stay. Documents, including appreciation certificates, newsletters, recognition programmes, and wellness activities, corroborated a culture of recognition. Drawings, including the puzzle heart and lighthouse, symbolised belonging and hope. The discussion point is that retention is not only about salary or workload; it is also about whether teachers feel they belong to a community that recognises them. Administrators who build belonging are building retention.

RQ2: Strategies Employed by School Administrators

The second research question shifts from experience to strategy: what did administrators actually do? Two themes emerged: responsive supportive leadership and collaborative professional development. These are not separate programmes; they are interlocking practices that together made support reliable.

Theme 4: Responsive Supportive Leadership

Responsive supportive leadership was characterised by empathy, timeliness, and practical helpfulness. Administrators recognised emotional struggles, anticipated needs, provided immediate assistance, and offered encouragement beyond formal supervision. Two categories explain how this worked.

First, administrative resources and instructional support enabled effective teaching. Participants described administrators who ensured materials, classroom supplies, behavioural support, substitute personnel, and additional staff were available. TP2 emphasised "adequate staffing support" and access to professional development. TP1 described receiving a printer after a district-wide connection problem was resolved, which made daily work "easier, more accessible, more convenient." TP3 described a SPED room stocked with resources and an administrator who provided an Amazon link for anything missing: "whatever that I need I just order." TP4 described face-to-face trainings. These examples may sound mundane, but in narrative terms they were morally significant: they communicated that teachers' time and work mattered. Resource allocation logs, purchasing records, staffing schedules, and supply requests corroborated these accounts. The literature supports this reading: McLeskey et al. (2023) and DeMatthews and Knight (2024) show that principals who allocate resources, ensure staffing, and remove operational barriers create more inclusive and supportive environments. In this study, resources were not only instructional; they were relational signals. A printer, a paraprofessional, or a timely substitute said, in effect, "we see your workload and we will share it."

Second, administrative validation, trust, and advocacy strengthened professional identity. Participants felt valued when administrators acknowledged competence, defended decisions, celebrated progress, and trusted instructional judgment. TP1 described "professional validation that you're good, that I'm good with what I'm doing." TP2 noted administrators who advocated for students with autism and ensured access to resources. TP3 described becoming more humble and helpful through supported experiences. TP4 described classroom visits becoming less anxiety-provoking as trust grew: "You do your job… there is that trust." Parent conference notes showed teachers given academic freedom within policy, observation reports and recognition documents confirmed advocacy, and the umbrella drawing symbolised protection during storms. Liu and Hallinger (2024) and Collie (2023) similarly link relational trust, recognition, and professional identity. The discussion here is that validation must be specific and credible. Generic praise can feel performative; specific recognition of a teacher's decision, documentation, or student progress communicates that the administrator has actually paid attention. Advocacy is especially important in special education, where teachers may face challenging parent meetings or behavioural crises. When administrators stand with teachers, rather than merely observing, teachers learn that they will not be left to absorb conflict alone.

Theme 5: Collaborative Professional Development

The second strategy theme shows that administrators supported teachers by investing in learning, mentoring, and collaboration. Support extended beyond formal training to include coaching, feedback, professional learning teams, and everyday problem-solving. Two categories capture this.

First, communication, accessibility, and presence built psychological safety. Participants described open communication through meetings, messages, group chats, emails, phone calls, hallway conversations, and immediate responses. TP3 described support communicated through "meetings, messages, text, group chats" and informal hallway questions. TP4 emphasised email as formal evidence and communication. TP2 valued visibility: "I can see that you're there… when I see you on the corridor or hallway, we say hi, hello." TP1 valued weekly emails that clarified expectations and availability. Long et al. (2024) and Fackler et al. (2024) link principal communication, psychological safety, and commitment. In this study, psychological safety was not an abstract climate variable; it was the lived sense that one could ask a question, admit a mistake, or request help without fear of judgment. That sense was built through repeated, low-stakes interactions. A hallway greeting, a quick check-in, or a prompt reply to a text taught teachers that administrators were approachable. Over time, teachers moved from hesitation to openness, a shift that TP1 described as learning to be vulnerable without feeling weak.

Second, collaborative administrative support and shared responsibility meant administrators worked alongside teachers. They assisted during behavioural crises, coordinated personnel, supported IEP implementation, participated in problem-solving, and shared instructional and organisational responsibilities. TP1 said, "I didn't feel alone. I felt that we were a team." TP2 described a network of support: if the principal or assistant principal was unavailable, a psychologist, coach, or speech therapist could help, and GroupMe made support "quick and effective." TP3 described paying forward the help she received by helping new teachers. TP4, as a resource teacher, described collaboration as essential to scheduling and instruction. IEP documentation, collaborative meeting records, staffing records, and intervention plans corroborated shared leadership, while journals described reduced stress. Alsuhaymi et al. (2024) and Deger et al. (2024) similarly emphasise collaborative leadership and mentorship in special education. The discussion point is that collaboration is not delegation. It is joint work. When administrators share responsibility, they reduce isolation, distribute emotional labour, and model that special education is a collective enterprise, not a solo assignment.

RQ3: How Teachers Navigated Support to Sustain Well-Being

The third research question asks how teachers actively navigated support. The findings show that teachers were not passive recipients. They interpreted, sought, used, and transformed support through reflection, relationship, and practice. Two themes capture this agency.

Theme 6: Resilience Through Support

Resilience through support describes how consistent guidance, encouragement, responsiveness, and emotional assistance enabled teachers to manage stress, maintain emotional balance, and develop greater resilience. Two categories explain this process.

First, professional growth and reflective practice strengthened well-being. Participants described early uncertainty giving way to competence through coaching, mentoring, professional conversations, and constructive feedback. TP2 said experiences "increased my confidence in supporting students with autism." TP1 linked trainings and check-ins to both professional and emotional growth: "I'm more confident now… I feel that I'm not alone." TP3 described assurance that it was okay to make mistakes and ask questions, which built bravery and self-confidence. TP4 described short professional learning team sessions, sometimes only 30 to 50 minutes, as "more meaningful" because they were consistent and relevant. These accounts align with Klusmann et al. (2023) and Liu and Hallinger (2024) on competence, learning opportunities, and well-being. The discussion is that professional growth is itself a well-being strategy. When teachers feel more competent, they feel less helpless. When they can reflect on practice with a trusted administrator or colleague, they can reframe difficulty as learning rather than failure. Reflection, in this sense, is not an extra task; it is the mechanism through which support becomes internalised.

Second, resilience and professional identity emerged through transformative experiences. Participants described overcoming challenges, receiving support, and reconstructing their understanding of themselves. TP1 emphasised that support was not 100 percent on leadership; teachers also had to learn to navigate emotions. TP4 described learning what to do when challenges exceeded solo capacity and knowing guidance was available. TP2 described becoming more resilient and compassionate. TP3 described moving from nervousness in meetings to confidence and calm. Journals and coaching records documented growth after challenges, including a coaching record that highlighted strengths rather than mistakes. Drawings, including TP3's timeline and TP1's boat moving toward calmer waters, visualised this transformation. Hascher and Waber (2023) and Burić and Moè (2023) similarly view resilience as socially constructed through individual resources and supportive workplace conditions. The present study adds a narrative nuance: resilience was not only bouncing back, but becoming someone new, a teacher who could interpret past difficulty as preparation for future helping. That identity shift, from anxious newcomer to confident professional who can support others, is perhaps the most important outcome of sustained support.

Theme 7: Growth Through Belonging

Growth through belonging shows that collaborative relationships, trust, recognition, and psychological safety sustained emotional well-being and long-term commitment. Two categories explain this.

First, trust, recognition, and psychological safety reinforced professional identity. Participants described moving from fear of mistakes and criticism toward confidence and security. TP3 said experiences "strengthened my skills, confidence and professional growth." TP1 described learning to rely on herself and then to support others, finding

"peace" and safety. TP2 described support as encouragement and trust, and teaching as a "two-way effort." TP4 described a shift from daily check-ins and classroom visits to trust. Observation reports, recognition records, appreciation letters, and evaluation conferences documented affirmation, while journals described psychological safety. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2023) and Huang et al. (2024) link trust, authentic leadership, and psychological safety to self-efficacy and reduced strain. In this study, psychological safety had a concrete behavioural consequence: teachers asked questions, admitted uncertainty, and sought help earlier, before problems escalated. That early help-seeking is itself a protective factor, and it depends on administrators creating conditions where vulnerability is not penalised.

Second, relationship-centred leadership sustained long-term commitment and well-being. Participants experienced administrators not merely as supervisors, but as authentic, empathetic, accessible, and flexible relational partners. TP1 described stepping up through challenges and learning to provide support to others. TP2 described growing professionally because support came from "different sectors, from different people." TP3 described administrative support as rare and valuable, worth staying for. TP4 described consistent guidance through Tuesday, Wednesday, and everyday informal check-ins. Collaborative meeting records documented shared responsibility, while drawings, including TP1's lighthouse and sea and TP4's completed heart, symbolised hope, commitment, and emotional wellness. Nguyen et al. (2023) and Madigan and Kim (2023) link collaborative cultures and workplace relationships to well-being and commitment. The discussion is that relationship-centred leadership is not soft or optional. It is the infrastructure that allows instructional leadership to work. Without trust, feedback can feel like criticism; without belonging, professional development can feel like compliance; without presence, resources can feel impersonal. With trust and belonging, the same practices become sustaining.

Integrated Discussion: What Support Really Does

Across all seven themes, a coherent account emerges. Administrative support sustains well-being when it is accessible, consistent, validating, collaborative, and practical. Accessibility means teachers can reach administrators quickly and predictably. Consistency means support does not depend on mood, crisis, or a single programme. Validation means teachers feel seen and trusted. Collaboration means responsibility is shared. Practicality means resources, staffing, and time are addressed. When these conditions are present, teachers reinterpret difficulty, seek help earlier, grow in competence, and imagine a future in the profession. When they are absent, teachers interpret the same difficulty as evidence that they are alone, inadequate, or unsupported.

The theoretical integration clarifies why. Social Support Theory explains that emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support buffer stress. Transformational Leadership Theory explains that leaders who inspire, individualise, and model care create climates of trust. Self-Determination Theory explains that autonomy, competence, and relatedness sustain motivation. The narrative data show these theories working together in everyday life: a principal's text message can simultaneously provide information, signal care, affirm competence, and preserve autonomy by offering help without taking over. A classroom visit can simultaneously be instructional support and relational reassurance, depending on how it is enacted. A recognition email can simultaneously validate identity and strengthen belonging. The conceptual model in Figure 4 summarises this integration.

The study also clarifies a common misunderstanding: support does not create dependence when it is done well. It creates the security from which autonomy grows. Participants moved from dependence to autonomy precisely because administrators remained available while gradually trusting them. This is consistent with attachment and scaffolding ideas in developmental and organisational psychology: secure base enables exploration. Administrators who provide a secure base, through presence, responsiveness, and trust, enable teachers to explore, take risks, and eventually mentor others. Administrators who confuse support with surveillance, or autonomy with abandonment, undermine that development.

Finally, the study highlights place and time. Support was most meaningful when it was visible in hallways, classrooms, and meeting rooms, and when it accumulated over months and years. A single supportive act mattered, but a pattern mattered more. Similarly, data collection during IEP season revealed that support is tested during peak demand. Administrators who remain responsive during IEP season, staffing shortages, or behavioural crises communicate that

support is not conditional on calm conditions. That message, repeated over time, is what teachers remembered and carried into their identities.

A third cross-cutting insight concerns the role of documents and drawings as more than corroboration. Documents showed that support had an organisational trace: emails, logs, meeting minutes, coaching records, and resource allocations made invisible care visible and accountable. Drawings showed that support had a symbolic life: a lighthouse, an umbrella, a puzzle, a timeline, a boat, and a heart each carried meanings that interviews alone might not have surfaced. The lighthouse, for example, captured guidance, hope, and direction at once. The umbrella captured protection without control. The puzzle captured the idea that no single act completes support; it is the fitting together of many acts that creates well-being. Together, these sources suggest that future studies of administrative support should attend to both the bureaucratic and the symbolic dimensions of leadership. What administrators write, fund, schedule, and recognise matters, and so do the images and metaphors teachers use to make sense of that work. When researchers and leaders listen for metaphors, they hear what teachers value most: being guided, protected, included, and trusted.

Another cross-cutting insight concerns language, culture, and transition. Participants' stories of entering US schools involved learning new systems, but also learning new relational scripts: how direct to be in asking for help, how to interpret feedback, how to signal competence without appearing to need support. For Filipino educators, values of respect, humility, and resilience shaped both help-seeking and help-giving. TP2 explicitly linked resilience to being Filipino, while TP3 and TP4 described learning to ask questions and accept help as a professional strength rather than a weakness. Administrators who were culturally responsive, patient, and explicit about expectations helped teachers navigate that transition. They did not assume that silence meant understanding, or that competence in one system automatically transferred to another. They offered guidance, clarified procedures, and normalised asking questions. This finding extends induction literature by showing that culturally responsive leadership is not only about curriculum or family engagement; it is also about how administrators interpret teachers' help-seeking, mistakes, and emotional expression.

Cross-theme comparison also reveals a pattern in what teachers remembered most vividly. They rarely quoted policy documents or formal evaluation ratings. They remembered moments: a text that arrived when a student was in crisis, a principal who stayed during a difficult parent meeting, a director who said it was okay to make a mistake, a colleague who covered a class, a shout-out that named a specific accomplishment. This pattern suggests that well-being is built in micro-interactions that accumulate into a reputation for care. Administrators who understand this will attend to the quality of ordinary encounters, not only to the design of formal programmes. They will notice that a hallway greeting, a timely reply, and a specific thank-you are not distractions from leadership; they are leadership. They will also notice that inconsistency is costly. A single caring act cannot compensate for a pattern of absence, just as a single critical act can loom large when trust is fragile. The implication is that leadership credibility is earned repeatedly, in small moments, over time.

Finally, the findings invite a reconsideration of what counts as evidence of good leadership in special education. Traditional indicators, such as compliance rates, observation scores, and documentation completion, capture important aspects of schooling, but they do not capture whether teachers feel safe, trusted, and belonging. The present study suggests complementary indicators: how quickly teachers receive help when they ask, whether they feel safe admitting mistakes, whether they experience recognition for specific work, whether responsibility is shared during crises, and whether they imagine a future in the school. These indicators can be explored through brief pulse surveys, focus groups, exit interviews, and reflective conversations, but they must be interpreted with care. Teachers will only answer honestly if they trust that their responses will not be used against them. That trust, in turn, depends on the very leadership the indicators seek to measure. The circularity is not a reason to avoid listening; it is a reason to listen consistently, act visibly on what is heard, and report back what changed. When teachers see that their voice leads to action, they are more likely to speak again.

That variation also helps explain why some support strategies worked in one moment and not another. Early in a teacher's tenure, frequent check-ins and classroom visits were experienced as reassuring because they signalled availability. Later, the same frequency could have felt intrusive if it had not been calibrated to growing competence. In these stories, administrators calibrated well: they reduced the intensity of direct oversight as trust grew, while

maintaining availability for crises. That calibration is consistent with Self-Determination Theory's distinction between structure and control. Structure clarifies expectations, provides feedback, and offers help. Control pressures, monitors, and removes choice. Participants experienced structure as supportive and control as undermining. Administrators who want to sustain well-being should therefore audit their practices for this distinction. They can ask: does this check-in clarify or constrain? Does this observation coach or catch? Does this meeting invite voice or require compliance? Does this resource remove a barrier or add a task? The answers, from teachers' perspectives, are the real test of whether a strategy counts as support.

Comparison across participants also clarifies that support was not experienced uniformly, even within the same district. TP1's story is organised around a contrast between schools: from fault-finding to safety-net leadership. TP2's story is organised around protection during storms: an umbrella, a team, and administrators who backed her in parent conflict. TP3's story is organised around adaptation and paying forward: from intensive mentoring to independence to mentoring others. TP4's story is organised around puzzle pieces: communication, collaboration, recognition, and trust fitting together into a completed heart. These different narrative organisations matter because they show that teachers do not simply receive support; they emplot it. They select turning points, assign motives, and draw moral lessons. TP1 learned that vulnerability is not weakness. TP2 learned that she was not alone. TP3 learned that she was powerful. TP4 learned that support is a whole made of parts. A leadership practice that honours this narrative agency will invite teachers to tell their own stories, rather than imposing a single account of what support should mean. It will also recognise that the same administrator behaviour can be storied differently by different teachers, depending on history, culture, and need.

Limitations

This study has limitations. The sample of four participants, while appropriate for narrative inquiry depth, limits transferability. All participants were Filipino special educators in Phoenix, and their experiences reflect that cultural and geographic context. The study relied on teachers' perspectives and did not include administrators', colleagues', or students' viewpoints. Narratives are retrospective and interpretive, shaped by memory and emotion at the time of interview. Data were collected during IEP season, which may have heightened awareness of workload and support. The study did not use quantitative measures of well-being, burnout, or administrative effectiveness, and therefore cannot estimate prevalence or causal effects. These limitations are not flaws in the design, but boundaries that should guide interpretation and future research.

Conclusion:

This narrative inquiry set out to understand how special educators experienced social and emotional support from school administrators and how that support sustained their well-being. The answer, drawn from four deeply storied lives, is that support sustained well-being when it was lived as a relationship, not merely delivered as a service. Teachers moved from anxiety to confidence when communication was accessible and collaboration shared the burden. They moved from dependence to autonomy when guidance was scaffolding rather than control and when trust grew over time. They found belonging when recognition, validation, and inclusive community made them feel seen and valued. Administrators supported them through responsive leadership, characterised by resources, validation, trust, and advocacy, and through collaborative professional development, characterised by mentoring, feedback, presence, and shared responsibility. Teachers navigated support through resilience, reflection, and growth, transforming difficulty into competence, identity, and commitment.

The practical message is both demanding and hopeful. Administrators do not need to invent a new programme to sustain special educators, although structured mentoring, regular check-ins, and wellness initiatives can help. They need to practise relational leadership consistently in everyday moments: greet teachers, listen without judgment, respond promptly, ask before assigning, share difficult work, provide needed resources, recognise specific contributions, trust professional judgment, and remain visible and available. These practices are low-cost, but they require attention, empathy, and follow-through. They also require organisational support: adequate staffing, materials, time, and clear procedures, without which relational care can feel insufficient. Schools that combine relational and organisational support create conditions in which special educators can thrive, not merely survive.

The theoretical message is that well-being is a relational, temporal, and situated accomplishment. It develops across time as teachers reinterpret past experiences, build present relationships, and imagine future professional selves. It develops through sociality as administrators, colleagues, and teams create psychological safety. It develops in place as classrooms, hallways, and meeting rooms become sites of belonging rather than isolation. Future research should extend this inquiry to other districts, regions, and school levels, include administrators' perspectives, and use mixed methods to examine how relational leadership relates to retention, burnout, and student outcomes over time. It should also examine how support can be sustained for administrators themselves, whose own well-being shapes the climates they create. For now, this study offers a clear invitation: if we want special educators to stay, grow, and teach well, we must lead in ways that make them feel supported, trusted, and at home in their schools.

For administrators, the study also reframes accountability. Accountability need not be experienced as surveillance when it is paired with support, transparency, and trust. Classroom visits, observations, and feedback can become coaching when they are specific, strengths-based, and followed by help. Documentation requirements can become manageable when administrators clarify procedures, provide time, and share responsibility. Parent meetings can become less threatening when administrators stand with teachers and trust their professional judgment. In each case, the formal requirement remains, but its meaning changes because the relationship around it has changed. That change is the quiet work of relational leadership, and it is the work that sustains special educators over time.

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