Special Education Teacher Shortage and Retention Factors

by

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Abstract

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The imbalance between qualified special education teachers and the number of special education students needing services has existed for decades. The shortage of special education teachers is not only a U.S. issue, but a global issue as well. Some research has indicated that special education teachers stay an average of 6 years in the classroom before leaving.

Research has indicated the number of new special education teachers leaving the field is higher than the number of veteran special education teachers that are retiring. This becomes very costly for school districts to continually recruit and hire new special education teachers. Therefore, school districts and administration need to take proactive steps to retain their special education teachers.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the retention of special education teachers. The instrumentation included a questionnaire and an interview protocol. The research questions focused on the following areas of retention: training, work rewards, work conditions, support, stress, coping strategies, and other factors. Research has indicated that factors such as training, rewards, positive work conditions, support, and coping strategies to deal with stress positively affect a special education teachers’ retention. The hope of this study was that the special education teachers will be provided with insight as to what was keeping them in the special education field, so that in turn the information gained may be used to retain incoming special education teachers and those who are thinking about leaving.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

There was a high level of teacher turnover in special education. Special education teacher attrition and transfer was up to 20% compared to only 12% for their general education teacher counterparts (Kiel, Heimlich, Markowetz, Braun & Weiβ, 2016). They noted special education teachers cited lack of support both from administration and peers, high workload, role conflicts, hard interpersonal interactions, misbehavior from challenging students; particularly those students that were diagnosed with emotional/behavior or autism spectrum disorders, and the high responsibility for these special needs students. The significant shortage of special education teachers spanned across all 48 states of the United States of America (Dewey et. al., 2017).

The Topic

There was a critical shortage of special education teachers. In many regions around the country the shortage of special education teachers continued to increase, even though there was a surplus of elementary teachers in the same regions (DeSutter & LeMire, 2016). This is a brief description of the proposed area of study.

The Research Problem

There was a high level of teacher turnover in special education throughout the U.S. The special education teachers’ attrition rate of 13% was twice that of general educators, and if looked at from a three-year perspective the attrition rate increased to 25%, with an additional 20% of special education teachers that would either transfer to a general education classroom or another special education position that was not in the classroom (Wong, Ruble, Yu & McGrew, 2017). At the researcher’s campus there was a
total of 10 special education teachers. In the past four years, 7 of the special education teachers the researcher had originally worked with have transferred to higher positions, moved from intensive to specialized, moved from intensive to VPK, transferred to another school in the district, and or to another school outside of the district. There was only one teacher that was still in their original position from four years ago.

**Background and Justification**

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), called the problem chronic and noted that teacher shortages in special education have existed for 20 years with no solution in sight (Marshall et. al., 2013, p. 127). Eighty-Two percent of special educators and instructional support personnel from across the nation reported that there were not enough professionals to meet the needs of students with disabilities ("Special education personnel shortages factsheet," n.d.). From 1990-2017 the U.S. Department of Education had special education as a teacher shortage area in Florida (Cross, 2016). School districts had alternative certification programs, preparation, routes to get certified in special education, but still had a shortage of special education teachers. Some special education teachers were intentionally dropping their exceptional student education certification.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Clearly there was a critical need for special education teachers. Brunsting, Sreckovic and Lane (2014), did a synthesis of 22 studies dating from 1979 through 2013 on special education teacher burnout, which was associated with teachers’ attrition, health issues, and negative student outcomes. The researcher of this study was unable to
find evidence in the literature on what special education teachers said keeps them in the special education setting.

**Audience**

The special education student population were the ones being affected by the special education teacher shortage. It was causing larger class sizes, which in turn meant less individualized instruction. Federal and State policy makers, along with district personnel, administrators, and teachers may benefit from reading this dissertation.

**Setting of the Study**

This was implied but would be the specific elementary school in Broward County where the data was collected. The elementary school served 545 students, from Pre-K, VPK, and K-5th grades. Forty-four percent of the students were Hispanic, 37% African-American, 13% Caucasian, 4% percent Asian, 2% two or more races, less than 1% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% Native American/Alaska Native. Seventy-four percent of the students were from low income families.

**Researcher’s Role**

The researcher of this study was a Pre-K Exceptional Student Education (ESE) intensive teacher. There were seven students in the class who were language impaired and had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The researcher of this paper had taught three years as a Pre-K ESE intensive teacher, and one semester as a kindergarten teacher, until she was put into a 2nd grade general education class for the remainder of that year.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the retention of special education teachers, by interviewing those who were still teaching in a special education classroom. This dissertation will communicate the reasons as to why they have stayed teaching in a special education classroom. Why is it that they succeeded in a special education classroom, but so many others have not? The answers revealed from the participants, may reveal key factors that will help other teachers withstand the pressures of teaching in a special education classroom. Thus, increase special education teacher retention, and decrease special education teacher attrition.

Central phenomenon: What would reduce the high level of attrition in special education?

Participants: There were 11 female special education teachers ranging in experience from 1 to 25 years of age who were teaching in a special education setting.

Unit of analysis: Current individual special education teachers.

Location: This is implied but would be the specific elementary school in Broward County where the data was collected. Seventy-four percent of the students were from low income families. Very few parents participated in school activities. Many of the parents did not speak English, or their English was very limited.

Definition of Terms

Certification. A certificate stating that the holder is eligible to work in a public school.

Exceptional Student Education (ESE). Special help that is given to students with disabilities.
**Special Education.** Educational instruction that is designed for students with special needs who’s learning cannot be met in the general education classroom.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There has been a critical shortage of special education teachers for decades (DeSutter & LeMire, 2016). The U.S. Department of Education reported that 47 out of 50 states anticipated a teacher shortage in at least one area of special education for the 2015-2016 school year (DeSutter & LeMire, p. 3). Internationally, there has long been a problem with the shortage of qualified special education teachers serving our students with disabilities (Wang & Mu, 2014).

The shortage of special education teachers has been attributed to several reasons such as poor working conditions, insufficient funding for incentive programs, increased education costs, credentialing barriers, professionals unwilling to work in certain communities, professionals not being able to pass state exams, etc. ("Special education personnel shortages factsheet," n.d.). Across the country researchers were trying to figure out what was causing the high attrition rate of special education teachers, and how to solve the critical shortage of special education teachers.

Theoretical Lens

The theoretical lens for this study was based upon the theory that all individuals have needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory relates to human needs and motivation, which was excellent in exploring the internal and external factors that were affecting special education teachers. Motivation concerns action, and the internal and external forces, which influence a person’s choice of action (Dinibutun, 2012, p. 114). Using Maslow’s theory may explain the high level of teacher turnover in special education. Per Maslow’s theory there are five basic needs (physiological, safety, love,
esteem, and self-actualization) that individuals must have met to feel satisfied to reach higher levels of achievement (1943). In addition, we are motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain the various conditions upon which these basic satisfactions rest and by certain more intellectual desires (Maslow, p. 394). Fisher & Royster (2016), Maslow’s hierarchy of physiological needs related to the teaching profession in the following ways (p.995):

**Self-Actualization**

Respect: obtaining recognition for work

Association: feelings of being part of a group, teamwork

Security: comfort, privacy, salary, cleanliness, order and feelings of safety

Subsistence: equipment, supplies, food, workshops

In relationship to a teacher the physiological needs/subsistence is the equipment, supplies needed to teach, professional development workshops needed for professional growth, and food. The safety/security is the teachers’ rewards both intrinsic/extrinsic, work conditions, and feelings of safety and order at their workplace. The belonging and love/association is the teachers support from peers, administration, parents/families, and paraprofessionals. This gives teachers the feeling of being part of a group, teamwork. The Self-Esteem/Self-Respect/Being/Self-Actualization is when teachers do the best that they can do. Self-actualization is an important component of teacher motivation (Illiya & Ifeoma, 2015). Teachers fulfill their potential and meaning in life through their creativity, independence, and spontaneity. Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs and motivation provided a new way to investigate the complex issues of teacher stress, burnout, and retention (Fisher & Royster, 2016).
Chronic Shortage of Teachers in Special Education

DeSutter and LeMire (2016), addressed the persistent shortage of special education teachers compared to general education teachers. They noted that the shortage of special education teachers continued to rise, while in many regions there was a surplus of elementary education teachers. Special education teacher attrition rates have been higher than general education teacher attrition rates for decades (Andrews & Brown, 2015). There are many different factors that affect whether a special education teacher chooses to stay in special education. The research found that experience with individuals with disabilities, having a family member that has a disability, and financial incentives did not seem to be an important factor when the participants had an interest in education, but were not choosing special education as a career path (DeSutter, & LeMire, p. 7). Many special education teachers choose special education as a career path, because they have an inspiration to help students that have special learning needs (Andrews & Brown, 2015).

To transition new teacher hires into their school settings, school districts were employing practices such as mentoring, coaching, and more recently, self-mentoring (Carr, Holmes & Flynn, 2017). This was being done, because many teachers were leaving the field of education within their first five years of teaching. Daily, one thousand teachers were leaving their teaching careers all together, while an additional one thousand teachers transferred to new schools trying to find better working conditions (Carr, Holmes & Flynn).

Some teachers transferred within their current district, while other teachers transferred to another district within their state, or to another state altogether (Feng,
Every time a district loses a teacher, it costs them thousands of dollars to replace them (Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016). Schools that have higher minority rates lose teachers to schools that do not have high minority rates (Feng). Similarly, schools in higher poverty areas lose teachers to schools that are not in a high poverty area (2014). Many special education students that are being served in the public-school system are minorities and live in the high poverty areas that teachers are leaving.

Special Education Teacher Retention

Teachers do not always want to remain a teacher, but their uncertainty of what it would be like in a profession other than teaching influences them to stay (Gomba, 2015). Throughout the literature there have been many variables identified that influence whether a teacher will stay teaching. Berry (2012) stated, “Teacher satisfaction and reported effectiveness were significantly correlated with four predictor variables: (a) the helpfulness of support from administrators, (b) the helpfulness of general education teachers, (c) whether the administrators and general education teachers understood the special educators’ role and responsibilities, and (d) when teachers reported a shared responsibility for the education of students” (p. 12). There is a need for effective strategies that will help retain teachers and reduce teacher shortages (De Stercke, Goyette & Robertson, 2015).

To cultivate an effective teaching community, principals must retain effective special education teachers (Bettini, Benedict, Thomas, Kimerling, Choi, 7 McLeskey, 2017). The cost of losing effective special education teachers is substantial both financially and academically (2017). Principals should provide effective special education teachers with supportive working conditions (2017). Teacher education
programs cannot provide special education teacher candidates with all of the knowledge and skills necessary to serve their students with varying disabilities, so it is important that administration play an important role in cultivating their special education teachers (2017).

Most teacher programs do not provide observation, structured feedback, or give the mentor the training needed to mentor new teachers assigned to them. (Marshall et. al., 2013). Mentoring is a tool that provides opportunities for reflection and engagement both for the mentor and mentee. Administrators can use mentoring to help novice teachers form professional relationships, learn how to share resources, not feel isolated, and get the emotional support they need to improve their classroom management, teaching methods, and their students learning experiences (Rogers and Skelton, 2013).

To meet the daily challenges of teaching, teachers need to have resiliency to remain in the education profession (Taylor, 2013). Administrators should provide professional development on resilience and model it (Taylor). A resilience model has professional learning communities, flexibility and resources to exercise autonomy, exercises on flexible locus of control, strategies and tools to cope with change, commitment, optimistic bias, education viewed as important, model and inspire tolerance, sensitivity, and appreciation for all, and efficacy beliefs (Taylor, p. 21-23).

Thibodeaux, Labat, Lee and Labat (2015) stated, “Principal leadership styles and behaviors had an impact on teachers’ intent to remain in the teaching profession, state-measured and non-state-measured subject area teachers’ perceptions did not have a significant impact on teacher job satisfaction, and there was a significant relationship between teacher job satisfaction and teacher mentoring on teachers’ intent to remain in
the teaching profession” (p. 247). Student’s success is also a contributing factor in a teacher desire to remain in teaching (Thibodeaux et. al.).

In the classroom setting teachers support and motivate their students to get them engaged, to help them succeed. Teachers also need support and motivation by their administrators to do their best and stay in the classroom (Kirkpatrick and Johnson, 2014). The more engaged teachers are, the more motivated they are, which increases productivity, and higher rates of teacher retention (2014).

There have been four key factors identified through previous studies to retain special education teachers: reducing stress through the training of coping strategies and cooperative skills; allowing opportunities for teachers to be creative; fostering collegial relations; and professional training through teacher preparation programs (Conley & You, 2016). The shortage is not being caused by teachers that are retiring, but by almost one third of the newly hired special education teachers leaving the special education field after three years (2016). There has been a decrease in enrollment of teacher special education programs (2016).

Training

**College Preparation.** Student teachers are not receiving high quality and developmentally appropriate support from their cooperating teachers (Clarke, Triggs and Nielsen, 2014). This is due to cooperating teachers not receiving specific preparation in becoming a mentor (2014). This is concerning, because student teachers consider their cooperating teachers to be a key contributor to their preparation of becoming a teacher (2014). Student teachers are being prepared through cross-categorical courses, which do

Policy changes have required special education students to be educated in the least restrictive environment. This has caused higher functioning special education students that were in special education classrooms to be put into general education classrooms. Due to these policy changes, special education teachers now have students with more significant learning needs that require intensive intervention (Dewey et. al., 2017). This means that state college and university teacher preparation programs need to improve to help special education teachers succeed in the classroom.

To satisfy requirements from the NCLB legislation, state departments of education are working with state colleges and university teacher preparation programs to produce more certified teachers to meet the demand (Banks, Obiakor & Algozzine, 2013). Colleges and universities are not preparing student teachers to work with the culturally and linguistically diverse population of students that they will be teaching in general and special education upon graduation (2013). It is important to prepare special education teachers not only to appreciate the diverse population of their students with disabilities but be prepared to teach the diverse population of students that they will serve.

Teacher preparation programs generally do not offer more than one course on classroom management or behavioral management techniques (Brunsting et. al., 2014). Universities and colleges try to incorporate many other different courses (i.e., assessment, differentiated instruction, reading, technology, math, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), etc.) into a special education degree. Therefore, it is important for
newly appointed special education teachers to seek out mentoring and further professional development for research-based classroom and behavioral management techniques (2014).

**Professional Development**

Professional development refers to ongoing learning opportunities that are available to teachers. It is meant to increase teacher’s skills/knowledge, enhance their working capabilities, and help them to become lifelong learners (Vu, Cao, Vu, & Cepero, 2014). Teachers generally are not highly confident when trying to address and implement evidence based best practices related to their students who have been diagnosed as having autism (Brock, Huber, Carter, Juarez, & Warren, 2014). Besides their students that have been diagnosed as having autism; teachers are not prepared to handle the academically and behaviorally challenging students that they will encounter in their classrooms daily (Rodgers & Skelton, 2013). Due to schools facing many complex challenges, professional development is the central component to educational improvement (Vu, et. al., 2014).

Professional development can be done through various avenues such as workshops, week-long summer institutes, state and national conferences, webinars, websites, college courses both on campus and on-line, study groups, coaching, and printed materials (Brock et. al., 2014). Online professional developments have become popular, because teachers can work around their busy schedules, have easy access to them, provide ongoing support, and supply resources that were unavailable to them before (Vu, et. al., 2014). Professional development opportunities are not uniform from school to school, district to district, or from state to state (2014).
Professional developments should be created based on evidence-based practices that will help support special education teachers to implement strategies and address the needs of their special education students that they serve in their classrooms. Training should include group skills and group theory, due to special education teachers having to work with many different individuals and teams throughout the day (Rock et. al., 2016). Professional development should help teachers improve their craft and improve student outcomes. A deluge of competing demands and conflicting priorities have heightened challenges for special educators working in today’s schools, and based on these and other challenges, the piece-meal fragmented approach to pre- and in-service training, which exists currently, needs to be replaced with 21st century models of special education teacher development that are seamless, technology enabled, comprehensive, cohesive, and career spanning (Rock et. al., p. 98).

Teachers have requested more professional development opportunities (Hughes, Matt & O’Reilly, 2015). Research has shown that professional developments that are authentic and meaningful to teachers, promote more change in their teaching practices (Thomson & Turner, 2015). Their findings also showed that altruistic and intrinsic reasons are the most influential in their decisions to continue teaching (2015).

**Rewards**

**Intrinsic & Extrinsic.** Employees are motivated by extrinsic rewards (e.g., pay, promotions) and intrinsic rewards (e.g., doing meaningful work); both rewards affect a workers’ intent to stay, job satisfaction, and work engagement (Stumpf, Tymon, Favorito & Smith, 2013). Some research supports that if employees are provided with high levels of intrinsic rewards, the demand for extrinsic rewards are reduced (2013). Intrinsic
motivation has great influence on a teacher’s intentions to stay in the profession, unless they are thinking about an immediate career change (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012).

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are important; there is not only a need to improve pay and conditions – employee autonomy, support and recognition are also critical (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012 p. 28). Even though teachers may work in difficult conditions, their attitudes, beliefs, values, and dispositions have great influence on whether they teach, and if they decide to stay in the profession (Gultekin & Acar, 2014). Teachers are mainly motivated by altruistic motivation such as the desire to help their students learn, improve society, and intrinsic motivations such as the enjoyment they get from working with their students, and the love of teaching (Thomson and Turner, 2015).

In the past extrinsic rewards tried have generally failed, but research has shown that teachers value intrinsic rewards (i.e., self-respect, responsibility, and a sense of accomplishment) as more motivational (Iliya and Ifeoma, 2015, p. 1734). If teachers’ goals are caring for their students and/or colleagues, then they are intrinsically motivated teachers (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2012). Intrinsic value and social utility value drives teachers’ decisions, mixed with the sense of compatibility of teaching (Low, Ng, Hui & Cai, 2047). Intrinsic rewards seem to be important factors in teachers’ decision making.

The importance of intrinsic rewards has appeared in the literature on teachers’ working conditions with regard to teacher turnover and attrition, satisfaction, and commitment (Rooney, 2015, p. 478). Support that encourages a teacher’s intrinsic motivation should be provided to keep them professionally motivated (Iliya & Ifeoma, 2015). Teachers work conditions have changed due to narrowed curriculum, and high-stakes testing, which has resulted in teacher’s intrinsic rewards diminishing (Rooney).
Teachers are intrinsically motivated by participating in the teaching-learning process, and management style (Gultekin & Acar, 2014).

**Work Conditions**

Work conditions affect everyone who works. Workplace conditions have been cited throughout the literature as the most prevalent primary factor affecting special education teacher attrition (Tyler & Brunner, 2014). Districts that struggle with high teacher turnover rates might want to consider their teachers’ perceptions of their working conditions (Burkhauser, 2017). Administrators play a vital role in their faculties workplace perceptions. Special education teachers rely on administration to provide the necessary working conditions needed, so they can effectively teach, and engage their students that have the most significant learning needs (Bettini, Crockett, Brownell & Merrill, 2016).

If there are multiple special education classrooms, administration needs to make sure that the case loads are equitably distributed by number and difficulty (e.g., high-maintenance parents, behavioral, multiple disabilities, etc.) (Williams, 2016). If caseloads are not equitably distributed, the special education teacher’s work conditions perception will not improve. The larger the caseload the larger amount of paperwork must be completed.

Peer support in the form of mentoring can improve a teachers’ perceptions of their working conditions. Research has indicated through teacher mentoring, induction, and professional developments, teachers are able to develop new skills (Bettini, et. al., 2016). These new skills help teachers to effectively handle different working conditions that they encounter throughout their careers.
The largest factor that contributes to a teacher staying at a school is their relationships with their colleagues (Resta, Huling, & Yeargain, 2013). The other factors for staying are supportive administrators, and relationships formed with students and their families (Resta, et. al., 2013). The largest factor that teachers say contributes to “high turnover” is difficulty with administration (Resta, et. al., 2013). Teachers are expected to do more with less resources, and if they need more resources they are expected to pay for them out of pocket and/or fund-raise (Resta, et. al., 2013). Special education teachers need the support of their peers, administration, families/parents, and paraprofessionals to successfully help their special education students thrive in school.

**Support**

**Peers.** Special education teachers and general education teachers are more likely to be committed to their place of employment; if they have strong relationships with their fellow coworkers, and a positive perception of their school environment (Jones, Youngs & Frank, 2013). Colleagues are important sources of information to newer education teachers that are learning how to navigate their various responsibilities in their new positions (Jones, et. al., 2013). To foster a work-life balance; which includes collegiality and professional growth, veteran teachers should include novice teachers in their planning and conversations (Greene, 2014).

Teachers should exchange ideas and best practices to perfect their craft. This is important, because teachers may be reluctant to ask their administration, and other school leaders questions due to the increased focus on accountability and teacher performance (Greene, 2014). Teachers should mentor one another and create support groups (Prilleltensky, Neff & Bessell, 2016).
A good mentor needs to have the required certifications, skills, experience, and people skills to support another teacher (Williams, 2016). Communication between the mentor and mentee is important. Mentors must be willing to share their instructional strategies and knowledge (2016). Teachers who mentor others become more reflective and analytical in their own teaching (Resta, et. al., 2013).

Mentors sometimes struggle giving feedback to their mentee (Williams, 2016). However, if a mentor does not provide their mentee with the proper feedback they may be setting their mentee up for failure (2016). There is little formal training on how to become a mentor (Resta, et. al., 2013). They noted mentors generally model what their own mentor did during their mentoring. Mentors tend to get wrapped up in their day-to-day teaching demands, so the mentoring falls on the wayside (2013). Administration should provide mentors and mentees with time to consult and collaborate with one another.

Support starts with the schools’ administration (Thibodeaux, et. al., 2015). An implementation of a quality mentor program by administration, would be effective in supporting teachers. It is important that administration pairs a mentor and a mentee that is compatible with one another, or negative mentoring may arise, and cause lingering consequences (Carr, et. al., 2017).

**Administration**

One of the most important factors for retaining special and general education teachers is support from their administration (Cancio, Albrecht & Johns, 2013). Administration should promote collaboration throughout the school by modeling the behavior; to build a strong community where faculty feel a sense of family and
belongingness (Gomba, 2015). Administration can use a variety of strategies to retain their teachers and build a strong community.

Practical strategies that assist administrators in supporting and improving the working conditions for teachers fall into five categories: (a) induction and mentoring programs, (b) outside resources and support, (c) professional development opportunities, (d) staff acknowledgement, (e) and availability of resources (Cancio, et. al., 2013, p. 307). When principals acknowledge that the job is difficult, they will have more success retaining their teachers (Hughes, et. al., 2015). Special education teachers that feel they are supported by their administration are more satisfied and committed with their positions and are less like to leave or transfer from it (Bettini, Cheyney, Wang & Leko, 2015).

Although administration is one of the most important factors in supporting and retaining special education teachers, they generally are not adequately prepared to do so effectively (Bettini, et. al., 2015). In most states administrators are not required to take any special education course work for their certification (Bettini, et. al., 2015). This leaves many administrators unprepared to support their special education teachers (Bettini, et. al., 2015).

Special education teachers have indicated that if their paperwork did not interrupt their teaching, they felt their administration supported them, and their workload was manageable, they would stay in the special education field (Belknap & Taymans, 2015). Administration needs to make every effort they can to keep strong special education teachers in the field (Belknap & Taymans). Instructional, emotional, and environmental
support from administration, and opportunities for personal growth impact a teacher’s decision on whether they want to stay or leave (Hughes, et. al., 2015).

Besides providing teachers with relevant professional development opportunities; administration should allocate time for teachers to voice their concerns, and actively listen when those concerns are being expressed (Taylor, 2013). Administration may want to implement a resource library in the teacher’s lounge; that provides relevant up-to-date books, journal articles, and other related electronic resources (Cancio, et. al., 2014). With a principal’s support, teachers can deal with the day-to-day struggles of working with their students’ parents and/or families successfully.

Parents/Families

Family-centered principles are important in early childhood special education and early intervention for special education children (Hansuvadha, 2009). Families provide the primary building blocks for their children’s learning and development, which significantly impacts their children’s positive outcomes (Hansuvadha, 2009). It is critical that teachers understand how to communicate with families (Hansuvadha). Student’s education requires effort from the family and school, which must be based on sound principles and perseverance for them to succeed (Sterian and Mocanu, 2013).

Parents and teachers need to communicate and collaborate to create a strong foundation of support for students to succeed (Schultz, Able, Streckovic, & White, 2016). Teachers curricula is very focused on the academics, so they need support from parents in working with their child to target their social skill development (2016). Research has found that collaboration between parents and teachers is critical to student’s social skill
Social skills help special education students succeed not only in the classroom, but outside of the classroom as well.

Although the parent-teacher partnership is important, it can sometimes be difficult to establish due to people’s attitudes and deeply rooted social traditions (Sterian & Mocanu, 2013). It takes professional wisdom, skill, knowledge and experience to establish and maintain a collaborative partnership (Mereoiu, Abercrombie & Murray, 2016). Students experience many benefits through effective collaboration such as services being aligned to their individual needs, improved attendance and behavior, and increased performance (2016).

**Paraprofessionals**

Due to school budgets, shortage of special education teachers, and increasing class sizes in special education; paraprofessionals and/or one-to-one assistants are being used to provide support in classrooms (Azad, Locke, Downey, Xie & Mandell, 2015). Paraprofessionals are an important component in classrooms that serve special education students (Azad et. al., 2015). However, paraprofessionals may not be receiving the training in effective strategies that they need to effectively engage with the special needs population they are working with (Azad et. al., 2015).

Special education teachers may not be receiving training on how to supervise the paraprofessionals coming into their classrooms. Special education teachers spend less than 2% of their time supervising their assistants (Azad et. al., 2015). Teachers that work with paraprofessionals should receive training on how to work with them, and paraprofessionals that work with special education students should receive training on the
specific skills that are required to work with the population (Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan & Hunt, 2012).

To meet their objectives, teachers and paraprofessionals need to work together as a unified team (Jones et. al., 2012). When teachers and paraprofessionals respect one another there is less stress, adults feel valued, which provides for an optimal learning environment for children and adults alike to thrive in (2012). Communication skills are a key component needed to establish a rapport with a colleague, and to be able to work as a team (Stockall, 2014).

Effective communication requires a person to listen, acknowledge the other person, ask both open-ended and closed questions, provide reflective feedback, paraphrasing, and clarifying if needed (Stockall, 2014). The biggest challenge most commonly mentioned, is the lack of time that teachers have to communicate with their paraprofessionals (Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016). Having effective communication with paraprofessionals and working together as a team in the classroom lessens everyone’s stress.

**Stress**

There have been several studies done in many countries around the world addressing the phenomenon of teacher’s stress, and the recurrence of it in the teaching profession (Carton & Fruchart, 2014). Teachers can be seriously affected by stress including but not limited to both physical illnesses and psychological disorders (Aguayo, Rodríguez, Mondolfi Miguel, & Pino-Juste, 2017). There are many factors that contribute to a special education teachers stress.
One factor that is highly related to teacher stress is difficult student behavior (Hinds, Jones, Gau, Forrester, & Biglan, 2015). Special education teachers that work with children diagnosed as having autism, and behavioral and emotional difficulties are 6 times more likely to leave their position than any other special education teacher (Biglan, Layton, Backen-Jones, Hankins, & Rusby, 2013). This is followed by children diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, physical disabilities, emotional difficulties, visual impairment, and mental retardation (2013). The misbehavior of the students is a major stressor that special education teachers deal with daily in their classrooms (2013).

Comparative international studies have shown that special education teachers stress levels are higher than their general education teacher counterparts (Kiel, et. al., 2016). They noted special education teacher’s students need constant support and have complex or profound needs that needs to be met daily (2016). Teachers become dissatisfied from their jobs, start to withdraw, become burnout, start having health problems, which all leads to attrition from their high levels of prolonged stress (Major, 2012).

Teaching quality and student engagement are directly correlated to teacher’s stress (Wong, et. al., 2017). Education reform has made teachers held to higher standards and accountability than before, which is causing administration to take desperate measures to meet the demands (Thibodeaux, et. al., 2015). Administration is a key factor to a schools’ climate. Through supports, and clarifying of roles, principals can counteract their teachers stress (Major, 2012).
In-service training should be offered to teachers from health professionals that specialize in coping and stress skills to help teachers cope with their stress (Yildirim, 2017). For teachers to be better prepared to cope with stress, teacher preparation programs should include more classroom management and psychological techniques that would help them deal with the stress, such as coping strategies, mindfulness, self-compassion, and acceptance (Prilleltensky, et. al., 2016). This is important, because a teacher’s primary function is to educate the societies they live in. The teachers’ psychological characteristics directly or indirectly effects the society as a whole (Yildirim, 2017).

**Coping Strategies of Stress**

Coping strategies for stress can be grouped into two categories known as active strategies such as social support, search for solutions, or palliative strategies such as expressing negative emotions, smoking, or drinking (Carton & Fruchart, 2014). Active strategies focus on eliminating the source of the stress for teachers (2014). Palliative strategies focus on reducing the deleterious effects of the stress for teachers (2014).

There are coping strategies that can help teachers deal with stress: always make time for yourself; including practicing meditation and solitude; stay healthy by exercising; eat a proper diet; get enough sleep; use friends and family as a support system; include some fun in your teaching throughout the day; and keep a good attitude and do not let things that are out of your control bring you down (Richards, 2012). Teachers should strive to keep balance in their life by reading, communicating with fellow colleagues, as well as networking with other professionals (Clement, 2017). There are many benefits for teachers who learn to cope with stress successfully (Richards).
Regardless of a teachers age or stage in their careers, all teachers have stress and job satisfaction, but strategies for coping with their stress differs with their age (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Young teachers (27-34 years) strategy is to be well prepared, work hard to keep up with everything, and avoid using sick leave (Skaalvik & Skaalvik). Middle aged teachers (35-50 years) strategy is being well prepared, work hard to keep up with everything, and use sick leave (Skaalvik & Skaalvik). Senior teachers (51-63 years) strategy start lowering their ambitions, reduce preparing time, exercised or relaxed after work, and used short-term sick leave (Skaalvik & Skaalvik).

Although it is well known that special education teacher’s jobs are demanding, special education teachers need to recognize how their job-related stress is affecting them both physically and mentally (Ansley, et. al., 2016). Using a variety of research-based coping strategies (i.e., aerobic exercise, yoga, cognitive behavioral methods, mindfulness training, and relaxation training) will help special education teachers to effectively manage their stress (2016). Researchers concluded that special education teachers should implement a stress management plan that includes psychological strategies and physical exercise to manage their stress (2016). Just implementing one of the coping stress strategies can help a special education teacher reduce their stress, versus a special education teacher choosing not to manage their stress at all (2016).

Mindfulness programs can help teachers prevent or minimize their stress symptoms (Aguayo, et. al., 2017). It improves teacher performance, physical health, cognitive abilities, as well as teacher-student relationships (2017). Mindfulness meditation has been shown as a useful tool for teachers to use for their psychological well-being (2017).
Conclusion

The retention rates of special education teachers continue to be lower than the retention rates of general education teachers (Andrews & Brown, 2015). School districts across the nation continue to have a difficult time trying to hire highly qualified special education teachers for their open positions (DeSutter & LeMire, 2016). Due to the shortage of special education teachers, school districts are hiring “out of field” teachers to fill the open positions (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Throughout the literature the factors as to why special education teachers leave or are thinking about leaving their teaching positions are due to high levels of stress from working conditions, heavy workloads, paperwork, student’s behaviors, and lack of support. These factors have been linked to special education teacher’s job dissatisfaction, and high attrition rates (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors affect teachers job satisfaction, and the decisions they make about their jobs (Shaukat & Nazir, 2017).

Special education teachers are either leaving the workforce all together, or they are going into a general education classroom. The average time a special education teacher to stays in the classroom is 6 years (Andrews & Brown, 2015). There is a gap in the literature on what makes special education teachers stay in the special education classroom setting. Attracting, developing, and retaining effective teachers as well as the preparation, recruitment, work, and career of qualified teachers are crucial to special teacher education in all countries (Wang & Mu, 2014, p. 358).
Research Questions

1. What factors contribute to special education teachers staying in special education?

2. What is the relationship between special education teachers’ retention rates and intrinsic/extrinsic rewards?

3. What is the relationship between special education teachers’ retention rates and support/motivation?

4. What is the relationship between special education teachers’ retention rates and training/stress management?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore the retention of special education teachers who were currently teaching as special education teachers. What factors contribute to their retention? Will the factors be like the researchers’ findings in the literature? Research in this subject area required close interactions between the researcher and special education teachers. It is hoped that the answers revealed from the participants, will help other special education teachers withstand the pressures of teaching. Thus, ultimately increasing special education teacher retention, and decreasing special education teacher attrition.

Qualitative Research Approach

The qualitative design chosen for this research study was the phenomenological design. The phenomenological qualitative study allowed the researcher to research special education teacher’s lived experiences and answer why they stayed in the special education field. By using the phenomenological approach, the researcher was able to ask open-ended questions during one-to-one individual in-depth interviews to gather “data that led to a textural description and a structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provided an understanding of the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell, 2015, p. 61). This phenomenological approach required text data to be transcribed, divided into manageable and meaningful segments, and then coded to build description and themes to answer the researcher’s questions.

Participants

This study was conducted in a South Florida school district. The targeted
participants for this study were special education teachers, who were currently teaching in a special education setting, at a specific school in Broward County where the data was collected. There were 11 female special education teachers ranging in age from 24 to 65 years of age at the specific school. All teachers were either European, African American and/or of Asian/Pacific descent.

The sampling procedure used for this study was purposeful homogeneous sampling in which the “researcher purposefully sampled individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that had defining characteristics” (Creswell, 2015, p. 207). Purposeful homogeneous sampling was the best type of sampling for this study, because it allowed the researcher to intentionally select the site and individuals to help the researcher understand the central phenomenon (Creswell).

The researcher sent all identified special education teachers an invitation, asking them to meet after school for an informational meeting. At the informational meeting, the researcher explained the purpose and procedures of the study (including the explanation of the questionnaire to collect demographic data, the interview protocol that was used to answer the researchers’ questions, the audio recording equipment that was used to record the interviews, and the informed consent that explained their rights as participants), and answered any questions that the special education teachers had. A consent form was given to the special education teachers who agreed to participate in the study to sign. The researcher then set dates for one-to-one interviews with the participants of the study either at school or off school grounds (whichever was convenient for the participants). The Table includes a synopsis of the participants.
Table

Participant List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Education level</th>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Bachelor's</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection Tools

The researcher utilized a questionnaire (see Appendices A) and an open-ended interview protocol (see Appendices B) to collect the data. After careful reflection, considering existing and alternative information sources, the researcher decided to create the data collection tools that would relate to the broader research questions of the study (McGuirk and O’Neill, 2016). The questionnaire provided demographic information from the participants. The questionnaire information allowed the researcher to describe the characteristics of the participants, and better understand the data collected. The semi-structured interview protocol corresponded to the topics (i.e., training, work rewards, work conditions, support, and stress) based on the research questions. The questionnaire and interview protocol were piloted and reviewed by a committee to ensure their validity.

The audio recording equipment for this study consisted of two different devices. The primary audio recording equipment was the Olympus WS-821 digital voice recorder to record the interviews. It has high-quality stereo recording optimized for conference
setting, playback efficiently with transcription mode, and has a USB direct connection for connecting to your laptop. The back-up recording equipment was a Jensen cassette player/recorder.

**Procedures**

An expert review of the questionnaire and interview protocol was done involving two participants. The researcher began with purposeful *homogeneous* sampling. A meeting was held after school, so volunteers would be given an opportunity to ask questions about the study prior to agreeing to become a participant. Participants were told the purpose, background and procedures that would be involved in the study (i.e., questionnaire and open-ended interview protocol, audio recording of sessions, and the informed consent that explained their rights as participants). Participants who agreed to participate in the study were then required to sign an informed consent notice, which documented their rights. After participants signed the informed consent notice, the researcher set up interview dates, times, and locations that worked for the participants.

Before the researcher started the one-to-one interviews, the questionnaire was given to the participant to fill out. Participants were reminded that the interview was being recorded. A semi-structured interview protocol was used during the interviews. The researcher read the introductory and a concluding monologue to participants. Participants were notified of their rights throughout the process.

After the researcher collected the data, the researcher met with each participant separately to perform member checks of their interview transcript to ensure accuracy. The researcher corrected participants interview transcripts and another member check
was done to ensure their accuracy. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to ensure participants anonymity.

**Data Analysis**

The information from the questionnaires was used to provide demographic data. The information from the interview protocols was qualitatively analyzed. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed by connecting the researchers voice recorder to the researcher’s laptop and downloading it. The Trint transforming talk transcribing website was then used to transcribe the interviews. After reading through the text data, the researcher divided the text into manageable and meaningful segments. The researcher used open coding to find key ideas from the collected qualitative data. Codes were then used to build description and themes. The transcribed qualitative data was color coded into patterns to reveal key ideas “themes”. The researchers’ intent is to triangulate and sort the data based off the themes. The triangulation of the data enhanced the accuracy of the study (Creswell, 2015).

**Ethical Considerations**

Participants were not given an incentive to join the voluntary study. The researcher approached the participants with respect and sensitivity including but not limited to (a) disclosing to participants the purpose and process of the study, (b) protecting participants anonymity, (c) not offering financial inducements to participate, (d) informing participants that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time both in writing and verbally, (e) showed respect to research site, (f) used ethical interview practices, and (g) explained the role of the researcher (Creswell, 2015).
The researcher used purposeful *homogeneous* sampling to select participants from the selected school. To ensure anonymity, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants and the school. The researcher removed any identifiable descriptors of the school from the data and the research. The researcher stored all digital data on a password protected personal laptop. All transcripts, research notes, and participants signed consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home office, and a locked briefcase during transport. Finally, all research materials will be stored securely for the required five-year period, and at the end of this time all records will be destroyed.

**Trustworthiness**

The questionnaire and interview protocol were reviewed by a panel of experts. The researcher used member checking to validate the study’s findings. During the member checking process, participants added or omitted comments. The researcher triangulated the data to assert the data interpretations were credible.

**Potential Research Bias**

The researcher was a special education teacher at the school where this study was conducted. In the last four years the researcher had seen special education teachers leave the profession all together and/or try to transfer to a general education classroom. The researcher had gone into teaching knowing that she was not going to stay. For the researcher; teaching was a stepping stone to move to a district position and become a professor. Having worked both as a special education teacher and a general education teacher for the last four years, the researcher had collaborated with the teacher participants and had background knowledge of the position. Therefore, there may have been potential for personal biases.
To combat personal bias, the researcher consistently reflected on her potential biases to stay neutral and objective throughout the duration of the study. The researcher objectively took interview notes and kept a reflective journal. The researcher bracketed “personal experiences – recognizing where the personal insight was separated from the researchers’ collection of data – was important, because it allowed a person to perceive the phenomenon “freshly, as if for the first time” (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p. 118). The researcher wanted to understand what factors helped retain teachers in special education positions, to stop the critical special education teacher shortage.

**Limitations**

The limitations associated with this research study was primarily the sample of participants and their demographics. It may not have represented all special education teachers. The study focused on one specific school location. There were very few men teaching at the school, and the ones that were taught in general education classrooms.
Chapter 4: Findings

Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher explored the lived experiences of eight select special education teachers in a school district in Florida to better understand what kept them in special education. Data was collected through a questionnaire and individual face-to-face interviews. The results yielded common themes among the special education teachers, which allowed the researcher to better understand the phenomenon.

The researcher learned that all the special education teachers had a strong passion to help their students succeed, whether they intended to stay in special education or not. They believed they were making a difference in their student's lives. Another significant finding was teachers who have been teaching for a while were happy with their salary and felt they earned it. While newer teachers felt their salary was not enough. It is important to note that general education teachers new to a special education position felt overwhelmed. New teachers on T.I.E.R (Teacher Induction for Effectiveness and Retention) found their own mentors, because their mentor did not have time for them. To provide context to the study, short introductions of each special education teacher's age, contract type, education and Florida certifications, years teaching, grade level and if they planned to stay in a special education classroom are given below. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Finally, the themes of the special education teachers' responses are presented.

Participant Summaries

Mary was a 28-year-old pay-for-performance teacher. She has a Master's in Early Child Ed. Special Education. Mary believed her initial college training had contributed to
her retention as a special education teacher. She had no Florida certifications. Mary has been teaching for 6 years. She taught a Pre-K Exceptional Student of Education (ESE) Behavior class. Mary planned on staying in a special education classroom.

Eve was a 60-year-old annual contract teacher. She had a Master's in Speech and Language. Eve believed her initial college training had not contributed to her retention as a special education teacher. Her certification in Preschool Education and Speech Language Impaired had expired. Eve had been teaching for 34 years. She was teaching a Pre-K ESE Specialized class. Eve planned on staying in a special education classroom until retirement.

Ruth was a 25-year-old pay-for-performance teacher. She had a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education. Ruth believed her initial college training had not contributed to her retention as a special education teacher. She had no Florida certifications. Ruth had been teaching for 3 years, but this was her first-year teaching in a special education classroom. She was teaching a Supported Kindergarten class. Ruth planned on leaving education all together at the end of the school year.

Esther was a 28-year-old pay-for-performance teacher. She had a Bachelor's in ESE K-12. Esther believed her initial college training had not contributed to her retention as a special education teacher. She had no Florida certifications. Esther had been teaching for 1 year. She was teaching a Pre-K ESE Intensive class. Esther planned on staying in a special education classroom.

Elizabeth was a 28-year-old pay-for-performance teacher. She had a Bachelor's in ESE K-12 with an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement. Elizabeth believed her initial college training had contributed to her retention as a special
education teacher. She had no Florida certifications. Elizabeth had been teaching for 2 years. She was teaching a Pre-K ESE Intensive class. Elizabeth planned on staying in a special education classroom.

Rachel was a 56-year-old annual contract teacher. She had a Bachelor's in Early Childhood. Rachel believed her initial college training had contributed to her retention as a special education teacher. She was certified in Pre-K-3, Specific Learning Disabilities and ESOL. Rachel had been teaching for 30 years. She was teaching a Pre-K ESE Specialized class. Rachel planned on staying in a special education classroom until retirement.

Hagar was a 55-year-old annual contract teacher. She had a Master's in Business Administration. Hagar believed her initial college training had not contributed to her retention as a special education teacher. She was certified in Elementary Education, ESOL and ESE. Hagar had been teaching for 12 years. She was teaching in a Varying Exceptionalities (VE) Resource room. Hagar planned on staying in a special education classroom.

Martha was a 65-year-old annual contract teacher. She had a Bachelor's in Art Education. Martha believed her initial college training had not contributed to her retention as a special education teacher. Her certification in Prekindergarten/Primary Education had expired. Martha had been teaching for 43 years. She was teaching a Pre-K ESE Specialized class. Martha planned on staying in a special education classroom until retirement.
**Themes**

As evident in the data, all the special education teachers had a strong desire to help their students and make a difference in their lives. Four major themes evolved from the analyzing of the data.

1. Teacher's reasons for staying in special education.
2. Student's progress and making a difference is rewarding.
3. Utilizing team support to stay in special education.

**Teacher's Reasons for Staying in Special Education**

During the interview, the special education teachers mentioned their reasons for staying in special education. Their reasons ranged from intrinsic rewards, extrinsic rewards and personal factors that motivated them.

The first interview was with Mary. Mary said that a family member had been diagnosed with autism. She wanted to help her family better understand the diagnosis. Now she wants to help her students and make a difference for them. She stated the following:

Right now, I'm still here, because I feel like I can still help these students and make a difference for them. I'm sure I think the day I decide I have to separate from special education...will be the day I realized no matter what I do...as much as I do...I'm not going to be able to make a difference or help these kids or teach them.

Eve had both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for staying in special education. She made the following comments:
I love getting the kids. As a matter of fact, I have one that I can think of for this year. He came in first day just making a lot of vocalizations even when I was talking in large circle time. And now you know he gets up and he's the calendar helper, the weather helper. So, that is my best intrinsic reward is watching language develop over time. Um, I would say probably the benefits the insurance, um I guess you know that I'm at the top of the salary scale.

Ruth decided to leave education all together, but stated she planned on finishing the school year. She did not consider the benefits as an extrinsic reward due to the fact she got them as a general education teacher the two years she taught in a general education classroom. She stated the following:

Just being honored to have them in my class, and then learn about them, and learning about the things they're going through, and being able to get to their levels, so I can teach them what they need to know, so that's really what I get out of it. Like teaching is not the job for the paycheck. You literally have to love the kids, you have to love what you're doing to like consistently to be here. It is all for the kids, that's why we're here.

Esther had both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons for staying in special education. She stated the following comments:

I guess you could say the benefits, the retirement, salary I think we should be paid more. Seeing or making a difference in students' progress. Just hearing like a parent say, "Oh my God they did something new today"…that makes me happy. They are talking more or and they're seeing more things…they're asking me for
more, they are able to spell a word. That...that makes me happy. To make a
difference, because if you're that one difference, I think they remember you.

Elizabeth had a neighbor that had a disability when she was younger that the other
children would not play with. She felt bad and played with her. Her younger brother was
diagnosed with ADHD and so her journey into helping people with special needs began.

She made the following comments:

The children. I really, like when I get the kids and they tell me everything they
can do when I read their paper and then at the end of the year I see their
growth...that...that's why I'm in it. It is sure not the income...I like to see them
grow...I really do. I can't leave...like I can't because, it's them they are the light
of the job, the kids, the students. That's what makes me stay, they're making me
laugh. I have children, so the time off...I really love the summer vacation,
Christmas, that is why I really like to be a teacher. I get to spend holidays with my
kids, so I really like that...that's a great benefit of being a teacher.

Rachel felt that she could associate with her students concerns and what they may be
feeling, because as a young child she experienced some learning difficulties. She stated
the following:

I continue to teach special education, because I want to be a catalyst in helping
children get a good solid educational foundation. It's my calling and my passion. I
enjoy the special feeling that comes with the bond of working collaboratively with
the students and parents so that the children reach their intended goals. A few of
the extrinsic rewards that contribute to me continuing in the field of special
education include job security and benefits.
Hagar is a Varying Exceptionalities (VE) resource teacher. This was her first-year teaching in a special education classroom. She did not consider the benefits as an extrinsic reward due to the fact she got them as a general education teacher the prior years she taught in a general education classroom. She stated the following comments:

Well I know that a lot of these children have various difficulties and I feel I can't leave them, because it's important to help them. What keeps me in is because, I really enjoy seeing children grow. So, it's an intrinsic reward. I really do it because, I love helping the kids. I like the small groups. I like the challenge. I like knowing that I'm helping kids that other people may forget about. You know when other people might forget these kids and count them out. I'm not counting them out. I'm not giving up on them.

Martha loves her students but talked a lot about retirement. She made the following comments:

The kids. It's the kids. Being with the kids…that's enough. I cannot imagine doing the kind of jobs that I see people that don't teach do. This is what I know how to do. Right now, drop is keeping me in, because that's found money to me. That quite frankly I've earned. So even though I would like to retire before the five years are up my husband is encouraging me to stay as long as I possibly can. It's found money…you know that alone is worth it to me and being taken out of intensive and back into specialized increased the length of my career without question.
Student's Progress and Making a Difference is Rewarding

Throughout the interviews, all the special education teachers shared how they were rewarded by their students’ progress and/or the difference they made for them.

Mary stated the following:

Making a difference in the young kids helping them make the little goals that we aim for um…seeing their progress. Especially the ones that we have had all year. From the beginning of the year until now, you know the progress we have made, especially in terms of learning behaviors and whenever we have our meetings…conferences with parents…like they can say the like see such a big difference in their child. That's pretty rewarding.

Eve's passion is speech and language. She made the following statement:

Watching him develop language over the course of this year…the growth I've seen, he's one of my most attentive students now, no noises.

Ruth believed that although her students had varying disabilities; she knew she could make a difference for them to help them succeed. She made the following comment:

I think these are the students that a lot of people write off, a lot of people you know discard, or say you know they can't do this they can't do that. And one…I don't like the word can't for any of my students. That's not a word we use, because everyone has the ability…if you need help that's fine. They might need a different way to do it…they might need different time to do it…a different space…or what have you…they can do it.

Esther loves seeing her students achieve their goals and making a difference. She made the following comments:
That the kids are achieving…I am happy with the kid's success even if it's just something little. So, I always said it's either me staying with the baby or me going to the high school and doing something there, because I can see a difference in high school and I can see a difference with little kids.

Elizabeth believes she can do a lot with her students when they are younger. She made the following statements:

But the babies…I can do a lot with the babies, so I love the babies. They are coming in and they can soak up so much in the few years I've been here, so I really like to be the foundation and teach them some things.

Rachel is rewarded by helping her students. She made the following comment:

I really believe in my students and strive hard to help them grow into productive little people.

Hagar enjoys working with her small groups. She believes she can make a difference for them to succeed. She made the following statements:

I think I'm better teaching the small groups. I enjoy it and I like kids learning. Every group of them. I really feel I'm doing something good and doing something good for children.

Martha believes she is making a difference with her students by giving them a creative outlet. She couldn't imagine herself being anything other than a teacher. She made the following comments:

Sure, these kids have special needs, but you can put the ones that need more language in a little group…that small group and work with them. I put something in their hands every single day to create something; a different kind of
material...that's me and I think that they flourish in that kind of an environment to create something every day...just put a mark on a paper and I'll put it on the wall.

**Utilizing Team Support to Stay in Special Education**

During the interviews, the participants all shared with the researcher how they utilized informal support to stay in special education. The informal support they received was the most beneficial support in retaining them in special education.

Mary stated the following:

I would say that team support is the biggest thing for me. Having the team…um having people, colleagues there to help support you, to help you with lesson plans, to kind of guide you through that…um especially as a new teacher having teachers who have been teaching for so long. I really kind of see them as a mentor and guide to me.

Eve made the following comments:

I would say at this school um, the team. The team has been supportive. You know a very supportive team. I would just say at this school for one year the team support.

Ruth stated the following comments:

Everyone is super helpful, no one…I'd never gotten to experience when I am talking to someone and you know they didn't want to speak or didn't want to help. But, I think that's the biggest thing for me coming back every year, knowing that I'm going to be working with such a great team.

Esther stated the following:
The help of the team. My coworkers really helped me. Especially this was my first year. That really helped. Yeah…my team support.

Elizabeth made the following comments:

I really like my team. My team is very helpful, everybody from the moment I came…which I came in the middle of the year. I got a chance to be in everyone's class. They were very helpful. They gave me a lot of resources. If I needed anything I could always go to them. So, the team that I'm on I really like it. They really helped me to like to come back this year. They are welcoming as well. So, my team is awesome. I really like my team. I really like the team.

Rachel stated the following:

I work with a phenomenal group of educational professionals who provide a team format in educating special needs Pre-K students. The support that I believe was most beneficial to my retention, was that of my colleagues. They were a part of the everyday facets of the job. I was able to benefit from their emotional and educational support.

Hagar stated the following comments:

The thing I don't necessarily love is it…I am on a team, but I'm not really on a team. All that I can say…all those people that have been helping me.

Martha made the following comments:

It's a great team. We take really good care of each other. I mean I absolutely feel accepted. I mean I don't ever feel like something happened that somebody is not going to help me with…never feel that way. I am very, very comfortable in this little group that we've created for ourselves. I have no questions about if I need
something or if somebody else sees something… I can't help… that's not going to happen. That to me is the most important part… the people that you work with. It's not what school you work in or the classroom you work in. It's the people that you surround yourself with. That's what's most important to me.

**Teacher Preferences for Relieving Stress**

Mary stated the following comments:

I have a big rule where I keep home life at home and school life at school. So, when I leave school I leave everything that is school related at school. I don't bring it home with me. So, you know I don't do anything school related once I'm home.

Eve made the following comments:

I don't think I have ever really used stress management strategies. I mean I've gone to employee assistance.

Ruth stated the following:

So, wow… at work my one strategy I use is counting because literally they will all come running towards me. There's just a lot comes at you and I can't always handle that, so like I count to five take a moment to breathe, always great, um a lot of times when they are doing their essential work or what have you I actually cut the lights off, because sometimes I think these lights remind me of a hospital, and it's like that can be also stressful. One big thing that as far as time management was um when our contracted time is over and at our school it's 2:50… I leave at 2:50 or as close as possible to that, because my first two years I overwhelmed myself. Praying every day for the opportunity, praying every day
for a blessing to come back. You know so, that definitely has been my stress management strategy.

Esther stated the following comments:

When I am worried about stuff, I go to my room and I close my door and I turn the TV on and I sleep. I separate myself from everybody else and I just go in my room and I cry. So, yes, yes, I do, I cry. Yes, I do, I cry. Understand when I'm stressed, I cry.

Elizabeth made the following comments:

I listen to a lot of music…like calming music when I'm in school during their little nap "I just get a little woosa while their sleeping." I also like to get massages on the outside. I am tense a lot from stress, so I get massages. I do a little alone time; just go to the movies or go out to eat or something that just relaxes me. I like music soothing sounds and stuff, that helps me stay.

Rachel stated the following:

I have learned that it is important to relax. It makes for a better teacher. There are times during the day that I remind myself to take deep breathes. Some of the techniques that I try, and practice are deep breathing, reading, listening to music and sharing concerns with colleagues.

Hagar stated the following comments:

I try to step back and try not to get irritated. I always exercise.

Martha made the following comments:

Camaraderie. Other people surrounding you that get it you know…that understand what you're going through or teacher next door that will if somebody
is just too much…we trade kids. That contributes to it…having somebody understand what your needs are, because they have the same ones…and helping you through it. That's all you need. You know that goes back to the teamwork thing and the support you get from your team. Of course, my family, my dogs, my knitting…absolutely.

Conclusion

Each of the eight special education teachers described what had kept them in a special education setting thus far. The special education teachers openly shared their reasons for staying in special education, how their student progress was rewarding, how they utilized team support and described their individual preferences for relieving stress. Overall, the special education teachers truly loved their students and felt they did the best they could to overcome the stressful factors of the job.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The number of special education teachers that leave the field yearly is double the number of new graduates entering the workforce (Brownell, Bishop & Sindelar, 2018). The researcher of this paper attributed poor working conditions, insufficient funding for incentive programs, increased education costs, credentialing barriers, professionals unwilling to work in certain communities, professionals not being able to pass state exams, etc. as being reasons for the shortage of special education teachers ("Special education personnel shortages factsheet," n.d.). Participants in this research study were asked research questions pertaining to their intentions, training, rewards, work conditions, support, stress, coping strategies of stress and other factors to determine what had contributed to their retention as a special education teacher.

This research study explored select special education teachers' lived experiences. Their lived experiences provided insight into what contributed to their retention as a special education teacher. The following four major themes were identified as (a) teacher's reasons for staying in special education, (b) student's progress and making a difference is rewarding, (c) utilizing team support to stay in special education, and (d) teacher preferences for relieving stress. Further discussion of the four themes is presented here.

Teacher's Reasons for Staying in Special Education

The reasons teachers stay in teaching are complex. There is no one reason teachers decide to stay in the profession. Over time data suggests that teachers can simultaneously become more extrinsically, intrinsically, altruistically and professionally motivated throughout their career (Chiong, Menzies & Parameshwaran, 2017). Eve
stated, "I would say probably the benefits, the insurance, um I guess you know that I'm at the top of the salary scale." Martha stated, "DROP is keeping me in. It's found money…you know that alone is worth it to me."

Veteran teachers felt a sense of relief that they had a sense of job security after teaching for a couple of years (He, Cooper & Tangredi, 2015). Rachel stated, "A few of the extrinsic rewards that contribute to me continuing in the field of Special Education include job security and benefits." There is no job security for pay for performance teachers.

Most teachers that stay often respond that they stay to make a difference in their students' lives and for the love of their students (Nieto, 2015). The data from this study showed that held true for teachers that were on the pay for performance scale. Most of the pay for performance teachers stated their salary was not where they would like it to be. Mary stated, "I'm still here, because I feel like I can still help these students and make a difference for them." Elizabeth stated, "I really like to be the foundation. It is sure not the income." Ruth stated, "Being able to get to their levels, so I can teach them what they need to know, so that's really what I got out of it. Like teaching is not the job for the paycheck."

Esther stated, "Seeing or making a difference in student progress. I guess you could say the benefits, the retirement, salary I think we should be paid more." If a teacher believes they are making a difference in their students' lives they will be more likely to stay in the teaching profession. Research on teacher beliefs shows that it does not only guide their classroom decision making, but also forms their teacher identity and impacts their retention as a teacher (He, Cooper & Tangredi, 2015).
Student's Progress and Making a Difference is Rewarding

The special education teachers in this study showed immense devotion to their students. They wanted to make a difference in their student's lives and found their student's progress very rewarding. To stay in the profession, teachers must love their students, teaching and the prestige of the profession itself (Akilli & Keskin, 2016). Mary stated, "really celebrating those little moments with him you know keeps me motivated to really appreciate the moments with my students that I have." Eve stated, "I love getting the kids. My best intrinsic reward is watching language develop over time."

Teachers play a key role in their students' progress (Banerjee, et. al., 2017). Ruth stated, "everyone has the ability, they might need a different way to do it, they might need different time to do it, a different space or what have you…they can do. I have committed to this." Esther stated, "seeing or making a difference in student progress, just hearing like a parent say, oh my God they did something new today…that makes me happy." Elizabeth stated, "the students' progress, I really like when I get the kids and they tell me everything they can do when I read their paper and at the end of the year I see their growth…that…that's why I'm in it."

Throughout teachers' careers making a difference in their students' lives continues to be a central component to them feeling fulfilled and committed (Gu, 2014). Rachel stated, "I enjoy the special feeling that comes with the bond of working collaboratively with the students and parents so that the children reach their intended goals. It's really heartwarming when parents open up and share about their child's successes." Teachers who enjoy teacher-student relations are more likely to commit to making a difference in their students' achievement (2014).
Teachers' job satisfaction has been connected to their ability to make a difference in their students' lives and their students' achievements (Tricarico, Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2015). Hagar stated, "It's the fact that they made so much progress. It makes me feel good that I'm helping someone, because I have a strong belief that no child should be leaving without knowing how to read…and if I can do that for that child…then I know that I can send them out into the world." Martha stated, "I put something in their hands every single day to create something; a different kind of material…that's me and I think that they flourish in that kind of an environment to create something every day…just put a mark on a paper and I'll put it on the wall and I think for me that's what makes it worth it."

**Utilizing Team Support to Stay in Special Education**

Successful teachers get support from their peers, administration and other colleagues to help them navigate through the system, strengthen their teaching practice and stay in the profession (Tricarico, Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2015). In this case study, most of the special education teachers stressed team support is what retained them in special education more than any other retention factor. Eve stated, "I would say at this school um, the team…the team has been supportive. You know a very supportive team." Ruth stated, "I think the biggest thing for me coming back every year, knowing that I'm going to be working with such a great team." To overcome challenges and stay in the profession teachers need to build upon the positive (2015). Esther stated, "My team really helped me, especially this was my first year." Rachel stated, "I work with a phenomenal group of educational professionals who provide a team format in educating special needs Pre-K students."
These interpersonal relationships are key to their fulfillment as a teacher and sense of belonging (Garwood, et. al. 2018). Elizabeth stated, "I really like my team. My team is very helpful, everybody from the moment I came…which I came in the middle of the year. I got a chance to be in everyone's class. If I needed anything I could always go to them. So, the team that I'm on I really like it. They helped me to like to come back this year. They are welcoming as well. So, my team is awesome." Research from Garwood (2018) found support from administration was less important to teachers than the relationships they have with their colleagues and teachers feel they need to look out for one another, because they are the ones in the trenches. Martha stated, "It's a great team. We take really good care of each other. I mean I absolutely feel accepted. I mean I don't ever feel like something happened that somebody is not going to help me with…never feel that way. I am very, very comfortable in this little group that we've created for ourselves. That to me is the most important…the people that you work with. It's not what school you work in or the classroom you work in. It's the people that you surround yourself with. That's what's most important to me."

The sharing of resources and strategies is a sign that a team is comfortable supporting and collaborating with one another (Glazier, et. al., 2017). Mary stated, "I would say that team support is the biggest thing for me. Having the team…um having people, colleagues there to help support you, to help you with lesson plans, to kind of guide you through that…um especially as a new teacher." Comfortable collaboration allows new teachers to feel good about themselves and helps them to move forward in their teaching, where they may have been stuck (2017).
Elizabeth who was a first-year teacher stated, "I really like my team. They gave me a lot of resources. She was like do you need anything? I'll come on over there. If I came across any problems she was like I'll be right over there."

**Teacher Preferences for Relieving Stress**

Teachers resort to various coping strategies to deal with their stress (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Teacher's most common preferences for relieving stress are listening to music and having support from family and friends (Cancio, et. al., 2018). Elizabeth stated, "I listen to a lot of music…like calming music when I'm in school during their little nap. I also like to get massages on the outside. I am tense a lot from stress, so I get massages. I do a little alone time; just go to the movies, go out to eat or something that just relaxes me. I like soothing music sounds and stuff…that helps me stay."

Rachel stated, "some of the techniques that I practice are deep breathing, reading, listening to music and sharing concerns with colleagues." Martha stated, "Camaraderie…other people surrounding you that get it you know…that understand what you're going through or teacher next door that will if somebody is just too much…we trade kids. That contributes to it…having somebody understand what your needs are, because they have the same ones…and helping you through it. Of course, my family, dogs and knitting absolutely help."

Doing relaxing activities such as sleeping, watching television, relaxing and other social interactions have been found to be extremely effective coping strategies (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Esther stated, "I turn the tv on and I sleep. So, you could say I use sleeping as a strategy. So, people are like "What's wrong? What's wrong?" and I am like just let me sleep and I am like I am overwhelmed here just let me sleep." Rachel stated, "I
have learned that it is important to relax. It makes for a better teacher. There are times during the day that I remind myself to take deep breathes."

Research shows other well-accepted coping methods of stress are exercise, meditation and free-time activities (Cancio, et. al., 2018). Hagar stated, "I always exercise." Mary prefers to do relaxing activities at home and not focus at all on work while at home. She stated, "I have a big rule where I keep home life at home and school life at school. So, when I leave school I leave everything that is school related at school. I don't bring it home with me. So, you know I don't do anything school related once I'm home."

Statistics indicate that many teachers use prayer to cope with their stress when faced with professional challenges (Hartwick & Kang, 2013). In this study only one special education teacher used prayer to help cope with her stress. Ruth stated, "So…again personally I am moving away from education now, but um I've lasted this entire year really from the support…really from you know my mother prays every day...prays with me every day. Yes, I pray every day to get me through it and at the end of the day I thank and pray for me to get through the next day. You know so, that definitely has been my stress management strategy."

Using substances, prescribed medication or smoking are the least effective coping strategies for teachers (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Ruth stated, "I also am now a huge wine drinker. So, that comes from education so thank you for that. When I go home…there is some wine there, so I am gonna get me some wine and do whatever else needs to be done. That's my coping now."
Eve was the only special education teacher that did not use any coping strategies for her stress. Eve stated, "I don't think I have ever really used stress management. I just…I stay because at the age I'm at. Um, kind of like I'm going to try to finish it out."

Stress is part of the teaching profession and it is imperative that teachers find effective ways to manage and cope with their stress to stay in the profession (Hartwick & Kang, 2013).

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

This phenomenological qualitative study focusing on the retention of special education teachers revealed significant findings related to extrinsic and intrinsic work rewards, intangible work conditions and teacher preferences for relieving stress. These areas were directly related to the retention of the special education teacher participants. Based on these findings there are numerous implications for practice that could be used to help retain special education teachers.

Extrinsic work rewards were associated more with veteran special education teachers' retention that included salary and benefits. That is since they are all at the top of the pay scale they are happy with their pay. None of the Pay for Performance teachers were happy with their pay. Most other jobs that require a bachelor's degree pay far more than what a teacher gets paid. If teachers' salaries were comparable to other jobs that required a bachelor's degree teachers would be more extrinsically rewarded. Teachers who have left the profession overwhelmingly recommended better salaries to boost teacher retention (Chiong, et al., 2017).

The intrinsic work rewards that the special education teachers expressed gave them the most satisfaction was associated with their students' progress and making a
difference in their students' lives. There are a variety of ways that the school district could effectively use these retention factors. Professional developments that pertain specifically to special education, assistance with writing goals and objectives, collecting data needed, and establishing measurable baseline information for their students are ways to enhance teacher efficacy, their student's progress and therefore the ability to make a difference in their students' lives. Teachers should be given a list of professional development opportunities provided throughout the year to sign up for that are relevant to them.

The intangible work condition that was associated with most of the special education teacher participants was utilizing team support. The administrator's role is very important in setting a positive environment in the areas of collaboration, acceptance and working together as a professional learning community. Staff and students would benefit greatly from this type of administrative support and guidance. Special education teachers should be invited to participate in both school and district wide decision-making opportunities that impacts them and their students.

Teacher's preferences for relieving stress was an area that varied by participants. This study found multiple coping strategies associated with special education teacher career retention. Schools and school districts should develop awareness and understanding of stress. They should develop a stress relieving/coping strategy program that would include simple coping strategies that could be implemented by the teacher in the classroom as well as out of the classroom, a resource to a professional, a gym membership as well as other resources. Colleges and universities should also address
stress, burnout and attrition in the courses they provide to their students (Cancio, et. al., 2018).

Caution is advised when interpreting the results from this study. This studies sampling did not represent the total population of special education teachers. It was based on one school in a district. Future research should involve multiple schools and districts to strengthen the results.

Second, this research study included both veteran and pay for performance teachers and found that they react and deal with stress differently from one another. In order to increase both teachers' careers, future research should involve the separation of the two types of teachers to strengthen the results.

The limitations of this study gave insight into suggestions for future inquiry on special education teacher retention factors. A qualitative study on pay for performance teachers lived experiences would be an important follow-up to this qualitative research study. Novice special education teachers tend to be more at risk to leave the teaching profession than their veteran counterparts (Cancio, et. al., 2018). The questioner and questions from this study would have to be revised. This would allow for a better understanding of how to retain our special education teachers that will soon be the majority, as the veteran teachers are near retirement.

A study on the development of a stress relieving/coping strategy program would also be an important research study. This would provide a platform for the change that needs to be implemented to retain our special education teachers at any stage of their careers. A happy teacher workforce improves students' achievement levels (Cancio, et. al., 2018).
References


Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.ezproxylocal.library.nova.edu/docview/1876310486?accountid=6579


Appendix A

Questionnaire
Questionnaire

1. Age:

________________________________________________________________________

2. Gender: Male ____ Female ____

3. Ethnic/Race: African-American ____ , Anglo-European ____ , Asian/Pacific Islander ____ , Hispanic ____ , Native American ____ , Other

_________________________________________

4. How many years have you been teaching?

________________________________________

5. What type of teacher are you? Annual Contract ____ Pay-For-Performance ____

6. What grade level do you teach?

________________________________________

7. How many students are in your classroom?

________________________________________

8. Do most of your students have more than one varying disability?

Yes ___ No ___

9. How many hours of instructional aide support do you get in a week?

____________

10. How many paraprofessionals do you have in your classroom?

________________________

11. Is professional development opportunities related to special education offered to you?

Yes___ No ___
Appendix B

Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol

Introduction:

I want to thank you for participating in my dissertation research study. My research study is based on special education teacher retention. I would like to find out what factors have motivated you to stay in special education, when so many special education teachers leave the field. May I have your permission to start recording this interview?

Intentions:

1. Do you intend to stay in special education?

2. If not – What factors are causing you to want to leave special education?

Training:

1. What degrees, certifications, and endorsements do you hold?

2. How did your initial college training contribute to your retention as a special education teacher?

3. How has professional development opportunities contributed to your retention as a special education teacher?
What professional development opportunities have you been given?

Were the professional development opportunities self-selected or authoritatively assigned?

What content of the professional development opportunities did you find to be beneficial and relevant?

Rewards:

4. What intrinsic or extrinsic rewards do you get from being a special education teacher?
   *Examples of intrinsic rewards are (making a difference, student progress, etc.).
   *Examples of extrinsic rewards are (salary, benefits, etc.).

Work Conditions:

5. How has your tangible work conditions contributed to your retention as a special education teacher?
   *Examples of tangible work conditions are (number of students, types of varying disabilities, class budget, resources, materials, classroom paraprofessionals, grade level, and type of class that you teach, etc.).
6. How has your intangible work conditions contributed to your retention as a special education teacher? *Examples of intangible work conditions are (staff morale, school climate, team support, feelings of acceptance, mainstreaming opportunities, and decision-making opportunities, etc.).

Support:

7. What types of support have you received since you have been teaching special education? *Examples of formal support are (New teacher orientation, assigned mentoring coach, etc.).

*Examples of informal support are (peer collaboration, mentoring, etc.).

8. What support was the most beneficial in retaining you in special education?

9. What support from administrators has been the most beneficial in retaining you in special education?
10. What support from parents/caregivers has been the most beneficial in retaining you in special education?

Stress:

11. What work factors have been a source of stress for you as a special education teacher?

*Examples of stress work factors are (students, parents, advocates, paperwork, curriculum, class size, etc.).

12. What other factors have been a source of stress for you as a special education teacher?
Coping Strategies of Stress:

13. What stress management strategies have contributed to your staying in special education?

14. Describe characteristics of your personality that may have helped you cope with stress and stay in special education.
   *Examples of personality characteristics are (flexibility, resiliency, sense of humor, etc.).

Other Factors:

15. Tell about any other factors that motivates you to be a special education teacher?

16. In a nutshell, can you tell me why you are still teaching in a special education setting?

Conclusion:

I would like to thank you for participating in my dissertation research study. I hope that this study will reveal factors that can be used to help retain special education teachers and stop the critical shortage of special education teachers.