

2023

## Teachers' Perceptions of High Teacher Turnover in Special Education

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Anikko Gorham

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Teachers' Perceptions of High Teacher Turnover in Special Education

by

Anikko Gorham

MA, Grand Canyon University, 2009

BS, Barton College, 2006

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2023

## Abstract

Nationally, special education teacher turnover is a significant issue for school districts. The problem addressed in this study was the high special education teacher turnover rate in one local school district in North Carolina. Guided by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this basic qualitative study explored previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district. Fifteen special education teachers who had separated from the local school district over the prior five years participated in semistructured interviews. Interview data were analyzed using open inductive coding following Yin's five-phase approach. Themes derived from the analysis included (a) special education is a challenging profession creating dissatisfaction at the workplace, (b) family and personal pressures strongly influenced teachers continuing in the profession, and (c) teachers experienced a desire for change into a less stressful position and/or more fulfilling career. These findings indicate that special education teacher turnover in the district was linked to dissatisfaction with working conditions and lack of administrative support at schools. A professional development project was designed to inform local school administrators about special education teachers' motivations for leaving the workplace and assist them with identifying strategies to reduce the high teacher turnover rate. By understanding and making efforts to address special education teachers' motivations for leaving the workplace, special education teachers are more likely to remain the workplace bringing experience and valuable human resources to the classroom which may result in positive social change for students and school communities over time.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to the loving memory of my aunt, the late Dr. Jeanette Davis, who passed away in 2014 due to breast cancer. I wish you were alive to share this milestone with me. You always encouraged me to further my education. I kept my promise to you that I would finish the doctoral program. Your strength, love, and support inspired me to achieve my goals. *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”* (2 Timothy 4:7). I hope I have made you proud!!

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

High teacher turnover has become a severe national problem, requiring the federal government's attention. The overall teacher turnover rate is currently 16%, with 8% of teachers leaving the teaching profession and the other 8% moving schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Fewer than one third of the teachers leaving their jobs are retired from the profession of teaching, but more than two thirds of the teachers leaving their jobs are changing careers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). *Teacher turnover* refers to teachers leaving their teaching position due to teacher attrition, teacher transfers, and teacher migration (Sutchter et al., 2019). *Teacher attrition*, teachers leaving the profession entirely, is the major contributor to teacher turnover. Attrition is responsible for 90% of teacher shortages each year (Sutchter et al., 2019). In the state of North Carolina, the percentage of teachers leaving the profession increased from 7.53% in 2019–2020 to 8.20% in 2020–2021 (North Carolina State of the Teaching Profession, 2022).

Policymakers pay little attention to teacher attrition and focus primarily on teacher recruitment policies (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Grant, 2017). Teachers' migrations have the same adverse impact on schools as those leaving the profession entirely because the vacancies must be filled, and the costs associated with replacement remain. For example, the economic cost to replace one teacher exceeds \$20,000 (Adnot et al., 2017; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Additionally,

teachers changing schools can lead to hiring issues for the hardest-hit schools, such as high-poverty and high-minority schools (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

The teaching profession has one of the highest turnover rates in the service industry sector (Clara, 2017). Teacher turnover creates a teacher shortage that impacts special education more than any other education field (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Forty-nine states, along with the District of Columbia, currently report shortages of special education teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This includes 98% of the nation's school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). A principal from one of the schools noted that many teachers transfer from special education to general education. This principal described special education teachers' jobs as more demanding with excessive paperwork (personal communication, November 11, 2020). Also, in special education, working conditions are difficult, and teachers often lack adequate administrative support and collaboration (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2017; Hasselquist & Graves, 2020). Thus, special education continues to be one of the disciplines with the highest rate of teacher turnover. Fifty percent of all schools across the U.S., and 90% of high-poverty and high-minority schools need qualified special education teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019). The persistent shortage of special education teachers, year after year, drives districts to fill special education positions with unprepared teachers, yet students with disabilities require highly qualified teachers to effectively teach them (Johnson et al., 2019; Langher et al., 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was implemented to ensure that students with disabilities are offered a free, appropriate public education. This legislation provides states with funds to ensure quality education for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). However, special education is still the discipline with the highest teacher shortage, especially in rural districts where administrators struggle to secure an adequate number of general education teachers (Brownell et al., 2018). The number of highly qualified special education teachers in North Carolina, for example, is 5.8 teachers per 100 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Schools are struggling to keep current teachers in the classrooms, and knowledge about their retention, as well as the high turnover rate of special education teachers, remains limited regardless of the increased legislative attention to special education issues (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Excessive teacher turnover in special education is one of the most critical issues in education and requires further research (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). In 2021, President Biden proposed \$9 billion in funding to address the special education teacher shortage (The White House, 2021a). Then, for the 2023 fiscal year, Biden proposed \$16.3 billion for special education and related services for students with disabilities in prekindergarten through 12th grade (The White House, 2023). Biden's increased funding proposal proves the urgency of the continued teacher shortage.

Teacher turnover rates vary across regions, states, districts, and subject areas (Peyton et al., 2020). According to North Carolina State Superintendent Catherine Truitt, attrition from the state's teacher corps remains a concern and a challenge state

representatives must address more aggressively. Attrition rates are higher in southern states than in northeastern states, where wages are better, classes are smaller, and investments in education are higher (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Although higher-spending northeastern regions have the lowest turnover rates, spending is not the only concern. In this study, I focused on the high turnover rate of special education teachers in one local school district in North Carolina.

### **Rationale**

Teacher turnover creates an imbalance in the labor market causing teacher shortages that force schools to hire unqualified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Gilmour & Henry, 2018; Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Moreover, high teacher turnover affects not only the learning of directly affected students but other students (Feng & Sass, 2017; Mason-Williams & Gagnon, 2017). For example, according to one of the principals in a North Carolina school district with a high special education teacher turnover rate, constantly changing teaching personnel can prevent instructional improvements and negatively affect teacher relations and collaboration (personal communication, October 19, 2020). Therefore, understanding teacher turnover is essential to keeping teachers in the classroom, especially with the growing interest in teacher diversity (Hansen & Quintero, 2018; Katz; 2018). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district.



### **Definitions of Terms**

*Attrition:* Teachers who change careers or retire from teaching (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

*Teacher migration:* Teachers who move to another special education position (Sutcher et al., 2019).

*Teacher transfers:* Teachers who leave special education for general education positions (Katz, 2018).

### **Significance of the Study**

Retaining special education teachers, especially with increased teacher shortages, is a high priority for school administrators (Bettini et al., 2020). Despite the focus on special education teacher turnover, understanding of teacher motivation to leave the field remains limited. Exploring special education teachers' perspectives on motives causing high teacher turnover is essential to gaining insights into retaining teachers (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). My study's findings could be used at the local level to design workshops for school administrators and provide them with knowledge concerning teacher turnover and teacher retention. The professional development workshop may improve school administrators' understanding of why so many special education teachers leave their positions and how schools could retain teachers. According to the director of human resources for the district chosen for the study, school administrators would appreciate more workshops on effective retention of special education teachers (personal communication, November 17, 2020). Long-term qualified special education teachers

who stay with a district throughout their teaching career would improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

### **Research Question**

The special education teacher turnover is a severe problem. High teacher turnover rates, along with the limited number of special education teachers available each year, contribute to an already high teacher shortage (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Thus, it is important to retain special education teachers to address the teacher shortage and provide quality education to students with disabilities. Exploring previous special education teachers' perspectives on motives causing the high teacher turnover could be helpful to improving teacher retention rates. In this study, I investigated the following question:

RQ: What are previous special educators' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district?

### **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this literature review was to provide the basis for studying the issue of persistent high teacher turnover in special education in the northeastern part of North Carolina. To research the topic, I selected peer-reviewed studies from databases such as Education Complete, ERIC, and SAGE Premier, accessed through the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. I also reviewed articles and books related to the theoretical framework used to guide this study. To obtain current data concerning the rates of special education teacher turnover, I accessed the websites of the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics. *Maslow's theory of motivation, special education, teacher supply and demand, teacher turnover,*

*teacher attrition*, and *job satisfaction* were keywords used to retrieve the relevant information for this study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework I chose to guide this study was Maslow's theory of human motivation based on the hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy of needs involves five levels of human needs: physiological, security, social, respect, and self-realization (Abulof, 2017; Burlison & Thoron, 2014). The main concept of Maslow's theory is that human development advances through the hierarchical satisfaction of needs. Lower-order needs must be met at least partially before the emergence of higher-order needs (Maslow, 1943). However, Maslow emphasized the possibility of exceptions to the order of needs where the order of specific needs might be reversed or certain needs may lose value in some people (Maslow, 1970). Key concepts of the theory: (a) individuals are motivated by current needs; (b) needs come in a hierarchy of prepotency; (c) preconditions such as freedom and seeking knowledge exist for basic needs as well, which affect human motivation; (d) the order of needs is flexible based on humans' differences and external environment; and (e) an individual's conduct is multi-motivated, determined by more than one need (Maslow, 1970; McLeod, 2018; Wininger & Norman, 2010).

Maslow presented the hierarchy of needs in 1943 and continued to develop the concept over several decades (McLeod, 2018). Maslow's theory is one of the most recognized and long-lived theories of human motivation, yet also the most misunderstood and misrepresented theory among academics and practitioners (Wininger & Norman, 2010). Despite this opposition, Maslow's theory has become the most popular and most-

often cited theory of motivation in various disciplines, including education (Abulof, 2017; Guo et al., 2019). According to McLeod (2018), Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a valuable concept to school management and teaching. The concept of the hierarchy of needs has been used by practitioners worldwide to understand employees' behaviors as driven by individual needs (Wininger & Norman, 2010). The theory has also been applied to design in the work environment (Guo et al., 2019). For example, Chretien (2014) used Maslow's hierarchy of needs to develop a hierarchy of needs pyramid in medicine. Kuranchie-Mensah and Amponsah-Tawiah (2016) successfully used Maslow's theory to examine employees' needs and workplace environments.

Maslow's hierarchy is a valuable theory to use in various organizations (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). According to Kaur (2013), Maslow's hierarchy of needs is "the best-known conceptualization of human needs" (p. 1061). The theory's continued resonance in scholarship across disciplines serves as evidence of its significance (Abulof, 2017; Bridgman et al., 2017). As Abulof (2017) noted, "However unscientific it may seem ... it explains human nature as something that most humans immediately recognize in themselves and others" (p. 508). The following example of Maslow's theory about how need motivates human behavior illustrates that satisfaction of a need dominates a person's attention:

For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interest exists but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food, and wants only food ... such a man can fairly be said to live by bread alone. But what happens to man's desires when there is

plenty of bread and when his belly is full? At once, other (and higher) needs emerge, and these, rather than physiological hunger, dominate the organism. And when these, in turn, are satisfied, again new (and still higher) needs emerge and so on. (Goble, 1971, p. 38, as cited in Seeley, 1992, p. 306)

The longer a need is denied, the stronger the motivation grows to fulfill the need (McLeod, 2018). Thus, the primary motivator of an individual's behavior is the desire to satisfy needs (Seeley, 1992).

Everyone has different needs, and everyone's behavior is motivated by the most dominating need, which they hope to satisfy (Maslow, 1943, 1954). In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the most prepotent of all needs driving human motivation is the physiological need (Maslow, 1987). This need must be satisfied at work and outside of the work environment to remain motivated and stay with a particular organization (Maslow, 1943, 1954). To support basic living needs, an employee generally desires normal working conditions, sufficient reward for the work done, and holidays. When these needs are satisfied, an individual seeks a safe environment to preserve satisfactory living conditions and employment and even to improve those conditions (Maslow, 1943, 1954). An organization's administration plays a vital role in supporting its employees' goals and needs by providing a guaranteed working place, economic encouragement, and additional support (Maslow, 1943). Once the security needs are met, employees seek a social belonging at work and outside the work environment. Again, an administration's support at the workplace is needed to create social and working relations. Grazulis (2007) stated respect and status play important roles next in this process of development. An

individual seeks recognition from their family, community, and employer. Recognition, support, and promotion at the workplace provide a basis for an employee's self-realization goals that could be achieving education, personal development, a promotion at work, etc. (Grazulis, 2007).

Maslow (1987) highlighted that satisfaction of needs is not an "all-or-none" (p. 69) occurrence. A person's needs are never satisfied fully; they are infinite. A sufficient or partial satisfaction of present needs is enough to lead to the emergence of higher-order needs (Grazulis, 2007). However, the hierarchy of needs is not a set of steps from one level to another (Maslow, 1987). Because of people's differences, exceptions to the order of needs are possible where the order of specific needs might be reversed, or certain needs may lose value in some people (Maslow, 1987; Wininger & Norman, 2010). For example, for some employees, respect and recognition may be more important than social belonging. While illiterate people may seek satisfaction of their needs only through work, others may pursue self-realization (Grazulis, 2007).

Moreover, the hierarchy of needs is not a fixed order that applies to every human being. The lower levels of basic needs are more generally applied to everyone than "superficial desires and behavior" (Grazulis, 2007, p. 4). According to Seeley (1992), needs emerge at the subconscious level, while behaviors at the conscious level develop through the evaluation process. The process of expressing the needs into action in an individual is influenced by culture, tradition, learning, constraints, etc. (Seeley, 1992). Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often divided into deficiency and growth needs, where the first four levels are described as deficiency needs, and the fifth level is referred to as a

growth need (Maslow, 1943). Once a deficiency need has been addressed satisfactorily, it becomes a salient need. On the contrary, once a growth need has been engaged, it may only become stronger because it emerges from a desire for personal development (McLeod, 2018). Unfortunately, the personal development process is often interrupted by a failure to attain deficiency needs (McLeod, 2018).

Thus, Maslow's theory of motivation was an excellent fit for this study. Specifically, in the process of analyzing the issue of high special education teacher turnover in North Carolina, I assessed teachers' motivations for leaving their workplace through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Everyone has different needs, and each teacher's decision to stay or leave is motivated by the most dominating need they hope to satisfy (Grazulis, 2007; Maslow, 1943; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). School administrators need to be concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Kaur, 2013; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Motivated teachers will then stay long enough to achieve their goals. Maslow's motivation theory could help school administrators understand how a teacher is motivated and where they are on the hierarchy of needs to better focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals (Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

Thus, I chose Maslow's theory of motivation to study the problem of teacher turnover. Specifically, in the process of studying the issue of high special education teacher turnover in North Carolina, I explored previous special education teachers' motivations for leaving their workplace through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

My study's findings were used to develop a professional development workshop for school administrators in the district based on a broader understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its application to retaining teachers throughout their careers.

### **Review of the Broader Literature**

In 2007–2009, during the Great Recession, many teachers lost their teaching jobs. Following the economic recovery, the issue of teacher shortage became a major concern in education (Sindelar et al., 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). While the teacher shortage implies the inability to fulfill vacancies with qualified teachers, the term is often used to describe an insufficient production of new teachers (Sutchter et al., 2019). To ensure that every school has a sufficient number of qualified teachers, the teacher demand must be considered regularly in the production of new teachers because of the continually increasing student population, changing pupil-teacher ratios, and teachers leaving their jobs (Shaughnessy et al., 2018; Sutchter et al., 2019). However, knowing the factors involved in teacher supply and demand aids little in resolving the teacher shortage.

A predictable school student population would allow for the preparation of a sufficient number of new teachers, unless there is a shortage of students willing to pursue the teaching profession. According to Sutchter et al. (2019), the number of teachers entering the profession has significantly declined while the school student population has increased. In addition, a pupil-teacher ratio would also predict the teacher supply and demand, if not directly affected by policy strategies (Sindelar et al., 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). The number of teachers leaving their jobs, which has increased in recent decades, is also predictable, considering teachers' dissatisfaction with the profession (Sutchter et



al., 2019). The lack of a national teacher-supply market for recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers throughout their careers is why the teaching profession remains unattractive for many (Bettini et al., 2017; Katz, 2018). According to Sutchter et al. (2019), there is no national analysis of teacher shortages or future prognosis, yet the problem of teacher shortages grows. Schools are forced to hire untrained teachers to meet demand, even in the field of special education, which requires highly qualified teachers to effectively teach students with disabilities (Shaughnessy et al., 2018; Sutchter et al., 2019).

In a study designed to analyze trends in the teacher supply and demand market, Sutchter et al. (2019) examined several federal databases to predict future ratios of teacher supply and demand under different assumptions and with different factors influencing the ratio. Sutchter et al. (2016) found that by 2025, with existing trends, the estimated teacher shortage would be over 300,000 teachers per year. Factors causing the shortage include (a) an enrollment decline in teacher preparation, (b) an increase in student enrollment, (c) a change in pupil–teacher ratios, and (d) high teacher turnover. To address the teacher shortage, the focus is on both increasing teacher preparation enrollment and keeping current teachers in the classrooms (Katz, 2018; Sutchter et al., 2019). In this study, the main focus was on why schools cannot keep current teachers, especially special education teachers, in the classrooms.

In the United States, the percentage of teachers leaving the teaching profession is 8%, and even higher for high-poverty and high-minority schools, which is much higher than in many countries around the world that offer supportive working conditions and

competitive wages (NCES, 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). The U.S. Department of Education could learn from high-achieving countries, such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada, which do not have high attrition rates. These and other countries around the world attract, prepare, and distribute highly trained teachers by increasing incentives instead of lowering standards (Katz, 2018; Sutchter et al., 2019). The investments made in these and other countries with lower attrition rates include (a) competitive salaries with additional incentives for disciplines and locations that are hard to staff; (b) high-quality teacher education, along with extensive teaching practice at clinical schools connected to the university at government expense; (c) mentoring by expert teachers, with both a reduced teaching load and shared planning time; (d) 10–20 hours per week of professional learning in collegial work settings; and (e) engagement of expert/veteran teachers in mentoring/coaching, curriculum development, and professional development (Sutchter et al., 2019).

In the United States, the teaching profession has the highest turnover rate (Clara, 2017). According to Sutchter et al. (2019), reducing teacher attrition would make a significant difference in balancing the teacher supply–demand ratio, and lowering the attrition rate by 50% would resolve the shortage issue. Although demand drives supply, it is expected that the teacher supply might improve. However, it is not likely that a teacher increase will be even across different disciplines (Katz, 2018; Sutchter et al., 2019). Special education is a discipline that continues to have the highest teacher turnover rates. Fifty percent of all schools across the United States and 90% of high-poverty and high-minority schools are short on qualified special education teachers (Carver-Thomas &

Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). Districts serving high-poverty and high-minority students have a 1.5 higher chance of hiring inexperienced teachers (Maready et al., 2021). Teacher turnover is a policy-flexible issue, however. To understand policies that would better address teacher turnover, it is essential to first identify the factors motivating teachers to leave the profession.

### **Teacher Turnover**

Teacher turnover refers to educators leaving their positions. The term could describe teacher attrition, transfers, and migration (Sutchter et al., 2019). Teacher attrition is the most potent contributor to teacher turnover. Even though a teacher transferring from special education to general education or a teacher migrating from one special education position to another does not contribute to the attrition rate, these types of teacher turnover still create many issues for the schools and affect student achievement (Adnot et al., 2017; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

### ***Drivers of Teacher Turnover***

The main driver of teacher turnover is the teaching circumstances, rather than student or teacher characteristics (Sutchter et al., 2019). According to Adnot et al. (2017) and Sutchter et al. (2019), the top five reasons for teachers leaving their positions other than retirement are childcare (37%), change of career (28%), dissatisfaction with accountability measures (25%), dissatisfaction with the administration (21%), and dissatisfaction with the teaching career (21%). Fewer than one third of the teachers leaving their jobs are retired from the profession, and more than two thirds of the teachers

leaving their jobs are those who are changing careers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019).

A portion of teachers leaves each year for a personal reason such as childcare. While these teachers create a reserve pool of teachers, it is difficult to predict how many will re-enter the profession. Teachers with more teaching experience are likely to re-enter the teaching within five years. The teachers' decision to re-enter the profession depends on economic conditions, alternative employment opportunities, and the teacher labor market (Sutcher et al., 2019). The main reason for the career change is dissatisfaction with anything from administration and leadership, lack of support, accountability pressures, career growth and professional learning opportunities, school culture, collegial relationships, decision-making autonomy, and workplace conditions, or other personal reasons (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Arviv Elyashiv & Navon, 2021; Guis, 2016).

Dissatisfaction with accountability measures refers to assessments and the lack of support to prepare students for examinations. Many teachers are concerned about their job security because of the increased accountability and high stakes testing policies (Sutcher et al., 2019). Workplace conditions, which refer to poor working conditions, that are especially common in high-poverty schools with disadvantaged students present a threat of losing a job as the result of school closures linked to increasing accountability under the No Child Left Behind (Fernet et al., 2016; Shaughnessy et al., 2018). Also, lack of resources and unfavorable pupil-teacher ratios affect student performance impacting teachers' job security (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Dissatisfaction with the administration refers to poor collegial relationships and lack of administrative support that drive teachers to leave their positions (Callahan, 2016; Hobbs & Putnam, 2016; Holmes et al., 2019). Teachers who find their school administrators unsupportive are most likely to leave their jobs. Other factors such as the quality of the leadership, instructional leadership, professional learning opportunities, and time for collaboration and planning also contribute to teachers' decision to leave the teaching career or change schools (Sutcher et al., 2019). School administrators should exercise supportive and encouraging behavior toward the teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019).

The teachers' limited ability to improve instructional practices because of the lack of decision-making autonomy adds to insecurity and dissatisfaction with their job. Teachers are dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities for professional advancement and overall job description. Also, teachers are unhappy with compensation tied to student performance. Many schools cannot offer a competitive wage because of the inequalities in teacher salaries across the school district, which leaves some teachers struggling financially (Bettini et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Teachers with little preparation are more likely to leave the profession than those with comprehensive preparation. Beginning teachers in special education are more likely to change a career than beginning general education teachers (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Scott, 2017; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). In a study designed to extend prior research about whether teachers will leave the profession and who leaves, Newton et al. (2018) examined when teachers leave and the dynamic nature of the teacher exit. Newton et al. (2018) found that recruiting capable teachers and ensuring working conditions for

long-term growth throughout their careers are the aspects that affect most teachers' decisions to stay or leave. Higher teacher attrition rates were also reported in high-minority and high-poverty schools with the fewest resources and less advantageous working conditions (Dewey et al., 2017; Grant & Brantlinger, 2022; Shaughnessy et al., 2018). Some states and regions also report higher attrition rates than others as a result of policy differences (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Along with teachers leaving the profession entirely, 8% of teachers leave special education for general education positions or move from one school to another to pursue better working conditions and higher competitive wages (NCES, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The migration of teachers from one position to another has the same adverse impact on schools, however, because the vacancies must be filled, and the cost associated with replacement remains. The economic cost to replace one teacher exceeds \$20,000 (Adnot et al., 2017; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Already poor working conditions affecting teachers' well-being, scarce resources, and continually changing teachers cause an adverse effect on student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019).

### **Teacher Turnover in Special Education**

The IDEA was implemented to ensure an appropriate education for all students. Since the legislation, special education enrollment has increased by 55%, while the demand for special education teachers grows (Gilmour & Wehby, 2019; Sindelar et al., 2018). Special education requires highly qualified teachers who can fully meet the needs of students with disabilities (Cancio et al., 2017; Gilmour, 2020; McLeskey et al., 2017).

Teacher turnover, which leads to teacher shortage around the country, impacts special education harder than any other education field (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). For example, the elementary school special education teacher turnover rate is 46% higher than elementary school general education teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The persistent shortage of special education teachers, year after year, drives schools to fill special education positions with unprepared teachers, while students with disabilities require highly qualified teachers to effectively teach students with disabilities (Johnson et al., 2019; Langher et al., 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019).

Special education teachers' jobs are more demanding and stressful than those of general classroom teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2017). Difficult working conditions, such as lack of support and collaboration and excessive paperwork, drive special education teachers to transfer to general education positions or change careers (Olsen & Haung, 2019; See et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2017). In a study designed to examine the predictors of special education teachers' intentions to leave, Conley and You (2017) found that administrative support and lack of team collaboration were the most significant factors motivating teachers to leave. Decision-making autonomy and workplace conditions also affect teachers' intentions to leave or stay (Conley & You, 2017; Ford et al., 2019).

Special education teachers working in high-poverty and high-minority schools are more likely to have alternative certification with no comprehensive preparation to teach students with disabilities (Dawson & Leytham, 2020; Flower et al., 2017). The turnover rate of teachers with alternative certification and less experience is much higher than that

of teachers certified through traditional programs (Dawson & Leytham, 2020; Flower et al., 2017). Shortcut alternative programs escalate the turnover and keep the teacher shortage rising (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dewey et al., 2017). Inexperienced special education teachers are more likely to change career than general education beginning teachers or transfer to general teaching positions (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). However, special education teacher turnover rates vary across states and within school districts. The rates are higher in the southern states than in the northeastern states, where the wages are higher, classes are smaller, and investments in education are higher (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Grant, 2017; Tran et al. (2020). One of the school districts in the northeastern part of North Carolina experiences a higher turnover rate in special education than other North Carolina districts, which was the reason for this study.

### **Connection Between Teacher Motivation and Retention**

Individuals, including teachers, are motivated by current needs (Maslow, 1987; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). To support basic living needs, teachers require sufficient reward for the work done. A teacher struggling financially, for instance, would not stay with the job. If and when the financial needs are satisfied, the teacher seeks a safe environment to preserve satisfactory living conditions and employment and strives to improve those conditions. A school administration plays a vital role in supporting their teachers' goals and needs by providing a guaranteed working place, economic encouragement, and additional support (Bettini et al., 2020). Teachers with unsupportive administrators are likely to leave their positions than those with well-supported



administration (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Uysal & Kayhan, 2018). Once the security need is met, the teacher seeks social belonging at work. Again, the school administration's support at the workplace is needed to create social and working relations (Tran & Dou, 2019; Burkhauser, 2017). Respect and status play an essential role in the teacher staying with the school. Recognition, support, and promotion at the workplace provide a basis for the teacher's self-realization and for achieving her/his full potential: higher education, personal development, a promotion at work, etc. A self-actualized teacher is a valuable asset to the school and to student achievement (Rajendran et al., 2020; Westervelt, 2016).

Everyone has different needs, and each teacher's behavior is motivated by the most dominating need, which they hope to satisfy (Grazulis, 2007; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). For example, if a teacher needs a sense of job security, the teacher's performance will be motivated by a job security offer (Sanjaya et al., 2023; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). It is not uncommon that higher-paid teachers leave their jobs, though. The financial aspect of the job, however powerful this motivator seems, cannot motivate a teacher to stay if it is no longer a driver of their needs and goals. The teacher's current motivator at this level may be broader responsibilities for further growth (Liu & Jie, 2017; Stefan et al., 2020; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

School administrators need to be more concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Inandi, 2022; Kaur, 2013; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Motivated teachers will stay long enough to achieve their

goals. Recognition of achievements, as soon as they appear, is the most potent motivator (Katz, 2018; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). However, motivation is not going to work, nor would it lead to job satisfaction, if a teacher with unsuitable skills is responsible for teaching, as in the situations when schools are forced to hire untrained teachers to meet the teacher demand (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This often happens in special education, a discipline that requires highly qualified teachers to effectively teach students with disabilities (Kaur, 2013; Sutchter et al., 2019).

Although basic or deficiency needs such as satisfactory living conditions, security, sense of belonging, and respect are more generally applied to all, individuals in the teaching profession desire growth such as higher education, personal development, contribution to the field of education, etc. A teacher's desire for growth is often disrupted if the basic needs are not met. Whether it is a basic deficiency need or a growth need, the dissatisfied teacher will investigate other opportunities to satisfy the needs. If the needs cannot be met through migration or transfer from one teaching position to another, the teacher looks for a career change and the opportunities to satisfy the needs elsewhere (Kaur, 2013; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). Maslow's motivation theory could explain to school administrators and policymakers how a teacher is motivated and where they are on the hierarchical pyramid, so they may focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals (Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). Teachers must be satisfied with their teaching career and all that it offers in order to teach students effectively. Satisfaction with a teaching career may require educational policy changes at the federal and local levels.

In the meantime, the U.S. education system lacks a systematic approach to recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers and employing accomplished teachers' knowledge and skills to improve the education system (Adnot et al., 2017; Sutcher et al., 2019). With little government support in teacher preparation and retaining of teachers, states and school districts with unequal resources confront: (a) different levels of teacher training with the least prepared teachers teaching the students with disabilities; (b) salaries below other occupations and even less for those teaching the educationally vulnerable students; (c) less desirable working conditions, lack of adequate resources, and lack of support, especially in high-poverty and high-minority schools; and (d) insufficient time for mentoring, collaboration, and professional development (Cancio et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2019). The U.S. Department of Education should adopt a systematic approach to teacher supply to meet the demand by equally addressing new teachers' recruitment and reducing teacher attrition. Policy interventions to implement comprehensive strategies at the federal and local levels are needed (Sutcher et al., 2019; Westervelt, 2016).

Based on what other countries employ to attract and retain teachers and achieve high student academic performance, the United States should focus on: (a) fostering parity with different professions' salaries for teachers, especially for special education teachers that enable schools to recruit highly qualified teachers to teach students with disabilities; (b) producing more highly qualified teachers through scholarships and career pathways; (c) providing effective mentoring, career development, and working conditions; and (d) developing a national teacher supply market to attract and retain

teachers throughout their careers so that states with teacher shortages and surpluses can work together (Bettini et al., 2017; Blazar et al., 2017; Sutchter et al., 2016). These suggestions are equally appropriate for both attracting and retaining teachers. Short-term policies for quickly filling the schools with new teachers would not sustain long-term qualified teacher positions.

Overall, teacher turnover, particularly in special education, is a severe national problem requiring attention at the federal level (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). Dissatisfaction with the profession and challenging working conditions significantly contribute to teachers' decisions to leave their positions. Teacher turnover, in turn, impacts students' academic achievement in general classrooms and in special education (Adnot et al., 2017; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond; 2019; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Meanwhile, school districts with consistently high special education teacher turnover rates, such as the one in North Carolina, would benefit from studies that provide an understanding of what causes exceptionally high turnover rates in those school districts.

### **Implications**

The findings in the literature review revealed information related to the turnover rates of special education teachers, including factors encouraging teacher turnover. Although teacher turnover is a national problem and requires the federal government's assistance, the turnover rates vary throughout the country and within the states. As with some eastern states, North Carolina has lower teacher turnover rates than other western regions of the country. However, one of the school districts in the northeast part of North

Carolina was experiencing consistently higher turnover rates in special education. Academic research was needed to identify factors that motivate special education teachers to leave the district. In this study, I explored the special education teachers' perspectives on what motivated them to leave their jobs in the school district.

The study's findings were used to design workshops for school and district administrators that would provide them with more knowledge about the high special education teacher turnover rate, factors causing teacher turnover, and motivational factors for teachers to stay. In a 3-day professional development workshop, school administrators would have the opportunity to review factors driving high teacher turnover in the school district and gain a broader knowledge on how Maslow's hierarchy of needs could be employed in the school settings to address the issue. Professional development would improve school administrators' understanding of how to retain qualified teachers, which would improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

### **Summary**

Everyone has different needs, and each teacher's decision to stay or leave is motivated by the most dominating need, which they hope to satisfy (Grazulis, 2007; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). School administrators need to be concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Kaur, 2013; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Motivated teachers will stay long enough to achieve their goals.

Maslow's theory of motivation suited this study well. Specifically, in the process of studying the issue of high special education teacher turnover in the northeastern part of North Carolina, I explored previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in a local school district in North Carolina through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. My study's findings could be used to develop a professional development workshop for school administrators in the district about a broader understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its application to retaining teachers throughout their careers.

In Section 2, I describe the methodology selected for this study. I also discuss the appropriateness of the research design for this study. This section includes the selection of the participants for the study, data collection, and data analysis. In Section 3, I present the study's findings. In this section, I also discuss application of the study's findings to educational practice. This section includes the implications of the study concerning the social change. In Section 4, I describe the proposed professional development project. I also present discussion, conclusions, and suggestions for future research. Finally, I discuss my experience concerning completing the doctoral study.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Research Design and Approach**

The purpose of this study was to explore previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district. Understanding the factors driving teacher turnover in special education is important for long-term teacher retention and student achievement. Thus, I researched the question: What were previous special educator teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district? To identify the reasons, I explored perceptions of special education teachers about the motives that influenced their decision to leave. For this study, I used a basic qualitative study approach to address the research question.

Among three methodologies: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, I chose a qualitative method for this study. The overall purpose of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of phenomena (Renz, 2018). The qualitative method is used to explore issues through human judgment by applying how and why questions (Roller, 2019). The qualitative method is used to assess how individuals experience and interpret occurrences by emphasizing words (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative research is applicable to studying participants' views and perspectives in various disciplines, including education (Yin, 2016). For example, Lynch (2016) effectively used qualitative research to explore principals' views on effective instructional practices for students with disabilities. The quantitative method is used to investigate through statistical analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2015). My research question did not require a statistical analysis. Mixed-methods research is used to examine research questions that require both

qualitative and quantitative inquiry to understand the research question from different viewpoints (Dawadi et al., 2021; Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016). The qualitative method was the most appropriate methodology to study my research question because it allowed me to understand previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district.

The chosen research design for this study was a basic qualitative study approach. The research question guided the choice of research design. The research question required an exploratory context inquiry of study participants' perceptions. Exploratory research is used to answer *what* questions and gain understanding of a phenomenon that lacks preliminary research (Yin, 2016). The basic qualitative study approach is applicable to studies requiring an understanding of an issue and human aspects (Ponce & Pagan-Maldonado, 2015; Rosenthal, 2016). Basic qualitative study design is a common type of qualitative study and has been used in various disciplines, including education, because of its simplicity and flexibility (Doyle, 2020). Thus, the exploratory basic qualitative study is used to explore *what* questions, rather than *how* and *why*, and a phenomenon's characteristics and people's attitudes toward an issue (see Hyejin et al., 2017; Nassaji, 2015).

The basic qualitative study approach supports the use of interviews to collect data. Additionally, the design supports the conversion of qualitatively collected data into quantifiable data for a descriptive representation of the findings (Nassaji, 2015). The information obtained from different contexts allows in-depth data analysis to provide an overall summary of the findings (Brien et al., 2016; Seixas et al., 2018). The basic



qualitative study approach allowed me to conduct thorough research into the issue and use the data for analysis and theoretical elaboration on the research problem (Ponce & Pagan-Maldonado, 2015).

Other qualitative research designs, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography, were not chosen for this study because these designs would not address the research question. A phenomenology approach is focused on subjective experiences and would not have addressed the study's purpose (see Yin, 2016). A grounded theory approach is used to systematically develop a social phenomenon theory, which would not apply to this study (see Khan, 2014). The ethnographic approach is used to investigate people's interactions in natural environments, which also did not apply to this study (see Honer & Hitzler, 2015; Krause, 2021).

### **Participants**

For this study, I invited participants among special education teachers who left a school district in North Carolina in the last 5 years. I made initial contact with the district's human resources via phone and email to obtain contact information for special education teachers who left the district. I invited 31 special education teachers to participate in the study, and of those, 15 participated.

The number of study participants depends on whether a sample is homogeneous or heterogeneous. A homogeneous sample requires fewer participants for data saturation. Also, a smaller number of participants should be engaged for a more in-depth inquiry (Hyett et al., 2014). Additionally, a sample size depends on the research problem and the complexity of the data gathered from the participants (Hyett et al., 2014). Considering the

uniqueness of the issue in this study, high special education teacher turnover within a specific district, 15 participants was a sufficient sample size for data saturation. Data saturation occurs when no new information is forthcoming.

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling, which allowed for the selection of special education teachers who could provide relevant information about the typical factors that motivated them to leave the district (see Yin, 2016). Specifically, in purposive selection of certain participants, I considered the relevance of the participants to the research question in this study. Purposive sampling is used when a researcher seeks to understand participants' perceptions and generalize a study's findings to similar settings (Anney, 2014; Cronin, 2014; Lynch, 2016).

The study participants' responses to the questions related to their teaching experience showed that the participants' years of teaching experience varied from 2 to 31 years, and all but one participant started their teaching career as a special education teacher. Twelve of the participants were special education teachers in the district for a short time, from 1 to 6 years. One of the participants left after 14 years of teaching in the district. Two of the participants started their special education teaching career in the district and left after 24 and 31 years of teaching. According to participant responses, none of the teachers left their positions to retire from their teaching careers.

All 15 participants were officially qualified for teaching students with disabilities. All participants had at least a bachelor's degree and a state license to be employed in special education. I assigned a conceptual code *qualified to teach students with disabilities* to eight participants holding bachelor's or master's degrees in disciplines

other than education and assigned *highly qualified to teach students with disabilities* to six participants holding master's degrees in special education and one participant who held a Ph.D. in special education. Although eight of 15 participants did not have a teaching degree, all 15 participants completed various training and preparation for the role of special education teacher. For example, Participant 3, holding other than an education degree, stated, "We had a lot of PD opportunities with the exceptional children team. First-year teacher additional support, beginning teacher program." Participant 8, holding a special education teaching degree, stated, "You name it, I had it: various reading training such as Foundations of Reading, Hill Center Training, Wilson Reading Training, Corrective Reading, Math Foundations."

Special education teachers working in high-poverty and high-minority schools are more likely to have alternative certification with no comprehensive preparation to teach students with disabilities (Flower et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2020; Sutchter et al., 2019). Additionally, Flower et al. found the turnover rate of teachers with alternative certification and less experience was much higher than that of teachers certified through traditional programs. However, in this study, while seven participants obtained certification through traditional programs, eight participants received alternative certification, and both groups possessed decades of experience in special education. Furthermore, all the participants attended various professional development programs required for special education teachers to support their teaching. The participants all taught in impoverished and high minority schools, and regardless of licensure or experience, all left the teaching positions in this workplace.

Before participants were contacted, I gained approval (02-02-21-0582763) from Walden University's Institutional Review Board to conduct the study. To protect the participants' rights, I ensured ethical research by following the principles of *The Belmont Report* (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). I presented the study's benefits and possible consequences for the participants including potential legal, economic, social, psychological, and physical risks (Yin, 2016).

After obtaining permission to contact the special education teachers, I connected with potential participants via email or phone and coordinated times to acquire the voluntary informed consent for participation in the interview. I presented myself to the potential participants as a colleague seeking to identify factors influencing special education teachers' decisions to leave their positions to address the special education teacher turnover crisis. I engaged in a caring relationship with the participants as individuals with needs (see Toombs et al., 2017). I described the study's purpose and its significance, offered to share the study's findings with the participants, and explained the participants' confidentiality by assigning numerical pseudonyms (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) in place of their names to ensure confidentiality. Collected information is stored in a password-protected computer. The completed study will be removed from the computer and saved on a USB flash drive for 5 years from the date of the study completion; after which, it will be deleted.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher is the main instrument in qualitative data collection (Yin, 2016). Qualitative research involves four types of data collection methods used to gather

different types of data: (a) interviewing and conversing, (b) observing, (c) collecting documents or archival records, and (d) feeling (Yin, 2016). After receiving informed consent, I contacted participants to schedule their interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each interview was conducted via phone based on the participant's availability. For this study, I interviewed 15 former special education teachers who left the research district. Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol (Appendix B) that I created. I used the content of the district's exit survey as my guide. After IRB approval, I received permission from the district to view the recently completed exit surveys to help inform the development of my own interview protocol. I modified and enhanced the existing district survey format to produce a viable interview protocol for my study. With participants' permission, I recorded the audio of the interviews, which helped me recollect participants' responses as needed. The interview protocol I created was the data collection instrument used in this study.

To answer the research question, I created the interview protocol with 25 questions: (a) six questions related to participants' education and experience; (b) one question related to student population; (c) five questions related to participants' reasons for leaving; (d) four questions related to participants' satisfaction with salary, affordability of adequate living conditions, secure working environment, and job security; (e) three questions related to communication, collaboration, respect, and recognition; (f) three questions related to administrative support concerning participants' needs, goals, and further growth; and (g) three questions were related to retaining special education teachers in the district. The protocol was designed to answer the research question

through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. All interviews were scheduled in 45-minute intervals, and I explained to participants that the interview may take less than 45 minutes. Interview length varied based on participants' responses to the open-ended interview questions.

Qualitative data were collected through individual interviews with former special education teachers who left the research district in the last 5 years. Data collection during the interviews consisted of listening to responses, audio recording, and note taking. I developed a transcribing language with abbreviations of possible concepts that may emerge during the interview for efficient note taking. Some of the questions on the interview protocol were used for preliminary data and were followed with open-ended questions to better understand participants' perceptions about leaving the field of special education. After each interview, I performed a transcript verification having participants confirm the accuracy of their interview transcript.

To conduct thorough research, I used a researcher's journal to record my own emerging understandings of previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace. In the journal, I also assigned a segment for reflective self-expression to record my assessments and viewpoints to help guide a bias-free investigation. In qualitative research, ensuring bias-free data collection and analysis is critical for conducting a valid study (MacDermid, 2017; Yin, 2016). In this study, the chance of bias was insignificant, considering my knowledge of special education and practical experience concerning special education teacher turnover. While no researcher is free of bias, I strived to present sufficient information to make my potential effect

evident so readers will be able to make their assessment (see Boutron, 2019; Yin, 2016). The journal may also be of assistance in conducting further research.

My role in this study was to explore special education teachers' motives for leaving their workplace. Understanding teachers' perceptions of the issue could help to address the district's special education teacher turnover. My professional responsibility is as a director of the exceptional children's program. While I am able to recommend teachers to be hired, principals within the district are the ones who recommend hiring at their individual schools. The direct supervisor of all teachers within the district is their assigned principal. The assigned principal completes teacher evaluations. I did not supervise or evaluate any of the participants. Mutual concern for improving special education teacher retention in the district and for developing good relationships with current and former special education teachers helped to stage the data collection with the potential participants. I acknowledge that there may be bias. I have witnessed firsthand and experienced high special education teacher turnover. The district struggles to stabilize and retain special education teachers. My experience in this work setting motivated my interest in this study and established my position as an insider researcher (see Heslop et al., 2018), which might create bias. However, I was conscious of bias by asking open-ended questions, and I used bracketing to not allow my personal view of the phenomena affect my own understanding of the responses provided by participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis, which consists of data management, analysis, and interpretation, relies on the data collection method (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Upon completion of the data

collection, to analyze data collected through the interview, I used Yin's five-phase analysis (Seixas et al., 2018; Yin, 2016). The analytic steps in qualitative research are abstract level of analysis (Akinyode, 2018).

Yin's five-phase analysis is as follows:

- **Compiling:** sorting the collected data and formally arranging the gathered information into a functional order.
- **Disassembling:** breaking down formally arranged information into smaller groups and assigning labels and codes or memos to vague ideas.
- **Reassembling:** identifying similar patterns and rearranging the groups into themes through the analytical process where data matrices may be created. Rival thinking is essential to identifying negative cases and to minimizing bias. Constant comparative analysis should be conducted to strengthen the credibility of the study. The analytic memo-ing practice is necessary to ensure a sense of completeness.
- **Interpreting:** developing a draft and creating tables and graphs where relevant to support the discussion of the data analysis.
- **Concluding:** drawing the conclusions.

These five phases allowed me to create a database to ensure a thorough analysis. As Yin (2016) emphasized, these five phases do not follow a linear sequence, but a recursive and iterative process that takes time to complete. I conducted a back-and-forth analysis to ensure the study's accuracy and credibility, because qualitative research is vulnerable to selectivity and bias (Baškarada, 2014; Yazan, 2015). Yin's five phases of qualitative data



analysis offer a logical approach to conducting a comprehensive study (Yazan, 2015). Also, I strived to demonstrate authenticity by providing a sound description of the data analysis.

During the compiling phase, I sorted the information gathered through the interviews and notes recorded in the researcher's journal into functional order for further analysis. This process of recording raw data into a recorded sheet in functional order is also called data documentation, which allows documentation of the collected information through every type of data collection (Akinyode, 2018). At the disassembling phase, I broke down the arranged information at the compiling phase into smaller groups to assign labels, codes, and analytic memos to record incomplete statements and ideas. Level 1- open codes and Level 2-category codes related the information to the study's main concept (see Yin, 2016). According to Miles et al. (2014), data coding aimed to examine the discrete data for similarities and differences. Also, data coding is designed to reduce the data. For example, an interview text is broken down into manageable and meaningful segments (Akinyode, 2018).

At the reassembling phase, I searched for patterns and arrange them accordingly. In this phase, constant comparative analysis in search of patterns, ideas, negative instances, similarities, and dissimilarities in the data involves a highly analytical process, which helps verify the data saturation (Cronin, 2014). According to Yin (2016), the search for discrepant, conflicting evidence demonstrates a strong, credible study. I maintained a skeptical awareness and searched for discrepant cases, rather than diminishing evidence, if such evidence is found (see Yin, 2016; Yazan, 2015).

At the interpreting phase, I created a draft with tables and graphs to interpret the study's findings beyond summarization. In describing the findings, I related the findings to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, extended by a call for action. The collected data provided insight into teacher retention and was used to develop a professional development workshop. The professional development workshop includes a 3-day program for school administrators in North Carolina introducing factors motivating special education teachers to leave their positions in North Carolina and the retention of the teachers based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

At the concluding phase, I discussed the entire study by describing the problem that prompted this study, the study's purpose, research questions, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the findings. Also, at this stage, I presented the study's connection to the real-world issue of teacher turnover and the transferability of the findings to other similar settings. Overall, a synthesis of the key findings was presented by conclusions. A conclusion is a concise summary of the study results (Moeller, 2015). At this stage, depending on the results of the study, I provided suggestions for further research.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

During the data collection process, all participants interviews were audio recorded. I used credibility and transferability to develop trustworthiness. I performed a transcript verification having the participants confirm the accuracy of their transcript for coding and themes provided accuracy of the data. A researcher journal was used to record

my own emerging understandings of previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Patterns that are contradictory to the themes that emerged are viewed as discrepant cases during the data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Analyzing the data for discrepant cases strengthens the credibility of the study by revealing inconsistencies in the research (Creswell, 2013). During the data collection and data analysis process, discrepant cases may occur (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There were no discrepant cases identified. If discrepant cases would have occurred, I would have included in the research findings. This would allow researchers a full picture of responses provided by the participants as well as increased trustworthiness of this study.

### **Data Analysis Results**

The primary purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace. The research question was: What were previous special educators' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district? I selected a basic qualitative study approach to address the research question.

In analyzing the collected data from interview responses and notes recorded in my researcher's journal, I used Yin's (2016) five-phase data analysis. I first sorted the collected information and arranged it into a formal database following the five-phase analysis. Next, I disassembled the data by breaking down the organized information into smaller groups and assigned conceptual codes where appropriate. Further, I identified

similar patterns and reassembled the groups into themes through the analytical process. I also created data matrices for a visual representation and analysis of the data. Then, I presented the interpretation and discussion of the study findings through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Lastly, I concluded the study's findings. In the following section, I present the study's findings.

### **Interview Findings**

During the interviews, 15 special education teachers who left the school district in the last five years shared their work experience in the district and their perceived reasons for leaving their specific workplace. The participants' responses showed that they all left their positions in the district voluntarily. It should be noted that many of the participants continued their special education careers in other districts, so the results may not transfer to special education as a profession. Interview data were analyzed using open, inductive coding following Yin's five-phase approach. Upon the data analysis, three major themes emerged motivating the participants to leave and they are: (a) special education is a challenging profession creating dissatisfaction at the workplace (b) family and personal pressures strongly influence teachers continuing in the profession, and (c) desire for change into a less stressful position and/or more fulfilling career. Three themes emerged from the qualitative analysis and the contributing responses from the participants. Table 1 provides a summary of the themes and subthemes derived from the interview data gave insight on participants answers to the research question.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Themes and Subthemes Derived from the Research Question*

Theme	Subtheme	RQ
Theme 1: Special education is a challenging profession creating dissatisfaction at the workplace	Subtheme 1.1: Dissatisfaction with teaching working conditions	X
	Subtheme 1.2: Dissatisfaction with leadership and support	
	Subtheme 1.3: Lack of financial compensation relative to self-worth	X
Theme 2: Family and personal pressures strongly influence teachers continuing in the profession	Subtheme 2.1: Standard of living	X
	Subtheme 2.2: Loss of time with family due to burdens of the job	X
Theme 3: Desire for change into a less stressful Position and/or more fulfilling career	Subtheme 3.1: Esteem needs	X
	Subtheme 3.2: Self-actualization needs	X

### **Theme 1: Special Education Is a Challenging Profession Creating Dissatisfaction at the Workplace**

The first theme identified builds upon three subthemes centered on dissatisfaction at the workplace. Thirteen participants stated that they left the workplace due to dissatisfaction with teaching circumstances. The dissatisfaction expressed by the participants fell into eight categories, and these categories were grouped into three subthemes centered on the underlying concept of supporting the teachers' psychological needs around self-esteem.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1 Dissatisfaction with Teaching Working Conditions***

High-minority and high-poverty schools with the fewest resources and less advantageous working conditions (see Dewey et al., 2017; Shaughnessy et al., 2018).

Fourteen of the 15 participants work in high-poverty, high-minority, or schools educating

primarily students of color. These teachers describe the more challenging working conditions that affected their decision to leave. For instance, Participant 1 stated,

Unfortunately, the school lacked resources, and the facility required repairs. I think that contributes to students' performance. If they attend a place where it is not taken care of, students will not feel like it is as necessary maybe for them, or they are not appreciated when things are breaking down. There are holes in the floor and all kinds of stuff. I think that affects students' attitudes and performance.

Also, Participant 15 indicated, "Working conditions (facilities, classroom resources, or school safety)- hostile at its best." Therefore, these teachers identified adverse working conditions contributed to the participants' decision to leave their positions.

Participant 4, also was dissatisfied with the job assignment, stated, "...going to different schools throughout the week. That was an overload going from the northern end to the southern end." Participant 10 highlighted that large class sizes and caseloads were issues, "I was very overwhelmed with the number of students I provided services to regarding the caseload. I had too many [individualized education program] meetings throughout the school year." Contributing to this subtheme, teachers identified the mental health needs of students and the lack of mental health training. For example, Participant 11 stated:

I think some of the main reasons for high special education teacher turnover in this district are an increased number of students with mental health issues and high behavior issues. Teachers were expected to teach students the academic

piece, but then there were emotional pieces to go with it. We don't have the mental health background to teach students with mental health issues.

Participant 15 stated, "There are a lot of students that transition from hospitals, psychiatric wards, mental institutes, and other places, which makes it a huge issue..." As Participant 2 stated, "It is never the students; it is always the outside factors" Appropriate support is needed to manage the education of students with disabilities effectively.

Beginning teachers in special education are more likely to change a career than beginning general education teachers (Scott, 2017; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Two of the three beginning teachers changed careers due to dissatisfaction at the workplace. Overall, dissatisfaction with the teaching circumstances was a major contributing factor to the participants' decisions to leave. Participant 8 stated, "Beginning teachers must do a lot of work, and some of the requirements have absolutely nothing to do with their current job. As a result, those teachers get burned out and leave within 1-2 years due to unnecessary requirements."

### ***Subtheme 1.2 Dissatisfaction with Leadership and Support***

Participants indicated dissatisfaction with school policies and practices influenced their decision to leave their teaching position. For example, Participant 15 stated, "School policies and practices were an issue because they were not being followed or, shall I say, were no real school policies in place." Participant 15 stated, "Job description or assignment was an issue at first until someone from the district level (EC Department) came down and explained to me exactly what my role was, and it made a lot of sense. I was once doing things because I thought it was my responsibility was actually someone

else's responsibility." Additionally, Participant 10 stated, "I did not feel the caseload was equally shared equally across the district."

Seven out of 15 participants were most dissatisfied with the lack of administrative support. For example, Participant 12 stated,

I did not feel supported by school administrators. They rarely came to visit my classroom or my students. I did not feel a part of the school. We were not always included in school activities or functions. They would come into my classroom when someone from the district level came to the school to do walkthroughs. It felt like we were treated beneath everyone else.

Other participants provided similar statements concerning administrative support.

Participant 13 decided to leave the field altogether due to dissatisfaction with the human resource department. Participant 13 stated, the treatment by individuals within the human resource department motivated the most to leave. Participant 7 stated, "The lack of support from the school principal. The lack of understanding from administrators and general education. It was very frustrating, and we never got recognized for the things that special education teachers were doing."

Also, the overwhelming responsibilities of special education teachers could be managed by providing them with additional resources, which contributes to the working conditions for long-term growth. For example, Participant 1 stated:

Sometimes there would be many students with special needs, and it just seemed like not enough time to support all of them. Then other times, it felt like I was managing the entire class, not just the students I was supposed to be responsible



for. It became an issue of the way things were structured to support students with special needs and for behavior issues. I wish there were more of a supportive program and more organization between administrators, counselors, and teachers. Just a more structured setup to provide support for students, especially with behavior needs. That was starting to bother me.

Additionally, the school administration's support at the workplace is needed to create positive social and working relations (Burkhauser, 2017) in support of teachers' belongingness needs. These participants identified teacher working relationships as contributing to the decision to leave the workplace. For example, Participant 7 said, "There was some tension between general education teachers and special education teachers. I liked working with my special education team and some general education teachers." Participant 1 stated:

The collaboration with general education teachers and special education teachers was almost non-existence. There was never a sense of urgency about planning together, collaborating, or coming up with ideas. The general education teachers wanted to push ahead with what they had for the curriculum, and we were just an afterthought as a special education teacher. I would bring up to them if we can meet and go over some issues, and if we meet, they will push through with their ideas. But, again, meeting with them is never productive.

Participant 2 also described the working relations between special education and general education teachers as influencing the decision to leave, stating, "To be honest, there were just certain things I did not see where I would progress in that area, and it wasn't so much

as administrative it was just the environment.” Participant 6 emphasized, “Not being treated as a person or an educator. Instead, being treated as property.”

Overall, the participants responses addressing administrators support were split. One of the participant’s responses was coded no support, two participants’ responses were coded minimal support, four were coded supportive to some extent, and 8 participants’ responses were coded supportive. Thus, eight out of 15 participants were satisfied with the support that they received from their administrations.

### ***Subtheme 1.3 Lack of Financial Compensation Relative to Self-Worth***

Financial compensation emerged as affecting motivation to remain in the workplace within two of the themes. Under the first theme, Subtheme 1.3, the participants identified the lack of financial compensation in relationship to the perception of self-worth for performing a challenging job in difficult working conditions. Participants were interviewed using the following question “Were you satisfied with the salary” regarding lack of financial compensation relative to self-worth. Twelve out of 15 participants agreed that a teacher salary is not adequate compensation for their work, four participants specifically expressed that they left their positions for financial reasons. For example, Participant 2 stated, “It’s like I could afford the bare minimum. There were some cutbacks.” Participant 6 said, “Not satisfied with the salary, not when you have neighboring districts with a higher supplement than you do, especially when you are doing the same job.” Participant 8, with 31 years of experience in special education, stated:

It was difficult making ends meet. It's not a lot of money at the end of the month. Having 25+ years in education and have not received a state pay raise for a long time. The pay raises that teachers have been given only apply to beginning teachers and not teachers who have years of experience.

Thirteen out of 15 participants struggled financially. "It's not poverty, but it was difficult making ends meet. The salary is super low and disrespectful. I have not received a pay raise for a long time" as Participant 8 expressed. Participant 11 suggested:

Offer incentives to bring teachers in and incentives for the veteran teachers. The teachers who have been loyal and working in the district should receive incentives to stay in the district. Special education teachers' incentives should not be the same as general education teachers. Special education teachers' incentives should be a lot higher due to the amount of work and responsibilities that come with the job. Moreover, the participants indicated, as any individual, a desire for promotions and pay raises especially when one is well deserved.

## **Theme 2: Family and Personal Pressures Strongly Influence Teachers Continuing in the Profession**

There were two subthemes that emerged under Theme 2. While not all participants elaborated on the specifics of the family/personal reason for leaving their workplace, some answers included a long commute to the workplace, relocation, and loss of time with family due to burdens of the job.

### ***Subtheme 2.1 Standard of Living***

Adequate financial compensation for the work special education teachers perform is also an aspect of the working condition for long-term growth. In Theme 2, family and personal pressures strongly influence teachers continuing in the profession, an additional financial subtheme was identified as participants cited compensation at rates so low it affected their ability to provide for families, improve or maintain acceptable living conditions, and have financial stability. Theme 2 and Subtheme 2.1 correlates to psychological needs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Participants were interviewed using the following question regarding standard of living: "Could you afford adequate living conditions?" Eight out of 15 participants expressed that they could afford adequate living conditions while others shared that barely making a living does not encourage a long-term career in special education. With an adequate financial reward, these participants would have been able to afford good living conditions with no long commute to work or a need to relocate elsewhere in search of a higher salary. For example, Participant 14 stated:

I wanted more out of my life, especially financially. The money I was making with a Ph.D. here, I could make that money with a bachelor's degree in another state. I devoted my time and energy to furthering my education to provide for my children and family the way I felt was adequate. I wanted my daughters to be able to go to the college of their choice and get a good education without worrying about if they could afford the tuition.

A teacher struggling financially to support basic living needs might not stay with the job. As Participant 1 stated, “We couldn’t afford adequate living conditions, we had to make a move ... I began exploring options outside of the county that would help my family and me with finances.” Eight out of 15 participants stated that they could afford adequate living conditions, however not satisfactory living conditions, as is explained by Participant 14:

Yes, I could afford the living conditions that I had chosen for myself at the time, but I was never satisfied with the living conditions. My living situation was based on my salary at that time. I wanted a bigger house with more space, but living in xxx, the cost of living was a lot higher, and I did not want to move to the district where I was working.

Moreover, even if the participants were able to make ends meet, they desired promotions because financial compensation, as described in Subtheme 1.3, was tied to perceptions of self-worth. For example, Participant 11 said they could afford adequate living conditions, “but I always want more.”

A sufficient or partial satisfaction of present needs is enough to lead to the emergence of higher-order needs (Grazulis, 2007). If and when the financial needs are satisfied, a teacher seeks a safe environment to preserve satisfactory living conditions and strives to improve those conditions. A school administration plays a vital role in supporting their teachers’ goals and needs by providing a guaranteed workplace, economic encouragement, and additional support (Bettini et al., 2020). Teachers with unsupportive administrators are more likely to leave their positions than those with well-

supported administration (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Uysal & Kayhan, 2018).

Overall, according to the study participants' responses, no economic encouragement has been provided to support these teachers' goals and needs. Eleven participants responded that they had a sense of job security, while four participants stated that they did not have a sense of the guaranteed workplace. However, as Participant 10 said concerning their job security, "Yes, I had a sense of job security because you don't have many people who want to step up to a plate and be a special education teacher." A feeling of job security should arise not because not many are willing to become special education teachers but because of administrative support and encouragement to succeed and become highly qualified educators for students with disabilities.

### ***Subtheme 2.2 Loss of Time with Family Due to Burdens of the Job***

Participant 8 stated,

I had been in that position for 14 years, and I loved my students, and I miss the school. I adored the administration. However, I was just done. I was done before COVID, and my last year was awful. All I did was work. I would work at school and then home. EC is a lot, and it's like a mountain that continues to pile up. It was a lot of paperwork, and we did not get any extra pay for it. My planning period was spent on paperwork. I would go home at night. My child saw I was working too much and when she said something to me about working all the time.

While Participant 8 highlighted family/personal reasons for leaving the workplace to be more with their family, it is evident that such circumstances arise due to the

overwhelming work special education teachers perform that is time-consuming with little financial compensation.

### **Theme 3: Desire for Change into a Less Stressful Position and/or More Fulfilling Career**

Arnup and Bowles (2016) and Guis (2016) identified several reasons teachers change careers, including career growth, accountability pressures, collegial relationships, and other personal reasons. Participant 11, who changed their career, stated, “I wasn’t actively looking, but when the opportunity presented itself, I felt that it was a good fit. Being in the midst of a pandemic, it was time to welcome change, and the opportunity came at the right time.” Participant 11, with 24 years in special education, accepted an administrative position in special education, which could be considered an advancement and professional growth. Thus, two of the participants, both beginning teachers, left their positions with the intention of leaving the teaching career. Otherwise, the participants in this study expressed that both feeling a lack of respect or belonging contributed greatly to the decision to leave.

#### ***Subtheme 3.1 Esteem Needs***

Respect and status play an essential role in the teacher staying with the school (Burkhauser, 2017). Subtheme 3.1 correlates to psychological needs of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs where individual’s need to feel respect and self-esteem (McLeod, 2022). In response to my question of whether participants were respected by coworkers and school administrators, 10 of the participants stated yes, and five said no. While only

five participants indicated that they did not feel respected, whether by their coworkers or school administrators, more than five participants experienced disrespect.

Participant 4 stated, “It was kind of like micromanaging between all of them. They had a thing against me and did not respect what I was trying to do.” Participants 6, 7, 9, and 12 all emphasized they experienced lack of respect from administrators than coworkers. Participant 6 indicated, “The principal did not treat me as a person or an educator. I was treated as property and was told to do what I was told and not ask questions.” According to Participant 7,

The biggest one was the lack of support from the school principal. Another one is the lack of understanding from administrators and general education. It was very frustrating and the lack of appreciation. We never got recognized for the things that special education teachers were doing. I did not feel like the school administrators and some general education teachers wanted to learn or understand special education.

Participant 9, also did not feel respected by school administrators, stated,

Difficulty with school building administrators. Miscommunication, mistreatment, feeling like I had to walk on eggs shells all the time. I was not able to speak without fear of someone twisting my words. I could not ask questions about decisions being criticized for what felt like minor things when dealing with student behaviors. I could not function under that pressure. The fear that I am going to get fussed at.

Additionally, Participant 12 stated,



I did not feel respected by the administrators. I felt respected by other EC (special education) teachers in the building but not with general education teachers.

General education teachers acted as if they did not want to teach our EC kids. It felt like we were treated beneath everyone else.

Too many intrusions on teaching time were another concern stated by the participants. For example, Participant 1 stated, “I was sometimes feeling like spinning my wheels and was not getting anywhere.” Participant 10, “I felt that I needed to take care of my mental health.” Participant 9 stated:

Miscommunication, mistreatment, feeling like I had to walk on eggshells all the time. I could not speak without fear of someone twisting my words, not being able to ask questions about decisions, being criticized for what felt like minor things when dealing with student behaviors. I could not function under that pressure. The fear that I am going to get fussed at.

None of the participants could recall any discussions concerning the long-term special education teaching career. For example, Participant 11 stated, “You just in that position, and that is just where you would stay. I was never encouraged to do something else besides being a special education teacher.”

### ***Subtheme 3.2 Self-Actualization Needs***

Recognition, support, encouragement, and promotion at the workplace provide a basis for the teacher’s self-realization and achieving their full potential: higher education, personal development, a promotion at work, etc. A self-actualized teacher is a valuable asset to the school and student achievement (Grazulis, 2007; Westervelt, 2016). Eleven of

the participants stated that they had received awards or recognition for the work done.

One of the participants indicated that they were supported in their desire to advance their careers. However, none of the participants have received a promotion.

During the interviews, the participants also revealed if the school administrators discussed their needs and goals for further growth, whatever is needed at the time to function as an effective special education teacher and grow professionally. The participants' responses were coded. The responses similar to (a) "there were times when they would do their observations on how a teacher can improve" coded as minimal support and encouragement for professional growth; (b) "yes, they would always ask if I needed anything; they were very supportive." coded as support but no encouragement for professional growth; and (c) "the principal gave me some pointers on things I can do to make myself a better educator through observations. Goals that I set for myself; I was able to meet the goals throughout the year. I received many compliments as well." coded as support and encouragement for professional growth.

### **Connecting the Findings to the Framework**

This study was grounded by Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory because research connects this framework to people's needs having to be met in any community or there is a risk of them wanting to leave that community for another that will meet their needs (Holmes et al. (2019). The community in focus for this study is being a part of the special education teaching community. This community is no different than any other community because if an individual special education teacher does not perceive their hierarchy of needs being met than there is a risk of that teacher wanting to leave the field.

In the field of education, we often think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs relating more so to the students rather than the teachers. We strive as educators to make sure students' needs are being met or risk losing their engagement in the classroom or in more extreme cases, losing our students to gangs who can provide students with a sense of belonging, which is a critical higher-level need that must be met according to Maslow's theory. However, not considering the teachers' perceived needs, as they relate to Maslow's theory is a possible mistake and one that needs to be considered more often, especially in today's classrooms where teachers are leaving the field at an alarming rate (Olsen & Huang, 2019).

This need was recently discussed by a group of Anxiety Specialists out of Seattle (2022) when they argued that perhaps it is time that we really consider how Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied specifically to educators. The authors captured the entire purpose of this current study because they connected the immediate requirement to consider teachers' hierarchy of needs to preserve teachers' mental health, a sense of belonging, and to ensure all their perceived needs, within reason, are met to stop the mass exodus of teachers from the field of the education. If local school and district leaders do not strive to meet teachers' hierarchy of needs as it relates to Maslow's theory, then they risk losing special education teachers, some who are highly qualified and needed to ensure the students' needs are also being met.

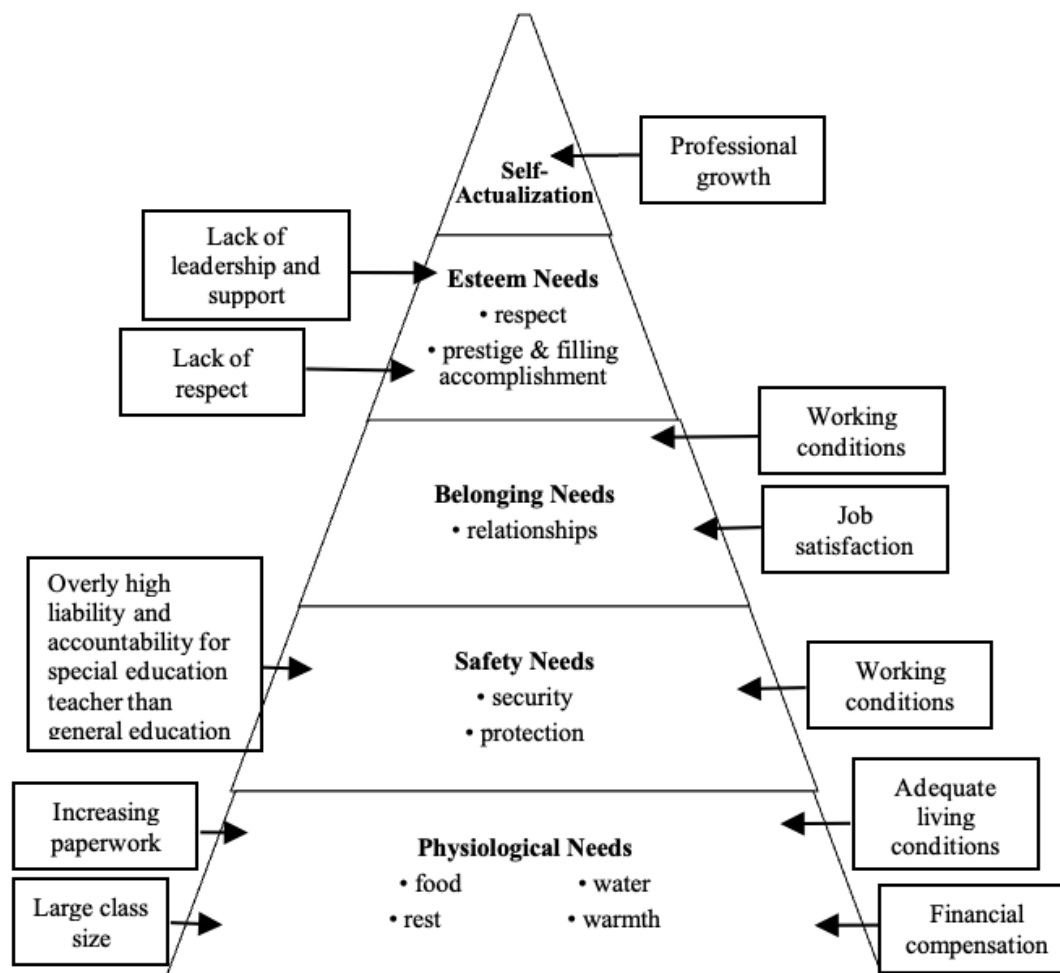
The results of this study are connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory in this section and the findings indicate that the teachers' hierarchy of needs are not being met based on each of the participant's specific perceptions. All the study participants do

have different needs, and their behaviors are motivated by the most current dominating need, which they hope to satisfy (see Grazulis, 2007; Maslow, 1987; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). This suggests that it is critical to consider all of Maslow's needs regarding teacher turnover, but it is also important to understand that different factors can impact a person's level of perceived needs in different ways. For example, financial compensation may not meet a teacher's perceived needs for being able to pay bills or provide food for their family. For another teacher, financial compensation may relate more to Maslow's higher need of esteem, which connects to being respected for the work that they do in relation to financial compensation.

The findings of this study are clearly connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs without doubt, and it is important to make this connection, but one must also consider that we cannot completely assume one factor or perceived need for leaving the field of special education completely connects to Maslow's theory in the same way for every participant.

**Figure 1**

*Perceived Motives for Leaving the Workplace Aligned With Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



Regardless, we must consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs to address the problem of teachers leaving the field of special education, but more importantly, we must consider the teacher as an individual person who comes to the teaching community with a different set of personal and professional goals and needs that cannot simply and completely be captured in the results of this one study or assumed to have the same

impact on each other in the same way. All of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are presented in Figure 1 and clearly highlight what needs are required for any teacher wanting to stay in the field or at least to feel satisfied with their career path. This section will highlight which needs were not being met by the participants who decided to leave the local research setting special education teaching community.

It should be strongly noted that Maslow (1987) highlighted that satisfaction of needs is not an "all-or-none" occurrence (p. 69). A person's needs are never satisfied fully, and they may change as a person goes through personal and professional growth changes which can impact perceived needs. A teacher, as an individual, wants more, especially when they work, accomplish, and grow professionally.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the most basic of all needs driving human motivation is the physiological need so we shall start there (Maslow, 1987). This first level need must be satisfied to remain motivated and stay with a particular organization or community (Acquah et al., 2021). The data analysis of the study participants' responses showed that to support their needs, at the very least, they desired normal working conditions, sufficient compensation for the work done, respectful relationships, and opportunities for growth, which was not happening.

Three participants responded, indicating that their basic needs were needed to be addressed to retain them in the district and they were not. The basic needs included: (a) adequate living conditions (physiological need); (b) overly high liability and accountability for special education teachers than general education teachers (security and safety); and (c) financial compensation (physiological needs and possibly the higher

need of esteem). Three other participants stated that attention to their basic and psychological needs was needed, which were (a) adequate financial compensation and the presence of social worker and the counselors for SWDs; (b) attendance to special education needs (both physiological and psychological needs); and (c) incentive not only to attract teachers but encourage them to stay. These responses affirm Maslow's hierarchy of needs and if they are not met, teachers will leave to have those needs met elsewhere in other schools, districts, or other professions.

School districts did not meet the psychological needs participants indicated that their psychological needs (esteem) should have been attended to, which are: (a) efficient collaboration between the special education teacher and EC team lead; (b) school administrators' competence regarding special education and support for special education teachers; (c) overwhelming paperwork affects the effectiveness of a special education teacher; (d) large class sizes due to the lack of organization, communication, collaboration, and respect; and (e) respectful relationships not only within the teaching community but HR and teachers. One of the participants indicated that opportunities for professional development were needed to retain them, signifying psychological need (esteem) and potential self-fulfillment need (Van Haitsma et. al., 2020).

Thus, most of the participants responded that their psychological needs were not met at their workplaces to stay with their jobs. Though almost all of the participants had an issue with the financial compensation for their work, the most current and dominating need was psychological need. The psychological need includes satisfactory working conditions and an environment where respect and opportunities for growth are present.

The next question addressing this topic asked What do you think are the main reasons for this district's high special education teacher turnover? The concepts that unfolded were lack of leadership support, lack of respect/appreciation, lack of innovative leadership concerning special education, overwhelming responsibilities and accountability, low salary, no appropriate mentorship for beginning teachers, and class sizes.

Finally, teachers were asked, "What suggestion do you have for improving special education teacher retention in the district? The themes that unfolded were (a) competent leadership in regard to special education; (b) respectful collaboration, inclusiveness, and support in managing students and paperwork; (c) housing opportunities for teachers in the district; (d) competitive salary and incentives; and (e) specific training and support for beginning teachers. In addition, the participants offered other reasons for leaving such as lack of incentives.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district. All 15 special education teachers left their teaching positions in the district due to dissatisfaction with one or more factors such as dissatisfaction at the workplace, family/personal reasons, financial reason, or career change. The interview responses showed that, after the departure, two of the participants with decades of experience in special education took administrative positions in special education. It could be in pursuit of their full potential and self-actualization needs. However, it is not if these participants



were actively seeking an administrative position. Three of the participants left the teaching career entirely where two of the participants left their jobs with the intent of leaving special education and one participant left for family/personal reasons, one of the participants retired not because they pursued a retirement but due to dissatisfaction at the workplace, and 9 participants accepted special education teacher positions in other districts or other states. Many participants continued their careers in special education but away from the district.

Recruiting capable teachers and ensuring working conditions for long-term growth throughout their careers are the aspects that affect most teachers' decisions to stay or leave (Newton et al., 2018). Recruiting capable teachers could be understood as hiring special education teachers with years of teaching experience and adequate training regarding special education because the education of students with disabilities requires highly qualified teachers (Gilmour & Henry, 2018; Kini & Podolsky, 2016). However, high special education teacher turnover often forces schools to hire unqualified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Gilmour & Henry, 2018). In this study, only two participants, both with two total years of teaching, left for a career change reason. All 15 participants but one started their teaching career as a special education teacher, and some of them became highly qualified capable teachers with decades of significant experience. Thus, based on this study, recruiting capable teachers is not the aspect leading to a stay or leave choice in this school district.

Ensuring working conditions for long-term growth throughout the special education teaching career is the aspect most likely affected most study participants'

decision to stay or leave. To create satisfactory working conditions, schools must have classroom resources and safe schools and ensure the environment where respect and opportunities for growth are present.

My study revealed key reasons why teachers felt they left one specific school district's special education program location in North Carolina. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which holds that individuals are motivated by current needs, provides the basis of the conceptual framework. The analysis indicated that the working conditions at schools in the district are the main contributor to special education teachers' decision to leave their special education positions at the school district. Regardless, the results could be used to help address the problem of special education teacher retention at the local school district. Thus, upon the study results, I propose a professional development project for school administrators to provide them with more knowledge about high teacher turnover rate, factors causing teacher turnover, and motivational factors to retain teachers in the district as well as research on best practices for utilizing Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory to improve teacher retention.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of my study was to explore previous special education teachers' motives for leaving their workplace. I chose for the study a local school district in North Carolina with one of the highest special education teacher turnover rates in the state. The focus of the data analysis was on participants' perceptions for why they left their workplace. While the participants provided various reasons for leaving their positions in the district, all the reasons connected to dissatisfaction at the workplace with one or more factors. Overall, the dissatisfactory issues at the workplace included teaching circumstances, overwhelming work of special education teachers that leaves no time for family, and low salary that leaves teachers struggling financially. The participants' responses regarding the dissatisfaction with teaching circumstances included lack of administrative support, discipline issues at the school, school policies and practices, job description or assignment, working conditions (facilities, classroom resources, or school safety), large class sizes, lack of opportunities for professional advancement, too many intrusions on teaching time, and teaching career in general.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the most prepotent of all needs driving human motivation is the physiological need (Maslow, 1987). The data indicated that most of the study participants were dissatisfied with psychological aspects such as lack of belongingness and esteem. While most participants stated that their basic needs were not met during their employment in the district, the most pressing needs that motivated them to leave were psychological needs.

Although almost all the participants had an issue with the financial compensation for their work, the most current and dominating need was a psychological need, which included satisfactory working conditions and an environment where respect and opportunities for growth are present. The participants also suggested that administrators should be attentive to the needs of special education teachers to retain special education teachers. Therefore, professional development for school administrators is necessary to improve special education teacher retention and student achievement. Thus, I created a professional development project based on my study findings as well as research on the theoretical premise of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory to improve teacher retention.

The goal of the professional development project for school administrators was to integrate Maslow's theory of human motivation based on the hierarchy of needs and the importance of attending to the needs of special education teachers to retain them in the district. In addition, during the professional development training, the school administrators would have the chance to gain new knowledge and collaborate with their colleagues. The professional development project is described in Appendix A.

### **Rationale**

The findings of my study guided the project genre, which was a professional development training. The special education teacher turnover rate in the research school district is one of the highest in the state. The study findings indicated that special education teacher turnover in the district is linked to dissatisfaction with one or more factors at the workplace. Schools must ensure working conditions for long-term growth throughout the special education teaching career to retain special education teachers

(Newton et al., 2018). To create satisfactory working conditions, school administrators must attend to the needs of the teachers.

Special education teachers have different needs, and their behaviors are motivated by the most current need (see Katz, 2018; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). A teacher must have satisfactory living conditions, housing opportunities with no long commute, adequate compensation for the work done to preserve the living conditions, respectful relationships to satisfy esteem needs, and opportunities for growth to meet their self-fulfillment needs (see Bettini et al., 2020; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). Whether it is a physiological, a psychological, or a self-fulfillment need, the current and dominating need of a teacher must be satisfied for them to stay with their current job. A teacher's needs must be met to remain motivated and stay with a particular school or district. A school's administration plays a vital role in supporting teachers' needs and goals (Burkhauser, 2017).

Because of individual differences, every teacher has different needs. For example, one may most desire a financial reward for the work done, while respect and recognition may be more important for another. School administrators need to be concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Kaur, 2013; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Motivated teachers may then stay long enough to achieve their goals. Maslow's motivation theory could help school administrators understand how a teacher is motivated and where they are on the hierarchy

of needs to better focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals (see Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

I used my study findings to develop a professional development workshop for school administrators in the district based on a broader understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its application to retaining teachers throughout their careers. According to the director of human resources for the district under study, school administrators would appreciate more workshops on effective retention of special education teachers (Personal communication, November 17, 2020). Professional development for school administrators concerning the needs of special education teachers has the potential to improve teacher retention.

### **Review of the Literature**

This literature review aims to provide a scholarly examination of studies related to the professional development of school administrators. I selected peer-reviewed studies from education databases such as Education Complete, ERIC, and SAGE Premier, accessed through the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. I used the following keywords: *professional development for school administrators*, *Maslow's theory of motivation*, and *special education teacher turnover* to select relevant studies. My search of the academic literature related to the topic showed a limited number of studies related to professional development of school administrators concerning special education teachers' needs. Thus, I focused on professional development and training for building-level administrators and how it related to special education teacher turnover.

## **Importance of Professional Development**

School leadership plays an essential role in a special education teacher's satisfaction with the job (Inandi et al., 2022). Job satisfaction determines if a teacher stays with the school or leave (Conley & You, 2017). High turnover among special education teachers indicates that teachers leaving their positions are not satisfied with their jobs (Bettini, 2020; Nordin et al., 2019). The findings of my study showed that all the study participants left their positions because of dissatisfaction with one or more factors at the workplace. To create and maintain satisfactory working conditions for teachers, schools must have competent school leadership (Toropova et al., 2021).

When transforming schools and investigating the evolving role of the principal, profound systematic changes must be made (Fullan, 2000). Pont et al. (2008) stated that principals are ill-equipped to handle the complexity of the tasks presented to them in 21st-century schools. Research reflects that principal preparation programs fail to produce leaders with the skills to lead schools into the 21st century (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013). Studies reveal that a principal's job is one of the most challenging professions yet is one of the most important for students and society as a whole (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013; Ferrandino, 2001; Grissom et al., 2021).

After reviewing the curriculum and course outlines of principal preparation programs at four major colleges and universities, I found that three of the programs did not require courses pertaining to special education. One university did require an overview of special education, but this course did not provide an in-depth understanding of the specific requirements of special education teachers such as paperwork demands,

special education policies and procedures, writing and implementing individualized education programs, scheduling, progress monitoring, and special education timelines. Restructuring principal preparation programs and creating principal leadership professional development experiences will take leaders one step closer to supporting school improvement and student achievement (Acton, 2021; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Professional development is designed to provide principals with the necessary skills and competencies to lead schools. Building-level administrators often find it difficult to find effective professional development opportunities (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). Principals in rural areas have even more limited access to quality professional development opportunities, which leads to decrease in growth potential (McConnell et al., 2021). Much of this is due to lack of funding, time, and human resources (Lavalley, 2018). Providing administrators with quality professional development grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs builds capacity for administrators and a common understanding of teacher needs and how to better support them.

Effective professional development grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs supports administrators by providing them with a deeper understanding of the psychological and physiological needs of teachers. Administrators who grasp a firm understanding of the needs of special education teachers can support teachers and strengthen their knowledge and skills. Effective professional development needs to provide time and structure for administrators to focus on increasing teachers' content knowledge and experiences. Effective leadership is critical to teacher success from



meaningful support and development to selection and retention of high-quality teachers (Day et al., 2020).

The purpose of professional development adds value, professional growth, a new understanding resulting in a sense of fulfillment, and teachers are better equipped to tackle the everyday challenges that exist in education (Taylor, 2019). When quality professional development is implemented and consistently enforced, the efforts to improve teaching and learning can lead to a school accomplishing its vision (Taylor, 2019). Professional development keeps administrators and teachers current on new curriculum resources, new findings on how children learn, and new technological tools for the classroom. Professional development in education is imperative because what educators do in the classroom affects student achievement.

### **Relationship Between Leadership and Job Dissatisfaction**

Job dissatisfaction is caused by special education teachers' overwhelming work with no adequate financial compensation. Another factor is the lack of support for special education teachers in managing students or the lack of resources to assist students with disabilities (Peyton et al., 2020). The lack of leadership support and communication/collaboration issues also contributes to job dissatisfaction (Nordin et al., 2019). Teachers satisfied with their job are highly motivated in the continuous development of students (Nordin et al., 2019). Without appropriate support and encouragement, it is challenging for special education teachers to achieve job satisfaction (Anderson, 2017).

Proficient leadership is needed to support the teachers' well-being, among other school administrators' duties (Nordin et al., 2019; Reingold & Dery, 2019). Though Although school administrators are overwhelmed with operational aspects of school management, principals involved in special education should organize, plan, and direct teachers for special education to function effectively (Nordin, 2020).

Special education teachers are not only teaching students with disabilities but performing tasks unrelated to students with disabilities, such as managing the classroom and other tasks (Bagley & Tang, 2018; Young, 2018). In a study conducted to test if there is a relationship between the school administrator, the task load of a special education teacher, and the teacher's job satisfaction, Nordin et al. (2020) found a significant relationship between the constructs. Nordin et al. concluded: "Principals should have the attitude to understand the scope of special education teachers' tasks in more detail and equip themselves with adequate knowledge of special education, special need students, and the scope of teacher assignments" (p. 3403). The high burden on special education teachers is related to poor leadership, which is also related to job dissatisfaction, stress level of teachers, and teacher turnover (Anderson, 2017; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Norazmi et al. (2020) conducted a study to test whether school administrators affect the task load of special education teachers and found that an administrator's qualities, such as leadership style, knowledge, experience, qualification, and even attitude, were responsible for special education teachers' task load. Although such factors as the number of students and facilities contribute to the task load of special education teachers, the main reason for teachers' overwhelming tasks is the school administrator

because administrators are responsible for the management of the school (Anderson, 2017; Norazmi, 2020). The task load affects teacher performance. The inability of special education teachers to perform at their best leads to a sense of dissatisfaction at work. For special education to function appropriately, capable school administrators are needed (Nordin et al., 2020; Tosh & Doss, 2019;).

### ***Attending to the Needs of Special Education Teachers***

School administrators impact students with disabilities' achievement through supervision, support, and retention of special education teachers (Lê & Combs, 2021). Maslow's theory of motivation based on the hierarchy of needs provides ideas on supporting teachers to motivate them to stay with their jobs. For example, the lack of the teachers' basic needs may negatively impact the teachers' ability to provide effective instruction and the students' performance (Shaughnessy et al., 2018). In addition, the teachers' "to stay or leave" decision is sensitive to the financial compensation for the teacher's work (Katz, 2018).

In a study designed to examine the experiences of Canadian school principals in supporting students with special education needs, Sider et al. (2021) described that the participants of the study, which were school administrators, stated that building good relationships with the teachers and support staff and working together as a team is essential for the special education. The participants also said that their relationship with the special education teachers and the support staff is developed through daily or weekly meetings. Special education teachers may feel isolated, vulnerable, or overwhelmed due to the complex needs of students with disabilities. School administrators' top priority is to

provide support and mentoring to these teachers. If the special education teachers feel that “they have been supported before, during, and following challenging experiences” (p. 236), then they commit to the students’ progress and are more likely to stay with the school (Sider et al., 2021). Teachers who find their school administrators unsupportive are most likely to leave their jobs. School administrators should exercise supportive and encouraging behavior toward the teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Additionally, Sider et al. (2021) described that the study participants stated that they practice *modeling behavior*, which they want to see in others. For example, the school administrators said they visit classrooms or playgrounds every day to check their progress and foster communication; they practice behavior they want teachers and students to adapt. Especially, the school administrators with a background in special education stated that they employ modeling behavior to support beginning special education teachers in learning techniques to meet the needs of students. The participants with no background in special education expressed that they are working towards the inclusive school environment by simply working near the most vulnerable teachers and spending time with the students (Sider et al., 2021).

In the Sider et al. (2021) study, many participants also responded that they did not have adequate training concerning special education. This gap in training of school administrators indicates that professional development is needed to enhance principals’ knowledge and skills concerning special education and the needs of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Sanchez et al., 2019). The leadership competencies can be developed through leadership development programs/professional learning

opportunities with attention to special education. Professional development programs for school administrators concerning special education should focus not on technical or legal information for principals but such competencies as the importance of special education teacher support, communication, collaboration, inclusiveness, and respectful environment (Billingsley et al., 2019; Wettlaufer & Sider, 2019).

In a study designed to explore teacher leadership in special education, Bagley and Tang (2018) found that special education teachers often carry on formal and informal leadership roles. Special education teachers take such responsibilities to advocate, facilitate, innovate, and administer to assist the school administrators. For example, some ensure a meaningful collaboration/communication between special education teachers and general education teachers, while another takes the facilitator/mediator role. Bagley and Tang (2018) found that allowing teachers to assume leadership responsibilities prevents special education teacher burnout, a critical issue in special education. By evolving the teachers through the leadership roles, school administrators get help in managing their overwhelming duties and create an environment for effective and inclusive education for all students by bringing together teachers and support staff. In addition, special education teachers are more likely to stay with the job where the school administrator demonstrates a strong leadership of trust that improves the teacher job satisfaction (Katz, 2018).

The genre selected for this study is a professional development project for administrators designed to introduce Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs. Reintroduction of Maslow's theory is needed to enhance principals'

knowledge and skills concerning the needs of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Lê & Combs, 2021). The findings of my study revealed that special education teacher turnover is related to dissatisfaction with working conditions. To create satisfactory working conditions, schools should have competent administrators who attend to the hierarchy of needs of special education teachers. School administrators, through attentive supervision, support, and retention of special education teachers, impact students with disabilities' achievement (Lê & Combs, 2021).

Maslow's motivational theory is used in various organizations, including education (Guo et al., 2019; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). According to McLeod (2018), Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a valuable concept to understand teachers' behaviors driven by individual needs. The teachers' needs must be satisfied at work and outside the work environment to remain motivated and stay with a school. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Maslow's motivation theory could help school administrators understand how a special education teacher is motivated and where they are on the hierarchy of needs to better focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals (Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

My study findings demonstrated that to support basic living needs, special education teachers, like any individual, require adequate financial compensation for the work done. The study participants were struggling financially and did not stay with the job. A few teachers who were satisfied or partially satisfied with the financial compensation also left their positions because they pursue a safe environment to preserve

satisfactory living conditions and employment and even strive to improve those conditions. This is a school board decision, not a school administrators' decision. A school administrator cannot offer to pay more but can provide other incentives to offset the lack of pay, as long as they are staying within district policy. A school administration plays a vital role in supporting their teachers' goals and needs by providing a guaranteed workplace, economic encouragement, and additional support (Bettini et al., 2020).

Most of the study participants had a sense of job security only because a few were willing to become special education teachers and not because of supportive school administrators regarding the security of a job. Teachers with unsupportive administrators are more likely to leave their positions than those with well-supported administration (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Uysal & Kayhan, 2018). Once the security need is met, the teacher seeks social belonging at work. According to the study participants, these special education teachers often felt isolated, stressed, and unimportant besides general education teachers. Again, the school administration's support at the workplace is needed to create healthy social and working relations (Inandi et al., 2022; Burkhauser, 2017).

Respect and status play an essential role in the teacher staying with the school. Unfortunately, many of the study participants felt unappreciated and disrespected. Recognition, support, and promotion at the workplace provide a basis for the teacher's self-realization and achieving their full potential: higher education, personal development, a promotion at work, etc. A self-actualized teacher is a valuable asset to the school and student achievement (Grazulis, 2007; Westervelt, 2016). While a few study

participants clearly stated that they left because of the financial compensation. Most of the participants' dominating needs were psychological, which motivated them to leave their positions.

Thus, school administrators need to be more concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully. Administrators need to spend time talking with the special educators to get to know their needs and perceived concerns. Maslow emphasized the possibility of exceptions to the order of needs where specific needs might be reversed, or particular needs may lose value in some people (Maslow, 1970). For example, a financial incentive may motivate some teachers to stay with the job. At the same time, for others, opportunities for professional growth might be the more dominating need, which motivates their decisions to stay or leave. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Motivated teachers will stay long enough to achieve their goals (Katz, 2018; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

Overall, special education teacher turnover is linked to dissatisfaction with the working conditions. Creating satisfactory working conditions rely on school administrators. Therefore, school administrators must attend to the needs of special education teachers to improve teacher retention and student achievement. Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs is an excellent approach when school administrators are affected by high special education teacher turnover.

If salary is low and special education teachers have a high caseload or workload, then their physiological needs may not be met. Low salary prevents special education



teacher's ability to meet the basic needs such as food and shelter. A large caseload or workload may prevent special education teachers from getting proper sleep. High caseloads, low salary, working conditions, and job satisfaction are reasons why teachers leave their position (Arviv Elyashiv & Navon, 2021). According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, if basic needs are not met, special education teachers will find ways to fulfill their needs elsewhere, which could lead to leaving their position or profession altogether. To reach the next level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is safety, physiological needs must occur.

Safety is the next level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Safety needs involve security and protection. If an individual safety is compromised and one feels threaten, he or she may only pay attention to safety (Maslow, 1943, 1954). At the safely level, an individual desire a need to feel safe. Special education teachers leave their position or profession because of working condition and student behavior, which both contributes to the need for special education teachers to feel safe. A special education teacher can feel unsafe due to poor student behavior. Working conditions could endangered job security. For example, a special education teacher working in a combative environment may live in fear of losing their job. Both factors may make a special education teacher feel unsafe, which could lead to leaving the position or the profession. An analysis conducted in 2019, showed that teachers' safety has been a concerned. It was reported that 12.4% of teachers were physically attacked by students and 21.8% had received threats while at work. If the basic need for safety is not met, special education teachers will not be able to move to focusing on higher levels of fulfillment (Maslow 1943, 1954). If the special

education teacher feels satisfaction for the level of safety, the teacher may choose to continue teaching in their current position.

Love and belonging are the next level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Special education teachers need to feel that they are just as equal to general education teachers to meet the demand of belongings. When teachers feel accepted, they build resiliency (Morettini et al, 2020). Building positive relationships with administrators as well as receiving administrators support contributes to the sense of feeling welcomed and loved. When special education teachers do not build positive relationships with their school administrators or feel supported, they are tempted to leave their current position or profession, which contributes to teacher turnover. Special education teachers in rural school districts need positive relationships and opportunities for advancements to consider returning to their current position (Opuku et al, 2020). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs explains that when love and belongings is met, an individual feel motivated to move to the next stage of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

As we climb the ladder of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the next level is esteem. This level addresses teachers need to feel respect, status, and recognition (Maslow, 1943, 1954). Special education teachers experience esteem needs by receiving respect from others. Administrators may incentives teachers for their perfect attendance, student achievement and growth, participation in professional development, school leadership teams, and professional learning communities, as well as volunteering in various capacities throughout the school, which fulfills the esteem needs. Based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs meeting esteem needs offer a sense of self-worth and self-

confidence. Not meeting esteem needs could lead to a feeling of defeated or weakness (Maslow 1943, 1954). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs explains that when esteem needs are met, could lead to teacher retention, whereas not meeting esteem needs may lead to teacher turnover.

The highest level of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is self-actualization. Self-actualization can refer to the pursuit of an individual's personal advancements or growth and full potential. Self-actualization could mean a variety of things to different individuals. For example, for teachers it could mean making a high salary, while for others it could be devoting their time to meet the professional and personal needs of others. Teachers experience self-actualization when the first four levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are fulfilled. Self-actualization may seem like teachers are growing professionally by participating in professional development opportunities, pursuing advancement degrees or certifications, and higher-level positions or roles.

### **Project Description**

The professional development project that I propose to assist school administrators is a 3-day program to introduce Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs. The Teacher Working Conditions and teacher retention reports of the district indicated a disproportionate number of special education teachers leaving the district and/or profession all together. Currently, the district employs an exceptional children's program director who offers a variety of professional development opportunities for special education teachers. However, the offerings usually occur during

the same time that administrators receive their professional development. Therefore, the administrators are unable to attend the special education training.

Obviously, scheduling is a barrier to the implementation of the professional development program. Principals are often pulled from their buildings during instructional times for a number of reasons. Therefore, it is not best practice to provide professional development during the instructional day. The professional development will be offered during the summer when there are a limited number of students and teachers in the school building. For any administrator who is unable to attend this professional development, a virtual self-paced version of the training will be offered.

Other barriers are funding and principal buy-in. Funding includes but not limited to hiring a facilitator, copies, supplies and materials, and food. In many cases, an outside facilitator must be hired to provide professional development. However, in this case and for this study, I as the exceptional children's director agreed to take the responsibility of the facilitator and conduct the professional development 3-day session. All other expenses will be covered by exceptional children's funding source. As with any changes or transformations comes resistance. A solution to this is include principals' representatives in the planning process of professional development.

During the sessions, the attending school administrators had an opportunity to recall Maslow's theory and collaborate with colleagues on its application within the school environment. The session was conducted by the facilitating trainer chosen upon the discussion with the school district administration. The program was focused on helping administrators, specifically principals, understand the correlation between

fulfilling special education teachers needs and Maslow's hierarchy of needs to decrease special education teacher turnover. PowerPoint presentation will be used as a vehicle to impart the necessary information. In addition, collaboration team groups were created based on the number of participants. The PowerPoint presentation of Maslow's theory with a detailed description of the hierarchy of needs is presented in Appendix A.

The training was conducted in August at the local library conference room. All the school administrators in the district were invited to participate in this professional development program. However, training was optional for the school administrators to attend. The findings of my study were presented to the participants and the importance of attending the professional development to improve special education teacher retention in the district. The professional development took place of a three-day period from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a 30-minute lunch from 12:00 p.m. to 12:30 p.m. Participants were given two fifteen minutes breaks during the course of the training sessions, one in the morning and one after lunch. This provided participants with an eight-hour day training for a total of 24 hours of actual training. The program was designed to be short considering the school administrators' vast responsibilities, especially before the beginning of the school session.

The first day of the professional development workshop included an overview of the three-day sessions, a formative assessment to determine the level of knowledge of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a PowerPoint presentation on special education teachers' needs and the findings of my study, and an in-depth PowerPoint presentation and explanation of Maslow's theory. At the end of the first-day session, the participants had

an opportunity to discuss with their colleagues their viewpoints on the application of the hierarchy of needs concept in a school setting. The administrators were provided the PowerPoint presentation in its electronic version for further use as guidance. The session ended with a brief recap of Maslow's motivational theory and the evaluation assessment survey of the first session with welcome suggestions concerning the first-day session and the project in general.

The second day of the workshop started with the recap of Maslow's motivational theory, followed by collaboration/communication activities regarding the theory's application in a school setting. The participants had an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues regarding the theory's application and the importance of attending to the needs of special education teachers to improve teacher retention. The bulk of the time during session 2 was spent having administrators brainstorm areas in which they felt their special education teachers needed additional support. Participants were given time to collaborate with colleagues to discuss and to develop ways to implement strategies that would provide support and follow-up communication for special education teacher. At the end of the session, the key viewpoints developed during the day were highlighted. Lastly, an evaluation assessment survey regarding the session was conducted.

The third, final day, of the professional development included a recap of the correlation between Maslow's theory and its implications on special education teacher turnover, and the key viewpoints of the administrators who participated in the first two sessions and how it aligns to and differs to their learnings. Principals and administrators brainstormed how to effectively apply the hierarchy of needs concept with special

education teachers. At the end of the three-day session, a plan of action outlining the strategies that will be implemented at both the building level was created and submitted to the district level point of contact. Finally, the administrators were asked to complete an evaluation assessment survey of the third session and a summative assessment of the entire professional development workshop with the option to provide suggestions on improving the content and delivery of the training.

To conduct the 3-day professional development sessions, the facilitating trainer along with the school district ensured that the local library's conference room was available for the sessions and secured resources needed to conduct the sessions such as projector for PowerPoint presentation, printed program evaluation/assessment surveys, paper, markers, and laptop computers. The director of human resources for the district chosen for the study stated that school administrators would appreciate more workshops on effective retention of special education teachers. Professional development for the school administrators concerning the needs of special education teachers has the potential to improve teacher retention. A possible challenge was the overwhelming responsibilities of the school administrators that could have prevented them from attending the all three sessions. This challenge was countered by offering a virtual self-paced version of the training.

Upon the agreement with the school district, I took the responsibility of the program facilitator and conducted the professional development 3-day sessions. As the director of the exceptional children's program and a researcher, I delivered insights on

special education teachers' issues, challenges, and expectations during the sessions. The timetable for the professional development sessions is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*A Timetable of the Professional Development Sessions*

Implementation time	Sessions
4 months	School district administration will be contacted to share the study findings and request to conduct the professional development program for the district's school administrators; request resources needed for the training sessions, including the funds for a light meal during the short break.
3 months	Local library will be contacted to reserve the training room for the sessions.
2 months	District's school administrators' email addresses will be obtained to send invitations to participate in the sessions.
1 month	Invitations to participate in the sessions will be sent to school administrators and confirmation of attendance recorded.
2 weeks	Library's training room availability will be confirmed; resources will be prepared; an outline of the sessions will be ready for the administrators.
1 week	Invitation reminders will be sent to school administrators.
Session	Professional development session will be conducted across 3 days.
Program report	Summative report on the conducted sessions will be prepared. Report will be shared with all school administrators in the district to assess and plan future professional development sessions.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

To assess the professional development training sessions, I conducted a formative assessment of the administrator's knowledge of Maslow's theory and its application. At the end of each session, an evaluations assessment survey was administered. Each session evaluation assessment survey helped to align the outcome with the learning objectives. The learning outcomes of the professional development workshop was to train administrators to use Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a vehicle to provide supports to



meet the very basic physiological, psychological, and physical needs thus increasing teacher's job satisfaction while decreasing special education teacher turnover.

The formative assessment was conducted at the beginning of the first-day session before the PowerPoint presentation. A formative assessment is an evaluation process used to adjust the instruction and to learn to achieve the intended instructional outcome (Dixson, & Worrell, 2016; Konopasek et al., 2016). The formative assessment provides information for the instructor to focus or redirect instruction and information for the learners to assess their learning (Cizek et al., 2019). The formative assessment included questions related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs to determine administrator's extent of understanding the motivational theory and the importance of its application in a school environment (Appendix A).

A summative assessment was conducted on the final day to evaluate the learners' progress and effectiveness of the professional development workshop (Cizek et al., 2019; Konopasek et al., 2016). The summative assessment consisted of questions designed to understand how the administrators perceived the hierarchy of needs concept to retain special education teachers (Appendix A). The summative assessment was administered anonymously to gain insights/suggestions on improving the quality of the professional development. Also, each administrator submitted a plan of action outlining strategies to provide increased support for special education teachers in their buildings. This the plan was submitted to the district level point of contact.

### **Project Implications**

This professional development project was based on the valuable findings of my study. The project has the potential to assist school administrators with the issue of high special education teacher turnover in the district. The knowledge gained during the 3-day professional development sessions was designed to improve school administrators' leadership skills, as many principals had limited leadership training in the area of special education. As my study findings showed, many of the study participants, special education teachers, left their teaching positions in the district due to the lack of administrative support, communication and collaboration issues, and the lack of appreciation for the work done.

Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs is a valuable concept to apply in school settings. Maslow's motivation theory could help school administrators understand how a special education teacher might be motivated and where they are on the hierarchy of needs to better focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals (see Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). School administrators need to be more concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Job satisfaction determines if the teacher stays with the school or leaves (Conley & You, 2017).

Thus, school administrators impact students with disabilities' achievement through supervision, support, and retention of special education teachers (Lê & Combs, 2021). Maslow's theory of motivation based on the hierarchy of needs provides ideas on

supporting teachers to motivate them to stay with their jobs. Thus, my professional development workshop provided the potential to contribute to the social change at the school district by improving special education teacher retention, which positively affects student performance.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

The primary purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore previous special education teachers' motives for leaving their workplaces. The findings indicated that special education teacher turnover in the district is linked to dissatisfaction with working conditions that include lack of administrator support, lack of financial compensation, lack of respect, overwhelming paperwork, large caseloads, and limited knowledge of policies and procedures for students with disabilities. Other factors include lack of appropriate scheduling that provides special education teachers adequate time to implement the specially designed instructional services outlined in students' individualized education programs and to group students effectively. Elyashiv (2019) determined teachers leave due to stressful working conditions. Therefore, schools must ensure working conditions for long-term growth throughout the special education teaching career to retain special education teachers.

To create satisfactory working conditions, school administrators should attend to the needs of the teachers. Unfortunately, school administrators often lack leadership training (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013, Grissom et al, 2021). Thus, professional development for school administrators is needed to improve special education teacher retention and student achievement. I designed a 3-day professional development workshop with a plan of action due at the end of the workshop sessions outlining the implementation of strategies to support special education teachers. The workshop aimed to train principals to use Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a vehicle to provide supports to

meet the psychological, physiological, and physical needs of the special education teachers to decrease teacher turnover.

According to the director of human resources for the district under study, school administrators have indicated they would appreciate more workshops on effective retention of special education teachers (personal communication, November 17, 2020). The request for a professional development program for the district school administrators supports my proposed professional development project designed to attend to the needs of special education teachers for long-term teacher retention. Previous research has shown that effective school administrators influence teacher retention (Ansley et al., 2019; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Also, the study participants' responses, although they have already left their positions in the study district, demonstrated openness and a desire to see the improvement of working conditions at schools for special education to function effectively. Participants also provided valuable suggestions on issues essential to special education teacher retention. These findings were crucial to identifying reasons for special education teacher turnover in the district and developing a practical project to assist school administrators with a strategy to retain teachers. Finally, the successful implementation of the program and special education teacher retention through the application of the hierarchy of needs may encourage other school districts with high teacher turnover to adopt this professional development program.

A potential limitation of the professional development project was that the study was limited to only one rural school district. For the study, I chose a rural school district with the highest special education teacher turnover in the state. Focusing on this school

was critical to understanding the reasons special education teachers have left the district or profession and how to retain them to improve student achievement. Teachers are a critical component for improving student achievement (Liao, 2019). Thus, the project may not be valuable to other school districts with low teacher turnover of special education. Some school districts may already be using Maslow's hierarchy of needs concept in their schools to retain special education teachers.

The second limitation of the project was the duration of the training, which is 8 hours per day for 3 days. This may not provide complete knowledge of Maslow's motivational theory, its practical application strategies, and extensive training. The workshop was designed to be short to encourage voluntary attendance amid the overwhelming responsibilities of school administrators, especially before the start of the school session. However, considering the school leaders' capabilities to manage numerous tasks with little guidance, expanding their knowledge introduced during the program should not be an issue.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

One of the alternative approaches to improve special education teacher retention in the district is for the school district administrators and the school leaders to revisit policies related to school management to improve teacher working conditions. The findings of my study indicate that working conditions at district schools are why special education teachers leave their positions. Therefore, a reevaluation of the policies concerning the financial compensation for special education teachers' work, incentives,

funds for classroom resources, or leadership training may provide strategies to support teacher retention.

Another alternative approach would be the application of distributed leadership at schools. Teachers provided with formal or informal leadership roles assist school administrators with their overwhelming responsibilities and work toward creating an environment for effective and inclusive education for all students and bringing together general education and special education teachers and support staff. In addition, special education teachers are more likely to stay with the job or return to teaching where the school administrator demonstrates a strong leadership of trust and where the teachers foster an environment of communication, collaboration, and respect (Bonato, 2019).

#### **Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change**

Throughout the doctoral program at Walden University, I gained valuable knowledge regarding the field of education, acquired skills for conducting scholarly research studies, and learned to apply knowledge and skills in my practice. My learning experience also helped me to improve my decision-making skills. The professional development project designed based on the findings of my study extended my knowledge in areas regarding brainstorming, organization, etc. I will utilize the new knowledge and skills in my practice to improve special education and student achievement. In addition, the professional development project I developed will be beneficial to addressing a critical issue concerning special education teacher turnover in my workplace.

The use of valuable resources at Walden University were beneficial to me completing my doctoral program. In addition, the communication and collaboration with

faculty and peers extended my research skills and problem-solving skills and inspired other skills. Although doctoral study was a challenging learning experience, I learned skills to make positive changes, which I will apply to improve special education for students with disabilities. In addition, I will work toward improving working conditions for special education teachers in the profession.

### **Reflections on Importance of the Work**

My study will greatly assist me in my work. As a director of the exceptional children's program, my concern is on how to retain special education teachers to improve student achievement. Conducting this study and understanding why special education teachers leave their positions in the district or the profession is valuable for the work I do. I interviewed previous special education teachers and listened to their responses, concerns, and suggestions regarding teacher retention. Through these interviews, I was able to identify the issue leading to teacher turnover and develop a professional development workshop designed to improve teacher retention. The successful implementation of special education teacher retention practice may encourage other school districts with high teacher turnover to adopt this professional development workshop approach.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

One of the school districts in North Carolina is experiencing high special education teacher turnover. Teacher turnover affects the academic achievement of students with disabilities. School administrators impact students with disabilities'



achievement through supervision, support, and retention of special education teachers (Lê & Combs, 2021).

A high teacher turnover indicates that the teachers leaving their positions are not satisfied with their jobs (Bettini, 2020; Nordin et al., 2019). School leadership plays an essential role in a special education teacher's satisfaction with the job. The teachers' needs must be satisfied at work and outside the work environment to remain motivated and stay with a school. Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). The findings of my study showed that all the study participants left their positions because of dissatisfaction with the lack of administrator support, lack of financial compensation, lack of respect, overwhelming paperwork, large caseloads, and limited knowledge of policies and procedures for students with disabilities at the workplace. Therefore, to create and maintain satisfactory working conditions for teachers, schools must have competent administrators who attend to the needs of special education teachers.

Upon the findings of my study, I developed a professional development project for school administrators to address the issue of teacher turnover. The workshop was designed to introduce Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs and how it correlates to the retention of special educators. Training principals on how to use the underline premises of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to understand the physiological, psychological, and physical needs of special education teachers to provide supports in the workplace thus, increasing teacher satisfaction and decreasing teacher turnover. A solid understanding of Maslow's theory is needed to enhance principals' knowledge and skills

concerning the needs of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Lê & Combs, 2021). Maslow's motivation theory could help school administrators understand how a special education teacher is motivated and where they are on the hierarchy of needs to better focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals (Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017). Thus, school administrators need to be more concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully.

Further research may be conducting studies in other rural school districts with similar special education teacher turnover rates. Also, continue to collect data on special education teacher turnover from the district for a three to five-year period to determine the effectiveness of the professional development workshop project. This information may be used to inform future professional development training sessions for administrators. Additional studies may be conducted to assess the building level administrators understanding of the special education teachers specific needs to address issues such as special education students scheduling conflicts with the school's master schedule, and special education teachers being pulled for class coverage. I recommend using this school year's retention data to determine areas of improvement and then schedule your professional development as needed.

### **Conclusion**

High special education teacher turnover in one of the school districts in North Carolina initiated my study to identify teachers' reasons for leaving their positions in the district. The study results revealed key reasons challenging special education teacher

retention. The data analysis indicated that the working conditions at schools in the district are the main contributor to special education teachers' decision to leave their positions.

School districts must ensure working conditions for long-term growth throughout the special education teaching career to retain special education teachers. To create satisfactory working conditions, schools must have safe schools, classroom resources, a respectful environment, growth opportunities, and attend to the teachers' needs. Special education teachers have different needs, and their behaviors are motivated by the most current need. To be an effective special education teacher, the teacher must have satisfactory living conditions, housing opportunities with no long commute, adequate compensation for the work done to preserve the satisfactory living conditions, respectful relationships to satisfy esteem needs, and opportunities for growth to meet their self-fulfillment needs.

The interview responses showed that almost all the study participants struggled financially. Some of the participants were dissatisfied with the long commute to work. Many participants did not receive much-needed administrative support and encouragement for a long-term teaching career. Many participants experienced disrespect, lack of appreciation, and poor communication and collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers. Thus, working conditions is the aspect that drove all these study participants to job dissatisfaction and turnover.

Based on my involvement with special education and the concern with teacher turnover, the study findings could be shared with the school administrators in the district. The study results could provide valuable information for addressing the issue of special

education teacher turnover. Moreover, based on the study findings, I designed a professional development project that would provide school administrators with training concerning the importance of attending to the needs of special education teachers. Specifically, the program is designed to reintroduce Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs. Maslow's motivation theory could help school administrators understand how a special education teacher is motivated and where they are on the hierarchy of needs to better focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals. The successful implementation of special education teacher retention practice may encourage other school districts with high teacher turnover to adopt my professional development program.

This study can lead to positive social change by decreasing teacher turnover and increasing teacher retention in rural school districts. It is known that special education students perform disproportionately lower than their non-disabled peers on standardized testing (Hurwitz et al., 2020). A decrease in special education teacher turnover could possibly close that achievement gap. Having the same teacher in one place over a period of time has proven to show an increase in student achievement (Podolsky et al., 2019). The equitable learning opportunities and resources may improve the opportunities for students to graduate with the necessary skills to be career and college ready and productive citizens of society. The study is significant and can contribute to positive social change for the students, teachers, and families.

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## Appendix A: Professional Development Project

### **Maslow's Motivational Theory**

**Purpose:** This professional development project for the school administrators aims to broaden the understanding of Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs.

**Goals:** The goal of the professional development project is for school administrators to understand the advantages of employing Maslow's hierarchy of needs concept in their practice to retain special education teachers and improve student achievement.

**Learning Outcomes:** The learning outcomes of this project include an understanding of Maslow's concept and its application in special education to retain teachers.

**Target Audience:** School administrators in the district

**Components:** Hierarchy of needs based on Maslow's theory of motivation

**Activities:** PowerPoint presentation, collaboration, discussion, and program evaluation.

### **Implementation Plan and Timeline**

**Tasks:** Organize the professional development project in cooperation with the school district; organize each session of the program accordingly, provide an overview of the 3-day program, its purpose, goal, and expected learning outcomes; manage effective communication/collaboration, conduct evaluation surveys after each session and at the end of the program.

**Due Date:** December 30, 2023

**Responsible Person:** Gorham Anikko

**Trainer Notes:**

1. Conduct a formative assessment at the beginning of the first-day session before the PowerPoint presentation to assess the school participants' extent of understanding Maslow's theory and the importance of its application in a school environment.
2. Overview of Maslow's motivational theory through PowerPoint presentation.
3. Demonstrate the connection between the study's findings and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

### **Project Outline:**

#### Day 1

1. A formative assessment
2. PowerPoint presentation of Maslow's motivational theory
3. Collaboration concerning the application of the theory in a school setting
4. Evaluation assessment survey of day one

Timeline	Activities	Notes
7:45 a.m.-8:00 a.m.	Check-In/Continental Breakfast	The program participants bring laptop computers
8:00 a.m.-8:30 a.m.	Overview of the professional development workshop	Purpose, goals, schedule, formative assessment of Maslow's theory
8:30 a.m.-9:30 a.m.	Formative Assessment/Discussion	The facilitator distributes the Formative Assessment
9:30 a.m.-9:45 a.m.	Break/Snacks	
9:45 a.m.-12:00 p.m.	PowerPoint Presentation: Special Education Teachers' Needs & Findings	The facilitator conducts the PowerPoint presentation
12:00 p.m.-12:30 p.m.	Lunch	Discussion

12:30 p.m.-2:00 p.m.	PowerPoint Presentation of Maslow's motivational theory	The facilitator conducts the PowerPoint presentation
2:00 p.m.-2:15 p.m.	Break/Snacks	
2:15 p.m.-3:45 p.m.	Collaboration/Communication regarding the theory's application in a school setting	Breakout Group Sessions
3:45 p.m.-4:30 p.m.	Share out with the whole group	Discussion
4:30 p.m.-4:50 p.m.	A brief recap of the day one session	The facilitator conducts the recap
4:50 p.m.-5:00 p.m.	Evaluation Assessment Survey	Ticket out the door

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## Day 2

1. Recap of Maslow's theory
2. Collaboration and Communication concerning the application of the theory regarding special education teachers
3. Evaluation assessment survey of day two

Timeline	Activities	Notes
7:45 a.m.-8:00 a.m.	Check-In/Continental Breakfast	The program participants bring laptop computers
8:00 a.m.-9:00 a.m.	Recap/Review/Discussion	The facilitator conducts a recap of the theory with PowerPoint slides
9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.	Collaboration/Communication regarding the theory's application with special education teachers (like/grade span groups-)	Different like group partner: Discussion of ideas, potential challenges in the application of the theory, key viewpoints
11:00 a.m.-11:15 a.m.	Morning Break	
11:15 a.m.-12:30 p.m.	Share out to the entire group	Like/grade span share out

12:30 p.m.-1:00 p.m.	Lunch	
1:00 p.m.-3:00 p.m.	Collaborate with non-like grade span colleagues	Discussion of ideas, potential challenges in the application of the theory, key viewpoints
3:00 p.m.-3:15 p.m.	Break/Snacks	
3:15 p.m.-4:30 p.m.	Share out	
4:30 p.m.-4:50 p.m.	A brief recap of the day two session	The facilitator conducts the recap
4:50 p.m.-5:00 p.m.	Evaluation Assessment Survey	Ticket out the door

### Day 3

1. Recap of Maslow's theory and the key viewpoints
2. Brainstorming regarding the effective application of the theory with special education teachers
3. Concluding collaboration and Communication concerning the effective application of the hierarchy of needs to special education teachers
4. Evaluation assessment survey of day three
5. Summative assessment of the program

Timeline	Activities	Notes
7:45 a.m.-8:00 a.m.	Check-In/Continental Breakfast	The program participants bring laptop computers
8:00 a.m.-8:30 a.m.	Recap	The facilitator conducts a recap
8:30 a.m.-9:45 a.m.	Discuss individual viewpoints and how it aligns to the workshop training and presented materials	
9:45 a.m.-11:00 a.m.	Return to like grade span groups	Discuss the commonalities and differences between

non-like grade span  
groups

11:00 a.m.-11:15 p.m.	Break	
11:15 p.m.-12:30 p.m.	Share out	
12:30 p.m.-1:00 p.m.	Lunch	
1:00 p.m.-3:15 p.m.	Develop a Plan of Action	Outlining Strategies
3:15 p.m.-3:30 p.m.	Break/Snacks	
3:30 p.m.-4:30 p.m.	Peer Review of Plan	
4:30 p.m.-5:00 p.m.	Evaluation Assessment Survey & Summative Assessment	The facilitator conducts

Day 1: The Project Study Findings and Maslow's Theory to School Administrators  
PowerPoint Presentation: Maslow's Motivational Theory Based on the Hierarchy of  
Needs

Slide 1

**Teachers' Perception of High Teacher Turnover in Special Education**

**By: Anikko Gorham**

Slide 2

**Overview**

- The special education teacher turnover rate in the school district is one of the highest in the state. Over the next three days, we will review and discuss:
- The findings of the study
- Maslow's motivational theory based on the hierarchy of needs and its application to retaining teachers, particularly special education teachers throughout their careers
- Various data as it relates to special education teacher turnover
- The workshop is focused on helping administrators, specifically principals, understand the correlation between fulfilling special education teachers needs and Maslow's hierarchy of needs to decrease special education teacher turnover. Collaboration team groups will be created based on the number of participants.

Slide 3

**Formative Assessment**

Name:

Date:



*On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)*

Knowledge of Maslow's theory in general

1 2 3 4 5

Understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs in a school setting

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs with special education teachers

1 2 3 4 5

Overall average:

What do you wish to gain from this workshop trainings?

What additional supports you need as an administrator to assist your special education teachers?

#### Slide 4

### **The Study**

*The purpose of the study:* To explore previous special education teachers' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district.

*Research Question:* What were previous special educators' perceived motives for leaving their workplace in the local school district?

*The main focus of the data analysis:* (a) on the proficiency of the study participants to teach students with disabilities and (b) on working conditions, the two main aspects often leading to a job dissatisfaction and turnover.

*Number of Participants:* 15 special education teachers

#### Slide 5

### **Findings of the Study**

*Findings:* The working conditions at schools in the district is the main contributor to special education teachers' decision to leave their positions.

*Reasons for Leaving:*

- Teaching circumstances
- Overwhelming work of special education teachers leaves no time for family
- Low salary leaves teachers struggling financially.

Main teaching circumstances: lack of administrative support, lack of collaboration/communication/respect, school policies and practices, job description or assignment, working conditions (facilities, classroom resources), large class sizes, lack of opportunities for professional advancement.

Slide 6

#### **The Dissatisfaction of Teachers Assessed through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

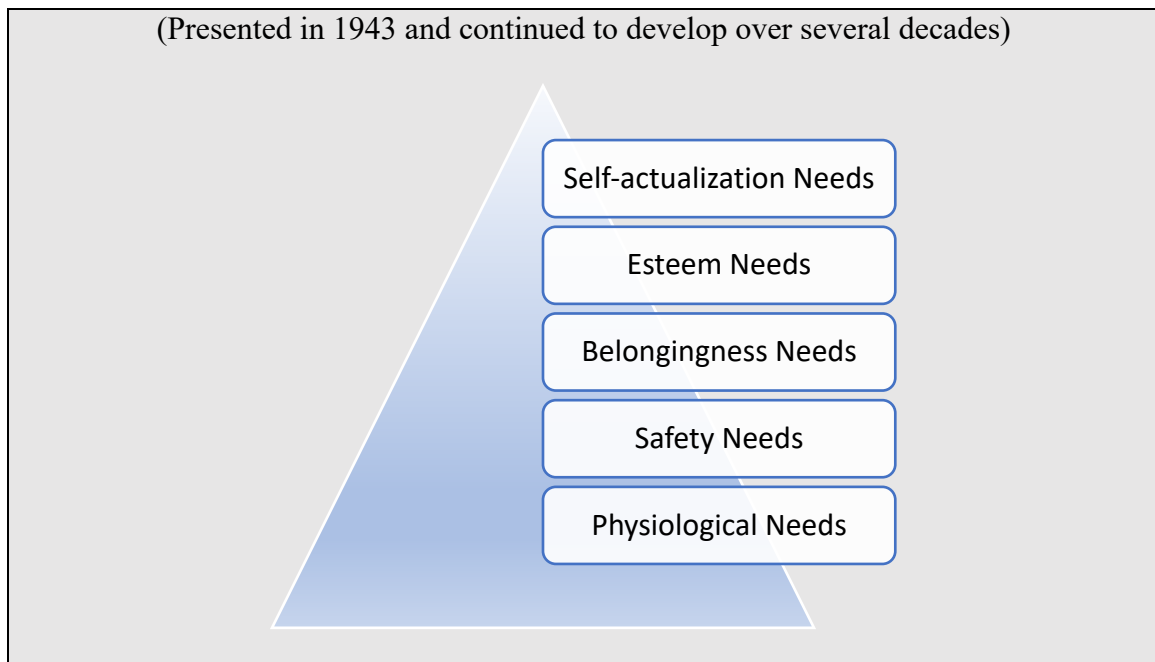
- ❖ Most of the study participants were dissatisfied with the psychological aspects such as lack of belongingness and esteem. While most participants stated that their basic needs were not met during their employment in the district, the most pressing needs that motivated them to leave were psychological needs.

*Overall findings:* most of the participants responded stating that their psychological needs were not met at their workplaces for them to stay with their jobs. Though, almost all of the participants had an issue with the financial compensation for the work they have done, the most current and dominating need was a psychological need, which includes satisfactory working conditions and the environment where respect and opportunities for growth are present.

**The participants' suggestion for improving special education teacher retention: attentive administration to the needs of special education teachers is needed.**

Slide 7

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



#### Slide 8

*“...For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interest exists but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food, and wants only food . . . such a man can fairly be said to live by bread alone. But what happens to man’s desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is full? At once, other (and higher) needs emerge, and these, rather than physiological hunger, dominate the organism. And when these, in turn, are satisfied, again new (and still higher) needs emerge and so on...”* (Goble, 1971, p.38; as cited in Seeley, 1992, p. 306)

#### Slide 9

##### **The Main Concept of Maslow’s Theory**

- Human development advances through the hierarchical satisfaction of needs.
- Lower-order needs must be met at least partially before the emergence of higher-order needs.

- Exceptions to the order of needs are possible where the order of specific needs might be reversed or certain needs may lose value in some people (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1970).

## Slide 10

### Key Concepts of the Maslow's Theory

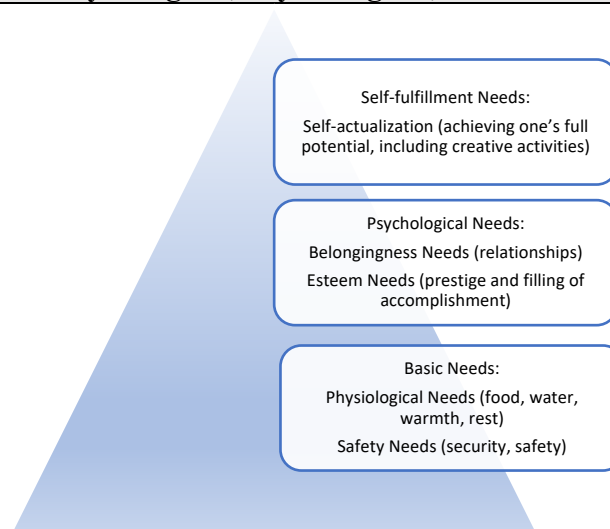
- Individuals are motivated by current needs
- Needs come in a hierarchy of prepotency
- Preconditions such as freedom and seeking knowledge exist for basic needs as well, which affect human motivation
- The order of needs is flexible based on humans' differences and the external environment

An individual's conduct is multi-motivated, determined by more than one need

(McLeod, 2018; Winger & Norman, 2010).

## Slide 11

### An individual's Physiological, Psychological, and Self-fulfillment Needs



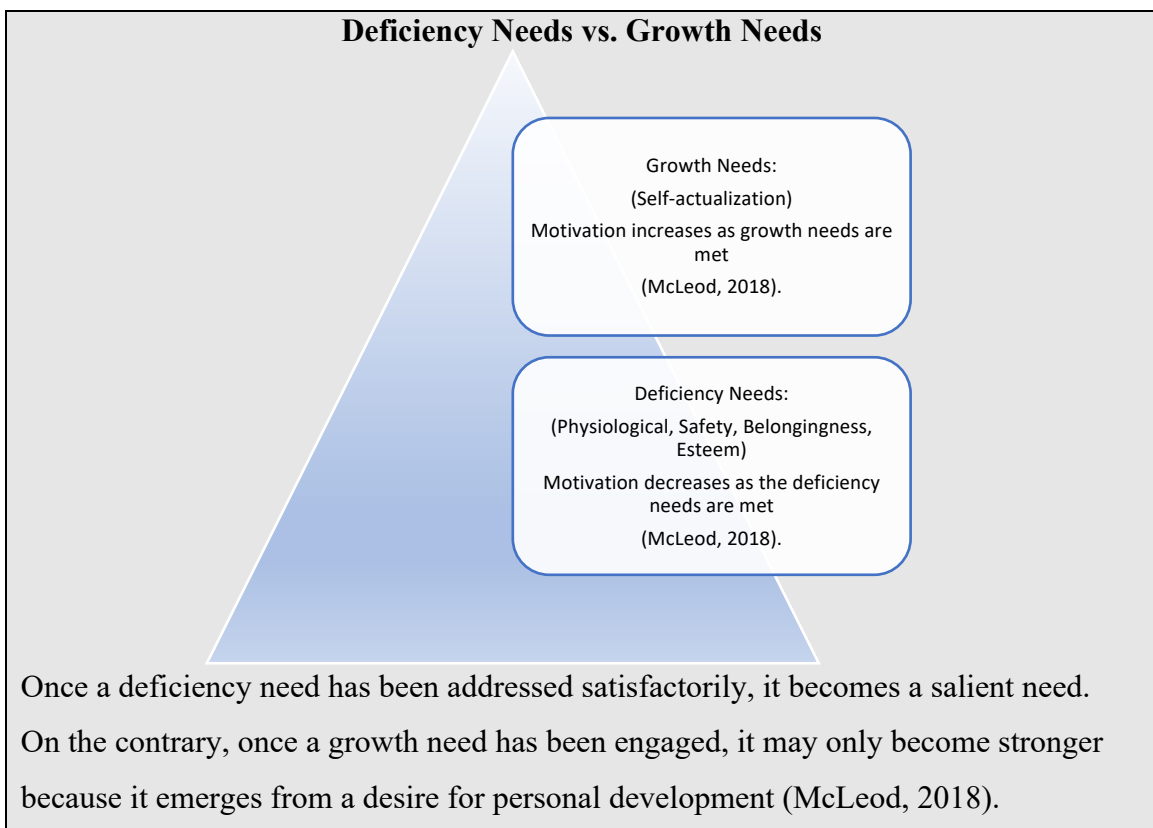
## Slide 12

**The hierarchy of needs is not a fixed order to every individual**

- The lower levels of basic needs are more generally applied to everyone than “superficial desires and behavior” (Grazulis, 2007, p. 4).

The needs emerge at the subconscious level, while behaviors at the conscious level develop through the evaluation process (Seeley, 1992).

## Slide 13



## Slide 14

**Group Discussion**

## Slide 15

### Conclusions of Maslow's of Hierarchy of Needs

- Maslow's theory has become the most popular and most-often cited theory of motivation in various disciplines, including education (Abulof, 2017; Guo et al., 2019).
- Maslow's hierarchy of needs is "the best-known conceptualization of human needs" (Kaur, 2013, p. 1061).
- Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a valuable concept to school management and teaching (McLeod, 2018).
- The concept of the hierarchy of needs has been used by practitioners worldwide to understand employees' behaviors as driven by individual needs (Wining & Norman, 2010).

## Slide 16

### Evaluation Assessment Survey

Date:

*On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)*

Facilitator assessment knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

Quality of the session

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge acquired

1 2 3 4 5

Practical applicability knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

What would you change/add to today's session?

## Day 2: Maslow's Motivational Theory

### PowerPoint Presentation: Special Education Teachers' Needs

#### Slide 1

#### **Recap: Key Concepts of the Maslow's Theory**

- ❖ Individuals are motivated by current needs
- ❖ Needs come in a hierarchy of prepotency
- ❖ Preconditions such as freedom and seeking knowledge exist for basic needs as well, which affect human motivation
- ❖ The order of needs is flexible based on humans' differences and the external environment
- ❖ An individual's conduct is multi-motivated, determined by more than one need (McLeod, 2018; Winger & Norman, 2010).

#### Slide 2

#### **Group Discussion**

#### Slide 3

#### **Special Education Teachers Needs**

##### **Physiological Need**

- ❖ Teachers require sufficient reward for the work done to support basic living needs.
- ❖ A teacher struggling financially would not stay with the job.

#### Slide 4

#### **Special Education Teachers Needs**

##### **Security Need**

If and when the financial needs are satisfied,

the teacher seeks a safe environment to preserve satisfactory living conditions and strives to improve those conditions.

*A school administration plays a vital role in supporting their teachers' goals and needs by providing a guaranteed working place, economic encouragement, and additional support (Bettini et al., 2020). Conversely, teachers with unsupportive administrators are likely to leave their positions than those with well-supported administration (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Uysal & Kayhan, 2018).*

Slide 5

### **Special Education Teachers Needs**

#### **Belongingness Needs**

Once the security need is met, the teacher seeks social belonging at work.

Again, the school administration's support at the workplace is needed to create social and working relations (Burkhauser, 2017).

Slide 6

### **Special Education Teachers Needs**

#### **Esteem Needs**

Respect and status play an essential role in the teacher staying with the school (Grazulis, 2007; Westervelt, 2016).

Slide 7

### **Special Education Teachers Needs**

#### **Self-realization Needs**

Recognition, support, and promotion at the workplace provide a basis for the teacher's self-realization and for achieving her/his full potential: higher education, personal development, a promotion at work, etc. A self-actualized teacher is a valuable asset to the school and student achievement (Grazulis, 2007; Westervelt, 2016).



## Slide 8

- ❖ Every teacher has different needs, and each teacher's behavior is motivated by the most dominating need, which they hope to satisfy (Grazulis, 2007; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). For example, if a teacher needs a sense of job security, the teacher's performance will be motivated by a job security offer (Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).
- ❖ It is not uncommon that higher-paid teachers leave their jobs, though. The financial aspect of the job, however powerful this motivator seems, cannot motivate a teacher to stay if it is no longer a driver of their needs and goals. The teacher's current motivator at this level may be broader responsibilities for further growth (Liu & Jie, 2017; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

## Slide 9

School administrators need to be more concerned about each teacher's individual needs to motivate them successfully.

- ❖ Motivational factors designed for teachers to achieve their needs and goals increase teacher job satisfaction (Kaur, 2013; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017).
- ❖ Motivated teachers will stay long enough to achieve their goals.
- ❖ As soon as they appear, recognition of achievements is the most potent motivator (Katz, 2018; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

## Slide 10

However.....

Motivation is not going to work, nor would it lead to job satisfaction, if a teacher with unsuitable skills is responsible for teaching, as in the situations when schools are forced to hire untrained teachers to meet the teacher demand (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This often happens in special education, a discipline that requires highly qualified teachers to effectively teach students with disabilities (Kaur, 2013; Sutchter et al., 2016).

## Slide 11

- ❖ Although basic or deficiency needs such as satisfactory living conditions, security, sense of belonging, and respect are generally applied to all, individuals in the teaching profession desire growth such as higher education, personal development, contribution to education, etc. A teacher's desire for growth is often disrupted if the basic needs are not met.
- ❖ Whether it is a basic deficiency need or a growth need, the dissatisfied teacher will look into other opportunities to satisfy the needs. For example, if the needs cannot be met through migration or transfer from one teaching position to another, the teacher looks for a career change and the opportunities to satisfy the needs elsewhere (Kaur, 2013; Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

## Slide 12

**Group Activity**

## Slide 13

**Conclusion**

Maslow's motivation theory could explain how a teacher is motivated and where they are on the hierarchical pyramid, so school administrators may focus on meeting the teacher's current needs and goals (Suyono & Mudjanarko, 2017).

## Slide 14

**Evaluation Assessment Survey**

Date:

*On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)*

Facilitator assessment knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

Quality of the session

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge acquired

1 2 3 4 5

Practical applicability knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

What would you change/add to today's session?

## Day 3: Putting It All Together

## Slide 1

- ❖ Recap of the correlation between Maslow's theory and its implications on special education teacher turnover
- ❖ Key viewpoints of the administrators who participated in the first two sessions and how it aligns to and differs to their learnings.
- ❖ Principals and administrators brainstormed how to effectively apply the hierarchy of needs concept with special education teachers.
- ❖ a plan of action outlining the strategies that will be implemented at both the building level was created and submitted to the district level point of contact.

## Slide 2

**Recap: Key Concepts of the Maslow's Theory**

- ❖ Individuals are motivated by current needs
- ❖ Needs come in a hierarchy of prepotency
- ❖ Preconditions such as freedom and seeking knowledge exist for basic needs as well, which affect human motivation
- ❖ The order of needs is flexible based on humans' differences and the external environment
- ❖ An individual's conduct is multi-motivated, determined by more than one need (McLeod, 2018; Wininger & Norman, 2010).

## Slide 3

**Group Activity: Plan of Action**

## Slide 4

**Evaluation Assessment Survey**

Date:

*On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)*

Facilitator assessment knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

Quality of the session

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge acquired

1 2 3 4 5

Practical applicability knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

What would you change/add to today's session?

Slide 5

### **Summative Assessment**

Name:

Date:

*On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)*

Knowledge of Maslow's theory in general

1 2 3 4 5

Understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs in a school setting

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs with special education teachers

1 2 3 4 5

Overall average:

Is there anything that was not covered during these training sessions on which you would like further training?

What type of follow up to these sessions is needed to help with implementation of the professional development sessions that you received?

### Formative Assessment

Name:

Date:

On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)

Knowledge of Maslow's theory in general

1 2 3 4 5

Understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs in a school setting

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs with special education teachers

1 2 3 4 5

Overall average:

What do you wish to gain from this workshop trainings?

What additional supports you need as an administrator to assist your special education teachers?

## Evaluation Assessment Survey

Date:

On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)

Facilitator assessment knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

Quality of the session

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge acquired

1 2 3 4 5

Practical applicability knowledge

1 2 3 4 5

What would you change or add to today's session?

## Summative Assessment

Name:

Date:

On the scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest) assessment of a knowledge/skills (circle one)

Knowledge of Maslow's theory in general

1 2 3 4 5

Understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs in a school setting

1 2 3 4 5

Applicability of the hierarchy of needs with special education teachers

1 2 3 4 5

Overall average:

Is there anything that was not covered during these training sessions on which you would like further training?

What type of follow up to these sessions is needed to help with implementation of the professional development sessions that you received?



## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

This interview topic is the turnover rate of special education teachers and the factors influencing the teachers' decisions to leave.

1. How many years total teaching experience?
2. How many years of experience as a special education teacher?
3. How many years of experience as a special education teacher in xxxxxxx school district?
4. What is your highest education level?
5. What kind of training and preparation for the role of a special education teacher have you received?
6. Are the education and training you received satisfactory for becoming an effective special education teacher?
7. Is the school you left in xxxxxxx district one of the following?
  - High-poverty school
  - High-minority school
  - Primarily students of color
8. Did you leave the special education position in xxxxxxx district voluntarily?
9. Did you leave the teaching position in xxxxxxx district for one of the following reasons?
  - Dissatisfaction
  - Family/Personal reasons
  - Retirement

- Career change
- Financial reasons

10. If dissatisfaction was one of the factors that influenced your decision to leave, which of these areas were you most dissatisfied with?

- Assessments and accountability measures
- Lack of support in preparing students for assessments
- Compensation tied to student performance
- Lack of administrative support
- Too many intrusions on teaching time
- Discipline issues at the school
- Lack of decision-making autonomy
- School policies and practices
- Teaching career
- Lack of opportunities for professional advancement
- Job description or assignment
- Large class sizes
- Working conditions (facilities, classroom resources, and/or school safety)

11. After leaving xxxxxxxx district, did you:

- Transfer from special education to general education?
- Attend a school to improve career opportunities within the field of education?
- Pursue another career?

12. While working in xxxxxxxx district, were you satisfied with your salary?

13. While working in xxxxxxx district, could you afford adequate living conditions with your salary?
14. While working in xxxxxxx district, did the school offer you a secure working environment free from harm and threats?
15. While working in xxxxxxx district, did you have a sense of job security?
16. While working in xxxxxxx district, did you have a sense of connection with your coworkers and communication/collaboration with the colleagues?
17. While working in xxxxxxx district, were you respected by your coworkers and school administrators?
18. While working in xxxxxxx district, did you receive any awards, recognition, promotion for your achievements or encouragement to achieve your goals?
19. What dissatisfaction most motivated you to leave the district?
20. While working in xxxxxxx district, did the school administrators discuss with you your needs and goals for further growth (whatever you needed at the time to function as an effective special education teacher and grow professionally)?  
Please elaborate.
21. While working in xxxxxxx district, did the school administrators discuss your plans for a long-term special education teaching career? Please elaborate.
22. While working in xxxxxxx district, did the school administrators offer you any support? Please elaborate.
23. What should the school administrators and the district have done to retain special education teachers like you? Please elaborate.

24. What suggestions do you have for improving special education teacher retention in xxxxxxxx district?
25. xxxxxxxx district has higher rates of special education teacher turnover than other school districts in North Carolina. What do you think are the main reasons for the high special education teacher turnover in this district?