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# Factors That Influence Special Education Teachers' Career Decisions in a Rural School District in Southern Indiana

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2013

Abstract

Factors That Influence Special Education Teachers' Career Decisions in a Rural School

District in Southern Indiana

by

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MA, Olivet Nazarene University, 2004

BS, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, 2001

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

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## Abstract

Attrition of special education teachers is a national problem resulting in lost monetary resources, school climate discontinuity, and lower student achievement. Within a small, rural district in southern Indiana, special education teacher attrition has risen since 2008 and continues to rise. District administrators want to retain teachers to ensure a continuity of instructional services for students with special needs. To explore this problem, an intrinsic qualitative case study was employed, guided by a research question that investigated the factors that special education teachers and administrators perceived as influencing special educators' career decisions. Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory and Billingsley's schematic representation of special education attrition and retention comprised the conceptual framework. Data collection included one-on-one semistructured interviews with 7 teachers and 5 administrators and teacher retention documents. Data analysis involved in vivo coding and an inductive process to collapse data into the 3 following themes: (a) daily challenges, (b) retention factors, (c) transfer or leaving factors. A project arose from the study. Using salient interview data, a professional development plan was designed to address teachers' needs of relevant professional development (PD) and collaboration. The PD plan will establish a professional learning community and utilizes free evidence-based online training modules to support reading comprehension of students with special needs. Positive social change may result from improvements in PD support provided by the district to retain its special education teachers, resulting in greater continuity of instruction for students with special needs who depend on high quality, experienced educators.



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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

The shortage of highly qualified special educators in the United States is a nationwide issue with all 50 states citing shortages statewide or in certain geographic areas that serve low income students (United States Department of Education, 2012). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) stated that the employment of special education teachers is predicted to increase 17% from 2010 to 2020 due to increased demand for special education teachers and growing student enrollment. However, McLeskey and Billingsley (2008) found that one out of four special education teachers leave his or her position each year. With demand increasing and attrition of special education teachers at such a high rate, the teacher shortage is likely to remain an issue for years to come.

In keeping with national reports, the state of Indiana is also experiencing difficulty filling special educator positions. Indiana's Education Roundtable, a committee cochaired by the governor of the state and the superintendent of public schools, noted that Indiana continues to experience a teacher shortage with special educators constituting over 80% of the shortage (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). As Indiana is facing a critical shortage of highly qualified special education teachers, retaining current special education teachers should be an area of priority for all Indiana districts. For a small rural district located in southern Indiana, retention of special education teachers is crucial.

In past years, the special education population in the district on which this study focused has made great gains towards meeting state mandated adequate yearly progress (AYP). However, levels of achievement have not met state mandated performance levels on annual standardized tests in Grades 3, 6, 8, and 10. The current special education teachers are familiar with their students' academic and social needs and are knowledgeable of the school's culture. Each special education teacher in this small district meets the Leave No Child Behind Act (2001) definition of highly qualified, which is rare in rural school settings (Courtade et al., 2010; Lynch, 2012). The fact that these teachers are highly qualified makes them extremely valuable to the district, but also very marketable and valuable to other school districts. Therefore, retaining these knowledgeable special education teachers is important in providing the continuity necessary to foster greater special education student achievement (Fall & Billingsley, 2011; Greyson & Alvarez, 2008).

### **Definition of the Problem**

National and state statistics demonstrate that the problem of finding and retaining qualified special education teachers is not an isolated issue (Indiana Department of Education, n.d; United States Department of Education, 2012). However, researchers have found special education teacher attrition to be most severe in urban and rural schools (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Teacher attrition has negative effects on students, school staff, and district budgets. When an experienced teacher leaves a position, oftentimes an inexperienced teacher replaces the experienced teacher, which causes a gap in knowledge of student history, academic need, and school culture. This

gap in knowledge creates a disruption in the continuity of instruction for students (Boe et al., 2008; Stronge et al., 2008). The turnover in instructional staff impacts the school culture (Fall & Billingsley, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). It takes time for incoming staff to gain knowledge of student performance history, to foster collegiality with school staff, and to develop relationships with students. Teacher attrition also creates an economic burden on districts, requiring administrators to spend additional funds to recruit, hire, and train new teachers (Boe et al., 2008; Bozonelos, 2008; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

This project study focused on a small (population under 2,000), rural district located in southern Indiana. In this district, the rate of special education teacher attrition is rising. From 2008 to 2012, nine special education teaching positions experienced a turnover. Although two of the openings resulted from retirement, the other seven resulted from teachers leaving the district or transferring into a general education position. Scholarly literature identifies many factors that influence teachers' career decisions; however, district leaders know little about the reasons why special education teacher attrition is rising within this particular district.

### **Rationale**

Special education teacher attrition is a national, state, and local issue. In the following sections, I outline the depth and implications of high rates of special education teacher attrition.



### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

Special education teacher attrition is a problem within the small rural district. A district official stated that the special education retention rate:

For the last five years is 86% (meaning nine positions have been replaced) and the teacher retention rate of teachers provided through Joint Services (a cooperative that provides special education services to this school district and many other school districts located in neighboring counties) has been dismal with one position still needing to be filled. (Personal Communication, November 13, 2012)

In August of 2012, the district had 3 out of 11 special education positions to fill. Two were filled, but one remains unfilled due to a lack of qualified candidates. District and school administrators are concerned with the difficulty of finding and retaining qualified individuals. The turnover rate and lack of personnel to fill these important positions directly impact the other teachers in the school, the students in need of special services, their families, and the community stakeholders (Greyson & Alvarex, 2008; Stewart, 2008). The stakeholders depend on the district officials to provide staffing, structures, and policies that ensure high quality learning opportunities for every student. Exploring the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions about remaining in their positions may provide valuable information to support greater teacher retention within the local setting.

## **Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

Insufficient staffing of special educators is evident in the U.S. Department of Education's teacher shortage statistics that note all 50 states have teacher shortages in special education positions (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Researchers have found that the shortage of special education teachers is higher than in other teaching areas (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Billingsley (2007) and Rosenberg and Sindelar (2005) noted that the high rate of teacher attrition is a major cause of the teacher shortages in the area of special education. There are different types of attrition, including leaving the teaching profession, transferring to a different teaching position in the same school, and/or transferring to a different school (Billingsley, 2004a; Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). Teacher attrition can have a negative impact on the collegial relationships that support a positive school climate (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Greyson & Alvarez, 2008; Killion & Roy, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). As an outgoing teacher leaves, it is not only the professional expertise that is lost, but also the experience of the school culture, collegial relationships, and student performance history. New teachers need time to gain proficiency in professional practice and to build relationships with teachers and students. When the school climate continuity is disrupted by teacher turnover, the disruption creates negative effects on school climate and student achievement (Boe et al., 2008; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fall & Billingsley, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stewart, 2008). I conducted a qualitative case study of the factors that influence teacher attrition to address the district administrators' concerns about the rising special education attrition rate within the rural district. The purpose of this study was to explore special

education teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions.

### **Definitions**

This project study uses a variety of terms related to teacher turnover, teacher attrition, and teacher retention. The following terms are derived from the literature and are defined to provide understanding of the context in which the terms are used.

*Attrition:* In the field of special education, attrition refers to teachers leaving their current teaching position completely, transferring to a general education position, and/or switching to a different school (Billingsley, 2004b; Boe et al., 2008).

*AYP:* AYP is an acronym for Adequate Yearly Progress. By federal mandate, each state calculates a school and district's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to determine if students are improving their performance based on the pre-determined annual targets (NCLB, 2001).

*Career Decisions:* Career decisions involve the choice to stay in a current position, transfer to a new position and or school, or to leave the profession (Billingsley, 1993, 2004b).

*External factors:* Related to special education attrition, external factors include societal, economic, or institutional variables that involve issues that are external to the school district or teacher (Billingsley, 1993; 2004b)

*Highly qualified teacher:* Required by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), a highly qualified teacher is a teacher who has met several criteria, (a) earned a bachelor's

degree from an accredited school, (b) obtained full state certification and licensure, and (c) demonstrated competence in the subject matter within his or her area(s) of teaching.

*Personal factors:* Related to special education attrition, personal factors include family issues, responsibilities outside of work, and health issues (Billingsley, 2004b; Loeb & Reininger, 2004).

*Professional Learning Community:* Professional learning communities are comprised of “educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 217).

*Teacher retention:* Teacher retention refers to teachers staying in the same position the following school year (Boe et al., 2008; Keigher, 2010).

*Work related factors:* Work related factors are factors that influence teachers’ career decisions such as, administrative support, colleague support, mentoring, induction policies, salary, school climate, teacher roles and role ambiguity, and professional development (Billingsley, 2004b; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

### **Significance**

Studying the problem of special education attrition is useful to the local school setting for multiple reasons. Researchers have demonstrated that job dissatisfaction is a reason why many teachers leave their positions (Huysman, 2008). Past research conducted across all the disciplines of education has identified job satisfaction essential for teacher retention (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Boe & Gilford,

1992; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991; Thorndike & Hagen, 1960).

Some external factors such as health or family issues may be a reason why teachers leave the field (Boe et al., 2008); however, other attrition (transferring to a new school and/or moving to a general education position) can be linked to internal factors related to dissatisfaction with the job or school climate (Butler, 2008; Stronge, Richard & Catano, 2008). Viel-Ruma, Houchins, Jolivette, and Benson (2010) asserted, “Due to the critical nature of the teacher attrition rate in the field of special education, it is important to identify those factors that both directly and indirectly contribute to teachers staying in the field” ( p. 231). Conducting a study of the internal factors that relate to job dissatisfaction may provide valuable information for creating effective policies and initiatives that positively influence teachers’ decisions to stay in their positions.

Studying special education teacher attrition is also important to support high student achievement. Stronge et al. (2008) posited that schools with more inexperienced teachers regularly demonstrate lower student achievement scores. Generally, inexperienced teachers are hired to replace outgoing experienced teachers (Billingsley, 2007; Courtade et al., 2010; Leko, 2010; Lynch, 2012). Additionally, researchers have found that a school climate of mutual trust, group cohesion, and respect directly relates to student academic achievement (MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Stewart, 2008). Teacher attrition can create disruptions within the school climate, which negatively impacts student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2012). McLeskey and Billingsley (2008) stated that understanding the relationship between student achievement and teacher attrition is important to improving the educational system. This project study

could provide local district administrators with information to improve structures and policies that facilitate teacher retention and maintain cohesiveness of the school community.

The research of special education teacher attrition and retention is relevant to the education profession as limited empirical research exists on special education teachers, especially those working in rural areas (Fall & Billingsley, 2011; Huysman, 2008; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Further study of special education attrition can add to the small amount of existing literature that focuses on special education teachers' daily experiences in a rural setting and their career decisions. The findings of this project study may serve to support the efforts of the local district and other small rural districts with similar characteristics and demographics in increasing special education retention rates.

### **Guiding/Research Question**

Researchers have stated further study of the direct and indirect factors that influence teachers to stay in their positions is needed (Billingsley, 2004b; Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Additionally, a district leader in the small, rural district commented on the turnover rate of special education teachers and the difficulty of filling the positions. In August of 2012, three special education positions became open. Two were filled, but one still remains unfilled. Considering these facts, an investigation into special education teachers' perceptions of factors that influence their career decision should be germane.

The central question and subquestions guiding the study are stated below.

Central question: What are the factors that special education teachers and school administrators in a small rural district perceive as having influence on special education teachers' career decisions?

Subquestion 1: How do special education teachers perceive these factors as influencing their plans to stay in their current position, transfer to a new position within the school or district, or leave the district?

Subquestion 2: What factors do school administrators perceive to influence special education teachers' career decisions?

### **Review of the Literature**

This section contains a review of the scholarly literature on the topic of special education teacher attrition. The review focuses on the factors that influence special education teacher attrition and the high cost of teacher attrition to school districts, school climates, and student achievement.

#### **Strategy Used for Searching the Literature**

A review of the literature on special education attrition was completed through an extensive search of literature on the topic. Searches were made using the following terms: *special education teachers*, *special education attrition*, *special education teacher career decisions*, *special education job satisfaction*, and *special education teacher retention*. These searches were conducted using multiple databases including ERIC, Education Research Complete, Academic Research Complete, and SAGE from the Walden University and Indiana University libraries. Internet searches were conducted for notable researchers in the field of special education and to obtain statistical data for

national, state, and local consideration. The internet search terms for statistical data included *teacher attrition rates*, *national teacher shortage rates*, and *Indiana teacher shortage rates*.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Researchers have studied special education attrition through the lenses of job satisfaction and working conditions that influence teachers' career decisions (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Huysman, 2008; Loeb et al., 2005; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Fish & Stevens, 2010). The conceptual framework for this study is based upon Herzberg's (1966) motivation-hygiene theory and Billingsley's (1993) schematic representation of special education attrition and retention. Herzberg (1966) identified factors that cause satisfaction and dissatisfaction in a work place. Working conditions and environment may influence special education teachers' decisions to stay or leave their position. Herzberg's (1966) theory describes five intrinsic needs-based satisfiers or motivating factors that can cause satisfaction. They are achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility, and opportunity for advancement. Herzberg (1966) also identified five extrinsic hygiene dissatisfiers or negative factors that can cause dissatisfaction. These factors include company policy and administrative practices, supervision, relationships with supervision, salary, and relationships with peers. Herzberg used the term hygiene to refer to those things that the organizational leadership must maintain to help avoid job dissatisfaction of the employees. Herzberg's (1966) theory has been used to identify factors that can cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction in a school setting (Huysman, 2008; Rhodes, 2012). To explore the factors that promote job satisfaction,



Herzberg's (1966) motivation-hygiene theory provided a basis to understand the internal and external factors that emerge from the interview data. That is, in the data coding process, I compared my data to key concepts from Herzberg's theory.

In addition to Herzberg's (1966) theory, Billingsley's (1993) schematic representation of special education attrition and retention provided an organizational structure for analyzing research data. Billingsley's model outlines several factors that influence teachers' career decisions to stay in the same teaching position, transfer to another location or teaching position, or to leave the teaching profession. These influences include external factors, employment factors, and personal factors. Billingsley (1993) considered external factors to be societal, economic, and institutional variables because they are peripheral to the teacher and the employing school district (Billingsley, 1993). Personal factors were variables such as family responsibilities. Employment factors consisted of three categories: professional qualifications; work conditions and rewards; and commitment to the school, district, teaching field, and teaching profession.

Billingsley (1993) posited that employment factors directly and indirectly affect teachers' career decisions and that desirable work environments provide greater opportunities for teachers to experience rewards (salary, recognition, and/or professional fulfillment). These rewards should produce greater levels of commitment and influence teachers to stay. Conversely, Billingsley (1993) suggested that undesirable work environments will not provide the opportunities for teachers to experience rewards. The lack of rewards may cause less commitment and possibly influence teachers to transfer to new positions or schools or leave the profession altogether. Billingsley (2004b) refined

the conceptual model to include work condition factors of compensation, school climate, support, and roles and responsibilities.

Herzberg's (1966) theory and Billingsley's (1993) schematic representation of special education attrition and retention undergirded the investigation and provided an understanding of the factors that influence special education teacher attrition. The background knowledge the theories provide supported the construction of an interview protocol. The combined conceptual framework was useful during the data analysis process to add depth and greater understanding of interview data and to organize the research data.

### **Highly Qualified Teacher**

The term highly qualified teacher (HQT) refers to the requirements of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). These federal laws mandate all children with disabilities be educated by a teacher who holds a degree, is fully licensed in the primary content area, and has demonstrated competencies in all subject areas that the position requires. These mandates have resulted in increased training for preservice teachers. However, a lack of a collective understanding of what makes a teacher highly qualified has brought about inconsistencies in teacher preparation (Ingersoll, 2008; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). Therrien and Washburn-Mosses (2009) surveyed 92 university and public school personnel associated with special education in the state of Ohio. They reported that the investigation “uncovered confusion and inconsistencies with respect to the provisions and effects of the HQT” (Therrien & Washburn-Moses, 2009, p.18). Furthermore, they determined that

universities were placing the responsibility to meet the HQT mandates on the school districts who hire the new teachers (Therrien & Washburn-Moses, 2009).

Fully preparing new special education teachers is difficult for universities. Teacher candidates must take courses in all content areas and all disabilities within the field of special education to prepare them for potential employment. Quigney (2009) noted the highly qualified teacher mandate puts a burden on special education teachers who's teaching responsibilities require them to teach more than one content area, especially those teachers who teach in a contained classroom who need certification in all content areas. To meet the highly qualified teacher mandate, special education teachers are required to take additional courses after employment to obtain full certification.

The highly qualified teacher mandates within the federal legislation (NCLB and IDEA) have put a strain on universities and school districts. Universities are struggling to design cohesive 4 year teacher preparation courses to prepare teachers to be highly qualified (Ingersoll, 2008; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Quigney, 2009; Therrien & Washburn-Moses, 2009). These mandates have also made it difficult for school districts to staff their special education positions with highly qualified teachers who meet the teaching requirements of the open positions (Irinaga-Bistolos, Schalock, Marvin, & Beck, 2007; Johnson et al., 2009). A lack of fully prepared teacher candidates leads to a lack of highly qualified teachers available to fill the vacant positions.

### **Special Education Teacher Shortage**

Throughout the history of special education, there have been special education teacher shortages (Billingsley, 1993, 2004a, 2004b). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

(2012) reported that in 2010, the number of special educators totaled 459,600. This number is projected to increase by 17% or 537,000 by the year 2020. This increase is attributed to expected student enrollment growth in elementary and secondary schools. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2010) stated, "We found that traditional teacher recruitment and replacement practices are just driving us deeper into the hole every year. We can't recruit our way out of this problem" (NCTAF, 2010, p. 5). Thornton, Peltier, and Medina (2007) noted that colleges and universities graduate only half the number of special education teachers needed to fill the current positions.

The initial lack of qualified teachers is compounded by high attrition rates once a position is filled. Reports of attrition rates for beginning (first year) special education teachers vary from 8% to 10 %, but have been calculated as high as 20% (Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2006). Attrition rates for special education teachers within the first 5 years of teaching range from 30% to 60% (Edgar & Pair, 2005; Irinaga-Bistolos et al., 2007). White and Mason (2006) reported that 24% of 147 beginning special education teachers who participated in their study left their teaching positions after the first year. Johnson et al. (2009) posited that special education teachers in rural Idaho usually leave their positions after three years. Although reported attrition rates vary, Sindelar et al. (2010) noted that the amount of research in special education teacher supply and demand along with the valid data sources of reports to Congress, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), and the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) have documented the extent and persistence of the issue.

Analysis of the above data sources has shown that special education attrition rates have ranged around 10% for the past 10 years (Boe & Cook, 2006). Despite the persistent problem of staffing special education positions, Boe et al. (2008) found that special education teachers do not leave the field of teaching at a higher rate than general education teachers and that the teacher turnover rate is lower than other occupations. However, Boe and Cook (2008) noted that special education teachers migrate to new schools at a higher rate than general education teachers, which influences the teacher shortage issue. Similarly, Billingsley (2004b) posited that special education teachers had a higher attrition rate than other subject area. Efforts to address the full range of the teacher shortage issue require more than solely focusing on the recruitment of new special education teachers. Attention should also focus on retaining high quality teachers once they are initially employed (Billingsley, 2004a; NCTAF, 2010).

### **Special Education Teacher Attrition**

Researchers have studied teacher attrition through the lens of job satisfaction, identifying extrinsic and intrinsic factors related to teachers staying in or leaving their positions (Gersten, Keating, Yuvanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Gunbayl & Toprak, 2010; Huysman, 2008; Perrachione, Rosser, & Peterson, 2008; Persevica, 2011; Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Persevica (2011) conducted a study of teacher job satisfaction and determined that the leading factor in teacher job satisfaction is related to internal factors of mutual relationships with their students and other teachers. Furthermore, Perrachione et al. (2008) suggested that intrinsic motivators (teacher efficacy, working with students, and

job satisfaction) significantly influence teacher retention, while extrinsic motivators (role overload and low salary) had no effect.

Contributing to teacher attrition research, Billingsley (1993, 2004b) outlined three major factors that can directly or indirectly influence teachers' career decision to stay in the position, transfer to a new position or school, or leave the profession. As discussed under the conceptual framework heading, these major factors include external factors, employment factors, and personal factors. Current scholarly literature identified key employment factors that influence teacher attrition. These key factors include teacher preparation, support, and working conditions.

### **Teacher Preparation**

Researchers found that teacher preparation has an influence on attrition rates (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Loeb & Reininger, 2004). Billingsley (2004b) claimed that uncertified or unprepared teachers are more likely to leave the field. Edgar and Pair (2005) investigated teaching candidates from the University of Washington after they left the preservice program. The researchers found greater retention rates associated with candidates who completed the 5 year program. These results corroborated findings from an earlier study conducted by Andrew and Schwab (1995). Thornton et al. (2007) confirmed that teachers who are well prepared and have a support system to help transition into the work place are more likely to stay in their special education positions. Connelly and Graham (2009) examined the relationship between student teacher preparation and special education teacher retention. This study revealed that teachers

who reported at least 10 weeks of student teaching experience were more likely to stay in their positions than those who had less than 10 weeks of student teaching experience.

In the age of accountability, preservice special education teachers need unique training. Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) asserted that the current district and policy expectations of new teachers requires them to be on-the job ready. For this to be true, new teachers must be knowledgeable of a variety of pedagogical and instructional practices. Preservice programs must properly prepare special education students to meet the numerous demands of teaching. However, in an effort to address the growing need for special education teachers and to satisfy the teacher shortage, universities and colleges have designed alternative routes to certification. Moore-Johnson, Birkland, and Peske (2003) and Moore-Johnson and Birkland (2006) determined that these alternative routes may be faster, but are likely to promote inadequate preparation of teachers for the multiple demands within a classroom. Brownell, Sindelar, and Keily (2012) suggested that, in today's accountability context, special educators must have a deep understanding of a wide integrated knowledge base in the areas of content, student learning, technology, and assessment. Brownell et al. also asserted that schools of education should prepare special education teachers through the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. This framework provides a structure for tiered, targeted instruction. The researchers believed that providing teacher preparation courses within this framework, will prepare teacher candidates for the demands within the school setting and reduce attrition due to lack of preparedness.

## **Support**

A lack of administrative support and collegiality among other staff is a reason for teacher attrition (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Billingsley, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Boyd et al., 2011; Butler, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Edgar & Pair, 2005; Horng, 2009; NACTF, 2010; Stronge et al., 2008; Thornton et al., 2007; Washburn-Moses, 2006). During the 2005 school year, Boyd et al. (2011) conducted a survey study including all beginning teachers in New York City. The teachers who remained in their positions after the first year were invited to complete a follow-up survey. The findings of this study demonstrated that the support provided by the administration and colleagues had the greatest influence on teacher retention. Billingsley (2004a) reported that special education teachers who stay in their positions are more likely to perceive their administration and school leaders as supportive, which is in contrast to other special education teachers who perceived their administration as unsupportive and chose to leave their position. Teachers working in a school that they perceive as a positive school climate (a nice place to work) are more likely to decide to stay in their current positions (Billingsley, 2004a; Bozonelos, 2008; Loeb & Reiniger, 2004; Stronge et al., 2008). Bozonelos (2008) noted that school climate has a major influence on special education attrition. In this study, teachers reported that working in a positive school climate fosters less stress, greater efficiency, more manageable workloads, and greater opportunities to focus on instruction.

Many beginning special education teachers consider collaboration as a necessary support and noted their frustration with a lack of collaboration within their school



(Demik, 2009, Griffin et al., 2009). Griffin et al. (2009) conducted a study of special education teachers' experiences. Survey results from 596 beginning teachers in Florida and Wisconsin indicated that collaboration and collegial support was a problem some faced in their first year of experience. Demik's (2009) qualitative study provided a wide range of issues that influence special education teachers to stay or leave the field. However, one commonality was the desire for greater cooperation among special educators and general educators. Gehrke and Murri (2006) concluded that support from colleagues and principals is an important factor in teacher retention. In a study of eight special education teachers, the highest mean score was given for collegiality of special education teachers. The third highest mean score was reported as support of the building principal.

The examples of support can be lengthened to include the results from other current studies. Gehrke and McCoy's (2007) study illustrated examples of support to include other special education teachers, mentors, and school personnel. Three of the 10 participants within the study who stated that they planned to transfer from special education to another teaching field also noted a lack of support as an influence. Hammerness (2008) concluded that a motive for teachers to move to new schools was pedagogical misalignment. In other words, teachers change schools to gain a better match between their personal visions of classroom practice and the realities within the classroom. However, the researcher expressed that moving to a better fit should not always reflect something negative. Cochran-Smith et al. (2011) stated that despite doing

well and developing strong practice, teachers will leave a school if they experience a lack of support or if the school culture does not reflect their views and beliefs.

### **Working Conditions**

Poor working conditions are linked to teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004b, 2007; Bozonelos, 2008; DeMik, 2009; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Edgar & Pair, 2005; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Thornton et al., 2007; Washburn-Moses, 2006).

Donaldson and Johnson (2010) identified working conditions that Teach for America teachers perceived as leading to low job satisfaction and low self-efficacy. Most notable were lack of support, difficult or inappropriate teaching assignments, lack of materials, and inadequate preparation. Viel-Ruma et al. (2010) revealed high correlations between good working conditions and job satisfaction, and job satisfaction and teacher retention. Horng (2009) found working conditions as an important influence on teachers' decisions to stay in their job or in what job they would take. The salient working conditions Horng identified include a safe, clean facility, good administrative support, and small class size. Viel-Ruma et al. and Boreman and Dowling's (2008) findings support the notion that teacher attrition is related to the avoidance of undesirable work conditions.

In addition to a safe, clean facility, good administrative support, and small class size, Billingsley (2007) identified other working conditions related to special education attrition that include role overload, inadequate resources, facilities or classrooms. Although the list of working conditions that special educators experience is long, special educators in rural settings also face teaching a wide variety of content to students with multiple disabilities, high caseloads, extensive paperwork, little or no access to

specialists, and lack of resources or assistive technologies (Adera & Lundall, 2010; Fall & Billingsley, 2011; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

Special education teachers encounter different challenges than general education teachers in the amount of documentation and paperwork required to complete each student's Individual Educational Plans (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011). Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004) stated that among the 1,153 participants in their study, one fourth of the teachers noted that their caseloads were unmanageable. Demik's (2009) narrative analysis of the experiences of five special education teachers denoted the frustrations associated with the enormous amounts of paperwork due to high case loads. Stevens and Fish's (2010) study of 15 special education teachers in Texas revealed that caseload and excessive paperwork was rated the highest influence of job dissatisfaction and leaving the position. Bozonelos (2008) explained that student caseload was the second highest reported factor of special education attrition in his study. Additionally, Butler (2008) claimed that the increase in special education teachers' caseloads was causing teachers to leave their positions, which is contributing to the national shortage of special education teachers.

### **Cost of Teacher Attrition**

Teacher attrition impacts school budgets, school climate continuity, and student achievement (Barnes, 2007; Boe et al., 2008; Stronge et al., 2008; NCTAF, 2010). The exact monetary cost of special education attrition is difficult to ascertain due to the few research studies that address it (Boe et al., 2008; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). However, a few teacher attrition studies documented the high cost of teachers leaving or

transferring (Barnes, Crow, & Schafer, 2007; Stronge et al., 2008; NCTAF, 2010).

Barnes et al. (2007) outlined a report from the NCTAF on the cost of teacher attrition which documented the cost of nationwide teacher attrition to be over \$ 7 billion a year. The researchers also asserted that costs of teacher turnover can reach as high as \$17,000 per teacher. Barnes et al. further commented that these resources could be better spent on instructional programs, initiatives, or improvements of the physical conditions within the schools.

Teacher attrition impacts student achievement. Ronfeldt et al. (2012) indicated that teacher turnover is directly related to lower student achievement. They found that in grade levels with high teacher turnover the students performed lower in English language arts and math, especially in schools with high poverty rates and African American students. Bryk and Schneider (2002) posited that the quality of relationships and trust among staff, students, and parents is a predictor of student achievement. MacNeil, Prater, & Busch (2009) and Stewart (2008) demonstrated how a positive school climate marked by close relationships and collegiality is directly correlated with high student achievement. When teachers leave their positions, institutional knowledge, instructional program knowledge, and student learning knowledge goes with them, resulting in discontinuity within the school community (Boe et al., 2008; Fall & Billingsley, 2011). As more experienced teachers leave their positions, less experienced teachers often take their place (Barnes et al., 2007; Edgar & Pair, 2005; NCTAF, 2010). Students taught by more inexperienced teachers tend to exhibit lower student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2012; Stronge et al., 2008). More specifically to the field of special education, students

with disabilities are more likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers due to the high rate of special education teacher turnover, meaning the most difficult to educate students are being taught by the least experienced teacher (Billingsley, 2004a; Boe et al., 2008; Irinaga-Bistolas et al., 2007).

The cost of teacher attrition is high in many respects. Teacher attrition results in lost monetary resources, school climate discontinuity, and lower student achievement. To address issues related to special educator attrition and retention, researchers should investigate not only why special educators are leaving their positions (attrition), but also why others choose to stay in their positions (retention). Boyd et al. (2011) suggested that further research of teacher attrition and retention should include investigations of what kinds of administrative support (what they do or do not do) and school contextual factors that may influence a teacher to stay or leave. McLeskey and Billingsley (2008) suggested further research consist of qualitative research that explores special educators daily work experiences and the influence of those experiences on career decisions. With these suggestions in mind, the purpose of this proposed study is to gain insight into special education teachers' and administrators' perceptions of factors that influence their career decisions.

### **Implications**

The implications of this project study could be a declining teacher attrition rate and improved student achievement. In this case study, I focused on a specific rural school district. The data analyzed from the special education teacher and administrator interviews contained salient information concerning the lack of relevant professional

development and the need for collaboration among the special education teachers within the district. I used the salient data to develop a professional development plan that establishes a professional learning community where special education teachers engage in collaborative inquiry and participate in on-line professional development training modules containing research based instructional strategies proven effective for students with special needs. Professional development and collaboration are factors that can influence greater special education teacher retention (Billingsley, 2007; Gersten et al., 2001; Swars, Meyer, May's & Lack, 2009). This study's findings could be useful to the local school setting to provide for the professional development and collaboration needs of the special education teachers in a cost effective manner. This study might also be useful for other rural school setting with similar characteristics.

### **Summary**

Special education teacher attrition is an educational problem that affects every state within the nation. Attrition is a major factor influencing the teacher shortage which negatively influences students, teachers, parents, and the greater community. Researchers identified several factors that lead to job dissatisfaction and influence special education teachers' career decisions to transfer to a new position and/or school or to leave the field. These factors include unpreparedness for realities within the classroom, lack of administrative support, lack of collegiality and collaboration, pedagogical differences, poor working conditions, too large of a caseload, and excessive paperwork. Although research in the field of special education attrition is growing, it still does not have the depth that researchers would like it to have. Researchers suggest further study should

include exploration of the work environments of special educators within rural school settings and in-depth qualitative studies that deeply delve into the daily experiences of special education teachers. The next section outlines a qualitative case study design to explore teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this project study was to investigate the daily experiences of rural special education teachers and how these experiences are interpreted to construct their perceptions and beliefs of factors that influence their career decisions. From an interpretive perspective, I conducted an intrinsic qualitative case study to understand the viewpoints of special education teachers who are united by a common bond of employment within the small, rural district. Intrinsic qualitative case study is an effective design for collecting interview data from participants who may share common workplace experiences (Merriam, 2009). A case study design allowed the teachers' own words to be the foundation of the data. The teachers' perceptions provided rich information to help understand teachers' daily experiences, and how these experiences impact the special educators' decisions to stay in their positions, transfer to new schools or general education positions, or leave the field. This section outlines the methodology for the study including a rationale for employing a qualitative case study, the selection of participants and sampling procedure, the researcher's role, the researcher/participant relationship, data collection, data analysis, credibility and reliability of data, and ethical considerations for participants.

### **Research Design and Approach**

Qualitative researchers strive to understand the world from the perspectives of those who live within it (Hatch, 2002). Creswell (2003) and Merriam (2009) explained that qualitative researchers study the context (setting) of the participants, which can add



greater understanding of how perceptions are constructed within that environment.

Lodico et al. (2010) pointed out that qualitative researchers focus on “giving voice to the feelings and perceptions of the participants under study” (p. 264). Lodico et al. further posited that case study research “endeavors to discover meaning, to investigate processes, and to gain insight into and in-depth understanding of an individual, group, or situation” (p. 269). The purpose of this project study was to investigate the perceptions of special educators and administrators within a small rural district. Conducting a qualitative case study allowed me to investigate the shared context of the participants’ experiences shaped by employment within the district as well as the participants’ experiences shaped by the individual school climates within the district.

A quantitative methodology, such as survey research, may provide some insight into participants’ perceptions of factors that influence their career decisions. However, a survey design would require participants to respond upon a continuum of predetermined factors, preventing any new (previously undetermined) information from being discovered (Fink, 2009). Survey design would not allow the participants’ voices and own words to be used in constructing understanding of their experiences and perceptions, nor would this design provide insight into the context that forms each participant’s experience and perceptions. Therefore, a qualitative approach was best suited for this study’s inquiry.

I considered a qualitative phenomenological approach for this study. However, Merriam (2009) explained that “a phenomenological approach is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (p. 26). The topic of special

education teacher attrition may not rise to the emotional or intense level of inquiry for which phenomenological studies are best suited.

Employing an intrinsic, qualitative case study provided multiple authentic data sources to facilitate thoughtful insight into the factors that influence special educators' career decisions to stay in their positions, transfer to new schools or general education positions, or leave the field of teaching. Hancock and Algozzine (2011) explained that an intrinsic case study design concentrates on learning more about an individual, group, organization, or event rather than constructing general theories or generalizing research findings to broader populations or settings as does the qualitative approach of grounded theory. The purpose of the project study was not to develop a theory of special education attrition, but rather to understand the factors within the district that may lead to attrition. This project study's findings, derived directly from the local district setting, provided valuable knowledge of the challenges the districts' special educators face in their daily work, the effective supports provided by administrators, and effectiveness of the current teacher retention practices. The knowledge gained from the study informed the creation of a new professional development plan to promote greater retention of the district's special education teachers. Furthermore, the findings from this case study investigation provided examples of specific factors or issues that rural special educators experience. Researchers suggested a need for more in-depth studies of special educators' daily experiences in rural schools (Boyd et al., 2011; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

## **Participants**

I used purposeful sampling, as participation in the project study required participants to be employed within the same district and/or teaching in the field of special education. Creswell (2012) argued that it is typical for a case study to include only a few individuals or cases because a researcher's ability to provide a thorough understanding diminishes with each addition of a new individual. There are currently 11 special education teachers working in the district fulfilling various roles from pre-kindergarten to secondary responsibilities. All 11 teachers were invited to participate in the study. Seven teachers responded to the invitation and signed informed consent forms to voluntarily participate in the study.

To provide multiple perspectives, Yin (2009) recommended interviewing multiple people. In keeping with this recommendation, five administrators (one from each of the four schools and a district level administrator) were also invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. All five administrators responded to the invitation and signed informed consent forms to voluntarily participate. Viewpoints of the administrators were important to gain a full understanding of the factors and contexts that influence teacher attrition and how current policies may support or hinder teacher retention. Merriam (2009) asserted that in qualitative studies, credibility and reliability of data is achieved from having a purposeful sample of a case. The 12 participants had direct knowledge of the experiences of special education teachers within the district and provided credibility and reliability of the data used in this proposed project study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical consideration of participants should be a researcher's priority in any study. I was dedicated to protecting the confidentiality and rights of each participant. Yin (2009) outlined measures that researchers can take to protect the human subjects within a study. These measures include gaining permission from a gate keeper within the organization, providing full disclosure of the study and its intended purposes to all participants, gaining informed consent from all participants, and ensuring confidentiality of participants. I developed a step-by-step plan to ensure ethical protection of the participants.

### **Consent and Access**

The first stage of the plan involved gaining permission from Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. The approval number for the study was 06-18-13-0274597. The next stage was to gain written permission from the district superintendent to conduct the study within the district. The superintendent received written information that included full disclosure of the study proposal and the purpose of the investigation. Once permission was granted from the IRB and district superintendent, I sent an email to all the special education teachers and administrators to introduce myself and start the relationship building process. The email briefly discussed the purpose of the study, outlined my role in this study as an information gatherer, and provided awareness that I would meet with them face to face to formally invite them to participate (See Appendix D). I then met face to face with each administrator and special education teacher who responded favorably to the e-mail invitation to formally invite him

or her to participate in the study. During the face to face meeting, each participant received a letter outlining the study; the minimal risk of participating in the study; the voluntary nature of participation; the confidentiality measures; and his or her right to withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix E). Two copies of the letter were signed, one copy for my records and the other for the participant's records.

### **Confidentiality**

Providing confidentiality for the participants was of primary concern, especially since the setting is a small rural district. To maintain confidentiality, all teacher interviews and member checks were conducted off the school grounds. Furthermore, each transcribed interview received a randomly assigned coded number to protect participants' identities (Lodico et al, 2010). Only I have access to the coding system. The number codes served to identify respondents throughout the study. I avoided collecting demographic information such as sex, years of experiences, or years of employment with the district to ensure additional confidentiality (Merriam, 2009). The district is small and providing any demographic information might give clues to the identity of the participants within the study.

Within the consent letter (Appendix E), participants were made aware of the many actions taken to ensure confidentiality. The letter directly stated that only I will have access to the names of participants and that all data and consent forms will be stored in a locked safe located in the researcher's home. All those who consented to participate in the project study were again verbally made aware of the measures taken to ensure confidentiality at the beginning of each interview.

## **Data Collection**

Interviews and district policy documents formed the data for this project study. In qualitative research, interviews take on an important role, especially when the topic studied cannot be readily observed (Creswell, 2010). For this project study, the primary method of data collection consisted of 12 tape-recorded, private, in-depth semistructured one-on-one interviews that lasted at least 45 minutes and conducted at a time and place of each participant's choosing. All teacher interviews took place off school grounds to increase the likelihood that participants spoke freely and to provide greater confidentiality. If the interviews were completed within the school setting, other school personnel may inadvertently gain awareness of the study or overhear comments, which could negatively influence the free exchange of information or infringe upon the participant's confidentiality and/or willingness to continue to participate. A secondary method of data collection was district policy documents related to teacher retention. This data source provided background understanding of current policies designed to promote teacher retention and corroborate interview data. The interview data and policy documents were the data sources used for triangulation to ensure validity of the study's findings. A full description of the credibility and validity procedures proposed in the study is outlined later in this section under the heading of credibility and dependability.

### **Gaining Access**

As previously discussed, permission to conduct the study was sought, prior to conducting the study. Once I received the necessary approvals, contacting the

participants commenced. Participants scheduled interview dates and times when signing the informed consent form.

### **Data Generation and Organizational System**

To organize the data, I used various software programs. All audio taped interviews were transcribed immediately after each interview with the use of Microsoft Word. Policy documents were scanned into a word document. Excel was utilized for chart making purposes and served as the as the organizational tool for the number codes for each document, the themes, and the in vivo codes that supported the emerging themes. I password protected all electronic files and stored them on a removable storage device. When not in use, the removable storage device was stored in a locked safe.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I sought to inform readers of the experiences and perceptions of the special educators as to the factors that influence their career decisions. The role that best described my intent would be observer as participant (Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). I may be considered a participant because I am an employee within the district; however, I do not function within the group of special educators and my primary role was information gather.

Researcher bias is a concern with any type of study (Creswell, 2012, Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). Yin (2009) believed that case study is potentially vulnerable to researcher bias due to the extensive literature review conducted before data collection. To avoid researcher bias, I was receptive to all data received through participant interviews and ensured that each participant was asked the same set of questions,

respective to their position as teacher or administrator. I also used a journal to record personal thoughts and reflections. The journaling helped to keep me aware of any personal perceptions that may have inadvertently affected the data collection or analysis process.

### **Researcher–Participant Relationship**

The boundaries of this case study are defined as the school district; therefore, the participants are connected by their employment within the small, rural district proposed for this study. I have been employed at one of the schools within this district for 11 years; first as Title 1 teacher and then as general education teacher. I am currently licensed in general elementary education and special education, but I have never been employed as a special education teacher. Previous to my employment, I fulfilled one special education field placements and a student teaching experience within three of the four schools within the district. However, since that time turnover of administration and special education teachers has occurred. There is no remaining staff in any of the schools who served as supervising teachers or administrators during my field work or student teaching experience. For all but one of the teacher participants, I am an employee of the district with whom no relationship exists. For one of the teacher participants, I am a co-worker and have served as the teacher of record for students on her case-load. Our relationship is of professionals working within the same school and is collegial; however, a friendship outside of school does not exist. My role as inquirer and information gatherer was made clear within the invitation to participate.



## Data Analysis

Analyzing the data required many phases. Merriam (2009) explained, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument used for research. Therefore, the researcher should also be responsible for analyzing the data. Merriam also believed that qualitative data collection and analysis should occur simultaneously. Additionally, Creswell (2012) advised conducting a preliminary exploratory analysis viewing the complete data set in its entirety to gain a general sense of the data before breaking it apart. Therefore, preliminary analysis took place as interviews were transcribed and member checked. I created transcripts of the interviews within hours of completing each interview. While transcribing each interview, I noted ideas and insights in a research journal. After member-checking each interview transcript, I updated the journal with new reflections or information to guide the analysis process. All interview transcripts and documents underwent preliminary review before intensive analysis began to aid in constructing a full picture of the data.

Intensive data analysis involved what Hatch (2002) suggested was “a systematic search for meaning” (p. 148). Experts explain that as qualitative researchers search for meaning, they must organize the data, seek out patterns and relationships between and among the data, make interpretations, and present descriptive findings. To begin this intense search for meaning, I used a lean coding strategy to ascertain *in vivo* codes that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2012). Saldana (2009) recommended *in vivo* coding “for beginning qualitative researcher learning how to code data and for studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2009, p. 74). The use of *in vivo*

codes was appropriate as the above statement matched my intentions for conducting the project study as well as my experience level as a researcher. My intent was to capture understanding derived from participants' experiences and to explore how these experiences were perceived to influence teachers' career decisions.

After completion of lean coding, I reviewed the transcripts several more times to evaluate if information fit into the preliminary in vivo coded categories or if new codes or categories were necessary to capture new insights (Saldana, 2009). Then, analysis of the policy documents began, with a focus on finding evidence of congruence with codes and categories that were constructed from the interview data. Manual coding of the data allowed a hands-on feel for the data as it was being organized and categorized.

The final phase of data analysis involved an inductive process of thoughtfully collapsing redundant codes and categories. Creswell (2012) recommended providing in-depth information about a few themes rather than surface level information about many themes. Hence, the themes underwent a reanalysis to ensure that they were supported from multiple perspectives (teachers, administrators, and policy documents). Collapsing the codes into a small number of deeply supported themes that include multiple perspectives provided multilayer meaning and understanding of the data.

### **Credibility and Dependability**

Validating the accuracy of the findings and interpretations should be of primary concern for a researcher throughout the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2012). However, the criteria for evaluating validity in qualitative studies differ from quantitative studies (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010). In qualitative research, "the

goal is to provide in-depth understanding of a limited setting, group, or person” (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 273). Credibility is the qualitative term that parallels validity in quantitative terms. Researchers provide credibility within their studies by accurately portraying participants’ perceptions of the setting and the events that were studied (Creswell, 2012). Whittmore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) stated:

Qualitative investigators ideally consider validity issues throughout the process in inquiry, particularly in the planning and analytic phases.

Findings subsequently need to be presented with an explicit articulation of the validity criteria of emphasis and the specific techniques employed, so that consumers of research can critique findings in a meaningful way. (p. 533)

In this project study, credibility, thoroughness, and congruence served as validity criteria (Whittmore et al., 2001). According to Whittmore et al. credibility requires the research results to reflect participants’ experiences and the context of the experiences. Thoroughness relates to the complete manner in which the findings address the research questions. Congruence necessitates alignment of the research process with the research findings. Using several validity criteria added rigor to the project study.

Along with validity criteria, Creswell (2012) and Lodico et al. (2010) described the importance of using techniques, such as member checking, triangulation of the data, a peer debriefer, and discrepant case analysis to ensure the accuracy and validity of interpretations. Merriam (2009) recommended that the researcher leave an audit trail. Journaling the process of the study provided documentation of how ideas were

constructed, how questions that arose were addressed, how decisions were made, and how problems encountered during data collection or analysis were addressed. My intent was to provide meaningful and credible findings that the district leadership could use to inform school structure and policy decisions. Therefore, member checks, triangulation of the data, use of a peer debriefer, and an audit trail were the strategies included to achieve validity of the study's findings. Each validity technique is discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking took place at several stages of the process. Once interviews were transcribed, each participant received a copy of the interview to review critically for accuracy and allow for clarification. Participants also received a draft copy of the findings to review the results to allow the participants an opportunity to reflect on the interpretations, respond to the completeness and fairness of the findings, clarify any misconceptions, and provide further insight into any points of interest.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is the process of using two or more data sources to corroborate findings (Creswell, 2012; Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2009). This project study includes multiple perspective interviews and documentary data that provided multiple sources of evidence to conduct within-method triangulation (Thurmond, 2001) and completely answer the research question. The beliefs and perceptions provided by special education teachers and administrators were carefully evaluated for similarities to substantiate the factors that emerge that may influence attrition and retention within the district. The documentary

data served as another layer in the analysis process to corroborate the findings of the interview data. Using the within-method type of triangulation ensured the accuracy of the findings.

### **Peer Debriefing**

A peer debriefer can add credibility to the findings. The purpose of a peer debriefer is to serve as an outside reviewer of the study and to provide insight into the strengths and weakness of the project (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et. al, 2010). A peer debriefer examined the study. This colleague has a doctoral degree and is familiar with the rigor necessary for doctoral level qualitative studies but is not affiliated with the district proposed in the study. The role of the colleague was to provide feedback of the appropriateness and levels of support provided for the themes. The peer debriefer provided feedback in writing by way of e-mail communication. This feedback will remain with all the other research data collected.

### **Procedure for Dealing with Discrepant Cases**

The process of looking for alternative explanations or conclusions is crucial to ensuring credible findings (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Participants had an opportunity to respond to and/or clarify interview responses and interpretations during the two member checking sessions. Likewise, I also had an opportunity during these sessions to clarify and further investigate any information that arose from the member checks. For this study there were no discrepant cases.

### **Audit Trail**

I kept a journal to document the entire process of the study. This journal notes when permission to conduct the study was granted, dates and times of interviews, and documents received from the district. It includes insights gleaned from the data and member checking dates, times, and results. Information on the triangulation process, how themes were collapsed, and peer debriefer contacts and results made up the documentation included for the audit trail. This journal also served as a reflection tool to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical manner.

### **Qualitative Results**

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions. I collected the data from a purposeful sampling of special education teachers who had varied years of teaching experiences and varied teaching responsibilities along with building administrators who supervise the teachers. Using in vivo codes during the data analysis process gave voice to the participants. The initial codes that illustrated the teachers' perceptions of the factors they daily experience included workload, caseload, ratio, paperwork, time, lack of professional development, lack of collaboration with other special education teachers, testing pressures, commitment to profession, student success, relationships, family atmosphere, enjoyment, physical and emotional drain, and new challenges. I organized the codes from the teacher interviews into three overarching themes labeled as daily challenges, retention factors, and transfer factors (see Figure 1).

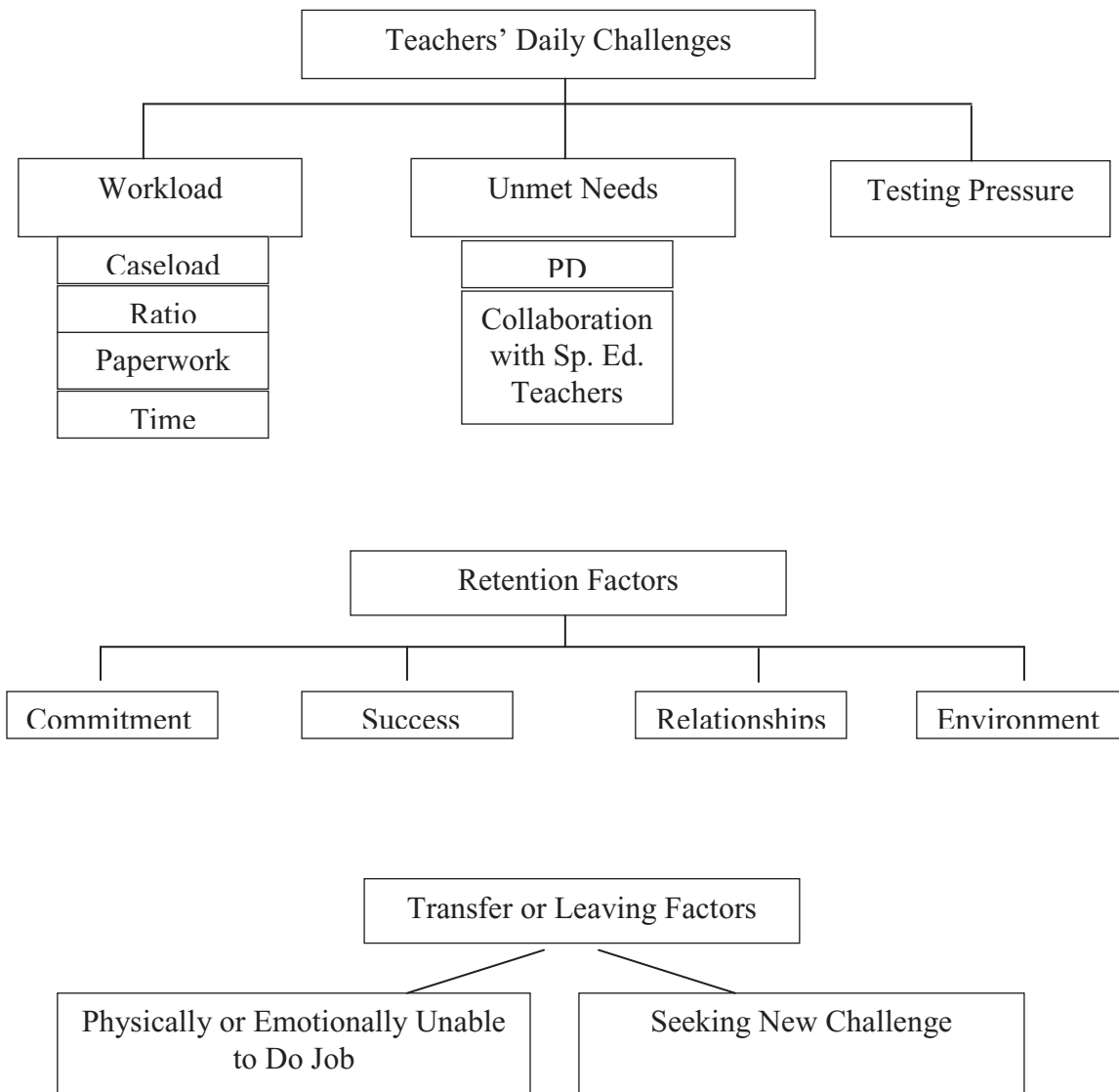
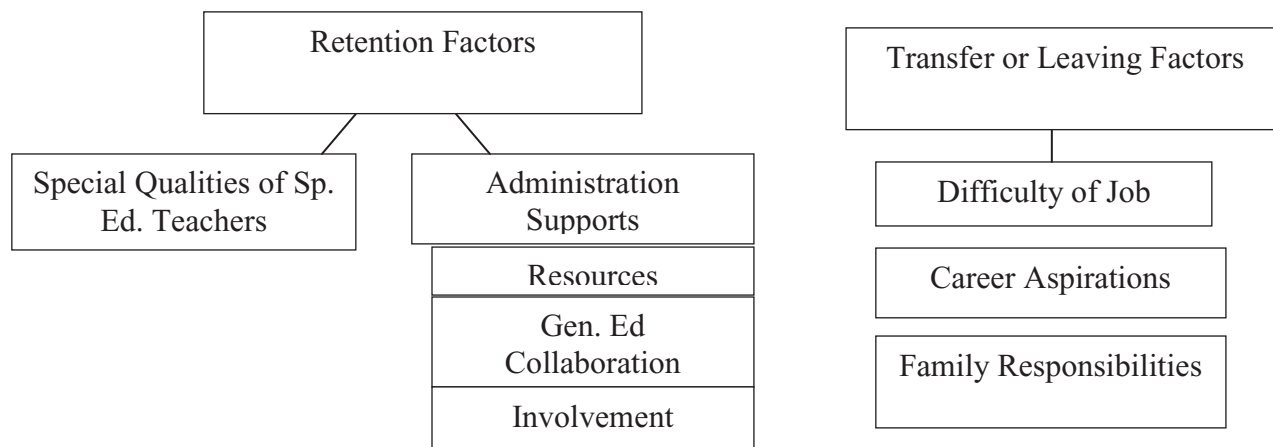


Figure 1. Themes of teacher interviews.

Administrators' perceptions of the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions were captured by the in vivo codes of difficult job, rare individuals, supports, involved, resources, collaboration, sameness of supports, lack of relevant professional development, budget cuts, and staffing issues. Codes derived from the administrators' interviews were organized into two overarching themes. These themes include factors promoting retention and factors influencing transfer to a new position (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Themes of administrator interviews.

Interview data from teachers and administrators revealed additional salient data concerning desired supports. Administrators and teachers alike expressed the need for relevant professional development to provide instructional guidance that can support the complex work special educators are expected to do. The teachers additionally expressed a desire to collaborate with the other special education teachers. The following section will discuss the findings in greater detail.



## **Findings and Salient Data**

The work of special education teachers is quite diverse as the special education discipline includes special education pedagogy, special education student learning needs, and special education law. Special education teachers support students with a variety of challenges, such as student learning, physical, behavioral, sensory needs, or a combination of needs. The requirements of a special education position present a complex work environment. This project study included an in-depth investigation to glean insight from the daily work experiences of the special education teachers' employed by the district and to ascertain the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions. After combining the commonalities within the teacher and administrator interview data, three overarching themes emerged: teachers' daily challenges, retention factors, and transfer or leaving factors. The interview data also contained salient information concerning special education teacher supports that were not as effective as the teachers or administrators wished they were. The salient data was grouped into two themes of relevant professional development opportunities and collaboration with other special education teachers throughout the district.

### **Theme 1: Teachers' Daily Challenges**

The data provided perspectives of the daily challenges embedded in the work of the special education teachers. The teachers provided specific information related to their work. This information was organized under one theme with two sub themes. The theme of teachers' daily challenges was broken into two sub themes to understand the teachers'

perceptions of the challenges faced by special education teachers. The sub themes include workload and testing pressures.

**Workload.** The seven teachers who participated in the interview process held positions throughout the district from pre-k through grade twelve. Despite the diversity within their positions, all seven participants remarked about the workload required in a special education position. In their conversations about the work they do as a special education teacher, the teachers discussed their workload within the context of caseload, paperwork, planning, teaching, and time constraints. Teacher 2 remarked:

Time, paperwork, and consultation, it's daunting. There is just too much expected some times. There is not enough of me to spend with everyone and to get everything done to my satisfaction. I want to be good at it and I want the kids to benefit. I don't feel like I have enough time to do that.

Teacher 2 further explained:

I mean, it is three different grades I am trying to keep up with, three different sets of expectations or assignments, teacher personalities, and student personalities. Do all that along with time to get to know the student really well and time to get the proper paperwork done. Our IEP's are crazy. Then I have to consider what tool is the best to use to document the progress on their goals and find time to enter all that, while teaching six periods a day.

Teacher 1 and teacher 6 commented on the teacher student ratio as the greatest challenge contributing to their workload. Teacher 1 noted:

Joint services [the co-op responsible for testing and placing special education students] is looking more at the number of students rather than the qualifying disabilities or ages of the children placed [in our program]. We figured it takes four to six hours per child [to complete the paperwork]. Then we test them and it takes quite a bit of work on the computer filling out the assessment parts and going through the standards and foundations just trying to find areas for their next level for their IEP. Additionally, teacher 6 stated that, “We struggle more with the ratio now than we used to.” That is my biggest issue.”

Explaining workload, teacher 3 remarked:

You have to do all this paperwork, on top of planning, and teaching and assessment also takes time away from instruction and planning. I am sorry but sometimes I feel an hour is not enough [instructional time]. It just doesn't cut it. I feel like I should give them [the students] 90 [minutes]. I can give them [the students] 60 but we will have to have 23 kids in the room. . . . I am only one person and can only do so much.

Likewise, teacher 5 commented:

The workload is challenging in addition to the regular challenges, some students have multiple disabilities. Not only are students coming into special education with learning disabilities, but many of them have behavioral issues, ADHD, or cognitive delays which requires greater amounts of instruction, planning, and paperwork.

Teacher 7 explained her feelings of stress due to the workload by summarizing the job of a special educator:

We go through [the curriculum] and think about how we were going to take that to teach our students and [think about] what they need to know for the ISTEP and IREAD. Meanwhile, most [students] are about two grade levels behind or more in lots of cases. So, it is just difficult and stressful in that area... The stress and time constraints since you are only allowed to have those students a certain amount of time are difficult.

Sometimes I feel like we don't have enough time to do justice for what we need to do with those students.

Although the teachers each had diverse teaching positions located in different schools within the district, there was commonality in their responses that illustrated the unique challenges of the workload that special educators must endure to effectively do their jobs.

**Testing pressures.** All students, regardless of disability, must take and pass some sort of state mandated assessment (grades 3-10) to measure student growth, which the state uses to calculate AYP for each school within the district. Unless students possess a significant cognitive delay or sensory disability, they are expected to take the state mandated standardized assessment (ISTEP+) along with the general education population. Special education students are expected to pass this test at a level that demonstrates grade level proficiency. In other words, a special education student in third grade must take and pass the assessment demonstrating proficiency in third grade content

and skills. In addition to ISTEP+ preparation, student progress on IEP goals must be progress monitored every nine weeks. A sub theme that emerged from the data on the daily challenges of special educators was the frustration with the time spent on testing and progress monitoring as well as the pressure related to student success on the ISTEP+.

Teacher 7 explained:

Standardized tests are difficult. There is a lot of pressure put on us there.

I think it is stressful being asked to teach students with huge gaps in their learning to be able to take these tests and now I feel like we are responsible for them being able to pass the test. [I] just sit and think about what I know they have to know and what I know they are able to do and to get those two things to meet is an everyday issue. When it comes down to test time, I think man did I do the right thing or what should I have done. Knowing the best thing is hard. You put forth the best effort all along so you just have to live with that.

Likewise, teacher 5 remarked:

We definitely need a different form of evaluating [and] testing our students besides the typical ISTEP+ test. I don't feel like the RISE evaluations [merit based evaluation system for the state of Indiana] and the ISTEP testing is good. You know that is a big challenge for us.

Teacher 2 expressed testing pressures, "I feel like all I do is test my kids.

Every two weeks we are taking some sort of test. It is not what I want to do and it is not what they want to do." Teacher 1 outlined the types of assessments that

must be completed for each of her students since they do not take the ISTEP+, “We have ISTAR and we fill out the Vinelands for the psychological aspects..., individual [performance] assessments, and we progress monitoring through ISTAR.” Teachers perceive the pressure that testing and student performance on these tests as a major challenge.

The factor of workload creating challenges for special education teachers was consistent with the current research. Researchers have identified that workload due to a large caseload and excessive paperwork as a factor that influences special education teacher attrition (Berry et al., 2011; Butler, 2008; and Stevens and Fish, 2010). Despite the acknowledgement by the teacher participants of the pressures of the workload required in a special education position, none of the participants in this study considered the workload as a factor that would influence them to leave a special education position at this present time.

Testing pressures experienced by special education teachers was not identified as a factor that influences special education working conditions within the conceptual framework or in scholarly literature on the topic of special education attrition. However, with growing state accountability measures for students with special needs; it was a factor that arose in this study. One reason that testing pressure may have surfaced in this theme was noted in teacher five’s comments about the RISE teacher evaluations. In addition to special education student assessments contributing to AYP accountability (NCLB, 2001), the state

of Indiana implemented a new teacher evaluation program (RISE) in 2012. This evaluation program uses a formula which includes student testing results to determine the performance rating and salary for teachers (IDOE, 2012). As special education teachers' work involves teaching students with documented special needs whose abilities may be several grade levels below the students' current grade placement, testing pressures have grown to become a more prominent challenge for the special education teachers within this district.

### **Theme 2: Retention Factors**

I related the codes from the interview data to the research question to attain a theme of retention factors. Within the theme are two sub themes of the recognition of difficulty of the job and supports. The supports noted in the findings derived from what the teachers and administrators deemed as important supports to help the teachers do their work.

**Recognition of difficulty of the job.** All five administrators commented on the difficulty of the job and the unique characteristics special educators possess.

Administrator 1 stated:

Special Education is such a distinct area. I think a person has to have a calling for that type of need for children and wanting to work with children with special needs and seeing them progress in academic needs as well as social and emotional growth and so on.

Administrator 2 also shared about the unique characteristics of special education teachers and commented:

Teaching a special needs class is a very difficult task. It is one of the most difficult teaching positions in a corporation. . . . It is difficult to find a special ed. teacher with the effective personality, demeanor, and skills necessary to be successful.

Administrator 3 remarked about the innate difficulty of a special education position:

I know that the job for special education teachers can be more stressful due to the load of paperwork, the emotional need of the students in their classroom, and the feeling of oh my goodness hurry up and get caught up is more immediate for a special ed. teacher.

Likewise, administrator 4 mentioned:

It is a tough job. Everybody here has a tough job, but it takes a special person to do what they do. It takes a special person to be in that field; I don't think we can reward them enough.

Administrator 5 commented on the difficulty of the job as well as the knowledge base that the special education teachers have:

It is a tough job. . . My degree is not in special ed. I have to rely on those professionals in that area. . . . I know I rely on my special education teachers a lot because they are the experts in that area. They know more of the laws and more of the requirements.

Each administrator expressed their perceptions of the uniqueness of a special education position and characteristics that special educators must possess.



The teacher interview data added further insight into the unique characteristics special educators possess and the commitment they have for the field. All seven teacher participants commented on their love of the profession and their commitment to continue working with special needs students. Each teacher's commitment was expressed as a love of what they are doing or a strong desire to help students with special needs.

Teacher 2 shared:

I started there [special education] and have never gotten out. You know, being in public I want to go talk to the kids. I want to find a way to interact with the kids. I just feel drawn to them. I have a tendency to want to counsel and I like helping people. I think that special education provides an avenue for me to do that, rather than as a classroom teacher. I just think that this is what I am supposed to do.

Similarly, teacher 3 expounded:

My heart was in special education. I use that [love of special education] to strive to open doors for students with special needs and give them the understanding that they can achieve something. You can do this. We have to do it a different way, but you can get there. I stay here due to the fact that I need to stay here until the Lord puts me into another direction.

Teachers 4 and teacher 7 responded in a similar manner about their need to help special needs students. Teacher 4 stated:

I know that every student has the ability to learn and I want to give those students a chance to do whatever they would want to do, whether it be

able to read better or if there is a further disability or more extensive disability they would be able to use those tools to get the education they would like. I have been around special education my whole life and it is just very near to me and dear to me.

Teacher 7 discussed: “I always felt that when I would be around a group of children and even my own children as they were growing up that I was drawn to those kids who needed a little extra help.

Commitment to the profession was also expressed in the comments of teacher six:

I think I like special education better because I understand the struggles they have. I see so much good [working with special education students] it would take a lot of really bad to get me to leave. It [reasons for transferring] would be nothing for me about the teaching or conditions.

Teacher 5 expressed similar perceptions as teacher six when discussing how challenges of the job influence her career decisions:

Personally, I wouldn't leave the profession because of it [challenges of the work]. It makes me just want to work harder at it and try to collaborate more with general education teachers and administrators in order to help these students be successful.

All seven teacher participants expressed a commitment to the field of special education based upon a personal conviction or desire to help students with special needs. The administrators' perceptions of the difficulty of the job and the

unique characteristics needed to be a special educator are supported by the teacher's perceptions of the greatest factor that influences their retention in their positions. This factor is a commitment to their profession. Within the schematic representation of the factors that influence special education career decisions, Billingsley (1993) identified a commitment to the profession as an important employment factor of teacher retention.

**Supports.** Current research includes many variables that contribute to effective support for special education teachers. Such things as administrative support, resources and materials, professional development and collegiality are noted as necessary supports for teacher retention (Bay & Parker Katz, 2009; Billingsley, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Boyd et al., 2011; Butler, 2008; Edgar & Pair, 2005). The district participating in the study is one of eight small, rural districts that participate in a special education co-operative (Joint Services) that provides some resources, professional development, and staffing to support each school. Administrative interview data demonstrated that they have a heavy reliance upon Joint Services to meet the professional development and resource needs of their special education staff. Administrator 1 noted: "Joint Services is first and foremost. They will be involved with beginning teachers as well as all teachers in providing support." Administrator 4 added, "Since Joint Services pretty much has control of most of the special ed. teachers, I think we rely heavily on them." Administrator 2 expressed, "Joint Services provides programs for our teachers throughout the school year." Additionally, administrator 3 said, "We have our co-op and they provide meetings and opportunities for the teachers to go to." Analysis of the data revealed that for supports

such as professional development and instructional resources Joint Services takes on that responsibility. However, the data also revealed an administrative desire to provide further supports.

Administrators expressed their involvement in scheduling, allowing collaboration with general education teachers, and just being available if they are needed as additional supports. Administrator 1 noted:

I love my staff and they have a comfort level of knowing that my door is always open. They know I am here to help them with whatever needs they have be it supplies, materials, someone to talk to ...they know that I am here for them. I and the classroom teachers [are] involved in providing support also. We have set weekly grade level meetings now which we are very grateful for. Our sections are now such that specials times allow us to do that. Special education teachers do not attend all of those, but they will attend on an as needed basis and they know they are welcome to attend anytime they would like. It's the same way with in-service trainings.

Administrator 3 illustrated many ways in which support is provided to the special educators in that school:

Emails, phone contacts, those face to face visits for that continued support for those teachers. . . . being present for them, doing some of the leg work for them, participating in a parent meeting that they have asked to reconvene, making contact with the other teachers, and when they are

asking for more; do everything I can to help them.... I hope that they feel that I get what they are doing and I get how they are feeling so that they trust me enough to talk to me about their frustrations.

Additionally, administrator 3 explained supports of collaboration that resulted from recent scheduling changes:

We built in a consultation period. It gives them [special education teachers meeting with general education teachers] an extra 30 minutes of time to ensure all the accommodations the students require can be met. Their prep times are such that it builds in another 45 minute period where they can do some teaming. We have also been talking about all the professional learning communities that we can have and how does that look – electronic connections. It doesn't have to be someone in our building that you can connect with, ask questions, and collaborate with.

Explaining supports, administrator 4 stated:

Personally, I do not think we can do enough. The only thing we do is ask them and praise them about what they are doing. If they ask for things we can give it to them. If they have a discipline issue, we help them with it. If they have a parent issue, we help them with it. I don't think any of them [special education teachers] feel uncomfortable coming to me for anything. As a matter of fact, I see them a lot. That is just the relationship we have.

Administrator 5 shared a personal philosophy of involvement related to supporting teachers:

So, if things do need changed, I try to give them [teachers] that leeway and support in making those changes. That has been my philosophy to try and encourage them. We try to meet with teachers. We try to have department meetings. But, I have told all of the teachers that I am young enough that I am not afraid of change. If they have ideas come to me. If there is anyway in the world we can make these changes and put them in place, I will do it. Like I said, the more things I can do to help those teachers in their positions, the better they are going to do. The better the morale is going to be and the better our school is going to be.

The administrator interview data demonstrated a strong desire of administrators to provide resources, allow for collaboration, and to be involved in the daily work of their special education teachers.

The teacher interview data corroborate the administrators' comments by expressing gratitude for the supports they receive. Teacher 7 commented:

Our school principal is great with support. If I would go in and ask for material or things that has never been an issue. I have always got that. He has always been very good to work with us when we need-time or things to be scheduled a certain way, he is very good about that.

Along the same lines, teacher 4 stated:

I feel I really get the support of administration. . . .It is nice to be able to have them understand where I am coming from and we understand where they are coming from. I appreciate that camaraderie with the administration. It helps a lot. I don't feel like I am out there by myself. The fact that the [school] administration has been there for me has helped out tremendously. I couldn't be happier with that.

Several teachers discussed resources they receive. Teacher 3 stated that, "The principal and the secretaries really help me out to get what I need." Teacher one shared that getting supplies and resources are not a problem for them like it used to be. Teacher six echoed that thought when she stated, "We are now getting some reading and math curriculum that we never got before. . . .During the science [adoption] we got some stuff that we can share. It is helping and making a difference."

Teachers not only express gratitude for the resources and administrative support they received but also for the collaboration that fosters strong relationships with the staff and students within their respective buildings. Teacher 4 stated how she enjoyed working with the other teachers, "It is just a good community of teachers and I like the camaraderie that's for sure!" Teacher 1 shared that, "I really like the [school] corporation." Teacher 2 and teacher 3 discussed the family like atmosphere within their respective school buildings. Teacher two shared that, "We [students and teachers] really form a relationship. I knew that when I went through school here. My teachers were a family. I wanted

to be part of that. I love it here. It is home.” Teacher 3 commented, “I chose [this district] because it is like a family. I liked the school. I liked the teachers. From the beginning, I was included like a family [member]. When you go into some schools, it doesn’t feel like that.” Teacher 3 continued:

The relationships I have built with the teachers and the support they give me is important. I am thankful for my [school] family and how they keep encouraging me. There are times that I just think I can’t do this; then someone comes by and says something encouraging and supportive.

Teacher 7 shared that she enjoyed the relationships with the teachers and students:

The teachers are all very good to work with. I really collaborate a lot with the inclusion teacher. We meet once a week to discuss what the upcoming skills are and what she is going to teach and what I am going to do. I usually teach a whole class lesson. . . I think that has kept me being in special ed. because I have been able to go out and be with all the other kids. I really enjoy that! By the time I have had those students for the whole year; I get to know a lot of kids on the grade level. Doing inclusion has probably helped me from getting burnt out.

Teacher 7 further commented on student relationships:

Day in and day out, I really enjoy them [the students]. I enjoy working with them and talking with them and building relationships. That’s so



rewarding. That's what's great about special education, really getting to know them almost like your own kids.

All teachers expressed their gratitude for the administrative support they receive as well as the important role collaboration plays in helping them to build strong relationships with staff and students.

The factors that promote retention in this study, recognition of the difficulty of job, the commitment special educators possess, and supports of resources, collaboration with general education teachers, and involvement of administration are consistent with the current literature. Gehrke and Murri (2006) found that support from colleagues and principals is an important factor in teacher retention. Demik's (2009) study identified a major factor that influenced teachers to leave their positions in special education as the lack of cooperation among special educators and general educators.

### **Theme 3: Transfer or Leaving Factors**

When analyzing the teacher and administrator interview data in terms of factors perceived as influencing special educators career decisions to transfer to a new school or general education position, three factors arose. These factors are physically or emotionally unable to do job, seeking new challenges, or personal/family responsibilities. Administrators discussed these factors based upon their knowledge of previous special education teachers moving to general education positions, retiring, or leaving due to family responsibilities; however, each administrator commented on the good retention rate that exists in their

respective school. Teachers discussed transfer issues in terms of possible factors that might influence them to leave their positions at some point in the future; however, each teacher commented on their personal desire to stay in special education.

**Physically or emotionally unable to do job.** The data on the workload of special education teachers employed within the district under study was previously discussed under the theme of teachers' daily challenges. This workload has both physical and emotional implications as Teacher 3 explains:

The workload of a special education teacher is a factor. Some may come into the position excited and willing, but I think due to the workload it drains you. This job does drain you year after year and it takes up a lot of your time and takes you away from your family and kids because there is so much you have to do on the inside. If a child has a communication problem, you have to make communication boards, if he or she needs special testing on top of that; you have to find those special tests or develop them. A lot of teachers come into this and I think that about after five years teachers want out. They become so tired physically and mentally with what it takes to be a special education teachers that they want to move to a classroom. When I get to the point that I can no longer physically and mentally do it; then that's when I will [leave].

Similarly, teacher 2 commented:

I would say in general the workload and paperwork and the time to do all that is stressful. I think all that stress is what pushes us out. It is just too hard to get everything done. We are spread too thin. Sometimes you just want to say forget it! Just leave and not dread the work that must get done in the morning.

Administrator 3 observed, “When you see a special education teacher that has been in for five or ten years, in the back of your mind you are thinking how long can they physically and emotionally withstand the weight of this job.” Administrator three further commented that one must continually evaluate how things are done by asking, “What would be a smarter way to do it because the volume of paperwork, the emotional weight of the job, and sometimes the behavioral situations you are dealing with in students is tremendous.”

**Seeking new challenges.** Analysis of administrator interview data revealed that administrators perceive teachers seeking a new challenge within general education as the main reason or factor influencing special education teacher turnover within the district. In this district, moving from a special education position to a general education position is not viewed negatively.

Administrator 1 explained:

In our building the only turnover I have had here in the last few years is one was a transfer to another building [general education] teaching position and the other was a move to a homeroom teaching position [in

this school]. In both cases it was brought about by career aspirations to seek a new challenge in general education.

Adding to the sentiment of new challenges, administrator 2 stated:

In researching our turnover since 2008, turnover has mostly been a teacher moving from a special needs class to a general ed. class to pursue a new challenge. We have had a number of special needs teachers that have moved to a regular classroom after they are employed by [the district]. For some, I do feel while earning their special needs license they are misled or misunderstand the demands of a special needs position. Once employed by a school corporation and the position and responsibilities becomes a reality, the demands of that position leads them to pursue other licensed areas in the corporation. . . . However for some, a teacher may just want a new challenge.

Teacher 7 speculated on a possible reason that she may leave her position, “The only reason I would leave is for a new challenge. I think everybody is better if you’re fresh and do different things instead of doing things over and over again.” However, teacher seven along with the six other teacher participants expressed that their current desire is to stay in special education.

**Personal or family responsibilities.** The administrative interview data revealed a factor of personal or family responsibility. Administrator 2 discussed that a few positions in the district resulted in turnover due to a spouse’s job transfer which required the special education teacher to resign to move with the family. Administrator 5

commented on a recent turnover in the school, “We had [teacher] for five years. [The teacher] would have been back with us, but her husband took a new job in Evansville. So overall we have been lucky to have a high retention rate.” Administrators expressed that personal or family responsibilities played an important role in recent special education teacher attrition.

The transfer and leaving factors that emerged from the interview data were consistent with the conceptual framework used in this study. Billingsley’s (1993; 2004b) schematic representation of the factors that influence special education teachers’ career decisions to transfer to a new school or general education position included personal factors such as family responsibilities and work conditions that would include physical or mental fatigue due to the excessive workload inherent in special education positions.

Although the factor of seeking a new challenge was not specifically identified in Billingsley’s (1993, 2004b) schematic representation; seeking a new challenge aligned with Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory. Professional growth related to Herzberg’s intrinsic needs based motivation factors that support job satisfaction. Hammerness (2008) noted that teachers leaving one position for a new one should not always reflect something negative. The data reflected the administrators’ perceptions of a special education teacher moving to a general education position as a natural transition to seek out a new challenge and as growth in professional practice.

**Salient Data**

Data gathered from 12 interviews with special education teachers and administrators employed by the district under study disclosed areas where special education teachers expressed unmet needs and administrators express a desire to better support the teachers. The first area is relevant professional development and instructional guidance to support the work of special educators. All seven teachers mentioned that they desire more instructional guidance to ensure all students are learning at high levels.

Teacher 7 summarized the plight of special education teachers:

Truthfully, we do not have any real guidance. With the general ed. teachers, they always have lots of workshops and they are given curriculum that is basically all laid out for them. That is not the case for us. We have to decide how to take the curriculum and teach kids who are way below grade level at their level but still allow them to be able to pass a standardized test at their grade level. . . no one ever comes in to tell us what to do about it, or what should you do about it, or here's some handy tips to help you out. Nobody really tells you anything.

Speaking about professional development, teacher 6 commented:

Sometimes I think we [special education teachers] need special training. I guess one of the things I feel like we struggle is that our needs are so different than the rest of the school. We wanted to go get training because behavior is for everybody, but it is a big issue in special needs. We couldn't go for the training for a long time. I know it is something

different from the rest of the school, so on their end they don't justify that as a big need because they try to do what will help the whole school.

Teacher 1 expressed her desire for more professional development to increase her teaching practices, "I think more workshops or conferences that we could attend would be very helpful. Usually, we have to seek out those opportunities and pay for them on our own." Similarly, teacher 2 discussed a need for deeper knowledge to successfully implement researched based programs for special education students:

Which programs work? E-mails are great. But, I want to know how you planned it; how did you implement it in your gen. ed. classes; how does your inclusion work, how do you get gen. ed teachers to understand that special ed. kids are labeled for a reason? They are not like everyone else and that is why they are labeled.

Teacher 3 openly reflected on her first year of experience and the need for continued instructional guidance and stated:

When I came into this job, I did not have a clue. I got my keys and there you go. I had no idea what to do and where to start. The support was there but not as a person who was in this position. I was given a mentor, but that mentor had never taught in special education. The mentor was nice, but if I would have had a mentor in the special education department, it would have been wonderful. There were not a lot of connections with special ed. and it was hard. Even now I feel I need more training on

instructional strategies and how to modify the curriculum because we deal with so many student needs.

Teacher 5 noted that profession development is needed to help the special education teachers better support their students throughout the day stating:

We need help, I guess, carrying over and accommodating and modifying instruction so that our students can have a little more success in the general ed. classroom even though they may be sole provided for in math or reading. Instruction in our room should carry over with modifying and differentiating to make them part of that so that they can see success in that classroom as well.

All seven teacher participants commented on a need for professional development to help them better support the diverse needs of their students.

Administrators shared that most professional development (PD) for special education teachers is provided by the educational cooperative, and district policy documents verified that one role of the educational cooperative is to provide professional development. However; administrators expressed a desire to provide more relevant professional development for their staff. Administrator 3 stated:

PD needs to be relevant to what they are doing on a day to day basis. Sometimes they [professional development opportunities provided by Joint Services] are misleading. The title of the PD opportunity will lead you to believe that you are going in and will receive practical suggestions on how to deal with a student for example with Autism or with high, high



emotional need and you come out and it is nothing more than bulleted points on a handout that you could have read, stayed in your, classroom and taught.

Administrator 1 shared another issue with providing professional development:

Back a few years ago, PD was abundant. Joint services would have periodic trainings for special education teachers. They still do but not as much as in the past. Also when budget constraints were not there, any time a teacher had a need or concern, I could find a particular training through SIEC [a local education center] or other places that I felt would be beneficial. If a teacher had a request to attend a conference, it was not an issue. Now that has changed the last few years with budgetary constraints. We do not have the flexibility we once did, but we still try to provide as much training as possible where it is needed.

Administrator 4 stated that professional development is very important, “But, if you have to rely on free, and free is the key word anymore, you don’t get much opportunity. So, I would say it is not very good.” Administrator 5 elaborated on the limitations administrators face when seeking professional development for their teachers in the district as well as the desire to provide greater support in that area:

We are limited on professional development growth, but I do provide everything I can. I know my resources are limited. Last year I think each building had \$1,500 to provide professional growth. With \$1,500 you

might say, “Oh great!” But, you get three people to go to a conference and you pretty much used up that \$1,500. So, we try to spread it around. But, I do try to make sure I go on priority and divvy it up as much as I can. I wish we could do more. Teachers want to. Teachers want to go to different professional development opportunities. We try to look at SIEC a lot to see the free or low cost ones that we can go to. . . .We [administrators] have talked about if there is any way even once a month, that we could have an early release. Even if we get out a half-hour early, we could use that half-hour for professional development.

The data provided evidence that both teachers and administrators are cognizant of the need for more relevant professional development to help support the special needs of the students within the district.

A second area of need arose from the teacher interview data was opportunities to collaborate with the other special education teachers within the district. The district consists of four schools a primary elementary school, an intermediate elementary school, a junior high, and a high school. The teachers employed within the district work in varying capacities in grade pre-k through grade 12. Supporting a special education student throughout the child’s school career is necessary; however, communication and collaboration of the special education teachers to share pertinent student information and ways to meet his or her needs is rare and limited by scheduling and time constraints. Teacher 2 discussed why there may be a need for such collaboration:

I wish I could work more with the other special education teachers.

I think having not necessarily a learning community but having a chance to sit down with all the other special education teachers and discuss what would you like me to do to prepare my students for (omitted grades). And working with elementary [to share that] this is what I would like them [students] to do and not just academically, but with how to advocate for themselves.

Likewise, teacher 3 commented:

I think it would be neat if we could meet with all the teachers within the special education department. Just to meet each other and share ideas. Communication and collaboration in a structured way would really help. I don't want people to think I am intruding in their area, I just want to be aware of what is going on and see what you are doing that I can be doing as well.

Additionally, Teacher 7 said:

I would like the ability to be in contact with other special education teachers with more experience and with more knowledge than I do. It would be nice if we had a way to be with the other special education teachers and get to talk with them. . . We really don't have opportunities to talk with them. There definitely needs some sort of special education school wide department that really does work together. It is not joint services.

Teacher 6 noted a benefit that collaboration could provide:

Communication, I think, makes a big difference that isn't realized yet.

That would be the biggest thing. I don't think they [administrators] realize. But it [need for communication of all special education teachers] is huge across a lot of areas.

The need for collaboration with the other special education teachers is important to understanding the daily challenges that special educators experience. The data reveals that administrators recognized the importance of collaboration with the general education teachers and are addressing scheduling to support greater school level collaboration as discussed in theme two. However, the teachers expressed the importance of district collaboration with all of the special education teachers to better support students who are transitioning from one school to the other.

### **Summary**

An intrinsic qualitative case study was best suited to answer the main research question: What are the factors that special education teachers and school administrators in a small rural district perceive as having an influence on special education teachers' career decisions? Patton (2002) noted, "Qualitative methods permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance" (p. 227). The purpose of the investigation was to gain an understanding of the special educators and administrators perceptions of the factors that influence teachers' career decisions to stay in their position within a small rural district, transfer to a special education position or

new school, or leave the field altogether. The inquiry was context and issue specific to allow for an in-depth inquiry.

Ethical issues and participants rights were considered and protected through a process of gaining written approval to conduct the study through Walden University's IRB and the district superintendent prior to inviting participants and gathering signed consent of participation forms. Confidentiality measures included holding interviews off school grounds, avoiding collection of demographic information that could give away the identify of a participant, randomly assigning each participant a number that was used throughout the study, and storing data and signed consent forms in a locked safe at my home.

The data for this project study consisted of multiple perspective interviews and district policy documents. Steps in the data analysis process included reviewing the data multiple times, using in vivo codes to give voice to the participants, and organizing the codes into themes. Member checking, triangulation, peer debriefing, and documenting the entire process in a research journal were strategies to provide credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Three themes and other salient information emerged from the data. The first theme was the daily challenges of teaching in a special education compiled into workload and testing pressures. The second theme was retention factors which included the recognition of the difficulty of the job, special education teacher commitment, and supports of resources, involvement, and collaboration with general education teachers. The third theme was transfer or leaving factors of physical or emotional fatigue, seeking

a new challenge, and personal factors. Salient data consisting of relevant professional development and the need for collaboration with special education teachers within the district were requested by teachers to help meet the diverse needs of their students.

A collaborative professional development project emanated from the results of the study. The project, discussed in detail in the next section, is designed to help the district address the needs for more relevant professional development and time to collaborate with the special education teachers within the district. This project arose out of expressed needs of the teachers and expressed desires from the administrators to provide supports whenever a need arises.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

In this qualitative project study, I explored the perceptions of special education teachers and administrators of the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions. The study involved a thorough analysis of in-depth interviews with special education teachers and administrators to understand teachers' daily experiences and to gain insight into factors that may influence teachers to stay in their positions, transfer to new general education positions or schools, or leave the profession. Salient data indicated that teachers need meaningful professional development targeted for the specialized work that they do, along with time to collaborate with other special education teachers in the district to share ideas, discuss current practices, and solve problems that occur within the classroom. The resulting project is a proposal for a 7 month long professional development program (see Appendix A) including the establishment of a professional learning community where special education teachers can discuss issues related to their work, engage in discourse on current practices, and participate in free online professional development aimed at turning theory of educating special needs students into effective teacher practice. This section provides detailed information about the professional development project.

#### **Description and Goals**

The problem addressed in this study and identified in Section 1 is that special education teacher attrition was rising in the district under study. In-depth interviews with teachers and administrators revealed factors that may influence special educators' career

decision and salient data of desired supports that have the potential to strengthen their commitment and professional practices. The teachers expressed their need for purposeful and relevant professional development and time to collaborate with the other special education teachers within the district. If implemented, the resulting project development plan provides structures for collaboration among the teachers as they engage in free online research based professional development modules specifically designed to increase the expertise and professional practices of special education teachers.

I designed the professional development plan to be implemented throughout one school year, with all special education teachers within the district participating in a monthly meeting of a professional learning community (PLC). An important aspect of the professional development plan is the ongoing support of learning and development of professional practice that results from collaboration within a culturally proficient professional learning community (Lindsey, Jungwirth, Pahl & Lindsey, 2009). During the first meeting, teachers will learn about how a PLC functions and about the personal responsibilities and commitments required to achieve a safe, nurturing, and productive environment. At this first meeting, the teachers will participate in a short activity to construct the norms and protocols which will guide all future meetings.

During this first meeting, the teachers can look through the 7-month plan that addresses professional development topics that arose during the interview process. However, PLC's serve to provide a venue for specific learning based upon student data, teacher need, and collaboratively set goals. Teachers will have an opportunity to dissect their current student data, discuss their most pressing needs, and, if necessary, realign the



topics and learning modules to address current student needs. This flexibility will ensure that learning material presented is relevant and purposeful for the teachers and their students. During subsequent meetings, teachers will engage in professional development modules, explore research related to proven instructional practices that allow students with special needs to access the curriculum at high levels, implement the strategies, and review student data to determine effectiveness.

Three goals supported the development of this plan. The first goal for this project was the creation of a district structure that provides a forum for the type of collaboration that is necessary for success within the dynamic field of special education. The second goal for this plan was for the participants to obtain relevant professional learning that can increase the teachers' knowledge and professional practices to meet the diverse needs of their students. The final goal was for the participants to experience and develop proficiency in participating in professional learning communities to address the learning needs of students and staff alike. Therefore, this project provides support structures of collaboration and professional development that research suggests can improve special education teacher retention by increasing teacher self-efficacy, reducing burnout, and improving teacher practice (Billingsley, 2004a; Billingsley, 2007).

### **Rationale**

The local problem that initiated this study was a rising special education teacher attrition rate within the district. Salient data that emerged from the interviews revealed that all of the teachers expressed a desire for relevant professional development opportunities to improve their knowledge of research based instructional practices for

students with special needs and time to collaborate with the other special education teachers within the district. Likewise, all of the administrators commented on a desire to provide relevant professional development specific to the needs of their special education teachers. However, budget restraints were a barrier.

Current studies on teacher retention factors have identified collaboration and targeted professional development as important to retaining teachers. Gersten et al., (2001) and Billingsley (2007) found that professional development opportunities have a direct effect on special educators' commitment to the profession and an indirect effect on teachers' intent to leave. Swars, Meyer, Mays, and Lack (2009) found that the 134 teachers who participated in their study reported five themes essential to keeping the teachers at their respective schools: shared values, unique student populations, teachers' relationships with administrators, teachers' daily life experiences, and teacher's relationships with fellow teachers. Implementing this professional development plan could improve interactions within the teachers' work environments, and strengthen conditions related to three of the five themes. Within the structures of a PLC, teachers can create shared values, positively influence teachers' daily life experiences by building effective teacher practice, and build strong relationships with fellow teachers. Thereby strengthening teacher's commitment to stay in their positions and possibly reducing special education teacher attrition.

### **Review of the Literature**

The work that special education teachers must perform is multifaceted requiring a wide range of duties and in a variety of instructional settings (Duffy & Forgan, 2004).

Due to the complexity of special educators' teaching duties, expertise needed to meet the needs of students qualifying for special education services, and diversity of the settings in which special education teachers perform their work, it is difficult for schools to find ways to support all the educators' professional needs (Duffy & Forgan, 2004; Filce, Sharpton, & Ryndak, 2008). The interview data discussed in Section 2 provided several themes related to factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions. Salient data extracted from the interview data served as the catalysts for a professional development plan that incorporates teacher collaboration and professional development targeted at the needs of the special education teachers. This professional development plan was informed by current theory and practice resulting from an extensive review of literature on professional learning communities and professional development. I conducted online searches of peer reviewed journal articles and publications on the topic using EBSCO, Google Scholar, ERIC and ProQuest. The following search terms were used to aid in acquiring relevant literature: *professional learning communities, educational communities, learning communities, learning organizations, communities of practice, collaboration, professional development, and training for teachers of special needs students*. The following outlines the professional literature related to the projects creation.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Today's complex educational environment requires collaboration to meet the diverse needs of staff and students within the school. To address this need, educators have created communities of practice referred to as professional learning communities.

Muirhead (2009) stated that the work within professional learning communities directly addresses the standards and accountability concerns found in the No Child Left Behind Act by building mutual accountability. Lunenburg's (2010) research into schools that demonstrated improvement over a sustained period of time indicated that the success was attributed to the stakeholders' abilities to function as a professional learning community. Crafton and Kaiser (2011) posited that professional learning communities provide a promising structure for sustained growth and change.

The learning communities comprise teachers, school administrators, and school partners that come together with a strong commitment to their professionalism and clarity about the rationale of their work through continuous study, reflection, dialogue, and learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Essential elements of learning communities include a shared vision, shared values, trust, and commitment to shared learning to address students' learning needs (Brindley & Crocco, 2009; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008; Hord, 2004; Jetton, Cancienne, & Greever, 2008; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Levine, 2010; Killion & Roy, 2009; Servage, 2008). PLCs are marked by collegiality infused with critical dialogue to promote reflection and problem solving to direct change that will support greater levels of learning for students (Goduto, Doolittle, & Leake, 2008; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2009; Lindsey et al., 2009; Prestridge, 2009). Killion and Roy (2009) described this type of collaboration:

Educators assess their instructional practices and their students' learning to determine whether the lessons they planned, the strategies they used,

and the explanations they devised helped students achieve what the teachers intended. Working together teachers are able to assist one another in continually improving their practices, reflecting on and refining their work with the support of colleagues (p. 5).

Professional learning communities break from tradition and encourage constructive feedback and open dialogue pertaining to current teaching practice (Nelson, 2009). The sustained collaboration and reflection inherent in professional learning communities provide an avenue to reculture a school system (Frost, Coomes, & Lindeblad, 2010).

This purposeful collaboration should be embedded as part of the work teachers do to facilitate the development of deep levels of trust and critical dialogue and reflection that can increase teacher efficacy and transform teacher practice (English, 2009; Gutierrez & Bryan, 2010; Hamos et al., 2009; Harris & Jones, 2010; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Levine, 2010; McNaughton & Lai, 2009; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Poekert, 2012). To support teachers and improve classroom instruction, embedded professional development opportunities is an area being addressed in many school improvement plans (Galluci, DeVoogt, Van Lare, Yoon & Boatright, 2010; Taylor, 2008). Formal structures such as dedicated time to collaborate, meeting facilities, and necessary resources must be considered and provided for in order to support the work of PLCs ( Killion & Roy, 2009; Lindsey et al., 2009; Servage, 2008). Dedicated leadership is also necessary to foster a shared vision and resulting shared beliefs and values (Killion & Roy, 2009; Lindsey et al., 2009; Trehearn, 2010). Professional organizations such as National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (2002) and Learning Forward (n.d.) hold teachers'

participation in learning communities as vital to effective professional development that ensures and sustains a high performing school climate. Morrissey (2000) believed that professional learning communities serve as “the supporting structure for schools to continuously transform themselves through their own internal capacity” (p. 10).

Professional learning communities are the means to reach the goal of improved student learning.

The research literature supports the use of professional learning communities as a vehicle to support collaboration, exploration, idea sharing, and investigation. The special education teachers who participated in the project study expressed their desire to collaborate with the other special education teachers to improve their knowledge and practice. Therefore, the plan establishes a professional learning community in which professional development will be obtained.

### **Professional Development**

Dennis Sparks (1998), National Staff Development Council emeritus executive director, stated:

If every student is to have a competent teacher, then virtually all their teachers must be learning virtually all the time. While that learning will occasionally happen in workshops and courses, most of it will occur as teachers plan lessons together, examine their own students work to find ways to improve it, observe one another teach and plan improvements based upon various data (p. 2).

Lama, Sula, and Gjokutaja (2011) found that professional development often times is lacking or inadequate to provide teachers with knowledge and skills necessary to instruct students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Recent research has proven that traditional models of one-day workshops are not effective in changing teacher practice (Joyce & Stowers, 2002; Ersoy & Cengelci, 2008; Papinczak, Tunny & Young, 2009; Shortland, 2010; Yeung-Chung, 2011). Joyce and Showers (2002) reported that learning theory alone translates into a 0% transfer to practice rate. Theory presentation and demonstration also translates into a 0% transfer to practice rate. Theory presentation, along with a demonstration and practice time during the session translates into a 5% transfer to practice rate. Theory presentation, a demonstration, practice within the session, along with support once teachers return to the classroom transferred into a 99% transfer to practice rate. They posited that these facts demonstrate that traditional models of professional development are unsuccessful at helping teachers turn theory into effective sustainable practice to help students achieve at greater levels.

On-going, embedded, and collaborative professional development that fosters deep reflection and feedback has proven to be most effective in helping teachers to turn theory into quality practice (Alber, 2011; Albrecht & Sehlaoui, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Klein & Riorda, 2011; Lee, 2010; McGee, 2008; Mohd Meerah, Halim, Rahman, Harun, & Abdullah, 2011; Nichols, 2012; Sturko & Holyoke, 2009; Woodley & Armatas, 2010). Biancarosa, Bryk, and Dexter (2010) conducted a four year longitudinal study and found that collaborative professional development resulted in substantial improvement in student learning. Other researchers support the claim that effective school based models

of professional development are implemented through professional learning communities (Killion & Roy, 2009; Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons, 2009; Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, & Sweeney, 2008; Williams, Brien, Sprague, & Sullivan, 2008; Wood, 2007).

Research has shown that high performing schools have school leaders who build staff capacity through on-going professional development opportunities within professional learning communities (Crawford & Torgensen, 2007; National Staff Development Council, 2001; Prytula & Weiman, 2012; Williams et al., 2008). While participating in collaborative professional development, teachers gain knowledge of other teachers' thinking and growth as they examine practices and construct shared meaning about the practices of teaching; thereby improving one's own ability as well as other teachers' abilities to design learning opportunities that promote high student performance for all students (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Strahan, Ceitner, & Lodico, 2010). Desimone (2011) conducted a study of empirical research and identified five core features of professional development that bring about changes in knowledge, practice, and student achievement. These five core features include a content focus, active learning, coherence to the daily work the teachers do; sustained duration, and collective participation. Chester (2012) found that teachers were more likely to try new things within their classrooms if they had a support group to discuss and work out implementation issues. Similarly, Shagiri (2012) emphasized the need for teachers to work together within a learning community to support the initial professional development received.



The current literature on effective professional development outlined in this literature review informed the professional development plan. The plan's design supports a collaborative environment where special education teachers investigate student performance and research effective instructional strategies to address student need as they engage in high levels of discourse and reflection related to teacher beliefs and effective practice. The plan also provides on-going support as teachers move through the professional development modules and implement the various instructional strategies.

### **Implementation**

With approval of the project study from Walden University, 06-18-13-0274597, the professional development plan will be submitted to the district superintendent. If approved by the superintendent, the professional development plan designed for the special education teachers could be implemented at the start of the 2014-2015 school year. The information on resources and supports, identification of potential barriers, timetable for implementation, and roles and responsibilities of stakeholders is outlined below.

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

The support structures available to implement the plan are a) a scheduled time to collaborate, b) a proper venue to hold the professional learning community, and c) access to computers, internet, and an interactive board. An additional support includes the expressed commitment of the special education teachers to participate in the professional learning community. A final support is absence of monetary resources required to implement the plan. The data and student work required for use within the professional

development plan will be derived from daily instructional opportunities; and the case studies, vignettes, and research resources are provided by the IRIS Center via free on-line professional development modules designed especially for special education teachers.

### **Potential Barriers**

The biggest potential barrier to the implementation of this professional development plan is the scheduling of a time for all of the special education teachers to meet without affecting instructional time. The current schedule in the plan is based upon the master schedules of each school for the 2013-2014 school year. If any of the master schedules change for the 2014 -2015 school year, it may impact the designated time that is noted in the plan. There will need to be flexibility in the scheduling and may require a reevaluation to ensure all teachers can attend with as little impact on instructional time as possible.

Another potential barrier related to scheduling is the date for each of the seven sessions. The teachers along with the district facilitator will set the dates during the first meeting. Communication with building principals will be necessary to ensure that building administrators do not inadvertently schedule other activities on these dates.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

The first step toward implementation of the plan is to receive approval from the district superintendent of the district where the interviews were conducted. The plan provides for seven months of collaborative inquiry to be implemented throughout a school year. As approval of the project study from Walden University must precede implementation, it should begin in September of 2014 and conclude in April of 2015.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

My role was to conduct the project study and to design the professional development plan based upon the needs teachers expressed during the one-on-one interviews. Professional literature on effective professional development and information on research based on-line professional development providers supported the creation of the plan. One of my potential roles is to join the first meeting to present an overview of the professional development plan and facilitate the creation of the group norms and processes to be used throughout the sessions.

The role of the district administrator is to evaluate the proposed professional development plan and approve its implementation. If approval occurs, the district administrator or designee would need to have knowledge of each school building's calendar and attend the initial meeting to help the educators schedule the seven sessions. Additionally, the district administrator would need to communicate the dates and times of the meetings with each building administrator.

The role of the teachers is to attend and actively participate within the professional learning community. Teachers will need to be willing to implement the strategies they are studying and be open to receiving feedback. Additionally, if the strategies do not seem to be improving student performance, the teachers need to be committed to determining the next steps and actions to take. Although the professional development plan provides teacher resources and on-line resources, teachers may need to be willing to seek out or research further resources to help with specific issues related to implementation of the strategies to ensure student growth.

## **Project Evaluation**

The product of this project study is a professional development plan that establishes a professional learning community for the special education teachers within the district. The goals of the project include the following: a) the creation of a district structure that provides a forum for the type of collaboration which is necessary for success within the dynamic field of special education, b) participants to receive relevant learning opportunities to increase the teachers' knowledge and professional practices to meet the diverse needs of their students, c) to allow the participants to experience and develop proficiency in participating in professional learning communities to foster personal, professional and student growth. To determine if these goals have been met, formative and summative evaluation will be necessary. Formative assessments will take place monthly to monitor the degree and effectiveness of the collaboration within the meetings. A summative evaluation will be completed to measure the overall effectiveness of the professional development plan in increasing teacher knowledge, collaboration skills, and student outcomes.

### **Formative Evaluation**

At the end of each monthly meeting, teachers will fill out an anonymous short open ended questionnaire (included in Appendix A) addressing the comfort level and effectiveness of the collaboration taking place within each meeting. This on-going evaluation will be guided by the following question: How has the structure of the professional development built capacity for collaboration across grade level learning? An open-ended questionnaire can provide rich qualitative data of the environment within

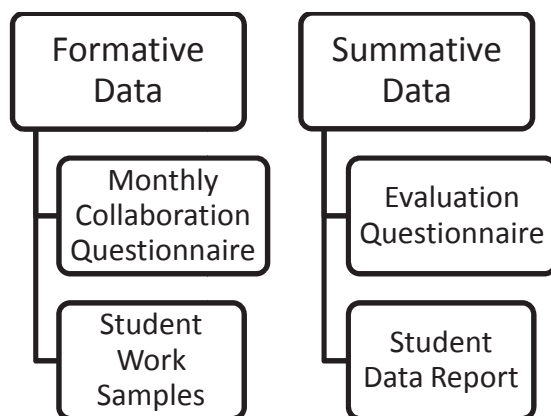
the professional learning community. Allowing for anonymity can foster insightful and truthful responses that the facilitator can use to create and sustain a respectful and nurturing environment.

### **Summative Evaluation**

A summative evaluation will consist of qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the professional development in building capacity to participate in collaborative inquiry and increasing knowledge, skills, and effective practices to address the needs of special needs students. The questions guiding the inquiry include the following: a) What are the teachers' perceptions of participating in a professional learning community? b) How effective was the professional development plan in improving student performance? The qualitative data resulting from an open-ended questionnaire (included in Appendix A) at the end of the year can provide insight into teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the professional learning community and the content of the professional development plan. The quantitative data resulting from student assessments reports will serve as evidence of theory contained in the professional development models being effectively transferred into teacher practice.

As the professional development plan establishes a PLC, it will be the teachers' first experience with collaborative learning. The findings will provide an important baseline from which further effective professional development designs can be made. The multiple efforts of building capacity for collaborative learning, increasing teacher knowledge and practice, and improving student performance require multiple data

sources to adequately evaluate the overall effectiveness of the product that arose from the project study (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Professional development evaluation process.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

This project study has implications for social change that include a) adding to the scholarly research of the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions, and (b) a no cost professional development plan that builds capacity for collaborative inquiry, teacher practice, and student achievement. The implication resulting from this study will be the creation of a professional learning community in which changes in professional development practices from occasional one-day sessions to embedded, collaborative learning will occur. This professional learning community format will support continuous learning for teachers as they explore research-based instructional strategies to address the learning needs of their students. As a result of higher levels of teacher learning, greater social change may be evident through increased levels of academic achievement for students with special needs.

**Local Community**

I conducted this project study to explore special education teachers' perceptions of the factors that influence the career decision within my local learning community. The resulting project provides support in the areas of collaboration with other special education teachers and relevant professional development. The content and activities within the professional development plan emanated from the expressed needs of the teachers during interview sessions. The plan requires no additional funds to implement, which breaks down the barrier of budget constraints that has prevented teachers from receiving relevant professional development opportunities.

The special education teachers will increase their knowledge of research based reading instructional strategies to increase student academic performance without causing a burden on the districts' finances. This knowledge should impact academic achievement of students with special needs. Higher academic achievement of students with special needs can result in long-term impact on greater high school graduation rates and possibly better post-secondary outcomes for students with special needs.

**Far-Reaching**

Many schools in Indiana are not meeting AYP in part because of low performance of special needs students on mandated state assessments. Additionally, many rural schools like the district that participated in this study rely on an educational cooperative to provide professional development. Interview data revealed that both teachers and administrators question the quality and relevance of professional development support provided by an entity located outside the district and far removed from the staff and

students within the schools. The targeted, no cost professional development plan establishes a professional learning community where teachers can engage in research, inquiry, and reflection specific to the needs of special needs students. Therefore, the plan has the potential to impact student learning on a broader level. Schools could utilize the framework of the professional development plan and on-line resources to provide high quality and relevant professional development to better meet the learning needs of special education teachers and students without taking away valuable resources necessary to ensure high academic performance of all students. The plan can be easily tailored to address the specific needs within any school; thereby allowing for the potential of widespread social change.

### **Conclusion**

The product that emerged from teacher and administrator interview data consists of a professional development plan that allows for collaborative inquiry. It was created to address the needs of relevant professional development and collaboration with other special education teachers. Providing these requested supports can foster greater commitment to the various roles of special education teachers and lead to greater retention. The three goals for the plan include establishing a district wide professional learning community for the eleven special education teachers in the district; providing relevant professional development that will foster professional growth and greater student achievement; and building capacity to participate in collaborative inquiries designed to address student needs. Formative evaluations in the form of an open-ended questionnaire will take place monthly to support the work being done within the community. A



Summative evaluation consisting of qualitative and quantitative data will be used to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the professional development structures and content. This information can be used to determine further learning needs of the teachers and the students.

The resulting plan was designed to help teachers within my local learning community. However, the plan is easily tailored to help other schools and districts provide targeted professional development for special education teachers. Section 4 outlines the strengths and limitations of the project study and provides an analysis of self as scholar, practitioner, and project developer.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

This section outlines the process of this doctoral project study. It includes a critical reflection of the project study from inception to inquire about the increasing attrition rate of the special education teachers within my district to its conclusion with the development of a professional development plan targeted to meet the special education teachers' specific needs. Teacher and administrator interview data comprised the data set from which the product of the project study originated. This section provides reflections on the project's strengths and limitations as well as analysis of scholarship, project development, and social change.

### **Project Strengths**

The project study, grounded in a conceptual framework of Billingsley (2004) schematic representation of special education teacher attrition, provided context specific information related to special education teacher attrition. Conducting interviews gave a voice to each teacher and administrator so their perceptions of special education teacher attrition could be understood. As the study was context specific, the interview data provided important information used in the development of a relevant professional development plan for the special education teachers within the district. This professional development project, grounded in the scholarly literature on effective professional development structures, provides for collaborative inquiry within a professional learning community. Within this community, teachers can investigate data to identify student needs, reflect on current practices, research best practices for teaching students with

special needs, and share experiences and expertise (English, 2009; Gutierrez & Bryan, 2010; Hamos et al., 2009; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Levine, 2010; McNaughton & Lai, 2009; Musanti & Pence, 2010). This project moves from the traditional model of professional development available in the district, a one-time workshop, to an embedded, ongoing model of inquiry and practice with continual support from fellow participants.

Additionally, the professional development project utilizes free online professional development modules consisting of case studies, vignettes, implementation considerations, and resources. These resources were designed by notable academic organizations in conjunction with Vanderbilt University with an emphasis on special education. Each module contains research based learning theories and instructional strategies aimed at improving special education students' academic performance. The district will not have to incur any monetary expense to implement the plan.

Furthermore, the plan is tailored to the specific learning needs of the special education teachers as expressed during the interview sessions. Therefore, the learning is relevant to the daily activities conducted within their classrooms. The relevant professional development opportunities should facilitate greater student achievement.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

A limitation of this project study is the context specific nature of the investigation. The findings are limited to the district that participated in the study. I used a qualitative approach to understand teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the factors that influence special education teacher attrition within one small, rural district. To gain greater understanding of teacher attrition, a researcher might want to conduct a survey

study that includes all of the school districts involved with the local educational cooperative, allowing for more special education teacher perceptions. The results could provide greater generalizability for other small, rural schools that utilize a cooperative to provide special education services.

Another limitation is in the limited perspective of the teachers who participated in the study. Interviewing only current special education teachers provided deep insights into the daily challenges and factors that might influence these teachers to leave their positions; however, including teachers who recently left a special education position for a general education position would provide additional insights into the factors that actually influenced special education teacher attrition within the district.

A limitation of the professional development plan that emanated from the project includes the time that may elapse between initial development of the professional development plan and implementation of the plan. This limitation can impact the relevance of professional development opportunities within the plan and the scheduling of meeting times. In any teaching position, time is a valuable commodity. For special education teachers, it is a scarce commodity. The challenge of professional development is to make the learning opportunities relevant and engaging to prevent animosity in losing time that is usually dedicated to other job related duties. Every effort has been made to address the needs expressed by the teachers. However, these needs have arisen from experiences with their current students. This plan will not be implemented until formal approval from Walden University and the district superintendent. To allow for the approval process, implementation cannot take place until the start of the 2014-2015

school year, meaning an entire school year will elapse between the initial needs assessment and the implementation of the professional development plan. During this time, student needs may change, teachers' learning needs may change, laws may change and new theories and instructional strategies may emerge. To address the possible limitation of relevant professional development, I would suggest a follow-up meeting with the special education teachers at the end of the 2013-2014 school year to conduct a review of their needs to ascertain the relevancy of the current plan and identify any new areas of learning to add. Changes can be made before full implementation to ensure relevant and up-to date information is included.

Scheduling can also be a potential limitation. The plan is based upon information from each school's master schedule. The current time does not conflict with other staff meetings and has the least impact on instruction time. However, if any school makes changes to their master schedule, the time for the collaborative meetings will need to be reevaluated to ensure a low impact on instructional time and to allow participation of all the special education teachers.

### **Scholarship**

Through this project study, I learned that teachers, like students, have diverse learning needs, and it is the power of purposeful learning opportunities for teachers that creates high academic achievement for students. Through the review of the scholarly literature on special education teachers' daily experiences and the interview process with the special education teachers within my local learning community, I have developed great insight into the joys and trials these teachers experience on a daily basis and

supports that are necessary for their jobs. Their dedication and stamina are truly inspiring. Working in a small rural district means that professional development opportunities for all teachers are scarce; however for special education teachers it is almost non-existent. Through the development of the project study, I gained important knowledge to design relevant and free professional development that will help support these teachers as they continue to perform incredibly difficult jobs. I am very grateful for the opportunity. This process has renewed my passion for the field of special education.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

Through conducting this project study, I learned that program developers must possess certain attributes. An essential attribute is organizational abilities. A project developer must be able to organize data relevant to the project, coordinate schedules and manage time effectively, and be able to analyze how a small change in one area, may require larger changes in other areas. Another necessary attribute is problem solving skills. A project developer must be able to think through many possible solutions and choose the one that best addresses and solves an issue without causing any unintended consequences. A final and very important attribute is flexibility. The best made plans can fall apart due to unforeseen circumstances; therefore, a project developer must be flexible to navigate the ebbs and flows that occur in our ever changing world.

### **Leadership and Change**

Leadership is essential to exact change within any organization; this is particularly true within a learning organization (Schlechty, 2009). An effective school leader must be able to articulate a strong vision and collaboratively build a system of

shared beliefs while respecting each person's individuality (Senge, 1990). A leader must also be cognizant of any resistance to change and facilitate the change process through building trust, providing support for those who need it, and staying engaged in the process that can bring about the desired change inspired by the vision (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). A good leader must be open to multiple perspectives, engage all stakeholders in developing school improvement initiatives. Additionally, effective leadership requires one to trust the expertise in the building and to be open to new ways of doing things to ensure continual growth within the learning organization (Killion & Roy, 2009; Lindsey, Jungwirth, Pahl, & Lindsey, 2009; Schlechty, 2009).

#### **Analysis of Self as Scholar**

The work required to complete this degree has brought about an understanding that becoming a scholar requires much more than acquiring knowledge. A true scholar has the ability to convey obtained knowledge to others in meaningful ways as they continue to seek out new knowledge from others. Through completing the requirements of the doctoral program, I have enhanced my confidence to tackle issues, seek out, and evaluate scholarly research to support solutions. Through this Walden experience, I am becoming a scholarly practitioner.

#### **Analysis of Self as Practitioner**

I have always been a seeker of knowledge and was quick to change in order to meet the needs of my students. However, through this experience I have learned to be more reflective of my practices and take time to consider how change can positively or negatively impact the learning environment. I have gained the knowledge and skills to

ascertain how best to implement the desired change and to consider aspects that must first be in place to facilitate the desired change. As a practitioner, I have learned the importance of educational research to support my own professional growth as well as other educators' professional growth. Finally, as a practitioner, I have learned that I can never stop learning. An educator needs to seek out new knowledge and educational innovations continually to support high academic achievement of all students.

### **Analysis of Self as Project Developer**

Developing this project required a great amount of research, inquiry, and assembling information. While completing this project, I learned how to organize vast amounts of information, how to schedule multiple venues while working around multiple individual's schedules, and how to allow for flexibility within a plan to address issues that arise. These attributes are valuable in my professional and personal settings. Through this process, I have grown both personally and professionally.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

The goal for education is to prepare students for successful involvement in the world after they complete their schooling. Preparing students with special needs to meet their fullest potential requires a great deal of knowledge of student impairments, academic content, and strategies to circumvent the impairment and allow access to the academic content. The results of this study support the current literature on the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions and highlighted needed supports of relevant professional development and collaboration with other special education teachers. The professional development plan that resulted from the interview



data addressed these needs by establishing a professional learning community to foster collaborative inquiry and implementing a cost free option of on-line professional development. If the professional development proves to be effective, it will have an impact on social change by improved professional learning for teachers and improved academic achievement of special needs students.

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

An implication of this project study is the need for relevant professional development to help special educators effectively meet the needs of their students. Another educational implication is the need for administrators to provide time for special educators to collaborate and build stronger teacher practice. The results of this study could be useful to other local districts experiencing the same difficulty in providing special educators with relevant professional development. The districts could explore options for providing professional development to their teachers. A suggestion for future research is to conduct this study in other districts that belong to the local educational cooperative to further explore the perceptions of special education teachers and school administrators of factors that influence career decisions beyond one district. Another suggestion for future research involves gaining the perspectives of teachers within the district that participated who recently transferred to a general education position. This data may provide more insight to the factors that influenced them to leave the field of special education and supports that may have influenced them to remain in the field.

### **Conclusion**

Reflection of this project study provided an opportunity for deep understanding of the important yet very difficult role special educators serve as they create learning opportunities designed to circumvent student learning issues. I now understand my role as an inclusion teacher and teacher leader in supporting the learning needs of the teachers through collaborative reflection of theory and practice. I will use the knowledge gained through the experience of obtaining this degree to increase the learning of all members of my local learning community. Educational research, such as this project study, can add to the current knowledge base of the experiences of special education teacher to inform district structures that promote professional growth and serve as retention factors for greater special education teacher retention.

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Professional Development  
for Special Education  
Teachers  
2014-2015

# The Project

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## Introduction

This professional development plan is designed to use researched-based practices in strengthening reading comprehension proven effective for special needs students. This plan also establishes a professional learning community for the special education teachers within the district. The content of this plan is based upon needs expressed by the special education teachers. It will serve as a guide for teachers to increase their knowledge of effective comprehension strategies for special needs students as they grow in their abilities to successfully collaborate. The training within the plan is aligned to the National Staff Development Council's (NSDC) definition of professional development (2001) and is aligned to Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning ([learningforward.org](http://learningforward.org)). The plan incorporates all seven professional learning standards and illustrates a process of providing professional development to classroom teachers in the area of reading comprehension strategies.

The formative evaluations will be reviewed monthly by district superintendent or designee to ensure a productive, collaborative environment. Student data reports and the summative questionnaire will be used to determine effectiveness of the professional development plan.

The professional learning community will meet over the course of seven months to participate in on-line training modules on effective instructional strategies to support reading comprehension. The professional development standards (see Figure 1) and Common Core Standards address in this plan (see Figure 2) are listed below:

Figure 1 – Standards for Professional Learning

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Standards For Professional Learning</b></p>	<p><b>Learning Communities:</b> Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.</p>	<p><b>Leadership:</b> Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.</p>	<p><b>Resources:</b> Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.</p>
<p><b>Data:</b> Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning.</p>	<p><b>Learning Designs:</b> Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.</p>	<p><b>Implementation:</b> Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change.</p>	<p><b>Outcomes:</b> Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.</p>

(Adapted from Learning Forward, n.d.)

Figure 2 – English Language Arts Common Core State Standards for Informational Text

<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1</b> Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.2</b> Identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3</b> Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.4</b> Ask and answer questions to help determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases in a text.	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5</b> Know and use various text features (e.g., headings, tables of contents, glossaries, electronic menus, icons) to locate key facts or information in a text.	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.6</b> Distinguish between information provided by pictures or other illustrations and information provided by the words in a text.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.8</b> Identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text.	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.9</b> Identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).	<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.10</b> Range, Quality and complexity of text

These standards will support collaborative, sustained, ongoing, and embedded professional development to foster greater knowledge and skills of the special education teachers in implementing research-based reading comprehension strategies proven effective for students with special needs.

### Session 1

<b>Professional Learning Standards:</b> Learning Communities, Leadership, Data,		
<b>Title:</b> Introduction to Professional Learning Communities		
<b>Time:</b> 12:00 – 3:30	<b>Location:</b> Primary building staff room	<b>Participants:</b> Special education teachers, district representative, and professional development plan designer
<b>Resources:</b> PowerPoint presentation on collaborative inquiry process, computers, and SmartBoard.		
<b>Objective 1:</b> Teachers will participate in a presentation and discussion of collaborative professional development.		
<b>Objective 2:</b> Teachers will discuss norms, terminology, and expectations for further collaborative work that will serve as the protocol for future sessions.		
<b>Outcomes:</b> *Teachers will gain knowledge of the collaborative, embedded professional development opportunities in which they will be participating.  *Teachers will collectively determine guidelines for teamwork and develop terminology to be used during collaborative work.		

### Agenda

1. Welcome and set purpose
2. PowerPoint collaborative inquiry process
3. Set norms activity facilitated by professional development designer
4. Discuss data to collect for next session
5. Set dates for sessions facilitated by district representative

## Session 2

<b>Professional Learning Standards:</b> Learning Communities, Leadership, Data, Learning Designs		
<b>Title:</b> Introduction to CSR: A Reading Comprehension Strategy		
<b>Time:</b> 12:00 – 3:30	<b>Location:</b> Primary building staff room	<b>Participants:</b> Special education teachers and professional development designer
<b>Resources:</b> IRIS Center CSR training module ( <a href="http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/csr/cresource.html">http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/csr/cresource.html</a> ), computers, SmartBoard, implementation resource packet for each teacher.		
<b>Objective 1:</b> Recognize strategies that improve reading comprehension		
<b>Objective 2:</b> Understand the purpose, components, and implementation of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)		
<b>Objective 3:</b> Be able to effectively implement the CSR approach		
<p><b>Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Teachers will gain knowledge of the CRS reading strategy.</li>   <li>*Teachers will articulate the current performance level of all students to determine which would benefit from this strategy.</li>   <li>*Teachers will discuss implementation questions, collectively design lesson plans and set a plan for implementation.</li>   <li>*Teachers will identify assessment data to monitor student growth through the implementation process.</li> </ul>		

### Agenda

1. IRIS Center Training Module
2. Implementation Discussion
3. Design modeling lesson plans for implementation across grade levels
4. Complete evaluation form on collaborative work (Handout 1)
5. Gather implementation resources



### Session 3

<b>Professional Learning Standards:</b> Learning Communities, Leadership, Data, Implementation		
<b>Title:</b> CSR – A Reading Comprehension Strategy Continued		
<b>Time:</b> 12:00 – 3:30	<b>Location:</b> Primary building staff room	<b>Participants:</b> Special education teachers
<b>Resources:</b> : IRIS Center CSR training module ( <a href="http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/csr/cresource.html">http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/csr/cresource.html</a> ), computers, and SmartBoard, Using Collaborative Strategic Reading PDF ( <a href="http://faculty.weber.edu/fbutler/Collaborative%20Reading.pdf">http://faculty.weber.edu/fbutler/Collaborative%20Reading.pdf</a> )		
<b>Objective 1:</b> Recognize strategies that improve reading comprehension		
<b>Objective 2:</b> Understand the purpose, components, and implementation of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)		
<b>Objective 3:</b> Be able to effectively implement the CSR approach		
<b>Outcomes:</b> *Teachers will understand and articulate the current performance level of all of our students using CSR.  *Teachers will collectively address implementation issues and provide suggestions.  * Teachers will explore additional resources to support implementation of CSR.		

### Agenda

1. Implementation Discussion
2. Student Progress Data Review
3. Review modeling lesson plans revise if necessary
4. Problem Solving/Further Research
5. Formative Evaluation Form (Handout 1)





### Session 4

<b>Professional Learning Standards:</b> Learning Communities, Leadership, Data, Implementation, Resources, Outcomes		
<b>Title:</b> Case Study in Comprehension and Vocabulary		
<b>Time:</b> 12:00 – 3:30	<b>Location:</b> Primary building staff room	<b>Participants:</b> Special education teachers
<b>Resources:</b> IRIS Center Case Study in Comprehension and Vocabulary ( <a href="http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ICS-007.pdf">http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ICS-007.pdf</a> ) ,		
<b>Objective 1:</b> Understand the differences among literal, evaluative, and inferential comprehension.		
<b>Objective 2:</b> Explore strategies to support vocabulary development that fosters greater levels of comprehension.		
<b>Objective 3:</b> Engage in leveled scenarios to design activities to support student growth in vocabulary development and comprehension.		
<b>Outcomes:</b> *Teachers will gain proficiency in implementing strategies to support vocabulary development.  *Teachers will understand and articulate the activities to address student need.  *Teachers will have knowledge and collaboratively created lesson plans to successfully implement strategies to improve student vocabulary development.		

### Agenda

1. CSR Implementation Discussion
2. IRIS Center Case Study on Vocabulary and Comprehension
3. Discussion of New Insights and Implementation Possibilities
4. Design lesson plans for implementation of new strategies
5. Formative Evaluation Form



### Session 5

<b>Professional Learning Standards:</b> Learning Communities, Leadership, Data, Resources		
<b>Title:</b> Case Study in Fluency and Word Identification		
<b>Time:</b> 12:00 – 3:30	<b>Location:</b> Primary building staff room	<b>Participants:</b> Special education teachers
<b>Resources:</b> Iris Center Case Study on Fluency and Word Identification ( <a href="http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ICS-006.pdf">http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ICS-006.pdf</a> ), and computers.		
<b>Objective 1:</b> Understand fluency involves automatic word and punctuation recognition, correct pacing, inflection, and efficiency		
<b>Objective 2:</b> Gain knowledge of instructional strategies to improve fluency		
<b>Outcomes:</b> *Teachers will gain knowledge of effective instructional strategies to improve fluency.  *Teachers will understand which strategies to use to address student needs.  *Teachers will gain experience designing activities to implement each strategy.		

### Agenda

1. Discussion of CSR or Comprehension/Vocabulary Strategies
2. IRIS Center Case Study
3. Discussion of New Insights and Implementation Possibilities
4. Design lesson plans for implementation of new strategies
5. Formative Evaluation From (Handout 1)



### Session 6

<b>Professional Learning Standards:</b> Learning Communities, Leadership, Data, Learning Designs, Implementation, Resources, and Outcomes		
<b>Title:</b> Data Review		
<b>Time:</b> 12:00 – 3:30	<b>Location:</b> Primary building staff room	<b>Participants:</b> Special education teachers
<b>Resources:</b> Student data, computers, word processing program		
<b>Objective 1:</b> Understand the impact the implemented instructional strategies have had on student performance.		
<b>Objective 2:</b> Use student data to guide further instruction.		
<b>Outcomes:</b> *Teachers will ascertain student progress resulting from strategies implementation.  *Teachers will engage in a collaborative process to solve implementation issues.  *Teachers will create action plans based upon evaluation of student data.		

### Agenda

1. Student Progress Data Review
2. Problem Solving/Further Research
3. Devise a plan of action to address student needs
4. Formative Evaluation Form (Handout 1)



### Session 7

<b>Professional Learning Standards:</b> Learning Communities, Leadership, Data, Resources, Learning Designs, Implementation, Outcomes		
<b>Title:</b> Evaluation: What Works Best for My Students		
<b>Time:</b> 12:00 – 3:30	<b>Location:</b> Primary building staff room	<b>Participants:</b> Special education teachers
<b>Resources:</b> All student data used during sessions, computer, spreadsheet software, and questionnaire		
<b>Objective 1:</b> Understand overall impact of implemented strategies on student performance.		
<b>Objective 2:</b> Design data report to demonstrate student performance throughout the sessions.		
<b>Outcomes:</b> *Teachers will gain knowledge of using data to address student needs.  *Teachers will understand which strategies work best and why they believe so.  *Teachers will determine overall effectiveness of the professional development plan.		

### Agenda

1. Student Progress Data Review
2. Prepare data report for summative evaluation
3. Generate a list of topics for future sessions
4. Complete final questionnaire (Handout 2)



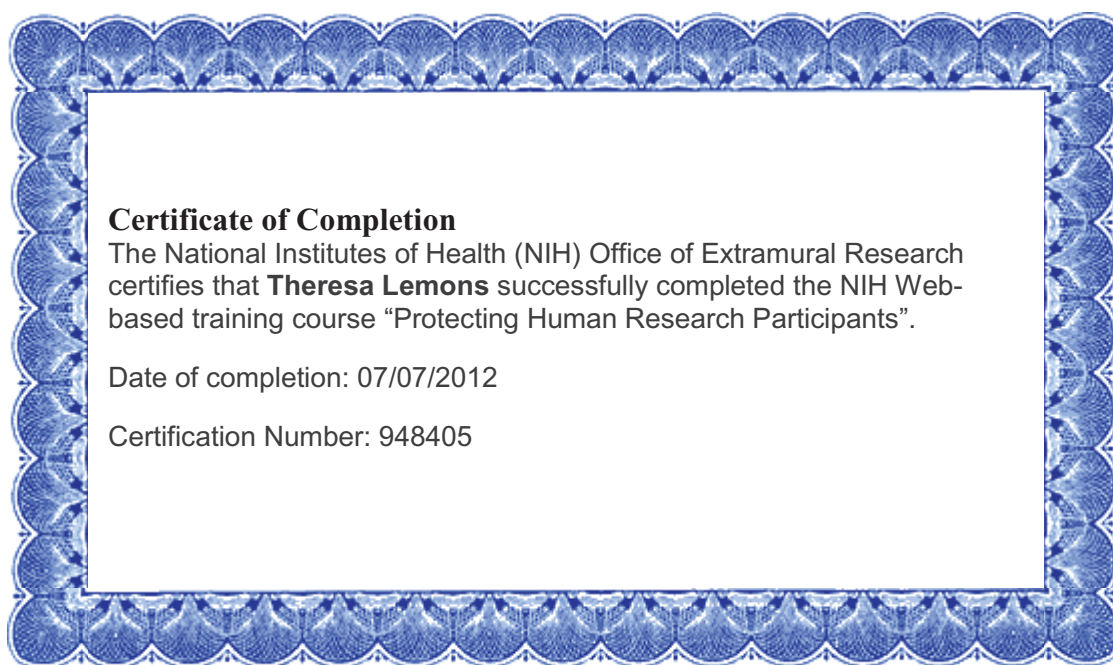


## Summative Questionnaire Continued

7. Explain how this professional development has supported your growth as a special education teacher.

8. What areas would you like additional training and/ or resources?

## Appendix B



## Appendix C

## Letter of Cooperation from a Community Research Partner

Date

Dear Theresa Lemons,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Factors that Influence Special Education Teachers' Career Decision in a Rural School District in Southern Indiana within Mitchell Community Schools District. As part of this study, I authorize you to contact possible participants, conduct interviews, and conduct member checks. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include providing policy documents related to teacher retention. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

District Superintendent

## Appendix D

You are invited to participate in a research study of factors that influence special educators' career decisions. I have obtained the District Superintendent's permission to collect data for this research project. You were chosen for inclusion in this study due to your experience of special education within this district. If you agree to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 45 minute face to face interview and two 15 -30 minute face to face or email member checking opportunities to affirm and clarify the data collected. Participation is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate. If you choose to participate, but change your mind at a later date, you can withdraw at any time. All information collected will remain confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this research study or would like more information, please reply to this email or call Theresa Lemons at 812-583-3844. If you want to speak privately about your rights to participate, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott at 1-800-925-3368, ext. 3121210. She is the Walden representative that can discuss this with you. Please respond to this email within seven days.

Thank you for your consideration,

Theresa Lemons  
Educational Researcher

## Appendix E

*CONSENT FORM*

You are invited to take part in a research study of special education attrition. The researcher is inviting special educators and administrators to be in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Theresa Lemons, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may know the researcher as an elementary teacher, but this study is separate from that role.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that may influence special educators’ career decisions.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-on-one interview 45 minute interview to discuss your experiences.
- Participate in a follow-up session to review your interview data for clarification and/or additional information.

Here are some sample questions:

Why did you decide to become a special education teacher?

Why did you decide to accept a position within the district?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at this district will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as reflecting on a negative experience. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. A potential benefit of this study is the information provided could help design structures and policies that support retention of special education teachers within the district.

**Payment:**

No compensation for participation will be provided

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be securely locked in a safe when not in use. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at [theresa.lemons@waldenu.edu](mailto:theresa.lemons@waldenu.edu), or by phone at 812-583-3844. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 3121210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 06-18-0274597 and it expires on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

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## Appendix F

## Interview Protocol for School Administrators

Informant:

Code:

Date:

Time:

Location:

Introduction: Thank you for taking time to speak with me today about the factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions.

*Question 1:* Turnover of special education teachers has increased in this district since 2008. Please reflect on the reasons why you think the turnover has occurred.

*Question 2:* In your view, what is done to encourage special education teachers to stay in their positions?

*Question 3:* Describe the professional development opportunities provided for the special education teachers in your school.

*Question 4:* How do administrators work with special education teachers?

*Question 5:* What supports are provided for special education teachers within this school?

*Question 6:* What supports are provided for new special education teachers within this school?

*Question 7:* What obstacles do you face when implementing supports or initiatives for retention of special education teachers?

*Question 8:* What is unique about your approach to supporting the special education staff in this school?





## Appendix H

**Curriculum Vitae***Theresa Lemons*

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**Education**

Bachelor of Science Degree Saint Mary of the Woods College  
 Major: Elementary Education  
 Minor: Learning Disabilities  
 Mildly Mentally Handicapped  
 GPA: 3.85

Master of Education Olivet Nazarene University  
 Major: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment  
 GPA: 4.0

Ed.D Candidate Walden University  
 Program: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment  
 GPA: 4.0

Indiana Teacher's License: Elementary Education 1-6 and 7/8 Non. Dept.  
 Learning Disabled K-12  
 Mildly Mentally Handicapped K-12

**Current Employer**

First Grade Teacher Community Schools  
 2006 – Present Address

Title I Instructor  
 2001 – 2006

**Employment History**

Title I Instructor West Washington School Corporation  
 Aug. 1999 – June 2000

Teacher Kid's Corner Preschool  
 1996 – 1999

## Professional Experience

### School Committee Memberships

Writing Committee

RTI Committee

Reading Leadership Team

Professional Learning Committee – Chairperson 2010

Text Book Adoption Committee

Math - 2003

English Language Arts – 2006, 2012

Curriculum Alignment /Assessment Writing Committee

English Language Arts - 2006

Social Studies -2007

Science - 2011

Host Classroom (2006 – present)

Field work experience/ student teaching for Indiana University and Indiana Wesleyan University

### Indiana Department of Education Committee Membership

2011 Advisory Committee Member – CORE Assessments for Pre-Service Teachers

2011 Reading Core Text Book Reviewer

## Extra Curricular Experience

Assistant Softball Coach                      2003-2006

Junior High Volleyball Coach              2006-2011

## Community Involvement

Be A Reader Program, developer and director, community based mentoring/reading program for elementary school students.

SOAR Adult Literacy Program, former volunteer reading tutor