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Special Education Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Needed Support to Retain Special Educators

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MA, Walden University, 2013

BS, University of Nevada, Reno, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

School leaders across the United States have documented a shortage of special education teachers, and special educators are leaving the field at double the rate of their general education peers. Researchers have indicated that this shortage is due to inadequate training and education, work load, and lack of administrative support. However, it is unclear what supports are needed to increase retention rates of special educators. This qualitative case study was designed to explore the perspectives of special educators regarding supports needed to improve special education retention rates in relation to the job characteristic theory and teachers' reasons for staying in the literature. Purposeful sampling was used to select 15 special education teachers with resource or self-contained teaching experience from 3 public schools of varying levels in 1 school district. Data were collected through semi structured interviews and open and a priori coding were used to develop themes. Key results from the study extended current knowledge related to the job characteristics framework of social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance and interdependence. The participants identified specific supports needed as additional time for tasks, awareness and understanding from colleagues, provision of peer mentors and peer observations, specific and meaningful assistance from administrators regarding behavioral issues and feedback regarding work performance. All participants reported remaining in the field because they enjoyed helping students succeed. The recommendations provided in this study might be used by school leaders to make informed decisions to retain special educators. Improving retention rates of special educators could save school districts money on new hires while increasing the number of highly qualified special educators needed to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

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Dedication

First, I would like to dedicate my doctoral study to my husband, Shawn. Without your love, support, and guidance I would not be where I am today. You allowed me to vent and cry to you when the process became so unbearable and my anxiety was through the roof. You pushed me through my low points where giving up was on my mind and you celebrated the small accomplishments with me, even if you didn't understand why we were celebrating. Thank you for going above and beyond over the past few years and picking up some extra responsibilities around the house, with our children, and our 4-legged member, Winter…. Just know that I love you to the moon and back.

Next, I would like to dedicate this doctoral study to my children, Elijah and Kaylee-Marie. I apologize for the many weekends mommy was busy working and not able to play or participate in family outings. However, know that through this journey you were my motivation and one reason I never gave up. I want you to know that you can achieve anything that you put your mind to and to not give up when things become unbearable. Just know that I love you through and through!

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this doctoral study to my younger brother, Maurice. Reflecting back on the years, I would not change a thing about growing up with you. Seeing the world through your eyes has opened my eyes and taught me some valuable lessons. You were my inspiration and the reason why I chose to be a special educator. Thank you for showing me that it is okay to be different and the importance of working hard to prove others wrong. Just know that I am your biggest fan!!

Acknowledgments

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To my parents, David and Maria. Thank you for your continued support through all my endeavors. Thank you for teaching me the value of an education and what it means to be dedicated to something you love. I couldn't have done this without your love and guidance over the years. Thank you for being one of my biggest cheerleaders!

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To Dr. Derek Schroll, my doctoral chair. Thank you for pushing me through this process and expecting high quality work from me since the beginning. Through this journey I appreciate how supportive, understanding, considerate, encouraging, and flexible you were when it came to my school work and personal life. You reminded me to take time for family and helped me stay focus by setting high goals for myself. Without your knowledge and support, I would not have completed this doctoral study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Retention of special education teachers has been an ongoing problem for district

and school leaders across the United States (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017;

Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Sindelar, Pua, & Fisher, 2018). Researchers at the College

Foundation of North Carolina (2018) noted that 13% of special educators leave the

profession each year. In addition, 98% of school districts have indicated a shortage of

special education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017). The supports needed

to retain special educators varies, but limited understanding of the supports leads to high

attrition rates (Koonkongsatian, 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand the

perceptions of special education teachers about supports needed to retain them and

understand the factors that encourage them to stay in the field of special education. The

purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine needed supports within the

school setting to foster social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task

interdependence. This study allowed special educators to voice the supports needed to be

successful within the school setting.

Chapter 1 includes an overview of the history related to the high attrition rates of

special education teachers and the programs that schools, districts, and the federal

government have implemented to decrease attrition rates and increase retention rates.

This discussion is followed by the problem, purpose, research questions, conceptual

framework, nature of the study, and significance of this research study. The results of this

study could provide insight to the supports needed to retain special educators within the

school setting that foster social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence based on job characteristic theory.

Background

Since the early 1950s, education has evolved for all students but most importantly for students with disabilities. Prior to the 1950s students with disabilities were often excluded from public schools or sent to private institution to receive life skill and job skill training (Esteves & Rao, 2008). In the 1950s, *Brown v. the Board of Education* led to more opportunities for all students after determining that segregation violated equal educational opportunity and that all students had a right to a public education. In the 1970s, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was signed, which required that all students with a disability have an individualized education plan (IEP), a free and appropriate public education, and education in the least restrictive environment. As laws are continuously being refined, the need for retaining special education has increased to ensure compliance of IEPs and that adequate instruction is being provided (Esteves & Rao, 2008).

Today, 13% of all students who are educated in public schools are classified with a disability, which requires qualified special educators providing the instruction to meet their individualized needs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Despite the rising number of special education students, administrators are often undereducated in the field of special education and rely on their special educators to provide input on how the programs should run (Bettini, Cheyney, Wang, & Leko, 2015). Without support special educators are leaving the field at high rates, which causes consequences for students and

schools such as more funding that is needed to train a new set of teachers to replace the teachers who were already trained.

Researchers have indicated the factors that result in high attrition rates for special educators. For example, Hagaman and Casey (2017) explored perspectives of special educators and found that the top reasons for high attrition rates were due to the stress regarding the amount of responsibilities they had to undertake and the lack of support from other teachers and administration. These results confirmed why 13% of special educators leave the field each school year, which is double the rate of general education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017). Additionally, Samuels (2018) noted that special educators leave at high rates due to minimal support from administrators, difficulty maintaining imperative tasks, and a caseload that pulls special educators from instruction.

Though researchers have noted that lack of support is a main reason for high attrition rates in special education (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2014; Hagaman & Casey, 2017; Samuels, 2018), it is unclear which supports are needed to increase retention rates of special educators, especially in relation to the job characteristic theory. Therefore, this study was necessary to examine supports that can be implemented to retain special educators. Findings can improve supports related to social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance and task interdependence, all major components of the job characteristic theory.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is that special educators leave the field at a high rate, and little is known about the supports teachers feel are needed to retain special educators. There is a discrepancy regarding the perceptions and current practices among special educators, which is not always shared with administration (Andrews & Brown, 2015). Support from administrators can be a factor toward teacher retention if administration are aware of the supports needed and implement them (Koonkongsatian, 2017). The types of supports needed to retain special educators varies based on the program and classification of students the teacher teaches (Bettini et al., 2015). By understanding the supports needed to retain special educators, schools can increase special education teacher retention rates (Brunsting, Lane, & Sreckovic, 2014). When administrators are given insight into what essential supports special educators need, they can begin to understand what is needed to maintain qualified special educators (Andrews & Brown, 2015). Thus, there is a need for qualitative researchers to examine which administrative supports special education teachers find helpful (Conley & You, 2016, p. 536).

School and district leaders not properly supporting special educators leads to these teachers exiting education at double the rate of their general education colleagues, which results in inexperienced or unqualified teachers providing educational services for students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017; Williams & Dikes, 2015). Special educators often leave the field at high rates, exacerbating the national shortage of qualified special educators (Higher Education Consortium for Special

Education, 2014). Nationwide, 98% of school districts have indicated that they have shortages of special education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017). Lack of support is one the strongest predictors of special educators leaving the field of education (Conley & You, 2016); however, little information is available regarding the supports needed to retain special educators in schools. Thus, there is a need to understand what support teachers need to improve retention efforts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore special education teachers' perspectives regarding the supports to improve special education teacher retention rates. Lack of support is a key reason that special educators leave the field (Koonkongsatian, 2017); however, it is unclear which supports are needed. A deeper understanding of supports can increase retention rates of special educators by overcoming perceived barriers that hinder special education retention rates. For instance, researchers at the American Institutes for Research (2016) noted that school leaders are not trained to support students with disabilities and their teachers.

To explore the perspectives of special educators, a qualitative research study was appropriate to obtain a greater understanding of the phenomenon by exploring how individuals create meaning through their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). An exploratory case study helped to explore the perspectives of special educators about supports needed to support teacher retention (see Yin, 2012). I used the job characteristic theory as the framework, which is focused on social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. Data were collected through semi structured

interviews with special educators from three schools within a school district in South Carolina. The results of study fill a gap in literature about practice by providing examples of research-based supports that can be implemented to support special educators and begin increasing retention rates.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide this study:

Research Question 1: What are special education teachers' perspectives of the supports within the school setting are needed to foster special education teachers' social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence to increase retention rates?

Research Question 2: What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that may result in a teacher leaving the field of special education?

Research Question 3: What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that support teachers to stay in the field of special education?

Conceptual Framework

The theory that was used to frame this study is Humphrey, Nahrgang, and Morgeson's (2007) job characteristic theory. The job characteristic theory is focused on the perceptions of employees regarding their satisfaction with their job in relation to social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. The social support aspect of the job characteristic theory supports this study, because I looked at the perceptions of individuals regarding supports provided (see Bettini et al., 2014). Social supports could encompass mentoring programs and professional learning

communities. In addition, the autonomy aspect and feedback components helped guide this study because both are used to examine decisions regarding an individual's work and how an individual can grow to become a better employee. Finally, the task significance and task interdependence of the theory supports this study because the workload in special education could adversely affect the retention rates of teachers due to burnout and little recognition (Bettini et al., 2014).

Data were collected and analyzed based on the participants' perceptions regarding supports to provide social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. Information regarding other factors that lead to special educators leaving the field were also be analyzed as well as the reasons why special educators stay within the field. Through the results, administrators and district leaders can have a better understanding of the supports needed to retain special educators within the school setting based on the feedback from special educators. In Chapter 2, a more in-depth review of the job characteristics theory will be provided and how the aspects within the theory can support retention rates.

Nature of the Study

The goal of qualitative research is to obtain a greater understanding of a phenomenon by exploring how people create meaning from experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used an exploratory case study to explore the perspectives of special educators about supports that are needed to support teacher retention (see Yin, 2012). I used purposeful sampling to select at least 15 special education teachers from three schools of varying levels (elementary/intermediate, middle, and high school) within a district in

South Carolina. The main criteria for this study were that the participant held a valid teaching license and has taught within a special education setting. Data were collected through semi structured interviews with an emphasis on social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence, which is based on the job characteristic theory. Special educators could also explain why they continue to stay in the field that currently has high attrition rates. To conduct the interview, a protocol (see Appendix) was used to guide the interview and the questions were based on the information within the literature review and the job characteristic theory.

I used triangulation because three different levels of educators provided information, so I compared the results to determine the perceived supports needed to retain special educators and to see whether there were common themes. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources to produce an understanding through one of four ways: methods triangulation, triangulation of sources, analyst triangulation, and theory/perspective triangulation (Denzin, 1978). By comparing the viewpoints of participants, I was able get a better understanding of supports needed to retain special educators.

From the data collected, I used a thematic analysis to analyze the textual data and elucidate themes within the job characteristic theory using a priori and open-coding to address the research questions and determine the perceived types of support provided and supports needed to retain special educators (see Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Emergent themes were created through codes, and the open analysis allowed me to develop the themes into distinguish categories, themes, and subheadings

(Stuckey, 2015). The results of the study were used to make research-based recommendations for addressing gaps in the literature about practice regarding special education retention efforts and suggestions for further inquiry.

Definitions

Autonomy: Degree in which a job provides freedom, discretion, and independence to the employee in scheduling the work and procedures to carry out the work (Batchelor, Abston, Lawlor, & Burch 2014).

Feedback: The clear and direct information regarding the effectiveness of the teacher's performance regarding the work activities required of them (Batchelor et al., 2014).

Social support: The collaboration and interaction a person has with individuals within the work place (O'Sullivan, 2016).

Special education teacher: A teacher who meets the South Carolina requirements for licensing to educate students with disabilities in the K-12 public schools and is tasked with coordinating and planning instruction that is aligned to the general education curriculum and individualized to the students' needs (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018b).

Task interdependence: The degree in which the job requires completion of an identifiable piece of work from the beginning to the end (Wegman, Hoffman, Carter, Twenge, & Guenole, 2018).

Task significance: The degree to which the work one does as an impact on the lives or work of other individuals (Batchelor et al., 2014).

Assumptions

An assumption that was made in this study was that special educators would respond open and honestly during the interviews. This assumption was made because participation was voluntary with no consequences for nonparticipation. In addition, I assumed all participants would be able to describe similar current supports implemented to promote social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence for special educators. Another assumption was that the special educators would be hesitant to converse with me due to being new at the school and district. To overcome this assumption, I engaged in conversations with my colleagues to build trust and create relationships where everyone felt comfortable. Finally, I assumed that the special educators who have left the field would have needed the same supports as those who remain in the field of special education. To address this assumption, I attempted to locate and contact special educators who left the field and gather their perspectives.

Scope and Delimitations

For this study, I investigated perceptions of supports needed by special educators to help identify key points to retain special educators in the classroom. I wanted to see what current supports are in place to promote social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence of special educators. In addition, I wanted to gain a better understanding of what special educators have and what they need to remain in the classroom while supporting and promoting social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. All participants in the study were certified educators who have experience in the special education environment.

Regarding delimitations, instead of providing special educators with a survey to fill out and risk the possibility of dishonesty, I conducted semi structured interviews. Due to time constraints, interviewing all special educators was not plausible. Therefore, the goal was to gather at least 15 participants within the three schools identified for this study.

Limitations

All research procedures, methods, and strategies have potential limitations (Creswell, 2012). This study was subjected to several limitations. First, the district the study was conducted in had several administrative changes within the schools. Therefore, the supports being discussed do not necessarily match the current experiences. A second limitation of this study could be related to biases of special educators have regarding their administrators and their frustrations with how programs are being implemented. To compensate and address frustration, the semi structured interviews provided opportunities for participant to be honest while answering questions regarding supports implemented and needed in the areas of social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. Finally, having a small sample size could create a limitation with transferability. To overcome this limitation, I asked guided questions to be able to generalize emergent themes.

Significance

The findings of this study can contribute to positive social change by providing supports that can be implemented to retain special educators. Retaining special educators can help develop special education programs within the school to better support students,

parents, and teachers and provide positive educational outcomes. In addition, by not retaining special educators, more funding is needed to train a new set of teachers to replace the teachers who were already trained (Samuels, 2018). Allowing special educators the opportunity to voice the supports needed to be successful within the school setting may lead to new initiatives that are more effective than current ones that are implemented without teacher input (Sobel & Taylor, 2015). Finally, by having experienced teachers who are supported in their efforts to work with students, students are more likely to be successful within the school setting (Vittek, 2015).

Summary

This chapter gave a brief but necessary overview of the study. The remainder of the study is organized into a literature review, research method, results, and discussion. Chapter 2 will provide the related literature on the historical background and pertinent concepts associated with high attrition rates in the field of special education. Chapter 3 will provide the research methodology of the study. Chapter 4 will provide the results of the study. Chapter 5 will contain the conclusions and recommendations based on the research findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore special education teachers' perspectives regarding the supports to improve special education teacher retention rates based on the job characteristic theory. Special educators leave the field at a high rate, but little is known about the supports special education teachers feel are needed to retain special educators. Understanding the support needed from special educators can help retain special educators in the school setting (Conley & You, 2016). Though the types of supports can vary based on the program and classification of students the teacher teaches (Bettini et al., 2015), support from administrators and districts leaders can improve teacher retention if they implement necessary support (Koonkongsatian, 2017). By increasing retention rates, students with disabilities will have experienced or veteran teachers to provide educational services, and less money will be spent on training novice teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017; Williams & Dikes, 2015). Therefore, I conducted this study to explore the supports needed to retain special educators that may decrease the high attrition rates many schools and districts are experiencing.

Chapter 2 addressed the literature search strategy used to complete this literature review. In addition, I will discuss topics that provide the background to support the problem and purpose of this study. The topics include job characteristic theory, reasons special educators are needed, other factors that impact special education retention rates, repercussions for students due to high attrition rates, and current efforts to retain and

attract special educators. Chapter 2 will conclude with a summary of the chapter, and an overview of the research methods will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Literature Search Strategy

To conduct the literature review, I used Walden University's Library website and found articles pertaining to my study through EBSCO. I also reviewed literature through Google Scholar. The keywords within the job characteristic theory of *social support*, *autonomy*, *feedback*, *task significance*, and *task interdependence in special education* revealed few articles published within the last 5 years. Subsequently, I widened my criteria to include the following terms: *job characteristic theory*, *special education attrition*, *special education retention*, and *known factors of high attrition rates*. Terms were searched individually and in various combinations. I was able to obtain more documented literature related to additional factors special educators leave the field outside the job characteristic theory.

To collect and organize the peer-reviewed articles and books, I used Zotero Connector to group articles by topics and subtopics. My course texts from Walden also provided valuable information for this review. In addition, I purchased three books from Amazon that were well documented in several references of published works and not available at the local library.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that drove this study is the job characteristic theory. The job characteristic theory is focused on employees' perceptions regarding their satisfaction with their job in relation to social support, autonomy, feedback, task

significance, and task interdependence (Humphrey et al., 2007). In addition, Hackman

and Oldman (1976) described the job characteristic theory as a way for employees to

voice their perceptions regarding the work they complete and a way to enrich the

educational setting. O'Brien (1982) added that when employees feel secure in the central

components of the job characteristic theory, willingness to remain with the job increases.

Kass, Vodanvich, and Khosravi (2011) also stated that

> employees who obtained the psychological states of experienced meaningfulness,
>
> experienced responsibility for outcomes of the work, and knowledge of the actual
>
> results of the work activities would be more internally motivated, perform higher
>
> quality of work, and remain in the job compared to employees who do not
>
> experience these psychological states. (p. 4).

To establish a more secure psychological state, the five components within the theory

need to be strong and supported (Daryanto, Sagala, & Badiran, 2015). However, within

the field of education high rates of job dissatisfaction among teachers has led to high

attrition rates.

Social Support

The first aspect of the job characteristic theory is social support. Social support

can be described as how people give assistance to each other (Bataineh, 2009). Lu et al.

(2015) added to this definition by stating that social support is the physical, emotional,

informational, and instrumental assistance an individual receives within a social network

among colleagues. Within the field of special education, isolation has been identified as a

factor in high attrition rates, whereas social support is necessary for retention (Fiorilli et

al., 2015). Social supports within a job setting increase retention when peer-to-peer learning opportunities arise to establish relationships among colleagues within a safe and respected work environment (Kramer, Hillman, & Zavala, 2018). Therefore, establishing supports within a school setting for special educators is a step to begin retaining special educators. These supports can include professional learning communities, mentoring programs, and professional development, which will be discussed further within this chapter.

The social supports that have been provided to special educators are mentoring, professional development, and induction programs (Mrstik, Vasquez, & Pearl, 2018). Mentor relationships are formed when a person of more experience is partnered with a person with less experience to provide support and offer guidance through experiences (Williams, 2016). Effective mentors are competent within their area of specialization, are willing to give positive and negative feedback, honest, and willing to share knowledge, deal directly with their mentee, and treat the mentee as a colleague. In addition, mentors also provide emotional support, a sense of teamwork, be responsive, follow through, and encourage ongoing reflection to grow as a professional (Madigan & Scroth-Cavataio, 2012). Mentoring is not a one-time occurrence but an ongoing process where the relationship between a mentee and mentor continuously grows. However, with high attrition rates in special education, having experienced teachers to serve as mentors to special educators is becoming a difficult task for many administrators and district officials because the number of new special educators surpasses the number of experienced teachers (Langher, Caputo, & Ricci, 2017).

Professional development for new special educators is another support many districts and administrators offer. Professional development as defined by the National Association of Special Education Teachers (2017) encompasses the following three principles: student learning is affected by teacher competence, teacher competence is boosted through ongoing professional development and learning, and teachers must be continuous learners. The benefits of offering professional development to employees is the ability for administrators and district officials to provide information that will be meaningful (Vice, 2018). Outside of professional development offered by schools and districts, special educators can engage in professional development events within their state or country. However, the drawback of these professional development opportunities is the amount of money to attend and the stress of drafting lesson plans to miss work to attend these sessions (Vice, 2018).

Another support district and state officials are implementing for their new special educators are induction programs. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (2018) define teacher induction programs as a way to "provide a systematic structure of support for beginning teachers which includes a new teacher orientation, mentoring relationships, support teams, workshops and training, and evaluation" (p. 1). Induction programs allow new teachers to strengthen their practice, learn professional responsibilities, and positively affect the learning of students. In addition, induction programs establish a collaborative learning community for educators. However, drawbacks of induction programs include cost, commitment, and time constraints (Tew, 2018).

Mentoring, professional development, and induction programs are just few of the social supports available to educators. Mentoring and induction programs are geared toward new employees rather than experienced teachers and professional development is provided for all teachers. However, more supports are needed for all special educators to help increase retention rates.

Autonomy

The second aspect of the job characteristic theory is autonomy. Autonomy is the degree in which the job provides independence and freedom in scheduling and determining procedures to be used within the job (Blanz, 2017). Teachers are responsible for instructing students to reach grade level standards but have autonomy in the way the information is relayed to students as long as the instruction falls within the parameters of the school or district frameworks (Figel, 2008). But within the school teacher autonomy is not easily maintained because working hours, standards, and some procedures and instructional frameworks that are set for teachers to follow. For example, teacher autonomy began to decline during the No Child Left Behind era when standardized testing began to move to the forefront of the education reform (Walker, 2016). However, teachers' professional autonomy can be honored by administrators by setting minimum guidelines, focusing on the big picture, and seeking feedback (Smith, 2017). Teachers who report high levels of autonomy are more likely to report high levels of general satisfaction and lower rates of attrition (Warner-Griffin, Cunningham, & Noel, 2018).

Feedback

The third aspect of the job characteristic theory is feedback, which is the extent workers are informed about their level effectiveness within their job (Kass et al., 2011). *Effectiveness* is defined as something someone produces to ensure a desired result of success (Effectiveness, n.d.). Feedback encompasses the advice, praise, and evaluation regarding work performance (Wiggins, 2012). In addition, the feedback regarding an employees' job performance should be "goal-related, tangible and transparent, actionable, specific and personalized, timely, ongoing, and consistent" (Wiggins, 2012, p. 5). Within special education, feedback is often missing one of these characteristics, which lead to special educators feeling insecure regarding their performance and their place in the school environment (Garet et al., 2017).

Feedback is one of the biggest factors teachers need to be satisfied with the job they are doing. Feedback provided to educators should be specific to the lesson being observed with specific example of areas of strengths and areas of weaknesses where a teacher can grow (Bashir, Kabir, & Rahman, 2016). Further, administrators and district officials are not the only ones who can provide effective feedback, peers can also provide valuable information to their colleagues. Quality feedback is provided to educators immediately after the lesson and provides opportunity for both parties to reflect to help the educator grow (Wolters, 2018). In addition, feedback should be provided in written form, so the educator and evaluator can go back and review it to determine growth as the year progresses. Therefore, feedback is a necessary component to increase retention rates because it provides information related to the teaching performance of educators.

Feedback has also been directly tied to why many special educators leave the field of special education (Teaching and Learning International Survey, 2009). Special educators who have left the field have reported that the evaluations did not represent the atmosphere within the classroom, which resulted in poor evaluations. In addition, many special educators explained the dynamics of their classroom was difficult to evaluate because of the individualized instruction happening among students. Special educators also explained that they would like their observation protocol to be different than the general educators because of the unique instructional practices that occur in the special education environment.

Task Significance and Task Identity

The fourth and fifth aspects of the job characteristic theory are task significance and task identity. Task significance is the extent the work impacts others (Kass et al., 2011). Task identity is the extent to which employees feel as though they complete a whole, identifiable product. Special educators have voiced concerns about task significance and task identity due to the feelings of isolation within the school environment (Marks, 2014). Special educators focus their task significance and identity toward their students and the progress they make within a school year, which allows them to reflect on their teaching practices. However, when viewing their task significance and identity outside of their students in the school setting many special educators are unsure where they belong in the school system (Rodriguez-Dorta & Borges, 2017).

Through previous research, aspects of the job characteristic theory have been linked to job satisfaction and attrition rates (Major, 2012). For example, Mat-Ali et al.

(2013) confirmed that there is a positive correlation regarding social support, autonomy, skill variety, task significance, task identity and feedback, and job satisfaction. In addition, the job characteristic theory enhances the psychological states of meaningfulness of work, responsibility for outcomes, and knowledge of results, which leads to high internal work motivation, high growth satisfaction, high general job satisfaction, and high work effectiveness (Expert Program Management, 2018). This can lead to lower attrition rates and higher retention rates. In the field of special education, enhancing these psychological states may lead to special educators feeling less burned-out and more appreciated within their job, which could lead to increasing retention rates (Major, 2012). Therefore, addressing the perceived supports needed to increase retention rates within the job characteristic theory is important to increase job satisfaction and decrease attrition rates.

Reasons to Retain Special Educators

Special educators started to become a critical component in the education system during the mid-1970s due to the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, which guaranteed any student the right to a free and appropriate education (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). As students with a spectrum of disabilities began to enroll in public schools, districts and administrators had to find ways to educate these individuals based on their unique needs. This changed the treatment of students with disabilities by providing them with educators to instruct them within the school setting. However, this change came at a price for districts, as training was needed for their educators (Hannah, 2017).

Today, special educators are needed due to the 6.7 million public-school students across the nation identified as having a disability under one of the 13 categories in the Individuals with Disability Education Act (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Each student is required an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment with instruction being provided by a highly qualified special educator (Umpstead, 2009). The severity the disability has on the student's education determines the placement of the student in the special education program (Shani & Hebel, 2016).

Nationwide, special educators are needed due to the high shortage many states are experiencing (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2018). In addition, each state experiences a higher shortage due to the number of students receiving services and the number of students special educators are allowed to have on their caseload. In South Carolina, the shortage of special educators for the 2017-2018 school year was noted at 38% (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018c). The caseload for special educators in South Carolina can range from 12 students if teaching in a moderate to a severe classroom to 32 students if instructing students in a resource or itinerant setting (South Carolina Department of Education, 2018a).

Outside of the increase of students and the law requiring schools to employ special educators to provide the necessary educational instruction, districts and schools need to retain special educators for other reasons. With high attrition rates, districts and schools are having to pay high costs to provide training and resources (Feng & Sass, 2017). Therefore, retaining special educators can save resources that could be returned to educators. In addition, retaining special educators also provides an educational benefit for

students with disabilities because experienced teachers are providing educational experiences for deepened learning (Vittek, 2015). Students educated by experienced teachers have a higher chance of performing well on state assessments compared to students who are instructed by new teachers (Feng & Sass, 2017).

Other Factors That Impact Special Education Retention Rates

Special educators are leaving the field at twice the rate of their general education peers (Vittek, 2015). Studies have shown that novice special educators exit the field at a higher rate when compared to veteran teachers (Tyler & Brunner, 2014). Vittek (2015) explains that age and years of teaching experience are also correlated with attrition. In addition, significant student teaching experiences can decrease a younger special educator's intent to leave the field (Connelly & Graham, 2009). However, current researchers also explain that external variables also impact the retention rates of special education teachers. These external factors are: ideal versus actual experiences (Andrews & Brown, 2015), job satisfaction, administrative support (Vittek, 2015), compensation (Lynch, 2016) and stress (Bennett et al, 2013).

Ideal Versus Actual Experiences

Special educators enter the field inspired to help students with disabilities without knowing the physical and mental demands the field requires (Andrews & Brown, 2015). Many enter the classroom after completing a teacher education program with high expectations of just teaching and students being receptive from day one (Haug, 2016). However, many special educators explain their frustrations of being taught through textbook situations instead of real-life situations. Therefore, when they enter the

classroom many feel unprepared because they have not been instructed on how to

manage the situation in front of them (Leshem, Zion, & Friedman, 2015). In addition,

many feel unprepared in establishing routines and effectively instructing students and

meeting the diverse needs of all their students (IRIS Center, 2018). Finally, many are

surprised with the time it takes to complete tasks and the lack of resources they actually

have. These actual experiences play a factor in the high attrition rates because new

special educators are unprepared to face the realistic demands within the field of special

education (Lynch, 2012; Whipp & Geronime, 2015).

Aside from feeling overwhelmed of the day to day job, many special educators

are leaving the field due to the working conditions not described within the textbook

scenarios (Lynch, 2016). Cancio and Johnson (2007) described that many special

educators are not qualified to address the aggressive behaviors some students with

disabilities display which are not typically addressed within the college textbooks. For

example, some students with emotional disabilities may experience destructive or

aggressive behaviors which can cause physical harm to teachers and lead to special

educators leaving the field.

To overcome ideal vs. actual experiences, Haug (2016) notes changes must be

made at the university level to better prepare special educators for the demands within

their job. Textbooks are beneficial and can be used as great resources but the experiences

and learning future special educators should be relevant to what they will see in the

classroom. Mentoring programs and interviews with current special educators can

support future teachers by providing opportunities for open and honest communication

about what is needed to be successful as a special educator. Therefore, without having established social supports in place to support the perspectives of special educators can lead,to them questioning their autonomy, task significance, and task identity within the school and classroom setting.

Job Satisfaction

Vittek (2015) notes the level of job satisfaction a teacher experiences can affect the decision for one to stay in special education or move to a general education position or leave the field of education all together. Job satisfaction in this case is defined as the extent to which people either like or dislikes their jobs (Mastrantuono, 2015). Horrison-Collier (2013) explains special educators leave the field at high rates because they dislike or are unsatisfied with their job. Many feel secluded from their general education peers and often feel alone which makes it difficult for them to feel satisfied. Some special educators are dissatisfied with the resources within the building or district and do not have the means to provide quality education which leads them to being frustrated and dissatisfied (Billingsley, 2004).

To begin to support special educators to increase their satisfaction within their job, one support which can be provided to special educators is to create professional learning communities to allow special educators and general educators the ability to collaborate amongst each other (Strydom, Nortje, & Beukes, 2011). Another support which could be implemented to increase job satisfaction is ensuring the resources within the school building are adequate enough for teachers to use within their classrooms (Vittek, 2015). Out-dated textbooks and technology are detrimental to the students'

learning and being up to date with the latest resources motivates teachers to use the resources provided. Therefore, increased support in task significance, task identity, feedback, autonomy, and social support could lead to higher levels of job satisfaction which could tentatively impact retention rates of special educators.

Administrative Support

The lack of support from administrators is known to be a major factor in the high attrition rates of special educators (Vittek, 2015). Samuels (2018) noted special educators do not feel valued at the school and when issues arise, they are often pushed aside because the special education community is a small percent of the entire school environment. Bettini, Cheyney, Wang and Leko (2015) explained many administrators do not have the training to support special educators and are not required to take coursework in special education to obtain their certification. Special educators who have left the field expressed if administrators were knowledgeable within the field and offered more support with student behavior and curriculum, they would have been more willing to stay in the field (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

To increase administrative support for special educators, administrators could take pride within their special education department and see them as an integral part of the school environment (Vittek, 2015). Special educators have a unique educational background which could be beneficial to the school environment. For example, special educators have background knowledge in all content areas, strategies to differentiate learners, and behavior modifications. Using the unique background of special educators could increase the feeling of administrative support many special educators do not have.

In addition, having quality and effective feedback could impact the level of administrative support special educators perceive because special educators can identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, the support from administration could also increase the autonomy of special educators within the classroom and school setting.

Compensation

Special educators make up the tens of thousands of teachers that leave the school setting to work in different occupations outside of education due to the low pay (Kelly, 2004). Teachers alone are compensated considerably less than other professions which require a four-year degree and often bring large amount of work home each night and weekend to stay ahead of the overwhelming workload they face (Hunting, 2017). In addition, many teachers use money from their own accounts to pay for supplies and resources which are not readily available within the school. To help overcome the low compensation, many special educators are working an additional job to pay for the resources needed within their classroom (Aragon, 2018). This causes special educators to become burned-out which plays a role in the low retention rates of special educators.

To overcome the cost of teachers having to spend money out of pocket, many states have implemented stipends to cover school supplies. In addition, some states have also implemented bonus programs to reward educators for not missing a day and programs to attract new employees with sign-on bonuses. Lastly, many districts and states are beginning to address the shortage of teachers and look into the state budgets to increase teacher salaries.

Stress

Another known factor of high attrition rates within special education is the level of stress the job puts on an individual (Vittek, 2015). The American Speech-Language Hearing Association (2018) noted special educators' burn out due to the poor working conditions. These conditions involve designing lessons to meet the needs of all learners, maintaining and updating IEP paperwork, writing IEPs, behavior support and meeting the requirements set by school administrators. In addition, many special educators are not able to complete the requirements of their job within their contracted hours and spend additional time outside of school to stay afloat with their job responsibilities (IRIS Center, 2018). By having their responsibilities pulled in several directions, stress builds up and adds to the burn-out many special educators feel which leads them to leaving the field at alarming rates.

To decrease the amount of stress special educators experience throughout the school day, Adeniyi, Fakolade, and Adeyinka (2010) note providing special educators with additional planning time can ease the amount of stress. In addition, decreasing the caseload for special educators could ease some of the stress special educators feel.

Repercussions for Students Due to High Attrition Rates

High attrition rates in special education do not only affect the schools and districts but it also affects the students who are enrolled in special education programs. Students with disabilities often have a difficult time emotionally and academically dealing with changes in routine (Bull et al, 2015) and having a number of different teachers from year to year is often difficult for the students and impedes their academic, behavioral, and

social achievement (Hume, Sreckovic, Snyder, & Carnahan, 2014). Students with disabilities benefit when they have access to a well-trained, experienced teacher (Cale, Delpino, & Myran, 2015). However, due to the shortage in special education many classrooms across the nation are filling vacancies with individuals trained in alternative programs which sometimes have no coursework or field experience in special education or by substitutes who do not hold a valid teaching license (Billingsely, 2004; Tyler & Brunner, 2014). Students within special education programs therefore are not receiving adequate instruction by highly qualified individuals as stated under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Current Efforts to Retain and Attract Special Education Teachers

Federal and state officials recognize the severity of the high attrition rates within the field of special education. To begin to retain and attract special educators many schools across the nation are providing new teachers with induction programs (IRIS Center, 2018). Within the induction program new teachers are being provided mentors, offered additional professional development and training, and meaningful feedback from observations to help keep educators within the field (Goldrick, 2016). Many districts are offering additional sign-on bonuses to attract special educators as well. Federally, the government is hoping to attract special educators by offering forgiveness programs on student loans many students take out to pay for their college studies (Federal Student Aid, 2018). These forgiveness loans do come with contingencies but allow opportunities for students to not remain in debt for a good portion of their lives.

In addition to providing induction programs, offering sign-on bonuses, and the federal government offering forgiveness on student loans many states are finding unique ways to attract and retain special educators. First, many districts and states are addressing the concern of teacher salaries and are aware that novice educators earn approximately 20% less than colleagues with college degrees (Bake, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2015). Therefore, states and districts are beginning to raise teacher salaries in areas where the pay is not competitive and unable to support the lifestyle of a middle-class citizen (Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). In addition, states and districts are able to use aspects of the Every Student Succeeds Act to aid title one schools and districts with additional resources to attract and retain special educators. Finally, some states and districts are adding additional compensation to employees through housing incentives, which includes covering expenses for rent, relocation, and down payment assistance.

The second thing many districts and states are addressing in hopes to attract and retain special educators is analyzing the preparation and costs to entry aspect of becoming a special educator (Podolsky, Kinia, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). Darling-Hammon, Chung, and Frelow (2002) recognized that when teachers have a strong preparation into the field a teachers' sense of efficacy, effectiveness, and improving outcomes for students drastically increases. Ingersoll, Merrill, & May (2014) added that with strong preparation into becoming a special educator increases the chances of the teacher remaining within the profession. Strong preparation programs include observing other teachers, a full semester of student teaching, receiving feedback, taking additional courses in teaching, learning, and selecting materials for instruction. To begin

to address strong preparation programs, states and districts are beginning to develop teacher residences (Podolsky et al, 2016). These residencies allow students the opportunity to acquire an income and experience while earning a credential with the commitment to remain in the area for several years. Therefore, providing valuable experience for novice educators as they enter the field.

Finally, many states and districts are beginning to recognize working conditions as a key contributor to high attrition rates of special educators in high poverty-schools (Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011). State and federal government officials are beginning to invest resources into developing strong standards for administration and provide them with resources to be successful running a school. These preparation programs for principals are able to be funded through the Every Student Succeeds Act. Lastly, states and districts have utilized surveys to assess the teaching and learning environments which is a strong predictor of job satisfaction (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012).

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter provided a literature review of important concepts and ideas to support this study. A review of the job characteristic theory was provided and how the theory aligns to the perspectives of special education teachers in relation to ways to support teacher retention. An overview of why special educators is needed, special education training, known causes for low special education teacher retention rates, repercussions for students, and current efforts district, state and federal officials are implementing to attract and retain special educators were discussed. Chapter 3 will

provide a detailed overview of the research method. Chapter 4 will show the results of the study and chapter 5 will provide a detailed discussion of possible next steps officials can begin to take to increase special education teacher retention.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore special education teachers' perspectives regarding the supports needed to improve special education teacher retention rates. To begin this chapter, an overview of the research design and rationale will be discussed followed by my role as a researcher. Next, the methodology will be discussed by identifying the participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection, and the data analysis plan. The remaining part of the chapter will address trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and a summary of the entire chapter with an overview of Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative study begins with an interest, problem, or question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). There is a nationwide and local problem of low retention rates in the field of special education and previous measures attempted to increase these retention rates. Therefore, I conducted this study to examine the supports needed to retain special educators from the perspectives of special educators in relation to the job characteristic theory. The results can be used to provide additional information on the supports needed to foster social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence as perceived by special educators. By understanding the current perspectives of special educators, school administration can begin to understand the supports needed to address the aspects of the job characteristic theory to increase retention rates of special educators.

Therefore, this study allowed me to gather descriptive data to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are special education teachers' perspectives of the supports within the school setting are needed to foster special education teachers' social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence to increase retention rates?

Research Question 2: What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that may result in a teacher leaving the field of special education?

Research Question 3: What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that support teachers to stay in the field of special education?

Role of the Researcher

For this study, my role involved conducting the interviews, collecting the information to answer the research questions, and analyzing the data. During the interviews, I moved toward a role as an active participant by asking follow-up questions based on the responses given by the participants. By engaging in the conversation, I acquired a better understanding of the perspectives of the teachers on the supports needed to improve special education retention rates. In addition, I was able to highlight why some special educators remain in the field. The interviews followed Patton's (2002) interview guide and open-ended interview approach where interview questions are scripted prior to conducting the interviews.

This study was conducted in the school district in which I am newly employed as a sixth grade teacher. The relationship with the participants of the study is strictly

professional. During the study, I was not in a supervisory role and did not have any power over the participants. As a new employee to the district, I did not have any prior knowledge of the participants and did not establish a personal relationship with them. Therefore, no researcher bias was evident within the study. However, there was till the potential of ethical issues. Interactions between the participants and researchers can cause ethical challenges, as each person is involved at various points throughout the study (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). By establishing guidelines and remaining within script during the interviews, I was able to mitigate this ethical issue.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The participant population was comprised of special educators who voluntarily agreed to meet with me to discuss the supports needed to improve special education teacher retention rates. Purposeful sampling was used to select 15 special educators from three different schools to answer the research questions that drove this study. The first 15 special educators who responded were selected to participate in the study. To participate within the study, the participant must have taught in an area of special education. To verify the participant has had teaching experience within special education, I followed up with the participants' administration.

To gather participants for this study, an e-mail was sent out to special educators within a school district in South Carolina. An e-mail list was gathered from the school websites, which entails a list of all special educators within the schools. Within the e-mail, a link was provided to them that gave them access to the informed consent that

provided a detailed outline of the research study. Participants then determined whether they would like to participate by completing a survey and providing additional information on their background in special education. To better understand the supports needed to retain special educators, a semistructured interview provided the information needed for data collection.

Instrumentation

I used an interview protocol, which included a list of questions that I asked the participants who volunteered to be a part of the study. The interview protocol was developed by focusing on key aspects of the job characteristic theory in terms of supports needed to retain special educators. Additional follow-up questions were asked to determine if additional factors outside of the job characteristic theory could lead to high attrition rates based upon the research conducted in the literature review. Finally, the last set of questions was focused on the participants' reasons they stay in the field of special education.

To validate the interview protocol, I used the four-phase process to interview protocol refinement (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Through this process I was able to ensure that the interview questions aligned with the research questions, organize the interview protocol to create and inquiry-based conversation, and have the protocol reviewed by others and pilot it. The interview protocol was reviewed by my committee and piloted with a special educator in an outside district where my study did not occur. This process strengthened the reliability of the interview protocol and increased the quality of the data

I received. In addition, the interview protocol was also approved by my committee and Walden University prior to conducting any research.

The instrumentation of semi structured interviews aided in answering the research questions for this study. The intent of the study was to identify needed supports from special educators to help increase retention rates in relation to the job characteristic theory. Participants who were not certified or those who do not have experience within the field of special education were not chosen to interview.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The first step to conduct this study was obtaining IRB approval from Walden University (approval no. 03-19-19-0328629). After approval was given, the next step was to obtain approval from administration and district leaders to conduct the study. A formal meeting was held with both administration and district leaders to explain the purpose and intent of the study. Approval was granted, and the next step was to gather participants. An e-mail was sent out to special educators with a survey created through Google Forms to determine who was willing to participate. Attached to the survey was an introductory letter providing potential participants with the purpose of the study, the significance, and potential benefits of the research study. The goal was to have at least 15 special educators from the three different schools. In addition, another Google Form was sent to previous or current administration to ensure previous teaching experience is evident in the field of special education. Further, within the e-mail correspondence a link was provided to obtain informed consent. Finally, all participants were provided with my e-mail address in the event they wish to contact me regarding any and all parts of the study.

All potential participants who accessed the Google Form were asked to indicate acknowledgement and willingness to participate in the research study by responding to the informed consent form. Participation was voluntary. Upon clicking a "yes" response directed the participant to the data collection tool. Upon completion of the Google Form, I contacted participants who agreed to participate to conduct a semi structured interview to inquire about the supports needed to retain special educators based on their perspectives.

The interviews with the participants occurred at the school of the participant or a place where the participant was comfortable. Since participation was voluntary, I did not want to add additional stress of meeting at set locations to conduct this study; therefore, I allowed the participant to choose where the interview occurred. The interviews with the participants occurred once and did not exceed an hour and a half. In addition, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

For participants who chose to exit the study prior to the study being completed had the right to do so. For these participants, a brief Google form was sent to the participant allowing them to explain their reason for exiting the study. For the participants who stayed through the entire study a debriefing procedure occurred. During the debriefing procedure, I met with participants one last time to review the results of the study with them and provide gratitude to them for participating in the study. Upon completion of the study, no follow-up procedures occurred.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative research allows researchers the opportunity to understand an individual's perspectives regarding a specific phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To better understand the perspectives of special educators in regard to the supports needed to increase retention rates in relation to the job characteristic theory a semi structured interview is the best data collection tool to answer the proposed research questions. Semi structured interviews allowed me to pose specific questions to participants and then add follow-up questions as needed to clarify information the participants provided.

From the data collected through the semi structured interviews, a thematic analysis was used to analyze the textual data to elucidate themes through a priori and open-coding system to address the research questions to determine the perceived types of support provided and needed to retain special educators (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The process of open-coding was used to aggregate the codes and themes (Creswell, 2012; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Thematic analysis followed by identifying key words and phrases. The frequency of occurrence of key words and phrases was analyzed. Through the coding system, emergent themes were created to allow a researcher the ability to develop categories, and subcategories as needed (Stuckey, 2015). The data were compared to find commonalities or differences between the three different groups of teachers being interviewed.

Trustworthiness

A key concept in establishing credibility within this study was to ensure specific strategies were being implemented to check for internal validity. Within this study

triangulation was addressed because three different groups provided information and the results were compared and contrasted to determine the perceived supports needed to retain special educators. Triangulation involves using various data sources in an investigation to produce a deeper understanding of a desired phenomenon (Denzin, 1978). In this study, participants from three different school levels (elementary/intermediate, middle, and high school) were interviewed to determine if common themes are noted between schools and school levels. In addition, through the data analysis, saturation became evident because themes were categorized and re-categorized until categories can no longer be created. Walker (2012) noted saturation is imperative in qualitative studies because it helps to ensure that adequate data is obtained to support the study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) note transferability allows readers to determine if the results can be replicated in another setting. In this study, transferability is addressed because multiple special educators from three schools were interviewed to determine the supports needed to increase specific aspects of the job characteristic theory. With the results being compared, specific supports may be duplicated by another participant in another school. In addition, the goal of the study was to identify supports needed to increase special education teacher retention rates. Administrators and district leaders could take the results of the study back to their schools to determine if the supports identified could help increase aspects of the job characteristic theory to help increase retention rates within their school.

Dependability includes the aspect of consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure dependability triangulation will be addressed. Triangulation was addressed because participants were from three different levels (elementary/intermediate, middle and high) were interviewed. The results analyzed to compare and contrast the perceived supports needed to increase teacher retention rates in relation to the job characteristic theory.

The final step of trustworthiness is to establish confirmability. Confirmability can be established through reflexivity with qualitative studies. To address reflexivity, I was self-aware regarding my role within the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Therefore, any notes taken throughout the process are available for others to analyze to show that any biases noted did not affect the results of the study. In addition, member checking was utilized. In member checking, the results of the study were returned to participants for them to check for truthfulness with their experiences (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Through this process confirmability aides in strengthening the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, a peer reviewer was utilized to examine all of the data to help check for logical development of themes. The peer reviewer was a person who has their doctoral degree and has experience with qualitative research. In addition, the reviewer signed a confidential agreement.

Ethical Procedures

Throughout the completion of this study, ethical procedures were addressed in every aspect of the study. As a requirement of the Walden University IRB, prior to collecting data the study was approved by a committee and Walden University's IRB.

Prior to recruiting participants for the study, I obtained proper approval from the school district as noted through IRB. The district officials were provided a copy of the informed consent which highlighted the description of the study, potential risks and benefits to the participants, the confidentiality agreement, the participants' right to withdraw from the study, and the consent of the participants. Once approval was granted, an email was sent out to potential participants with the informed consent and upon agreement and a survey was completed. The necessary information needed to meet criterion was obtained from participants to ensure participants can answer the questions with honesty. Any information collected from participants was coded to ensure they will not be identifiable by outsiders. All information will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a personal computer flash drive for 5 years. No risks were associated with participation of the study because all information collected within the study was confidential. By ensuring the confidentiality of the participants and safeguarding all data guaranteed the protection of human rights. In addition, the researcher's role was clearly presented in regard to the validity of the findings and the design, reliability, and validity of the process were addressed.

Summary

This chapter provided an in-depth analysis of the research method. A detailed explanation of the research design and rationale was provided as well as the role of the researcher. This chapter also highlighted the methodology of the study by focusing on the participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, the data analysis plan. To establish trustworthiness within the study, strategies were explained to address credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, the ethical procedures were

discussed in which the study notes how guidelines were met under Walden University's

IRB. Chapter 4 will provide the data collected from the research questions to determine

the perceived supports needed to increase special education retention rates as pertained to

the job characteristic theory.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore special education teachers' perspectives regarding supports to improve special education teacher retention rates. High attrition rates in special education are related to the lack of support special educators feel (Koonkongsatian, 2017). To better support special educators, a deeper understanding of the which supports are needed is necessary. Therefore, this study provides information that can help increase retention rates of special educators. The research questions were designed to address this issue:

Research Question 1: What are special education teachers' perspectives of the supports within the school setting that are needed to foster special education teachers' social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence to increase retention rates?

Research Question 2: What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that result in a teacher leaving the field of special education?

Research Question 3: What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that support teachers to stay in the field of special education?

Chapter 4 provides the setting in which the interviews took place in addition to a discussion on the data collection and data analysis. In addition, the results of the study will be provided by answering the three research questions, and the evidence of trustworthiness will be expanded on. Finally, a summary of the answers to the research questions will be provided as well as an introduction to the details that guide Chapter 5.

Setting

The interviews for this doctoral study all occurred after school and outside of teacher contract hours. Therefore, fatigue and/or stress of the day may have influenced participants' responses to the interview questions. In addition, the participants were preparing for their busy time of the year, as spring IEP meetings were approaching. The participants of the study were people I knew personally or professionally and were employed within the same district as myself.

The participants of the study were all current special educators with varying levels of experiences ranging from 3 years to 24 years in the field. All participants obtained their certification through a university/college program. Ten participants hold a master's degree or higher. Six of the 15 participants were self-contained teachers, and nine were resource teachers. Self-contained teachers provide instruction to their students in their classroom and instruct all core content and life skills lessons. Resource teachers provide inclusion and pull-out support for students in reading, math, and behavior. Caseload numbers for participants ranged from six to 17 students for self-contained teachers and 25 to 36 students for resource teachers. Further, 14 of the participants were female.

Data Collection

The data collection for this study involved one-on-one interviews with the participants. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes with follow-up questions if more clarification was needed during the interview. Each interview was recorded on a personal tape-recorder and stored on a flash drive. After the interviews, each one was transcribed using the Microsoft Word and saved on the same flash drive as the

interviews. The data collection that occurred for this study aligned with the data collection plan which was presented in Chapter 3. In addition, no unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection phase.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the semi structured interviews, each one was carefully transcribed. The transcriptions were used to perform a thematic analysis to analyze the textual data through a priori and an open-coding system. From the textual data, I began writing key words and phrases the participants used for each research question on flash cards and putting their responses under the designated research questions. This helped me pull out similar key words and phrases and begin creating themes that were transferred to creating categories and subcategories as needed. After analyzing all the interviews, I looked for commonalities and differences between the three different groups of teachers.

In analyzing the current supports offered to special educators by their school and district, the following codes, categories, and themes emerged from the interviews based on the analyzation of responses to the interview questions. First, high autonomy was a common response when participants were asked to describe their autonomy. All resource teachers noted the ability to create their own schedules, which also consists of their pull-out schedules for their students and no set curriculum that they are required to use. All self-contained teachers noted high autonomy in creating their classroom schedules but low autonomy in curriculum provided to them for use. All teachers also noted low collaboration and social support within their schools and district but high task

significance when it came to their students. One participant noted "I can see my task significance for students when they take the time to stop by and just say hello."

In analyzing the needed supports in the different aspects of the job characteristic theory, a common theme that emerged was time. Participants noted that many do not get a planning period during the day or are overused to cover duties. Therefore, little time is available to prepare lessons, complete paperwork, and collaborate with coworkers. Another common theme was the need for quality feedback based on work performance. Several participants noted that they had not been formally observed this year and were provided little feedback regarding their performance and task significance within the school. One participant noted,

> I would like to be observed quarterly, where an administrator comes into my room for more than 5 minutes and provides me with meaningful feedback. I want to know what I am doing well but areas where I can grow and then set goals to see this growth.

In analyzing the reasons special educators leave and stay within in the field, a common theme in reasons for high attrition rates was having no support and lack of respect from colleagues. Participants were asked to hypothesize why special educators leave the field and then were asked if they thought about leaving the field. If they responded with "yes" to having thoughts about leaving, I asked them to explain their reasons. However, when analyzing why special educators stay within the field, all participants noted their students as the reason they stay. One participant stated, "I stay for

my students and to see their progress. The 'a-ha' moments our students have makes it worth it all."

During this study, no discrepant cases were noted. Again, all participants volunteered to participate within the research study and were active special educators. Therefore, they were not factored within the analysis of this research study.

Results

The purpose of this study was to analyze the supports to retain special educators in schools. Three research questions guided the analysis of results for this study. Participant responses are organized in the following sections by question and theme related to the job characteristic theory.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was "What are special education teachers' perspectives of the supports within the school setting are needed to foster special education teachers' social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence to increase retention rates?"

Social support. All participants noted that their school has attempted to increase social support by establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) for their special education teachers. These PLCs allow time for teachers to quickly meet with each other and touch base with others. Participant A explained,

> PLCs allow me to see other adults while engaging in conversation regarding content, updates from administration and any issues with our students. However, getting to these PLCs is often difficult due to time constraints or other

responsibilities. Sometimes, I am called to assist a student or have students in my classroom for pull-out services which means I am unable to meet with my PLC. Monthly faculty meetings and professional development days were also noted as additional supports implemented to increase social support. Participant E stated, "Professional development days are my favorite because I get to interact with my whole department while creating meaningful experiences for our students." Participant F also noted, "Professional development days are sanctioned and therefore guaranteed the time to meet and collaborate with my colleagues because I do not have to worry about meeting with students or being pulled away to help with a situation."

When looking at the social support among other special educators within the school and district, all special educators noted their yearly district meeting as a way to seek support from other special educators within the district. This meeting is where logistics regarding IEPs are shared, and the different schools can share transitioning students' service minutes to ensure the correct services and times of service is correct for the next year's IEP. Participant C noted that "district meetings are very informal with minimal social interactions and more emphasis is making sure minutes are accurate." Participant K stated, "district meetings allow me to put a name to an e-mail." However, responses among the social support among special educators in the school varied. Several participants noted that they have time every 2 weeks to meet with their department, and others noted no time is provided unless it is through faculty meetings and professional development days. Self-contained teachers unanimously stated that seeking social support from other special educators is nearly impossible due to having their students all day.

Participant I stated, "I am with my students all day and when they go to activities other teachers are planning or I am keeping a student due to behavioral concerns from that day."

The needed supports special educators noted to increase social support among colleagues to begin to increase retention rates are time and awareness of what special educators do and their role within the school. Participants expressed time as a need to engage with others within their school or district. Through this engagement, collaboration can occur, and ideas can be expressed to aid students with content, social support, and behavioral support. A possible solution that Participant E explained to increase time was to schedule two 30 to 45 minute planning periods for special educators. One would be a common time for special educators to meet and collaborate. The second planning period would allow special educators to collaborate with general educators to support general educators and find ways to integrate their knowledge into the content. One self-contained teacher stated that she would enjoy meeting with general educators to find ways to integrate her students with the rest of the school environment. Finally, special educators expressed that having empathetic coworkers would help increase social support by informing the staff of the responsibilities special educators have daily.

Autonomy. Special educators noted that they all have a high level of autonomy within their school. Resource teachers unanimously explained that with the aid of the master schedule and teachers' daily schedule, they are able to create pull-out groups based on the needs of their students. In addition, they have high autonomy within their curriculum and the resources used to aid their students. Self-contained teachers, on the

other hand, only noted high autonomy with creating their daily schedules. In addition, they can hand schedule their students for related arts to ensure IEP compliance is being met. However, they are given the appropriate research-based curriculum to use to instruct their students based on the students' level. Participant B and Participant G, who are self-contained teachers, both noted that a benefit of their job is the autonomy they are given to create meaningful educational experiences for their students.

The needed supports special educators felt to increase autonomy included providing special educators with a mentor who has established high autonomy within the school setting. Mentoring would provide new teachers as well as veteran teachers with limited autonomy an outlet to gain skills and strategies to increase their autonomy. Skills that were noted as needed to have high autonomy is building trust with administration, being an expert within your field, keeping autonomy student-centered, having confidence, and having strong communication skills. However, autonomy does not occur without a supportive administration that allows their educators to grow and learn from their experiences.

Feedback. The special educators who were interviewed for this study noted that little feedback is given outside of their student learning objectives. Thirteen of the 15 special educators noted that they had been informally observed for quick walkthroughs where administration was looking for specific district initiatives and left with a sticky note that thanked them for their hard work. However, little feedback and support is provided when looking at the work performance of special educators. Several special educators noted that they had not formally been observed for this school year, and eight

stated that when they were observed the observation lasted about 10 minutes. Feedback received from administration often comes through an e-mail or online program and not in a face-to-face meeting.

The needed supports special educators feel is imperative to increase feedback among special educators is providing special educators specific and meaningful feedback regarding their performance. Participant F expressed "5-minute walk throughs are not enough time to truly evaluate my teaching and allow myself to grow." Specific feedback requires frequent observations which occur at different parts of the day. Participants expressed that the observations be at least 30 minutes and a follow-up conference is needed. Participant A, D, E and J noted that within their observations they would like to hear the positives within the lesson and then be provided with areas where growth is needed and from there determine the supports needed to help them grow as a professional.

In addition to receiving feedback from administrators, an additional support which was noted by the special educators interviewed was receiving peer feedback from their colleagues. Participant A, C, and K expressed having a peer observe a lesson or a classroom dynamic can provide meaningful feedback within teaching strategies, resources and curriculum, classroom management ideas, and behavior interventions. Participant C stated "At times I feel like I get in a routine and am afraid to venture out or miss key things while instructing my students. Therefore, having a peer observe periodically can provide meaningful feedback to increase my performance within the classroom."

Task significance. Task significance is described as the degree one's work impacts the lives or work of individuals. Through the data collected, it was evident to see that all participants noted high task significance with their students. Self-contained teachers noted that they spend at least 6 hours daily with their students and provide them with the academic, emotional, behavioral and social support needed to get through the day and see the progress of all their work. Resource teachers, on the other hand, noted that their students and other students they may see within inclusion make it a point to stop by just to say "hey" or to receive a hug. They feel the work they do is impacting the students they see. However, all participants noted low task significance with colleagues and administrators. Reasons participants felt the low task significance were due to lack of time to collaborate, lack of awareness of what special educators do, little recognition, and isolation of the high demands of special education. These responses were more common in the three middle school and eight high school participants. All participants noted that they are not provided with feedback regarding their task significance within the school.

The needed supports special educators' feel is needed to increase task significance for special educators is to bridge the gap between special educators and general educators. It was expressed that there is a lack of awareness and education involved with the responsibilities and roles special educators take on during the day and how they can provide meaningful support to all. Participant L noted "general educators should be required to shadow a special educator to better understand the workload special educators have." Participant F stated, "one cannot truly understand if they do not experience it for themselves." Open communication between administrators, special educators and general

educators must take place to begin to highlight the similarities and differences between the two roles.

In addition to increasing awareness and educating general educators, participants also expressed the need to be wanted and appreciated within their school. Many of the participants noted high levels of isolation and little recognition for the work and services they are providing to the school and other teachers. Participant F stated "a simple statement of gratitude would allow myself to see that I am wanted and making a difference. Somedays I go days without acknowledgement of my work and it makes it difficult to complete my job." Communication is needed in order to increase task significance for special educators.

Task interdependence. Through the interviews, I was able to learn that special educators are not provided with supports to help see the task interdependence of current visions within the school. Participants feel excluded from the big picture due to what they teach. In addition, assigned readings are provided for us to read during their own time. Participant M stated "I know the main thing the school is wanting us to achieve because we spend multiple days talking about it during the first few days back from summer. However, after that I feel excluded from the current visions because the little resources are given to us and we are not included in school day professional development times due to our schedules and needs of our students."

The perceived supports special educators' feel are needed to increase task interdependence of special educators is to have clear visions and goals, and administrative support. Participants expressed that they often find themselves not fitting

into the visions and goals because they are unsure of what is expected of them through the process or in order to reach the end goal. To rectify this problem, Participant N expressed having an open meeting with administrators to discuss the role of special education within the school's visions and goals to support special educators to feel a part of the process. This would also open the doorway for open communication and collaboration among special educators and administrators.

In addition to having a meeting with administrators, another need to increase task interdependence is administrative support. Participant E spent time discussing that administrative support provides pathways for special educators to meet required expectations while adhering to tasks special educators are bounded by law to do. In addition, with administrative support productive collaboration between all stakeholders can begin to provide guidance to help all parties feel a part of the process.

In conclusion the needed supports perceived by special educators to begin to increase retention rates utilizing the job characteristic theory are imperative to consider and understand in order to help increase the retention rates for special educators. The perceived needed supports to increase social support is time and awareness of the jobs special educators do. The needed supports to increase autonomy of special educators is to provide mentor teachers and increase administrative support to allow special educators to obtain the skills necessary to increase their autonomy within the school setting. The needed support to increase feedback requires adequate and thought-provoking feedback regarding work performance from both administrators and colleagues. The needed support to increase task significance of special educators is to bridge the gap between

special and regular educators, increase awareness and education of the roles special educators play, and being acknowledged for their work by colleagues and administrators. Finally, the needed supports perceived to increase task interdependence among special educators are an open and honest meeting with administration, and administrative support which provides resources and effective collaboration and communication between all stakeholders to help all feel a part of the end result of the goal or vision.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was "What factors may result in a teacher leaving the field of special education?"

The factors that the participants noted may result in a teacher leaving the field of special education and adding to the high attrition rates of special educators' range are administrative support, colleagues, job demands, and student behavior. Participants noted administrative support is a key reason a special educator leaves the field because little recognition is provided for the work that is being done on a daily basis. In addition, many administrators do not have special education expertise and unable to provide adequate support in resources and curriculum that is needed to help students and teachers be successful.

Colleagues were another factor which contributes to teachers exiting the field at alarming rates. Special educators at times may not feel as respected as other colleagues within the building because the lack of awareness and education of the duties and responsibilities of special educators. One participant expressed that when one doesn't feel

respected, they are more likely to segregate themselves and find themselves alone during the work day which takes a toll on the mental state of the person.

The field of special education has a high job demand which requires special educators to meet services and goals written on a federal government. In addition, to the stress of maintaing paperwork, special educators are busy providing instruction, writing IEP's, providing behavioral support to students, and doing school related duties. Participant N expressed that with the responsibilities of the job and having little time to complete tasks, special educators are becoming burned out because they take work home to do to prepare for the next day which does not allow them to complete additional tasks." This alone adds high levels of stress and anxiety again can take a toll on a person's mental state after a while of feeling run down and burned out.

The last reason which was expressed by participants regarding the factors that cause special educators to leave the field revolved around student behavior. New teachers straight out of college are often unprepared to deal with the behaviors that students with disabilities sometimes display within the classroom. In addition, some educators feel that they are not supported by administrators and district officials when students with severe behaviors show up in their classroom. Participant I noted that she has been told to deal and handle the behavior unless it is a true emergency where the student has injured yourself or another student. This leads to special educators feeling discouraged and frustrated. Finally, a few participants noted aggressive behaviors which result in serious injuries were main reasons for high attrition because one doesn't want to be abused within the school setting.

The key reasons which were suggested by the participants on why special educators leave the field at high rates are because they do not have administrative support, conflict with colleagues, high job demands and responsibilities, and student behavior. All participants stated that they themselves have thought about leaving the field of education at one point in their career.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was "What factors support teachers to stay in the field of special education?"

To conclude the interviews with participants, I asked each participant reasons special educators stay and then asked them to note why they continue to stay in special education. One common theme which emerged out of all 15 participants were that the students were the main reasons special educators stay within the field. "It is working towards and seeing the light bulb moments of students and seeing how students grow throughout the year." Participant D added to her response by noting that special educators stay within the field because they feel they can make a difference. All participants expressed that they stay within the field for the students and the "aha" moments which occur during the learning process.

In addition to the students, another common theme which emerged was money. Participants noted that the district provided a sign-on bonus for the first two years of employment at the district which was non-taxable. Participant I also expressed the opportunity to earn additional money throughout the year by providing homebound

services to students outside of contract hours which is added to their paycheck twice a month.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Referring to chapter 3 of this study, a key concept in establishing credibility which this proposed study is ensuring specific strategies were implemented to check for internal validity. To establish credibility, all participants of this study were employed through the same school district. However, special educators from three different school levels participated within the study to allow for triangulation of the data. In addition, saturation of the data was evident in the analysis which helped themes become apparent.

Transferability was addressed within this study by having multiple special educators from three schools participate to determine the support needed to increase specific aspects of the job characteristic theory after analyzing the current support offered. The results were compared which allowed specific supports to be duplicated by another participant. In addition, the goal of the study is to identify needed supports to retain special educators to increase retention rates. A copy of the final study will be provided to the superintendent, as requested by him, to determine if the supports identified could begin to increase aspects of the job characteristic theory to help increase retention rates within their school.

Dependability was addressed through this study through the process of triangulation. Participants from this study were from three different levels (elementary/intermediate, middle, and high). The results were then analyzed which were

compared and contrasted to better understand the perceived supports needed to increase teacher retention rates in relation to the aspects of the job characteristic theory.

Finally, confirmability was reached within this study through the process of reflexivity. During the interviews, I was aware of my role within the study and no biases is evident through the analyzation. Member checking was utilized where I returned to participants and asked them to review their interpretations of what was said within the interviews and my analyses for truthfulness from their experiences. Finally, a peer reviewer, a person who has their doctorate degree and familiar with qualitative research, was relied on to ensure there was a logical development of themes based on the information collected through semi-structured interviews.

Summary

This chapter included a review of the results which were gathered through interviews in determining the needed supports to help retain special educators as perceived by special educators. Before noting the needed supports, an analysis of current supports provided were reviewed to better allow one to understand where the supports were needed. From the results it was evident that in order to increase special education retention rates in the field of special education utilizing the job characteristic theory the following supports are needed. To increase social support the supports that are perceived needed are time and awareness of the jobs special educators do. The needed supports to increase autonomy of special educators is to provide mentor teachers and increase administrative support to allow special educators to obtain the skills necessary to increase their autonomy within the school setting. The needed support to increase feedback

requires adequate and thought-provoking feedback regarding work performance from both administrators and colleagues. The needed support to increase task significance of special educators is to bridge the gap between special and regular educators, increase awareness and education of the roles special educators play, and being acknowledged for their work by colleagues and administrators. Finally, the needed supports perceived to increase task interdependence among special educators is an open and honest meeting with administration, and administrative support which provides resources and effective collaboration and communication between all stakeholders to help all feel a part of the result of the goal or vision.

The second half of this chapter included the factors which result in special educators leaving the field and the factors which result in special educators remaining in the field. The following factors were noted by participants on why special educators leave the field. First, is administrative support, second is conflicts with colleagues, third is the high job demand that special education has and fourth is related to the behaviors some students with disabilities display. However, it was expressed by participants that the factors which keep special educators within the field result around the students progressing and getting the "aha" moments.

The last part of this chapter included the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 5 of this study will provide a summary of the key findings of this study. In addition, a detailed explanation of the interpretation of the findings, the limitations within the study, recommendations for future studies, and the implication this study has on the field of education will be addressed.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore special education teachers' perspectives regarding supports to improve special education teacher retention rates. It is unclear which supports are needed despite lack of support being a main reason for high attrition rates among special educators (Koonkongsatian, 2017). Therefore, this study was conducted to gather perspectives of current special educators of needed supports in relation to the job characteristic theory to provide information that may increase special education retention rates.

The results from the one-on-one interviews with current special educators indicated supports in relation to job characteristic theory that may increase retention rates of special educators. To increase social support, participants noted the need for more time and awareness of special educators' roles. To increase autonomy of special educators, participants suggested providing mentor teachers and increasing administrative support to allow special educators to obtain the skills to increase their autonomy in the school setting. To increase feedback, participants recommended adequate and thought-provoking feedback regarding work performance from both administrators and colleagues. To increase task significance of special educators, schools need to address the gap between special and regular educators, increase awareness and education of special educators' roles, and acknowledge special educators for their work. Finally, the supports perceived to increase task interdependence among special educators is an open and honest meeting with administration, and administrative support that provides resources and collaboration

and communication between all stakeholders to help everyone feel part of the result of the goal.

In addition to identifying the supports needed in relation to job characteristic theory, I conducted an analysis of factors that result in special educators either leaving or remaining in the field. A few factors were suggested by participants to determine why special educators leave the field of special education: the lack of administrative support, conflicts with colleagues, high job demand of special education, and behaviors some students with disabilities display. However, participants also expressed the factors that keep special educators in the field: students progressing, getting the "aha" moments, and the monetary benefits of being a special educator.

Interpretation of the Findings

Based on the data analysis, the findings were able to confirm, disconfirm, or extend current knowledge as described in the literature review in Chapter 2. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of special educators of needed supports in relation to the job characteristic theory as well as current literature. Job characteristic theory is focused on employees satisfaction with their job in relation to social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence (Humphrey et al., 2007). The more secure employees feel with the aspects of the job characteristic theory, the more willing they are to remain in their job. This study was conducted to determine supports that could increase retention rates of special educators.

Research Question 1

  Social support. A factor to high attrition rates within the field of special

education is the feeling of isolation and little time to engage in learning opportunities and

establish relationships with colleagues (Fiorilli et al., 2015; Zavala, 2018). To address

these factors, mentoring, professional development, and induction programs are strategies

that have been identified to increase social support among special educators (Mrstik et

al., 2018). The results of this study confirmed that mentoring is available to teachers and

whole school professional development occurs to allow opportunities to build

relationship and learn with colleagues. Mentoring between special educators was

identified as a veteran teacher supporting a novice teacher to provide guidance and

answer questions. However, the results of the study also extend current knowledge by

addressing flaws with these supports. The participants noted that time was a needed

support to partake in mentoring relationships and professional development opportunities.

Special educators expressed being overused for duties before and after school, which

decreases the amount of time to check in with their colleagues and provide additional

support. In addition, many special educators noted little planning time, which added to

the decreased amount of time to engage with colleagues. Lack of planning for special

educators impedes their ability to perform their job responsibilities and increases pressure

to get numerous tasks done with little time (Samuels, 2018). Thus, special educators will

stay in their classroom to complete paperwork and be available for students rather than

meet with their colleagues (West Ed, 2014).

In regard to professional development, this study confirmed participation of schoolwide meetings when applicable, but participants were not engaged with professional development opportunities that happen during school hours due to time constraints and job responsibilities. Further, a drawback to the professional development opportunities is the limited focus on supports for special educators and the focus on strategies for the school and/or district. Special educators are assets to schools and districts because of their diverse training they have received (Council for Exceptional Children, 2019). Special educators need the same professional trainings as general educators because of the support they provide to the students and their colleagues.

The results of this study also extended the current literature regarding social support of special educators by identifying reasons that impede special educators from building relationships with colleagues: lack of awareness and understanding of the responsibilities and job of a special educator. Special educators may not be willing to build relationships with colleagues after overhearing colleague's negative comments with each other regarding aspects of the special education program (classroom sizes, workload, free time, etc.) that do not show understanding of the responsibilities of special educators. Schools can increase relationships, build empathy, and create a positive working environment by providing understanding to all school employees of the day-to-day job of a special educator. Without understanding and communicating the responsibilities, it is hard to establish empathy and support, which leads to animosity between colleagues (Beer, Rodriguez, & Taylor, 2015).

Autonomy. Research suggests that within the field of education, autonomy can be difficult to establish due to the parameters set by administrators and district officials (Figel, 2008). Based on the perspectives of special educators, this study extends the knowledge on autonomy special educators have by noting the high autonomy they have. Resource teachers expressed autonomy through scheduling of students, creating pull-out schedules, behavior management, and finding resources to use to instruct students on necessary skills. Self-contained teachers expressed autonomy through creating their daily teaching schedules, scheduling students in noncontent subjects, and behavior management.

In addition to extending the knowledge that special educators report having high autonomy within their job, this research showed the supports special educators feel are needed to increase autonomy. The first support is providing special educators with a mentor who has high autonomy within the school setting. Mentoring programs can allow teachers of varying experience to collaborate among each other to gain specific skills (Vittek, 2015). Mentoring should not be a 1-year partnership between teachers but a commitment for several years with the hope of the mentee becoming a mentor to provide support for other teachers (Reese, 2015). The mentorship would provide teachers with limited autonomy a way to increase their autonomy by conversing and observing with special educators who demonstrate high autonomy within the school and classroom setting. The strategies noted by participants to help increase autonomy within the classroom and school setting are to build trust with administration, be an expert within the field, keep the autonomy student-centered, and have confidence and strong

communication skills. Confidence and strong communication skills are necessary components to increase personal resilience, which leads to higher levels of autonomy (McDonald et al., 2015).

The second support perceived by special educators to increase autonomy is to have a supportive administration that allows educators to grow and learn from experiences to begin to build their autonomy and experiences. For instance, Hughes, Matt, and O'Reilly (2015) cited administrative support as significant to retention rates because educators want to feel that they are receiving supports for personal growth in the school setting. Whether these supports are emotional, environmental or instructional, educators want to feel that they can grow and be supported to grow further.

Feedback. It is important for educators to receive frequent feedback on their work performance to allow for reflection and improve the instruction provided to students (Dipaola & Hoy, 2014). This research confirmed that a type of observation is provided, but the type of feedback received varies. The participant responses indicated that special educators are not frequently observed and provided with quality feedback regarding their work performance. The results from this study can be used to extend current knowledge on the type of evaluations and feedback special educators are wanting to receive based on the work performance of special educators. The special educators who were interviewed in this study expressed a desire to be evaluated at least four times a year and provided with substantial feedback to help them grow as educators within the classroom setting. Quality feedback entails observations that last at least 30 minutes and end with a face-to-face interaction to explore strengths, areas of growths, and goals to focus on before the

next observation. A face-to-face interaction is important to ensure that feedback is not misconstrued and goals are discussed (Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016, p. 382).

Feedback not only by administration but by other special educators was also noted as necessary. Peer observations can increase reflective thoughts within educators (Artzt, Armour-Thomas, Curcio, & Gurl, 2015). Peer observations also allow for educators to see different teaching strategies and gain ideas to incorporate in their own classrooms. However, growth is not able to occur if feedback is not provided and supports are not in place to allow educators to feel successful in the classroom. To begin supporting special educators in the classroom, quality feedback regarding work performance is needed by both administrators and other special educators. Feedback should provide areas of strengths, areas of growth, and goals a teacher wants to accomplish to better their teaching (Rekert, Wim, & Veen, 2017). In addition, supports should be established to meet goals and help special educators grow (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015).

Task significance. The impact special educators have on students was confirmed through this study. The special educators who participated in this study noted that they feel and can see that the work they do impacts the lives of the students they are working with based on student performance and gestures. The participants noted that the small gestures of students stopping by just to say "hey" or the hug and high five received in the hallway shows the high task significance special educators have with their students. Special educators are often a safe person for students with disabilities to go to because of the empathy and concern shown toward them and the amount of individualized time they receive from special educators (McLeskey et al., 2017).

This study also extends current knowledge and shows that many special educators feel low task significance among their colleagues. It is important to change the dynamics between special educators, general educators, and administrators to increase the task significance of special educators. Special educators want to feel appreciated and recognized for their work performance by their colleagues (Major, 2012). The job of special educators is not recognized in society, and there is a lack of respect many show toward special education (Ketheeswaran, 2018). The lack of understanding among professionals in schools impedes the recognition and appreciation. Little recognition within a job can result in employees questioning their purpose within their job (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). This study supports that special educators need understanding from general educators regarding their roles and duties within the school setting. In addition, this study suggests that special educators would appreciate recognition and appreciation from colleagues to know that the work they are doing is beneficial and to feel that their work has purpose.

Task interdependence. The results of this study confirmed the literature reflected in Chapter 2 that special educators do not know how they fit into the school system to reach the goals and visions set by administration. For example, Rodriguez-Dorta and Borges (2017) noted that outside of their task significance and task interdependence with their students, special educators are unsure where they belong in the school system. To increase the security of task interdependence of special educators, supports are needed to help special educators know their place in the school system. The first support recommended based on the perceptions of special educators is for administrators to meet

with the special education department to provide the goals and visions of the special education program and how the program will support the school in meeting its set goals. This meeting allows for special educators to see their task significance within the school and how it leads toward task interdependence. Through this meeting, open communication and explained goals and visions allows all stakeholders to understand their role within the school setting (Rodriguez-Dorta & Borges, 2017). Establishing roles for stakeholders in the school ensures accountability and positive task interdependence (Peabody & Demanchick, 2016).

The second support needed to increase task interdependence once a meeting has been set is providing resources for teachers to be successful and not allowing special educators to struggle in completing their job. Resources should be readily available for classroom tasks, which includes classroom materials and updated technology for students and teachers (Cullen-Lester, Woehler, & Willburn, 2016). In addition, the resources should encompass necessary trainings available for educators through professional development, conferences, trainings, and webinars. Through the supports of administrative guidance and adequate resources, the security of task interdependence may increase, which may increase retention rates of special educators.

Research Question 2

Research has noted factors that lead to high attrition rates: ideal versus actual experiences, job satisfaction, administrative support, compensation, and stress (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Bennet et al., 2013; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Lynch, 2016; Vittek, 2015). The results of this study confirm that lack of administrative support and job

demands are factors that lead to high attrition rates. The results also add colleagues and student behaviors as reasons for high attrition rates. Colleagues were a factor because participants often felt secluded, unappreciated, and misunderstood. The roles and responsibilities special educators have not been known by colleagues, which leads to misunderstandings (Mason-Williams, 2015). Participants also expressed that their classrooms were often at different locations from other special educators or from the team that they are working on. In addition, participants noted some days they have no interaction with other adults due to their job demands. Limited planning time and rushing to complete tasks leaves special educators in their classroom, which increases the feeling of isolation (Samuels, 2018). The results also showed the limited task significance of work performance and little understanding of the role and job duties of special educators. Several participants expressed overhearing conversations or remarks made about the little work special educators have compared to general educators. Special educators need to feel wanted to continue working to provide students with disabilities the instruction they deserve (Jenkins, Flores, & Reinke, 2015).

Student behaviors were also noted as a factor to the high attrition rates in special education. Participants noted being unprepared to deal with the noncompliance and aggressive behaviors students with disabilities can often exhibit. In addition, participants felt little support is provided when a student begins to display disruptive behavior. Participants also noted the emotional, physical, and mental toll students' behavior can have on their well-being. Special educators begin to leave the field due to not wanting to endure the psychological effects students' behavior can begin to have on them. To

support special educators to handle the noncompliance and aggressive behaviors, administrators and district officials should provide adequate training and resources. Providing trainings to help deescalate situations is important to keep the school environment a safe place (Trussell, Lewis, & Raynor, 2016). In addition, teacher preparation programs should increase the amount of behavior modification classes to help support novice teachers. The lack of behavior training in education programs leads to novice teachers being unprepared to deal with the tasks in front of them regarding student behavior (Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015).

Research Question 3

The results from the research study was able to confirm that special educators remain within the field due to the bonuses provided to them. In addition, this study was able to extend on the current literature by adding a main factor on why special educators remain in the field. This factor is the students. Based upon the results of the data, special educators remain in the field for their love of students. Special educators enjoy watching their students make progress and live for the moments which are described as the "aha" moments. A final factor which emerged was believing in oneself to make a difference no matter how small that difference is.

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Limitations of the Study

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Limitations within a qualitative research study cannot be avoided. The first limitation was the sample size as it included the minimum number of 15 participants which were selected through purposeful sampling. Due to purposeful sampling and the limited number of participants, Patton (2015) shared three limitations which are

associated with this type of sampling. These limitations included situation, time period of

when interviews occurred, and the selection process of participants. I addressed this

limitation by interviewing multiple educators from different schools and levels to ensure

transferability.

In addition to the relatively small sample size, another limitation can be that

participants may have been reluctant to share their perceptions or behaved differently

because the interviews were audio recorded. Participants could have felt they were being

judged during interviews which could have affected their responses. In addition,

participants may have held back from their responses I knew their supervisors would be

reading this.

Finally, another limitation might be the different years of teaching experiences of

teachers and the setting the participant teaches in which can affect their responses to the

interview questions. Teachers with years of experience might provide more substantial

responses in regard to needed supports compare to teachers with fewer years of

experience. In addition, the setting in which participants provide instruction to students

could impact the responses to interview questions. Self-contained teachers spend a large

portion of their day with the same students with little breaks while resource teachers pull

different students throughout their day. All participants were highly-qualified to teach in

the field of special education and had at least 3 years of experience.

Recommendations

Based upon the results gathered from the interviews with special educators, the

following recommendations are provided with hope to increase the supports within the

different aspects of the job characteristic theory. Again, Humphrey, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2007) explain that the job characteristic theory focuses on the perceptions of employees regarding their satisfaction with their job in relation to social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. The more secure an employee feels within the aspects of the job characteristic theory the more willing they are to remain within their job.

To support special educators to feel secure within their job in relation to social support, the results recommend one to provide special educators with sacred time where they are not being used for school duties and able to interact with their colleagues to begin to establish relationships within the school setting. An example to increase time for special educators in not assigning morning duties to special educators to allow times for special educators to meet with colleagues before school. In addition to providing sacred time for special educators, another recommendation to increase social support is bridging the gap between general and special educators in order to gain a better understanding of the job demands one has. Empathy and understanding do not happen unless effective communication and collaboration has been established to build relationships between special and general educators (Beer et al., 2015).

To support building autonomy within special educators, the results from the study support providing mentors to learn how to build high autonomy within your classroom and school. In addition to providing mentors, the results recommend for administrative and district officials to be supportive for their special educators to obtain the skills necessary to gain high autonomy. Trial and error opportunities should be allowed and

reflected on with both special educator and administration for one to build the confidence to establish high autonomy.

The final three aspects of the job characteristic theory are feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. To support special educators to feel secure within the aspect of feedback it is recommended to have administrators and special educators evaluating other special educators work performance regularly. Based upon this feedback it is suggested to provide areas of strengths, areas of growth and set goals to help special educators grow within the profession. Time is needed to have an open conversation regarding the evaluations. To support special educators to feel secure within the aspect of task significance, it is recommended that administrators find a way to bridge the gap between special and regular educators to increase awareness of the many roles special educators have. To begin to bridge this gap administrators can hold professional developments at the beginning of the school year highlighting the respective roles of both parties which could possibly open up communication barriers between the two groups. In addition, the results support recognizing the work special educators do on a daily basis and provide them with recognition, so they feel a part of the school community. This recognition could be through informal conversations, quick e-mails, or a heartfelt "thank-you." To increase the security within task interdependence of special educators, this study recommends administrators and special educators to have a meeting and decide in which capacity special educators will contribute to the school goals and visions. Finally, it is recommended for administrators to provide effective resources, collaboration and

communication between all stakeholders to assist special educators in feeling a part of meeting the goals and visions of administrators.

Implications

Through the research conducted, the needed supports perceived by special educators in relation to the job characteristic were analyzed and revealed. The findings may lead to practical supports which could be implemented and provide improvements to the retention rates of special educators.

Schools and Districts

Professionally, the results could lead to increasing retention rates of special educators. When employees feel secure and supported in all aspects of the job characteristic theory the willingness to remain within the field increases (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Steyn and Vawda (2014) adds that when all aspects of the job characteristic theory are met the work environment as a whole is more positive. Retaining special educators can help develop special education programs within the school to better support students, parents, and teachers to provide positive educational outcomes for all. In addition, retaining special educators allows schools and district to save money on the training required for special educators and put resources towards curriculum and resources to help their special educators be successful within the classroom (Samuels, 2018). Finally, by increasing retention rates of employees' administrators can put more focus on school improvement rather than training new employees (Ruff, 2016).

Special Educators

Being secure in all aspects of the job characteristic theory can provide special educators with a positive outlook and mental state. Special educators will enter their school day feeling less relaxed which leads to low anxiety and stress levels (Birtch & Chiang, 2015). The field of special education is often a high stress and low recognition job which impedes the mental, emotional, and physical state of a special educator (Bettini, Cheyney, & Wang, 2015). By increasing the supports in the areas of social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task dependence special educators have the chance to feel more secure within their emotional, mental, and physical state. With a secure emotional, mental and physical state special educators can focus on providing quality instruction and support to their students and colleagues which creates a positive environment for all (Garcia-Carrion, Roldan, & Campos, 2018). The results and recommendations which were described within this study can begin to pave a way to better understand the perceived supports needed for special educators to begin retaining them within the school setting. Special educators are an integral part of the school system who provide support to both students and teachers academically, socially, and behaviorly.

Students

Outside of the schools, districts, and special educators, meeting the aspects of the job characteristic theory and increasing retention rates of special educators also has a positive impact for students. Prettyman and Sass (2018) note retaining special educators provide students with experienced special educators who have learned the skills of

advocation and strategies which can have a positive impact on students. Providing experienced special educators to students allows them to be educated by highly-trained teachers and allows IEPs to be personal from student to student. Most special educators have the same student for several years which allow students to build a meaningful relationship with an adult outside of their home to share success and failures with (Neiuwerburg, 2018). Students with disabilities are 60% more likely to be bullied by peers within their school setting (Skrzypiec, Askell-Williams, Slee, & Rudzinski, 2015) and about 3% are more likely to attempt suicide due to the high anxiety school causes for them (Joshi, Hartley, Kessler, & Barstead, 2015). By having that trusted special educator for students allows them to have an adult to confide in and get help from instead of being turned away by an adult who is not specialized with dealing with students with disabilities. Which in turn can hopefully allow students to see the value of their life and begin to enjoy being at school.

Conclusion

The increase in attrition rates of special educators is a high concern and causes high implications for students, schools and districts. A key component of the Every Student Succeeds Act requires highly qualified special educators providing adequate instruction to students with disabilities in hopes to close the learning gap between them and their nondisabled peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). With districts around the nation reporting special education vacancies and many districts employee substitutes to fill those vacancies, key components of Every Student Succeeds Act are not being met and students with disabilities are not being provided an adequate instruction by a highly

qualified special educator. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the supports needed to begin to retain special educators within the school setting.

Through this study, perceptions of special educators were explored regarding the needed supports in relation to the job characteristic theory. As previously stated, Humphrey, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2007) reported that when components of the job characteristic theory are met the willingness to stay within a job increases. Therefore, the need to support our special educators is imperative because they are responsible for providing the necessary education to the next generation of young adults. Based upon the study it was found that the key supports needed to begin retaining special educators are time, empathy, colleagues understanding the role and responsibilities of special educators, mentors, frequent meaningful observations, resources, and administrative support. Special educators will always be a high commodity within the education system and their expertise is needed to educate and support teachers who educate students with disabilities. By retaining special educators, schools and districts can begin to put less focus on hiring quality teachers and put more focus on building special education programs which provide a quality education that prepares students for life after high school. In conclusion, this study showed that special educators remain in the field for the students and to retain them it is imperative to provide the necessary supports for them to be successful.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

The purpose of this interview is to further my understanding in regard to supports needed within the school setting to foster social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence of special educators to begin understanding how to increase retention rates. In addition, I am interested in any factors which may result in a special educator to stay or leave the field of special education. The answers provided will contribute to my study by identifying key factors schools and districts can begin to implement to help retain special educators.

I want to remind you again that this interview is confidential and your identity will be kept confidential to everyone, excluding myself. Your honesty will be greatly appreciated and is taken without judgement. Your experiences are valuable and will contribute to this study and the field of special education. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to end this interview at any time. Finally, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will be asked to confirm the findings from the data analysis of your interview, once the data are analyzed. In addition, you will be asked to provide review the final draft of the study to ensure accuracy.

The purpose of the interview is to deepen my understanding of the following research questions which are being used to drive this research study:

- What are special education teachers' perspectives of the supports within the school setting are provided to foster special education teachers' social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence to increase retention rates?

- What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that may result in a teacher leaving the field of special education?

- What are special education teachers' perspectives of factors that support teachers to stay in the field of special education?

Interview Questions

Demographic Information

1. How many years have you taught in the field of special education?

2. What certifications do you currently hold?

3. How did you gain your certification (through a university, alternative program)?

Student Demographics

4. How many students do you have on your caseload?

5. On average, how many students are in your classroom?

6. What grade levels are represented in your classroom?

Analyzing the current supports offered within the school and/or district

7. What current efforts has your school adopted to increase social support within the school setting?

8. Describe the collaboration and support among other special educators within your school and/or district?

9. Within the school setting, autonomy can be difficult to establish, describe the autonomy you currently have within the school or your classroom?

10. Do you feel like there is shared decision making in what you teach your students? Explain in detail.

11. Do you receive feedback based upon your performance within the school setting?

12. How does administration provide feedback to you based on your teaching practices?

13. Would you describe the feedback as specific? Explain.

14. Is the feedback immediate? Explain.

15. Is the feedback ongoing and meaningful? Explain

16. Is there opportunity to receive feedback from peers? Explain.

17. How do you receive feedback?

18. How is feedback incorporated into your teaching?

19. Task significance is described as the degree one's work impacts the lives or work of other individuals; how would you describe your task significance with the school setting?

20. Are you provided feedback regarding your task significance from colleagues or administration?

21. Describe the supports in place for you to see the task interdependence of current visions within the school?

Analyzing the needed supports

22. Describe the supports you feel are needed to increase social support among your colleagues?

    a. Where do you feel the most support is needed within the field of special education?

23. What strategies do you feel one could adopt to increase autonomy within the school and classroom?

24. Describe the type of feedback you would like to receive?

    a. How would this feedback be communicated with you?

25. Describe the supports you feel would increase task significance for special educators?

26. Describe the supports you feel would increase task interdependence for special educators?

Reasons special educators leave or remain in the field

27. What factors do you feel contribute to the high attrition rates?

    a. Have you thought about leaving the field of special education, if so why? If not, why?

28. What factors do you feel keep some special educators within the field?

    a. Why do you remain in the field of special education?

Probes for further information

1. Tell me more about _____.

2. Are there examples of _____.

3. Why do you think that is? _____